

## Book and Media Reviews

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butes, the opportunity now exists for exploring new issues in these islands.

A significant contribution to Polynesian research specifically and Oceanic anthropological research in general, *Polynesian Outliers: The State of the Art* will indeed serve as an essential baseline for present and future outlier studies. As a teaching tool, this collection may be too advanced for many undergraduate contexts but would be excellent for graduate students with prior coursework in Pacific Islands studies or Oceanic anthropology.

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*The Haus Tambaran of Bongiora: A View from Within of the Tambaran and Yam Cults of the Abelam in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea*, by Godfried Johan Marie Gerrits. Lugano: Museo delle Culture di Lugano, 2012. ISBN 978-88-7795-215-8, 486 pages, preface, maps, tables, photographs, appendixes, notes, glossary/index, bibliography. US\$169.99.

The origins of *The Haus Tambaran of Bongiora* are arresting. Between 1972 and 1977, Godfried Gerrits was a doctor and the provincial officer for leprosy and tuberculosis control at the hospital at Maprik Town in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). In early 1973, people from Bongiora village, a few miles to the northwest of Maprik, offered to sell him some carvings associated with a korombo (haus tambaran in Tok

Pisin) that had been built in Bongiora in 1965. In 1972, these carvings had been used in the Utmandji and Kimbi male initiation sequences, and in offering the remnants to Gerrits, Bongiora people appear to have been hoping for a novel recycling of their art production. Instead, Gerrits negotiated a deal through which they would reconstruct and restore the two initiation chambers involved in the 1972 initiations. Subsequently, he had these reconstructions removed to European museums: the Putilaga chamber, in which the Kimbi sequence was staged, went to the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, and the LungwallIndu chamber, used for the Utmandji stage, to the Linden Museum in Stuttgart. Anyone who has been fortunate to see either of these truly breathtaking displays will know how indebted we are to Gerrits for his efforts in documenting Abelam culture.

Following an introduction, the book's second chapter provides an extremely detailed description of the Bongiora korombo, which was still standing and in relatively good condition in 1973. As many readers will know, the Abelam became famous for these remarkable structures. Their enormous, cantilevered facades, painted with row upon row of looming, ritual faces, constitute a civil engineering triumph and, together with the profusion of other graphic and plastic art that adorned them, an exemplar of just how spectacular artistic production can be in small-scale societies.

The greater part of the book, though, is taken up by the topics mentioned in the subtitle—the initiation sequence associated with the Abelam Tambaran and yam cults, both of

which had their ritual “eye,” so to speak, in the haus tambaran. Abelam initiation sequences were some of the most elaborate in New Guinea. Based largely on participant accounts, supplemented with some firsthand observation, chapters 3 and 4 describe each stage of the sequence as it was conducted in and around Bongiora. Exceptionally close attention is paid to the Utmandji and Kimbi stages that were conducted in the Lungwallndu and Putilaga chambers, respectively. The Abelam were also famous for producing exceptionally long yams. Chapter 5, billed as a “brief summary” of long yam cultivation and the yam cult, is in reality a detailed description of both.

Gerrits is not an anthropologist and makes no attempt to analyze the data he furnishes. His aim is “purely” ethnographic, an extended and detailed description. In chapter 6, however, he does attempt a quasi-theoretical point, arguing that the urungwall represented “the tangent plane where the Tambaran and the Yam Cult intersect” (368). Materially, the urungwall were referred to as the “backbone” of the haus tambaran (281), three- to four-foot-long, carved wooden cylinders that served as resonant cavities for bamboo trumpets. On a spiritual plane, they produced the uncanny voice of the ngwallndu—the so-called Tambaran spirits. The notion that the ngwallndu are intimately involved in both the initiation and yam cult is hardly new, but Gerrits provides a quite comprehensive account of the evidence connecting them.

One cannot help but be impressed by the sheer volume of data that Gerrits presents in this volume. His

textual descriptions are meticulous, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, and they are complemented by an extraordinary range of photographs (some 135, not counting those in the appendixes that document each item in the chamber displays). Many, including some that document intimate phases of the initiation process, are probably unique. Certainly, no book has ever quite managed to convey, as this one does, the extraordinary labor investment, artistic skill, and sheer volume of aesthetic production that was invested in both the structure and the cults that revolved around it. Many Abelam initiation sequences were designed to strike terror into initiands, and, at several points, Gerrits’s descriptions help to provide insight into just how they evoked this affective response. The volume provides as much ethnographic detail as any published source about Abelam initiation and yam cult practices.

Since Gerrits is not an anthropologist, it is unnecessary—and it would certainly be uncharitable—to criticize his volume for its anthropological failings. Comments on a few omissions and issues are in order, though, so that the would-be reader knows what to expect. First, it is not easy to gauge how representative the Bongiora korombo, initiations, and yam-cult practice are in space and time. As Bongiora interlocutors acknowledged, for instance, some of the initiations they described had been foreshortened or telescoped to adapt to postcontact developments (70, 139, 370n7). The korombo facade had only four rows of designs “because it was too small to paint all the other items” (47). On the other hand, it would be hazardous

to imagine that circumstances did not commonly force similar adaptations in precontact times.

Lacking anthropological skills, as the author notes, he was unable to situate his accounts of the yam and tambaran cults in the social and cultural organization of Abelam society. As he also acknowledges, he obtained virtually no information from female interlocutors and hardly any more on women's participation in the structures and events he describes. It is part of the charm of Gerrits's work, however, that he goes out of his way to emphasize these limitations and even to acknowledge where he thinks his claims may be wrong, for instance regarding his introductory survey of Abelam social organization (370n13).

Finally, the reader is advised that, although Gerrits's descriptions of core aspects of Abelam initiation (here supplemented with photographs of initiatory and ritual penis bleeding) are all but unique in the New Guinea ethnographic record, they do raise privacy and confidentiality issues. The information on which the book is based was originally made available only to the Basel and Stuttgart museums and to the National Museum of Papua New Guinea "on a condition of confidentiality" (24) because at the time some of his Abelam interlocutors "felt that certain details of the initiations should not be made available to non-initiated Abelam" (370n3). Gerrits's justification for making them public now is that much of Abelam culture has gone and that PNG National Cultural Policy advocates they be made available to present-day Abelam, their descendants, and other students of

Abelam culture (24). Others may feel that this issue is rather more complex.

These reservations aside, the academic world is fortunate that Gerrits undertook what has clearly been a long-term labor of love. Though *The Haus Tambaran of Bongiora* is unlikely to draw a wide academic audience, this should not be held against it because it succeeds well in achieving its modest and clearly identified goals.

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*Christian Politics in Oceania*, edited by Matt Tomlinson and Debra McDougall. ASAO Studies in Pacific Anthropology Series, Volume 2. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. ISBN 978-0-85745-746-2, ix + 260 pages, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$90.00.

This edited volume continues a by now significant history of monographs in the anthropology of Christianity in Oceania, with *Mission, Church and Sect in Oceania* (edited by James Boutilier, Sharon Tiffany, and Daniel Hughes, 1978) and *Christianity in Oceania* (edited by John Barker) as its main predecessors in the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) series. So what has *Christian Politics in Oceania* to offer to the current popular field of studies of Christianity in the Pacific and beyond?

In their introduction, the editors repeat the question that Fenella Cannell posed in her edited volume, *The Anthropology of Christianity* (2006): "What difference does Christianity