BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Robert Borofsky, *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Pp. xxii, 201, illustrated, index. US$34.50 cloth.

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Robert Borofsky's *Making History,* one of the most original and thought-provoking ethnographies I have read in some time, takes as its point of departure the *Akatawa,* a dual form of social organization briefly instituted on the island of Pukapuka in 1976. Borofsky wonders why, even though previous ethnographers had not mentioned this institution, his informants claimed that it had appeared repeatedly in the past. Although the *Akatawa* itself would seem a slight subject for even a short monograph, it provides a convenient excuse for parallel investigations of how ethnographer and native gather and validate knowledge, how they construct understandings of a culture's past and present, and how these understandings influence each other.

As a contribution to anthropological theory and methodology, *Making History* has multiple strengths. (As a contribution to Pacific ethnology, it falls outside my area of competence—I am a Latin Americanist.) Tactful and gentle concerning his predecessors, Borofsky steps quietly around the polemical pitfalls into which Freeman leapt. Stronger on fieldwork than on history and theory, perhaps a bit myopic about himself and his relationship to his predecessors, Borofsky is nonetheless always provocative and incisive.

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In my opinion, the book is strongest in chapters 3 through 5, on acquiring and validating traditional knowledge and constructing historical understandings. Like Edwin Hutchins's *Culture and Inference* (1980), it focuses on learning and thinking in natural situations applied to real-life tasks rather than to an investigator's test or protocol, Borofsky's approach makes good sense, given that many of the contentious issues concerning cross-cultural cognitive difference must be tested against natural thinking, and the richness of the cases drawn from interviews and observation, along with Borofsky's judicious matching of cases to theory, makes it work. Among the many gems in his cases, my favorite concerns a man who added a completely new and idiosyncratic detail to a myth (p. 124), all the while insisting that most of the people he and Borofsky had surveyed told the story that way—a vivid illustration of the creativity within the seemingly mechanical transmission of culture.

Rather than limiting himself to cognition per se, Borofsky considers a wide variety of factors bearing on how Pukapukans learn—personality, socialization, cognitive and emotional styles, speech forms, and norms of interaction—and persuasively links all of these elements to status rivalry, which, though muted by an egalitarian ethos, is pervasive on Pukapuka. Perhaps most impressive, he suggests how these factors influence the content and organization of cultural knowledge, as well as the process of learning. For instance, because Pukapukans are discouraged from asking direct questions, even more so from asking the same question again, "changes in people's accounts over time may thus not always be discernable, either to Pukapukans or to anthropologists" (p. 85). And a preoccupation with relative status, by first encouraging people to learn from public discussions (thus avoiding subordination to a teacher) and then prompting speakers to challenge each other, seems to prevent consensus on many points, promoting cultural diversity and ambiguity (p. 122).

One of Borofsky's greatest strengths is his ability to move back and forth between the subject culture and its ethnographers, showing, for instance, how anthropologists and Pukapukans share many rules of thumb in collecting and evaluating information. He demonstrates that interaction between ethnographer's and informant's assumptions can shape or even distort research, as when Julia Hecht wrongly inferred that membership in burial lineages is tentative from informants' ignorance of other people's membership (pp. 67-68); as when Borofsky's own insistent questioning on a point forced informants to give a definite answer to a question on which their own culture lets them remain hap-

pily vague (pp. 151-152); as when he and others try too hard to decontextualize indigenous cognition (pp. 125-128). Borofsky's discussion of the "native point of view" as a goal of ethnography is especially useful: He shows how native formulaic constructions of a domain can drastically oversimplify it (pp. 70-71) and, more generally, that an ethnography aimed at members of other societies cannot and should not replicate native understandings (p. 153). As he himself points out (p. 154), his conclusions on these and other issues have force precisely because he embeds them not in a programmatic discussion but in a revealing examination of particular ethnographers dealing with particular issues and particular informants.

Borofsky's insistence on the mutual influence of status rivalry and learning is valuable, even overdue in anthropology: Many ethnographies allude to competition through esoteric knowledge, but few take it seriously enough to focus on the process and effects of competition. Even a handful of well-documented cases opens up possibilities for comparison. Richard Price, for instance, in his *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (1983), shows that the Saramaka Maroons of the Guianas, as contentious and concerned with who knows what as are the Pukapukans, not only discourage direct questions, but also conceal historical knowledge in small, disconnected fragments. These fragments, however, are often remarkably accurate concerning events as far back as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which Borofsky indicates is not the case on Pukapuka. The San Blas Kuna of Panama, among whom I have worked, compete for prestige through esoteric learning, but institutional and normative constraints make traditional knowledge less changeable and variable than its Pukapukan equivalent: Kuna learners, for instance, though they dislike subordination as intensely as Pukapukans, cannot substitute learning from public displays (pp. 100-101) for formal apprenticeship. I hope Borofsky's monograph will stimulate further interest in this topic.

As the comparison with Price's path-breaking book suggests, Borofsky's work bears strongly on the question of historical consciousness, another topic whose importance is widely acknowledged in anthropology but so far seldom studied in depth. Concerning the *Akatawa,* he suggests that "a few individuals' private (and probably vague) conceptions were drawn into the public realm and supported by both the 'Council of Important People' and the populace at large. Calling into question beliefs about earlier *Akatawa* after the revival began became a questioning of the authority and competency of these groups" (p. 141) —to the extent that this authoritative consensus even molded individual

memories of participation in past revivals. Despite Borofsky's delicacy on this point, the reader ends up concluding that the *Akatawa* may in fact never have appeared before 1976.

If *Making History's* greatest strengths emerge in chapters 3 through 5, its limitations appear most clearly in chapter 2, by far the books longest and most heterogeneous. The chapter describes contemporary Pukapukan social organization, reviews earlier descriptions by Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole and Julia Hecht, and details differences and discrepancies among the accounts. In this chapter, though convincing and lucid in his own descriptions and insightful about ethnography in general as well as work on Pukapuka in particular, Borofsky misses some important aspects of the ethnographic continuum in which he situates himself and those who came before him.

In the gentlest possible way, Borofsky finds the Beagleholes' account of Pukapukan social organization seriously lacking, in terms of distorting oversimplification as well as outright error, and though less critical of Hecht's more recent work, he does charge her with both oversimplification and misunderstanding patrilineal affiliation on Pukapuka. In his sympathetic but nevertheless detailed and unsparing account of how his predecessors went astray, Borofsky emphasizes the topical interests and academic loyalties of Hecht and the Beagleholes, their fieldwork practices, the compression demanded by publication, and the goal of historical reconstruction. Interesting and convincing as far as he goes, Borofsky in my opinion gives too much weight to the immediate field situation and the background of each ethnographer, too little to wider currents in anthropology. In particular, he misses the constraining effects of analytical categories and expectations in the idiosyncratic field of kinship studies.

To a large degree— even more than is the case in studying, say, subsistence or shamanism—ethnographers attempting to make sense of the incredibly complex and confusing web of relations we call kinship have had to depend on inflexible and heavily aprioristic typologies, which told them what to look for as well as why it mattered. Categories such as matrilineal and patrilocal used to have (and sometimes still have) the character of ideal types. No particular case fit very well—see the Beagleholes' remarks on why Pukapukan residence choices would not conform to rule (1938:251)—but, given that "none of the above" was not an option, these categories were unavoidable.

The effects of the categories and expectations prevailing in the 1930s on the Beagleholes' work are immediately apparent in, for instance, their attempts to account for residence choice by manipulating the

patrilocal/matrilocal distinction (1938:250); in their taken-for-granted evolutionary reconstruction of kinship (1938:224, 232); and in their claim that a Pukapukan is born into precisely six kinds of groups (1938:219), even though the nature and ontological status of one of the six, the "bilateral kin group," never becomes clear.

The question of bilateral or cognatic kinship shows the grip of typology on ethnography with particular clarity. In explaining why the Beagleholes and Hecht differed in analyzing land tenure in terms of, respectively, unilineal and cognatic descent, Borofsky notes that not only did Hecht collect genealogies more assiduously but that "cognatic descent theory has become a topic of considerable interest among anthropologists" (p. 65). What mattered, in fact, was less Hecht's interest in this social form than recognition of its existence. For the Beagleholes and most of their generation, descent was by definition unilineal and bilateral kinship was a matter of kindreds and diffuse ties: Cognatic descent groups could not exist on Pukapuka because they did not exist yet in theory. Similarly, Borofsky can subtly depict the Pukapukan (cognatic descent) *koputangata* as ambiguously category and group, alternately ego-focused and ancestor-focused (pp. 24-35), only because several decades of terminological and descriptive deconstruction in kinship studies since the Beagleholes' time have empowered him to do so.

One can see the effects of current theory on Borofsky's own descriptions of social organization in the matter of cross-cutting ties, which, following Sahlins, he finds everywhere on Pukapuka, and which he credits with "dampening disruptive intergroup conflicts" (p. 18). Given this concept's long history of use, especially by Africanists and the Manchester School (Gluckman 1956, 1965; Colson 1953, 1974; Kroeber 1917; Murphy 1957), Borofsky would have strengthened his analysis by taking it less for granted and by paying some attention to its application outside Polynesia, especially since Hallpike (1973) has seriously called into question the reality and conflict-reducing qualities of cross-cutting ties (see also Kang 1976; Dillon 1980).

More to the point here, theory—not the field situation—led Borofsky to perceive those ties and to attribute integrative and harmonizing functions to them (and to ambiguity and fluidity in social alignments as well), a theme he returns to repeatedly throughout the book (pp. 18, 23-24, 42, 45, 72-73, 134). His language is teleological as well as functionalist, especially on page 45, when he leaves the impression that atolls require cross-cutting ties, a need filled in different eras on Pukapuka by matrilineal versus patrilineal descent and by village affiliation versus residence Like the great majority of anthropologists today,

Borofsky would presumably reject the label of functionalist, and yet, as is often the case, the assumptions of functional analysis (which refuses to die no matter how many stakes we drive into its heart) inform his understanding of Pukapukan social organization.

Borofsky, for his part, sees the crucial theoretical difference separating himself from the Beagleholes and Hecht as their emphasis on "uniformity at the expense of diversity, stasis at the expense of change" (pp. 66, 2, 50-51, 53, 68-69). Although this difference is indeed readily apparent in his own descriptions, Borofsky never gives the issue of cultural diversity the attention his remarks call for. The heterogeneity he demonstrates, for instance, largely falls within the area of social organization, not in cultural constructs concerning kinship but in complex aggregates and accumulations of choice and practice, where diversity could be expected to be greatest. Concerning cognition and learning, on the other hand, he emphasizes variation only in *content:* The way in which people go about acquiring, validating, and displaying knowledge he describes as more or less uniform throughout Pukapuka. In other words, for all that Borofsky embraces cultural diversity, he ultimately explains variation in one domain in terms of more or less invariant patterns in another.

I also have mixed feelings about Borofsky's version of where he himself fits in this ethnographic tradition and how his work relates to his predecessors'. Certainly, his conclusion that any single ethnography is necessarily partial and one-sided and that "a much better sense of the atoll's social organization developed from the compilation of our various accounts" (p. 152) is right on target. One also needs to know, however, how successive field studies and monographs are related. Borofsky cogently suggests that Hecht got into difficulties by letting the Beagleholes' report overly influence her research agenda, thus leading her to "the merging of different temporal orders" (pp. 69, 61). What of Borofsky himself, who had presumably also read the Beagleholes' report before beginning fieldwork? How much did each fieldworker follow or reject those who went before? How much did she or he try to test, to confirm or refute earlier works? My own fieldwork experience in a society studied by numerous anthropologists is that mutual influence is strong and that the ethnographic tradition is best seen as a chain of interconnected ethnographic texts, along with the questions and agendas they establish, rather than as a succession of fieldworkers independently working in the same place.

Borofsky also strikes me as incompletely reflexive on another aspect of his relationship to Hecht and the Beagleholes. For all his respectful

acceptance of their work—which, although strained in a few places, seems both genuine and commendable—his book is a kind of status challenge. He is, after all, presuming to interpret in detail *their* work, picking it apart and putting it in its proper place. His rhetoric, moreover, implicitly asserts his dominance: After we have been properly impressed by his forty-one months of fieldwork and ten thousand pages of notes (p. xv), Borofsky lets us know that the Beagleholes spent a mere seven and a half months on Pukapuka, Hecht a respectable thirteen, and that the Beagleholes' notes on some topics are thin. Similarly, by opening his book with two and a half pages of acknowledgments written in Pukapukan and ending with an appendix in the same language, Borofsky not-so-subtly establishes his mastery of the field language, as do various linguistic quibbles throughout (e.g., p. 14). What is striking is that, just as in other matters that Borofsky himself points out, the ethnographer and his informants end up resembling each other.

This convergence adds, in fact, to the interest of the book, and if, as I argue, Borofsky misses part of the picture in chapter 2, he more than makes up for it afterwards. Especially in its implications for culture theory, namely that the way in which culture-bearers interact with each other may affect the content and form of cultural knowledge and the degree to which it is shared and consistent, *Making History* offers a great deal to think about.

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