When a distinguished British social anthropologist writes a book on emotion, that's news. A. L. Epstein, professor emeritus at the University of Sussex, well known for his writing on political and legal issues in Central Africa and Melanesia, has done just that.

In the last two decades, anthropologists have paid increasingly more attention to the role of emotion in human behavior. There have been many important contributions toward understanding how culture shapes emotion, as well as some progress toward sorting out the mix of pan-cultural and culture-specific in emotion behavior. Most of these studies have emerged from dissertation research by younger scholars. It was little more than twenty years ago that emotion emerged almost by accident as a focus of research (eg, Jean Briggs's Inuit study), but more recent research has been specifically designed to investigate emotions (eg, Catherine Lutz's Ifaluk study.)

Epstein comes to emotion through a very different route. He had already done extensive ethnographic work, but came to feel that for some questions, the current concepts of social anthropology were inadequate. While trying to understand a political crisis over federation in Central Africa, he found himself pushed to draw on psychoanalytic ideas about emotion to explain the very different reactions of different populations. As Epstein developed his thinking about emotion he drew especially from psychologists like Sylvan Tomkins (whom he praises), anthropologists like Catherine Lutz (whom he criticizes), and most ingeniously and interestingly, from the 1979 novel, Aimbe the Pastor, written in English by Paulias Matane, a Tolai.

For a decade now, Epstein has been writing short pieces on emotion, sharpening his pen, as it were. Perhaps the most notable of these was his 1984

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Royal Anthropological Institute Occa­sional Paper on "The Experience of Shame in Melanesia," subtitled "An Essay in the Anthropology of Affect." This was both survey and attempt to deal with some of his own data from the Tolai of Matupit, New Britain, a culture which he and others had already described and analyzed at length.

Then, in 1986, he took the logical next step, returning to the Tolai to reexamine their behavior in the light of emotion. The importance of this book, then, lies not just in its elaboration of the role of emotions in one Melanesian culture. More important, it shows the centrality of emotion in human behavior ("in the midst of life") by demonstrating its power of explanation, the sorts of things that can be understood better by including considerations of affect in the conceptual tool kit. In his first footnote, Epstein quotes a premature but prescient 1935 statement from Seligman, "Today no anthropologist would regard as adequate any explana­tion that did not give full weight to the emotional elements." The next year, on the second page of Naven, Gregory Bateson made a similarly strong claim for what he called "ethos." Either quotation could serve as the epigraph for this book.

The real strength of the book lies in three central chapters treating "Work, Ambition, and Envy," "Kin, Love, and Anger," and "Tambu, Grief, and the Meaning of Death." Epstein convincingly uses insights about Tolai emotions to go beyond his previous accountings of economic, judicial, and ritual aspects of Tolai culture. He makes effective use of data, anecdotal and systematic, drawn from his thirty years of experience with Tolai in New Britain and in England.

By now there are many good descriptions of emotion concepts from other Pacific cultures, and Epstein is able to locate the Tolai in terms of their neighbors. For example, the Tolai idea of "varmari" fits in well with a common pan-Pacific emotion that is close to the English "love," but includes more nurturance, even sadness, and much less romance and sexuality.

On the whole, the many recent writings on emotion by anthropologists have tended to treat it as an end in itself, which is fair enough given the newness of the subject. But now Epstein has made an important step forward by applying these newly learned lessons to the understanding of many other aspects of culture. Half a century later, Seligman's dictum is being realized.

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