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## REVIEWS

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Eric Venbrux, *A Death in the Tiwi Islands: Conflict, Ritual, and Social Life in an Australian Aboriginal Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. 269, illus., maps, appendices, glossary, references, index. £40 hardcover; £14.95 paperback.

*Reviewed by Jane C. Goodale, Bryn Mawr College*

THIS STUDY POWERFULLY illustrates the value of an extended case study in contemporary ethnographic writing. In this exciting and extremely well written account and analysis of an unwitnessed murder (of a middle-aged man who was one of the author's assistants), Venbrux presents a detailed description and analysis of contemporary Tiwi life.

Originally intent on gaining an understanding of ritual symbolism, Venbrux settled into the Tiwi community of Pularumpi, one of the three major modern Tiwi townships on Melville and Bathurst Islands of North Australia. The community is part of a society and culture that have been studied by many anthropologists throughout its approximately hundred years of continuous contact with other Australians (white and black). These prior studies are extensively acknowledged and quoted and are used to demonstrate the continuities and changes that are so forcibly brought to bear on the Tiwi's and the author's understanding of the events following the death of the man the author calls Tobias. (All real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.)

Venbrux begins with a narrative account of his arrival and the beginning of his study of ritual symbolism, which was to be suddenly interrupted by the murder. He then sets the stage for the subsequent events, actions, and reactions with a rather complete summary of Tiwi life, culture, and society

covering the historic to modern period. Very interestingly he follows this with a chapter in which he retells a well-known Tiwi historic tale concerning Tobias's father who, at the end of the last century, was the central figure in a "pay-back" murder plot involving as victims members of a neighboring Tiwi group (now residing mainly at Milikapiti—where this reviewer has conducted all her research). This is followed by a biographic sketch of Tobias, introducing the continuities implicit in the father-son relationship in Tiwi society. The tale also empirically grounds one of Venbrux's conclusions, which is that competition and violence have always been a part of Tiwi life. Although the technology has changed, the issues underlying violence and resolution of conflict have largely been maintained. So too the underlying causes of competition and violence—marriage transactions—remain similar to those described for the past in spite of the changes brought about through the influence of the Catholic church and the Australian government, which has put to a stop the practice of polygyny and prenatal selection of mothers-in-law and the bestowal of wives.

The subsequent handling of the case by both the Australian police and judiciary on the scene and in the courts, and by the affected Tiwi as they engaged in daily discussion and participation in ritual is found in chapters 4–7. A great deal of detail is presented along with considerable annotation and comment by the author and reference to other literature. While ritual form and performance have changed some, it becomes clear that the Tiwi mortuary and annual yam ceremonies are, as they were in the past, central in the maintenance of cultural identity and resolution of conflict. For the Tiwi the alien court system of justice is largely irrelevant to their concept of resolution of conflict.

This study has much to recommend it to scholar and student alike. For those familiar with previous studies of the Tiwi, Venbrux brings the reader up to the present with excellent coverage of daily and ritual life in the modern townships. For those who are reading about the Tiwi for the first time the author gives ample background so that they become aware of how a dynamic culture and society meets an old challenge in a new setting. It is the strength of Venbrux's analysis that he is so detailed in his reporting of the key individuals' responses in the contexts of kinship, matrilineal, and country relationships. In doing so Venbrux demonstrates his interpretation that "Tiwi ways of dealing with the killing . . . were evidence of the originality and creativity so valued by Tiwi people" (p. 233). I suspect, however, that some readers may have some difficulty in following the many individuals and their kin relationships with the victim and with each other, particularly readers unfamiliar with the pervasiveness of Aboriginal kinship. To address this problem Venbrux includes truncated genealogies and a table of dramatis

personae. For this reader it was a pleasure to read today such an empirically based analysis of a dynamic culture and society. Venbrux clearly demonstrates that ethnography is alive and well.