

Culture



Karen Eriksen PAIGE and Jeffery M. PAIGE, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981. 380 pages, appendices, index. US \$8.95 (paper), US \$25.00 (cloth)

Janice Boddy

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Nils-Aslak VALKEAPÄÄ, *Greetings from Lappland: The Sami — Europe's Forgotten People*, Translated by Beverley Wahl, London, Zed Press, 1983, 128 pages. In Canada: Between The Lines Press, Toronto. \$9.95 (paper), \$22.00 (cloth).

By Ludger Müller-Wille
McGill University

During the last ten years, in fact since the First Arctic Peoples Conference in Copenhagen in 1973, representatives of northern peoples have effectively used communication media to voice their concern over territoriality and sovereignty as indigenous inhabitants of their homelands. By 1984, the predicament of northern peoples in the western circum-polar world is well known in the polar states between Alaska and Finland — Sami, Inuit and Indians visit back and forth and support each other politically and culturally. This recent era of international aboriginal communication has raised public awareness internationally, but has overshadowed at times internal and regional developments important to individual ethnic groups. Therefore the English translation of Valkeapää's *Greetings from Lappland* is welcome, although the original text predates the recent wave of ethnic politics. The book, including additions to this English edition, does try to put the Sami as an ethnic minority into the context of the political status of indigenous peoples world-wide.

Valkeapää is a representative of the Northern Reindeer Herding Sami of northwestern Finland. Since the 1960s he has emerged as a versatile musician combining traditional Sami "yoik" and modern music, a poet and a painter (with six books and seven LPs). Since the 1970s, he has projected his artistic performances onto the international level — touring Nordic countries, North America and the Soviet Union. In doing so, he stressed the strong cultural identity of indigenous peoples versus majority societies.

Greetings from Lappland was written for the Finnish majority in Finland (Terveisä Lapista, Helsinki: Otava, 1971). In thirty brief essays, he tells the Finns about the Sami's feelings as a disadvantaged minority. In 1978, a translation into New Norwegian was made and published with a few revisions to adapt to Norway, where most of the Sami live in northern Fenno-Scandia and conflicts between minority and majority have been more pronounced (Helsing frå sameland, Oslo: Pax, 1979). The third linguistic filter — the translation

from New Norwegian into English — includes most of the original essays, but with the addition of "Translator's Foreword" and "Author's Introduction". Both of these try to update the essays by referring to the most recent events around the Sami's fight against major developments in their land like the Alta Hydro-electric Complex in Norway. The text is illustrated by maps and, in particular, by photos taken by Nils Somby during the clashes between Sami demonstrators and Norwegian authorities in 1982.

In order to present a complete picture of Sami — Nordic relations, Valkeapää does not pretend to be purely scientific in his topical discussions. Rather, he is concerned with the preservation of a particular philosophy of life, inherent in people who depend for their survival on a strong man-earth relationship. He makes an explicit plea for more compassion and understanding between the "industrialized" and "underdeveloped" societies — "For we live and dwell on the same Earth." (p. 7).

This translation will contribute to better understanding of the Sami's situation in the English speaking world. Still, it is unfortunate that the author, together with the translator, did not take advantage of this opportunity to revise, correct and update the book significantly for the English version, and thus make the case of the Sami more well-known to the world at large.

Karen Eriksen PAIGE and Jeffery M. PAIGE, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981. 380 pages, appendices, index. US \$8.95 (paper), US \$25.00 (cloth).

By Janice Boddy,
University of Toronto

Until lately, ethnographic works were inclined to portray women as valuable pawns in power struggles among men, as reactors — not actors — in the political arena. Recent fieldwork has reversed this trend; studies conducted among women have shown that they, like men, work actively to maximize their positions in the effort to attain legitimate political ends. Unfortunately, the authors of this book wholeheartedly embrace the earlier view; it is one of its premises and, in my opinion, a weakness. Despite this, Paige and Paige present a thought-provoking argument, one that deserves attention from anthropologists concerned with gender, ritual, and social organization.

The book opens with a critical summary of existing theories of “reproductive ritual”: menarcheal ceremonies, menstrual taboos, circumcision, childbirth practices—in short, rites having to do with physiological aspects of human reproduction. This collation itself is a significant contribution.

Departing from these views, the authors propose to consider ritual “a continuation of politics by another means”. Reproductive rituals, in particular, are oblique and partial attempts to solve political dilemmas common to societies lacking centralized authority. In kin-based societies, wealth and power ultimately derive from the control of human reproduction; hence, men compete for rights to women and their offspring. Such rights are distributed via implicit and explicit bargains between interested men. Birth, sexual maturity and other crucial events in the reproductive cycle signal potential political crises, since the loyalties of new or newly adult members of a kin group may now be subject to transfer, renegotiation, or dissolution. But political claims are not readily enforceable in the absence of an independent judiciary. Instead, the crises are (partially) overcome through reproductive rituals—disguised bargaining mechanisms which tacitly allow the men who sponsor them to increase, maintain or assess their support in the community. The rituals are motivated by self-interest; they are performed not for the subjects undergoing them but for the sponsors and, most significantly, for the audience of observers.

Based on these ideas, and reasoning from a materialist position, the authors generate a model to account for the nature and distribution of reproductive rituals in “pre-industrial” societies. Their method involves both qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative comparison of 108 band and tribal societies selected from the 186 provinces of the “Standard Cross-Cultural Sample”. They contend that where a society’s resource base favors the growth of strong “fraternal interest groups”—groups of male consanguines acting as corporate units—reproductive rituals will take the form of “surveillance”: monitoring explicit (but not immutable) bargains and contracts involving women and junior males (*e.g.* secluding daughters until marriage and pregnant women before and after delivery, submitting a man’s sons to the risks of circumcision in affirmation of his loyalty to the group). On the other hand, where the economy favors weak fraternal interest groups and men lack permanent backing for their assertions, reproductive rites “attempt to establish temporary political factions at critical points in a woman’s reproductive cycle and gain at least temporary support for claims to a woman’s fertility” (p. 259)—whence public menarcheal ceremonies and the *couvade*, referred to as “social mobilization” rituals. A third category accounts for societies in which the economic base permits continuously negotiated but temporally

limited coalitions around single individuals, as in Melanesia. In such “unstable” societies a man must simultaneously display his power and de-emphasize it in order to attract followers, but avoid alienating them. It is no accident that here one finds the strongest of menstrual taboos: segregation. The man whose wife takes to the menstrual hut successfully proclaims her ongoing fertility while striking an attitude of “ritual disinterest” towards the basis of his power. These propositions are first discussed in Chapter 2 and substantiated with case material and statistical analyses in four following chapters. Chapter 7 provides a summary and indications for further research in complex societies.

That there is much to admire and much to argue with is a tribute to this book’s scope and imagination. It suffers in places from the problems of most cross-cultural endeavors: there are some out-of-context descriptions and judicious simplifications, too little attention paid to negative cases, and several enthusiastic over-generalizations. The qualitative chapter sections range widely, and societies in different areas are sometimes deceptively juxtaposed. Compounding this is the minor frustration that geographic locations are rarely provided in the text, though they do appear in an appendix.

The authors scrupulously exclude peasant societies from their statistical calculations, yet they cite one in their qualitative analysis (Egyptian Nubians, pp. 88-89) and fail to inform readers of the shift. Here the authors state that infibulation is undertaken as a surveillance rite, providing prospective husbands with proof of a woman’s virginity so as to avoid competing paternity claims after marriage. But if this is so the connection is far less obvious than they suggest: Sudanese men with whom I discussed this maintain that infibulation actually makes it easier for a woman to engage in pre-marital sex since the vaginal orifice can always be restitched—virtue, to all appearances, intact.

Most troublesome for me is the book’s theoretical dogmatism, present—albeit unevenly—throughout. Ritual is seen as epiphenomenal, coming into play (invented ??) only after other political means have proved inadequate. It is a strategy of last resorts, “a form of psychological warfare, or puffery, used when opportunities for more direct forms of conflict and more explicit bargaining are restricted” (p. 48). Again, reproductive rituals are “attempts to gain political advantage in conflicts over women and children rather than mechanisms for satisfying the psychological needs of individuals or for symbolically reducing social conflict and tension. [They] are motivated by self-interest; their sentimental and religious symbolism merely cloaks their true objectives” (p. 50, *emphasis mine*). One can understand the authors’ reluctance to tackle such issues as symbolism, for this is clearly tangential to their interests. But their contention that it

is a “facade” (p. 159), or “puffery”, serving to disguise the “true” nature of ritual (and here they verge on ethology), dismisses an entire dimension of human endeavor with a single stroke. What is missing is an acknowledgement that shared symbols and beliefs are also cultural material, meaningful resources which, like yams or pigs, can be manipulated for political ends. How else could these rituals achieve, even partially, the goals which the authors propose for them? However novel and stimulating their approach, the fact that ritual may be political is neither new nor surprising; but that it should be only political, is.

This controversial book adds fuel to a number of existing debates, on gender and politics, materialist and non-materialist concepts of culture, ritual and social organization. Despite my reservations it is a welcome addition, not to be ignored.

Kathleen GOUGH, *Rural Society in Southeast India*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1981, 458 pages, U.S. \$44.50 (Cloth).

By Donna Winslow
Université de Montréal

This is the first volume of what will be a two volume study on socio-economic change in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu. As Gough (p. 407) points out, the book is primarily a descriptive account interspersed with theoretical insights. Indeed, this book is very informative with highly readable and candid accounts of village life in rural India. Unfortunately, the theoretical insights are at times confusing, perhaps because Gough uses Marxist terminology without showing how her definitions of social classes were constructed from analysis of the relations of production which are described in Chapters 3, 4, 11 and 20.

The book is divided into three sections and covers developments in the region up to the mid 1950's. It is based on field work carried out during 1951-53 in two villages of Thanjavur—Kumbapettai and Kirippur—and represents over thirty years of anthropological work and experience in India.

Part I analyzes the political economy and background of Thanjavur as a whole. It includes a detailed description of the transformation of pre-capitalist relations under colonialism, the resulting changes in the class structure and organization of production, and an account of the roots and activities of the post-Independence political parties.

Gough attributes to pre-British Thanjavur an Asiatic mode of production, characterized by self-sufficient villages jointly held by kinship communities of land managers, who governed the village peasants

and slaves; and cities that were primarily religious, royal and military encampments. Gough maintains that even in the absence of private property in land, classes did exist. “The main classes appear to have been the state class, the state servants, the commodity producers and merchants, the peasants and the slaves” (p. 408).

The author provides a general profile of the changes which occurred in the district between 1771 and 1860 — the introduction of bourgeois property relations, the destruction of traditional crafts, the development of a cash/market economy based on the export of rice—while surplus was siphoned off for primitive accumulation at the centre. The village community began to break up as land passed into the hands of non-traditional owners. Tenancy became individual and contractual rather than communal and hereditary. As absentee landownership increased, sharecropping declined and was replaced by fixed-rent tenancy. After slavery was abolished in 1861, indentured and later ‘free’ labour migrated to British plantations in Ceylon, Burma, etc. Thanjavur developed a virtual monocrop economy with 77% of the workforce engaged in rice production, and there was a marked increase in the number of casual day labourers. It would have been helpful to have had more information on the organization of labour on the large temple and monastic estates and to know how they were incorporated into Gough's data, since, together with the private estates, they comprise about one-half of the district land.

Part II turns to the micro level and describes Kumbapettai, a village in northwest Thanjavur traditionally owned and governed by Brahmans. The focus is on the political economy of the village, particularly changes in the caste and class structure.

As in Beteille's work (Beteille, A., *Caste Class and Power. Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), Gough effectively shows how new sources of wealth brought about a non-alignment of caste and class, e.g. the emergence of a new group of Non-Brahman commodity producers and traders who owned land independent of the traditional Brahman landlords. The Brahmans' dominance began to decline as a result of: the growth of absentee landownership; fragmentation of landholdings; family bankruptcies; the departure of Brahmans for the cities; and the replacement of hereditary relations between master and servant by modern labour relations which were short-term and contractual.

Gough gives a good description of the growth of political parties and voting patterns, but one is left wondering how the event of Independence, and particularly universal adult suffrage, affected social relations in the village. The new values introduced by the anti-Brahman D.K. party and the Communist