Reviews

Extensively researched, using a broad selection of primary sources and richly illustrated with 25 colour plates and scores of black and white illustrations, *Bligh* successfully combines historical and anthropological perspectives. Accessible and easy to read, the book is written with a sensitive style and nuanced (at times speculative) perspective about how to represent the past. Salmond remains true to her intention to illuminate the island world with comprehensive descriptions of Polynesian words, customs, beliefs and practice that may prove too detailed for some readers. *Bligh* is a book that will have wide appeal and a worthy addition to Salmond’s award-winning repertoire.


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Gunter Senft is an Austronesian language specialist well known for his many years of working and living with the people of the Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea, learning and researching the language of Kilivila. He first visited Tauwema, a village on Kaile’una Island, in 1982, and has maintained a relationship with the people there since. Thus a book by Senft devoted to a particular performance practice of Trobriand Islanders is something to anticipate, as it promises rich ethnography and a depth of detail and understanding.

In this slim and handsomely-presented book (volume 5 in a series published by Benjamins entitled *Culture and Language Use: Studies in Anthropological Linguistics*), Senft shines his light on death in the Trobriand Islands. His focus is on Islanders’ traditional belief system regarding the spirit world and how this belief system is expressed through performance, particularly song language.

The book is arranged into four chapters, preceded by some very useful maps and a brief introduction. His skill at ethnographic writing, displayed at the outset, will be particularly valuable for readers who have little knowledge of ritual life in Papua New Guinea (since the book lacks photographs that might otherwise illustrate these scenes). Chapter 1, which is a short (13 page) introduction to mortuary ritual and belief in the Trobriand Islands, introduces the reader to the concept of the baloma, the spirit of the deceased. From this first chapter the reader new to the subject matter will realise that Senft’s writing draws heavily on research that has gone before, most notably that of Malinowski, perhaps the most famous researcher to work in the Trobriand Islands. Senft’s reading and re-reading of Malinowski’s work is a cornerstone of this book.

Chapter 2 is a longer chapter describing in more detail the journey of the baloma after death, the underworld into which the baloma enters, and the interaction of baloma with their former real-world lives, with some comparative notes on similar
eschatological concepts in other parts of the region. It is here that Senft begins to describe the sexual lives of the *baloma* that the title of the book evokes. Lengthy passages from Malinowski are reproduced here that compare and sometimes contrast with information gathered by Senft during his research. While the presence of Malinowski is significant to the book, and is expected owing to Malinowski’s own pre-occupation with “the sexual life of savages”, his shadow can be at times oppressive. Conflicting opinions surrounding Malinowski’s work come to a head early on as Senft declares Malinowski’s assertion of a Trobriand Islanders’ notion of “virgin birth” either a mistake or a tool to promote Malinowski’s career (p. 33). Senft then goes on to explain his disbelief of Malinowski’s claim, including what Senft himself labels a “nasty imputation” (p. 35), and then cites email correspondence with Michael Young and Eric Venbrux that vigorously disagrees with Senft’s assertions. Such interpersonal verbal jousting comes as a surprise in this academic context, but certainly makes for interesting reading.

Chapter 3, the longest chapter at almost 60 pages, is where the reader is finally presented with the songs that are the focus of the book, songs associated with death, the afterlife and the spirit world that crystallise aspects of Trobriand eschatology (and Trobriand culture more broadly). Song by song, stanza by stanza, the songs are systematically described. This formulaic approach to analysis is useful to compare across songs, but the structure becomes somewhat repetitive after several song analyses, and lacks the poetic flow evident elsewhere in the monograph. Towards the end of the chapter Senft presents songs that encode colonial and war histories in the Trobriands, and these are a welcome addition to the book, showing how ancestral song genres can embrace change.

In the Introduction, Senft mentions that the multimedia data upon which this research draws (sound recordings and some film footage) are available through Senft’s website at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (http://www.mpi.nl/people/senft-gunter/research). It is in Chapter 3 that the reader is directed to these, with the analyses of each song beginning with a reference to the website and to the file name under which the example can be found. The instructions are clear enough, and the files are presented in more than one format to assist in downloading, however the site itself could be more navigation-friendly. Despite this, it is highly commendable that this data has been made available online. Multimedia publication using online resources is relatively new for academic publication so it is natural that ways to do this will improve over time.

Chapter 4 is a short conclusion where in ten pages Senft draws particular attention to the moribund condition of aspects of the song language used, the culture change experienced by Trobriand Islanders more generally, and the nature of languages as dynamic. Following this is an appendix of quotes from James Frazer’s 1913 publication *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead*, which Senft appears to have provided for comparative purposes. A second appendix appears listing the metadata that accompanies the multimedia examples (also available online).

While the focus of this book is the songs of the Trobriand Islanders, it is notable that the volume does not include any musical analysis (though it does include some general musical description as part of the ethnography). Senft is fully aware of this missing element; rather than apologising, he expresses the wish that publishing this
work and making the multimedia examples freely accessible online will inspire a “music ethnologist” to become engaged with this material (p. xvii). The resources provided are indeed rich and abundant, and it would be wonderful to see this wish come to fruition.


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Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart are social anthropologists at the University of Pittsburgh. Prolific writers, these authors have wide-ranging interests and field experience, covering topics from symbolism and ritual to medical anthropology, and geographic areas from the United Kingdom to Asia and Oceania. The breadth of the authors’ scholarship is reflected in their twofold goals in *Kinship in Action*: to interpret kinship through a processual lens and to explore the interplay between individuals and the kinship systems in which they participate. Strathern and Stewart should be lauded for promoting a pluralistic perspective in the study of kinship and for moving beyond entrenched debates that have for decades plagued synthetic research efforts. The greatest strength of this book also engenders its greatest weakness, however: breadth of coverage is sacrificed for depth of included case studies. This leaves two potential, but undefined, audiences for the book: undergraduate students of kinship who might use this to supplement more traditional texts; and kinship experts desiring exposure to important, but often overlooked, case studies.

*Kinship in Action* may be structured for use as a supplementary text for an introductory kinship course: the first chapter presents a partial overview of the anthropology of kinship as well as its foundational areas of inquiry; subsequent chapters address the life cycle of the family, cultural variation in concepts of reproduction, and the variable structures and functions of kinship; final chapters challenge traditional notions of kinship through exploration of Schneider’s Euro-American “folk model” of kinship as well as new reproductive technologies; and each chapter concludes with “Questions to Consider”. The examples discussed in the book range from contemporary legal cases grappling with the rights of biological versus contractual (“social”) parents, to fictional accounts of kinship in films and novels, to the commoditisation of marriage in the context of market integration among the Telefomin of Papua New Guinea. While students are likely to benefit from the breadth and novelty of these examples, a more streamlined structure, focusing more closely on each case’s original contributions to existing literature, would assist students in unpacking the relevant points.

An instructor who is already very familiar with the anthropology of kinship might profitably make use of the case studies provided in *Kinship in Action*. The geographic emphasis on Oceania provides refreshing examples of populations with which kinship scholars may be relatively unfamiliar, including the Hagen, Duna, Pangia, Melpa,