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Cosmology and Social Life: Ritual Exchange among the Mambai of East Timor. By Elizabeth G. Traube. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. Pp. xiii, 289.

Elizabeth Traube's book is an important and welcome addition to the all-too-scarce ethnographic literature on the peoples of East Timor. In view of the catastrophic events which overtook the region immediately after the period of the author's field-work (she was there in 1972–74; the Portuguese departure, civil war, and Indonesian invasion were to follow in 1975) and the question mark which thus hangs over the present fate of the Mambai, this record of Mambai life and thought is all the more precious.

The book does not aim to be a comprehensive ethnography; Traube has deliberately narrowed her focus to dwell upon the cosmological themes embedded in Mambai myth and ritual performances. We learn, in fact, much more about cosmology than about social life. This choice of subject matter closely reflects Traube's own field-work experience, in which she was steadily drawn into a study of ritual and myth with the aid of two men, both ritual specialists, who became her chief informants. Though this is a minor point, the addition of a map and glossary would have been helpful to the reader. The Mambai have a typically eastern Indonesian system of prescriptive alliance, in which kinship groupings (closely identified with houses) relate to each other either as wife-givers or wife-takers. The first few chapters of the book deal with house organization and symbolism, and with the marriage alliances between houses which ensure the continued reproduction of descent groups. Marriage institutes a relationship of exchange which is drawn out over many years, culminating in the prestations made by affines at mortuary rituals. Given the importance of this system for the form of relationships among the living, it is not surprising that the principles of reciprocity and exchange should be carried over into Mambai relations with the supernatural, emerging as a leitmotiv even in ideas about life and death. Life is viewed as the product of a cycle of exchanges punctuated by deaths, and dying "is conceived of as an obligation contracted through living". Brooding themes emerge in myth and ritual verse of the inevitability of ruin and decay as a necessary stage in the renewal of life.

In this way, Mambai have formulated their own solution to the ques-

tions of life and death which all religions attempt to address. Their view of the human condition is a sombre one, but as Traube puts it, they "put their anxiety to creative use", for the goal of all ritual action is to promote fertility. Mambai take their ritual responsibilities very seriously, for according to myths about their origin they are descendants of an original elder brother, endowed with ritual authority and left to keep a lonely vigil at the navel-centre of the world after younger brothers had departed, taking with them the emblems of political power. Mambai view the cosmos as being in need of continual human intervention if the proper balance between Earth and Heaven, wet and dry seasons, is to be maintained. It is their ritual activities that ensure continued fertility on earth. Mambai rituals, then, are performed not just for their own benefit but for the sake of the rest of the world too. Mambai picture themselves mournfully as orphans, left behind by the primordial powers, Father Heaven and Mother Earth, who have retreated from each other. Left to themselves, these two deities grow listless and inert, and it is the responsibility of the Mambai periodically to awaken them with ritual noise, and incite them to life-giving sexual activity. In Mambai thought, milk, semen, and rain are linked and interwoven in a complex symbolic interplay, attracting dense clusters of meaning. Traube elegantly analyses these themes in myths, rituals, and the poetic language of ritual. But in myth Mother Earth, worn out by her efforts in giving birth and nourishing her infants, must also endure the ordeal of death and decay. Her body becomes Timor itself, her head to the south and her feet holding back the sea to the north. Her navel is a hollow rock at the heart of a Mambai village, Raimaus, which is regarded as the most important ritual centre. The black, decayed flesh of the Mother claims the bodies of humans, who must undergo the same process; but it also becomes the source of life, nourishing the plants on which humans feed. In rites, wife-giving groups compare themselves to the Mother, dwelling on the sufferings and sacrifices they endure in order to provide the promise of new life for their wife-takers. The system of marital alliances, and the ritual cycle, are thus bound together as the Mambai "play out the collective premises or institutionalized fictions of existence: that one's own life derives from others; that gifts of life create mutual obligations; and that interdependent social groups must unite to fulfil obligations to the cosmos".

The Mambai ritual cycle, in a pattern not unfamiliar in Indonesia,

is divided into two opposing yet complementary halves. "White" ritual is concerned with the living and the enhancement of fertility, while "Black" rituals are those to do with death. As in so many societies of the archipelago, mortuary rites are elaborate and protracted, composed of different phases. The final, most expensive ceremony held for a group of long-deceased ancestors actually bridges the "Black" and "White" categories, closing the circle, as it were, by transforming the ancestors into a state where they become a source of fertility. They then make their home in the sea, "symbolically fixed between the dry land and the upperworld, associated with rising moisture and falling rain". This division of rites, and the role of the ancestors in transcending death to become a source of continued fertility for the living, is closely echoed (to give but one example) in the religion of the Sa'dan Toraja of Sulawesi, with their rites of the "East" and the "West". Traube's exposition of the Mambai ritual schema enlarges our understanding of such Indonesian world-views. The centrality of mortuary ritual and its sometimes joyous and celebratory character is also highly distinctive. Strangely enough, "White" ritual, which one might expect to be the more elating part of the cycle, takes on a gloomy tone, and the obsession with decomposition emerges as a dominant theme. Words like "sombre", "mournful", "bitter", "sinister", and "grim" recur repeatedly in Traube's descriptions of these rites. It is only when we reach the account of "Black" ritual that the mood changes, and the atmosphere becomes "festive", "gamelike", and "effervescent" and feasting, song, pageantry, flamboyance, and "boisterous, exuberant dancing". One is strongly reminded of some Madagascar societies, who have developed to equal heights this apparently shared Austronesian approach to death (see, for example, Richard Huntington on the Bara, in *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, edited by R. Huntington and P. Metcalf [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979]).

A number of other themes are of similar comparative interest: for example, the predominance of botanical metaphors of growth, of "trunk" and "tip", like the trunk and branches of a tree, which are applied in many different contexts. Senior and junior houses, for example, relate to each other as "trunk" and "tip", just as in myth, younger brothers scattered to found new houses, each taking with him and planting a "cutting" from the central house-post of the first house. Under-

standing ritual, according to Traube's informants, required a movement from the superficial "tips" to the true "trunk" of knowledge, where all would become clear and unified. These paired concepts are very widely reported in other Indonesian societies.

Traube's chapter on the house as the central unit of kinship organization fits clearly within an ever more strongly emerging body of work on Indonesian societies, in which the house is seen as the key to the analysis of kinship systems. Surprisingly, although she draws upon many of the works of Lévi-Strauss, his *La Voie des masques* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1979), in which he developed the concept of "house societies", is not among them. One could, none the less, hardly find an example more convincing than the Mambai, fulfilling practically all the criteria which Lévi-Strauss delineates as characteristic of such a society. The identity between an origin-house and a group of kin, the relative lack of importance attached to precise genealogical reckoning, the significance of the house as a ritual site, the giving of distinctive names to houses and the remembering of their histories, their possession of sacred heirlooms, which in turn are personified and have their own histories — all are highly characteristic of the "house society". Viewing social arrangements in these terms helps to make sense of the often apparently contradictory data on Indonesian kinship systems, which otherwise may appear to be either hopelessly vague or else strangely irregular, making simultaneous use of principles which anthropologists have normally regarded as incompatible with each other. Traube's analysis of the role of Mambai houses is of very great interest in the light of this newly developing picture of Indonesian kinship systems.

Through Traube's analysis of ritual life and particularly of ritual language, we gain a rich and vivid picture of indigenous modes of thought. Admittedly it is an élite picture, though derived in large measure from the esoteric knowledge of ritual specialists. Ordinary people gain their understanding of ritual chiefly from the act of participating in it, and for them many of the themes, which Traube strives to make explicit, must remain implicit. But, as we discover, there is an inherent tension also for ritual specialists between the wish to prove their knowledge by showing it, and the necessity to maintain ritual status through concealment and secrecy. Although Traube is explicit about the dominant role played in her researches by her major informants, I was

left none the less regretting the absence of other voices, of a sense of diversity of viewpoints. How, for example, do women see the rites, or the themes of birth and death so prominent in myth? How much has change and missionary activity actually affected Mambai religion? Traube sought out a people apparently remote, aloof, their culture still "full and intact", yet she also mentions that the Mambai have had contacts with the Portuguese since at least 1769, and one of her earliest Mambai friends was a Catholic who had never attended an indigenous Mambai ritual. Traube provides a fascinating chapter on the way in which the Mambai wove the Portuguese into their myths, seeing them as descendants of that original younger brother who claimed the tokens of temporal power and travelled across the sea with them. They could thus reconcile themselves to the presence of the Portuguese as legitimate rulers, who none the less should have owed (and sometimes failed to observe) certain obligations to their ritually superior elder brothers, the Mambai. Such indigenous perspectives on historical events are immensely valuable, and yet, the evasion of a fuller discussion of just how far these events affected Mambai life, and of current interactions with the outside world, means that a sense of dynamics is lost. In the same way, an element seems to be missing from the analysis of ritual. In discussing the "meaning" of rituals, Traube hints at the importance for individuals of competition for ritual status and the strategies pursued between affines, yet declares her own "impatience with the social interests manifestly at stake in any performance". The search for closure, for the "trunk" of symbolic understanding which her informants urged her to attain, leaves the reader with a sense of disjunction from everyday life; myth and rite add up to a whole, but appear detached from social relations and the motives and concerns of actors. This can be frustrating for the reader, and for all the eloquence of Traube's analysis, I think this is ultimately the book's weakness. However, one may hope that future books will perhaps deal with these themes.

The picture which Traube paints of the Mambai is of a distinctly dour people. One is reminded of the eastern Sumbanese, of whom Gregory Forth drily remarks that "jocosity, especially, is not generally valued among them" (*Rindi: An Ethnography of a Traditional Domain in Eastern Sumba* [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981], p. 22). But is this just their cultural style, something perhaps widely shared with peoples

in this part of Indonesia, or could it reflect a depression which has structural causes? Traube says just enough about Mambai experience of colonialism, and their fears for the future, to leave us wondering. Mambai feelings of political powerlessness and "a sense of loss" seem to pervade the book and demand further examination. The analysis of complex patterns of symbolism is by its nature inclined to produce a rather static, synchronic picture of a society and its ways of thought. It is certainly not that Traube is insensitive to the historical and sociological issues; rather, she deliberately chooses not to pursue them in this book. But we ignore the diachronic elements at our peril.

Mambai myths record a time when symbols of power were not respected by the people, who began to kill each other at random; and they felt anxious, towards the end of Traube's visit, that should the Portuguese abandon them without making the proper provisions for succession, this state of primordial social chaos would return. This haunting vision, disturbingly accurate as it proved to be, suggests that the Mambai had at least some clues as to what was going on beyond their own boundaries, but the reader is given a picture of Mambai life which is highly self-contained, and is left with a sense of something missing. Perhaps this highlights for us the risk for the anthropologist of underplaying historical context, even for a while.

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