

*From Muyuw to the Trobriands: Transformations along the Northern Side of the Kula Ring.* By Frederick H. Damon. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990. Pp. xvi, 285.

Among the many bright spots in the recent proliferation of ethnographic writings on Melanesia is the re-analysis of the Kula Ring, the ceremonial exchange system made famous in Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and Marcel Mauss' *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925). Not only has Malinowski's Trobriand Islands material been subject to intensive re-study, criticism, and re-interpretation, but a wealth of new data from other parts of the general Massim area have led to broader historical and comparative perspectives on the Kula. *From Muyuw to the Trobriands*, by Frederick Damon, is a much-awaited major contribution to this collective effort, particularly because one of its central claims is that there are systematic *cultural* relationships among the island societies found in this area that are far more fundamental than the fact of their joint participation in the exchange of armshells and necklaces.

Damon sets out to develop a transformational model encompassing a subset of Kula societies, namely, the island groups along the "northern side" of the Kula Ring, including the Trobriand Islands to the west, Gawa in the centre, and Muyuw (Woodlark Island) to the east. His regional approach to these societies does not depend entirely on their inter-connection through Kula exchanges, but goes beyond trade to consider phenomena such as calendrical systems, village spatial arrangement, affinal exchange dynamics, productive differentiation, gardening symbolism, cross-cousin marriage rules, and hierarchical political relations. Towards this goal, Damon seeks to combine a "structuralism" of conscious forms with a "world-systems" approach (denuded of the centre-periphery notions critical to Wallerstein's theory).

In this perspective individual social units are relational products of the larger system. Particular cultural forms are not autonomous entities connected by economic means to other autonomous entities. Rather, the cultural elaboration of one place is a consequence of the cultural forms of the whole and of other particular places. (p. 13)

Throughout the book Damon describes a “continuum of differences” (p. 225) by triangulating his own ethnographic data from Muiuw, Nancy Munn’s work on Gawa, and the writings of ethnographers of the Trobriands (principally, Austin, Leach, Malinowski, Montague, Weiner, Powell). Basic to the analysis is the claim that there is a regional inversion between concentric hierarchy in the Trobriands and static dualism in Muiuw. This regional inversion is manifested, for example, in west-to-east contrasts between temporal and spatial metaphors, between vertical and horizontal garden markers, between centre-periphery structures and east-west (that is, “following the sun”) parallel structures, between prescriptive cross-cousin marriage and its proscription, and between the external and internal origins of social rank. For many of these contrastive values, Damon tries to demonstrate that Gawa is an intermediary case.

This highly creative, and at times speculative, regional analysis is further enriched by three additional avenues of analysis. First, Damon notes that there is, to some degree, a correspondence to this areal continuum within the immediate Muiuw island area: for instance, the western district tends to shift various cultural values towards those values found in the Trobriands. An important reason for this intra-Muiuw differentiation is the historically and archaeologically attested productive variation among villages rich in gardening, villages active in Kula trading, villages skilled in wood carving, and villages expert in fishing. Second, Damon observes that some of the regional inversions correspond to temporally layered differences at Muiuw. It appears that the island was considerably more economically differentiated and more politically hierarchical in the mid-nineteenth century. In other words, there is a diachronic dimension to the structural inversions most evident in their regional dispersal. But informants recall important recent changes in ritual symbolism that have blurred the metaphorical correlation between village and garden layout and the performative actions of the culture hero Geliw. The combination of these points leads to the perplexing question: why have historical forces operated to mask the “old customs” of Muiuw when it is these *later* forms that fit more coherently into Damon’s hypothesized regional continuum. Third, Damon points out there are serious discrepancies between Muiuw’s cultural models and its social

realities. An important instance is the quadripartite organization of matrilineal clans, which correlates with wind direction, spatial symbolism, and totemic values. Although not themselves ranked (as in the Trobriands), these clans together represent a logic of hierarchical encompassment. Now, the interesting point is that, today, Muyuw has eight, not four, clans, a fact which might suggest a historical shift towards non-hierarchical social organization and a recognition — echoed in certain myths — that power or force is a matter of individual accomplishment rather than presupposed social position.

*From Muyuw to the Trobriands's* central hypothesis, that there exists a coherent regional system on the “northern side” of the Kula Ring *not* defined by the Kula itself would certainly have delighted the late Edmund Leach, who argued forcefully that the Kula was not a “Massim-wide thing-in-itself” (“Conclusion”, *The Kula*, edited by E. Leach and J. Leach [Cambridge University Press, 1983], p. 535). Rather than placing several societies as positions along a line of generalized exchange, Damon's argument suggests, much like Leach's classic work on highland Burma, that alternative models of society (symmetrical versus asymmetrical or egalitarian versus hierarchical) might themselves be areally and historically ordered. This approach, I believe, is promising to the degree that analysts are able to specify more clearly the range of *types* of cultural differentiation characterizing a mini-world-system. In this book I count the following: (1) the presence versus absence of a phenomenon, (2) the stressed versus unstressed weight of a phenomenon, (3) contextual variation of values (for example, spatial rotation of symbolic values), (4) alternative symbolic logics (for example, temporal versus spatial models), (5) inversions of signifiers (horizontal versus vertical garden markers), (6) inversions of signified values, and (7) differences by degree (for example, continuum of value shifts). In other words, we need to think more precisely about terms such as “differentiation”, “continuum”, and “inversion” if this approach is to develop. Finally, more attention needs to be directed at the critical issue of the *locus* of the underlying transformational logic unifying a stipulated region. For a structuralism like Levi-Strauss's, which posits a universal cognitive or neural patterning homologous to divisions in the natural and social worlds, the

problem is avoided, since there need be neither a social substrate to support, for example, a set of mythological variations, nor a conscious mind to ground intentionality or agency. But Damon here urges a structuralism of conscious models, and this implies that either we rely on one culture's image of its neighbours (that is, what people in Muyuw think people in the Trobriands are doing) or else we are left with transformations labelled "cultural" without a social group whose meaningfulness they express.

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