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# Glowczewski, Barbara and Henry, Rosita ed. *The challenge of indigenous peoples. Spectacle or politics?*

László Kürti

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Glowczewski, Barbara and Henry, Rosita ed., *The Challenge of Indigenous Peoples. Spectacle or Politics?* Oxford: The Bardwell Press, 2011. Hardback, ebook, 300 pp. £90.00. Published June 2011.

- 1 At the outset, I must confess that since I am not a specialist in Asia, not even an anthropologist of Aboriginal tribal areas, I was a little hesitant to pick up this book for a review. Having started to read it, I became more and more overwhelmed by the many-faceted new ideas and detailed analyses of art forms, performances and festivals from Oceania, Australia, Siberia and India. Since I have been involved with performance and dance myself for the past thirty years, and having just recently completed an edited volume on festivals, I became convinced that I could evaluate this book for what it brings to my knowledge in these areas. I hope that my comments will be well-taken by the authors from somebody who comes from the field of anthropology of Europe and dance.
- 2 “The challenge of indigenous peoples” opens with an introductory essay by Barbara Glowczewski mapping the terrain on indigeneity and performance (“Between Spectacle and Politics: Indigenous Singularities) and sets the tone for the entire project. In “Nomads But ‘Anchored’: Desert People and Kimberley People,” *Stéphane Lacam-Gitareu* discusses the notion nomadism as it relates to Australian hunters and gatherers. The question is apt: if the Australian aborigines “have no need to hunt or collect plants from the bush to be able to feed themselves, even if these activities still have a place in

their daily lives. On the other hand, one could ask whether they are still nomads.” As the author points out “there is no no-man’s land.” It turns out, after the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1976), many groups opted to return to their ancestral land in vehicles, and new communities – called “outstations” – were set up. Obviously, new mobility defines tribes that were once very mobile. But more interestingly is the concept of “immobile movement,” that of “those of the initiates who retrace the journeys of their ancestor-figures in the Dreaming.”

- 3 Jessica De Lary Healy provides fascinating insight in her chapter “The Genealogy of Dialogue: Fieldwork Stories from Arnhem Land,” on how today’s young Australians – more precisely the Yolngu people – use high-tech means to recover lost knowledge of their ancestors by repatriating records, fieldnotes, photographs and objects collected throughout the twentieth-century by researchers and housed in various museums. One such object, a diamond patterned bark painting representing the ghost Murayana, was also digitalized and used by descendants in a new festival context. As she argues: “Digital repatriation from museums has enabled the renewal of social and ritual practices on the ceremonial ground. At the same time, formal collaborations of the type described here present archival institutions with the opportunity to restore meaning to their old collections by providing them with a dialogic history of these collections” (p. 66). Although she does not make it clear, her chapter is also a warning that fieldwork and items and/or photographs taken could be of enormous use later, but they could also present potential conflicts between researchers and informants.
- 4 In the chapter titled “The Resounding of a Plane Crash: Articulating Gender Relations in a Festival Performance of the Aeroplane Dance in Borroloola, Australia,” the anthropologist *Anke Tonnaer* investigates gender roles and dance performance with reference to the Aeroplane dance. This chapter is a real gem and I was immediately thinking of the Trobriand cricket (both the film and fascinating response to colonialism). There during cricket matches one hears recent songs and sees new dances associated with the new elements of cricket, ridiculing onlookers or opposing teams and the special PK dance. I found PK dance of the most incredible inventions of the Trobrianders. PK is a brand of chewing gum of Wrigley’s, an American company that was already producing chewing gum in Melbourne Australia by 1915. In 1929, Wrigley’s introduced its new brand, PK – the name came from the company’s policy Pack tight-Keep clean! In no time, the chewing gum became a household item across the entire British Empire. That it made it into a tribal song is no incident then. Similarly, in the series of cricket dances there is the Aeroplane; dancers imitate the take-off and landing of an airplane. Does this sound similar? Well, yes. In her chapter, Tonnaer is analyzing the story of Little Eva, a B-24 US bomber that crashed killing several soldiers. The airplane and the ordeal of the survivor were made into a song and dance sometimes during the 1950s by the aborigines and performed at various occasions. It was, however, last dances in 1993 when it was filmed and then faded into history. This followed the traditional norm: when the song’s composer dies his or her song cannot be performed again (the original composer was a Yanyuwa man who was involved with the search party to find the missing airman of Little Eva). At a 2001 festival, the dance belonging to the so-called “little history” songs (meaning those songs of recent past that could be performed at any time with no restrictions) surfaced again with an important proviso: this time it was appropriated by women performers. This shift was

facilitated by the fact that one of the performers was named the owner of the originally male song.

- 5 In “Two Intercultural Stagings with the Yolngu and the Kija: The Representation of Relations ” the French anthropologist, *Martin Préaud*, discusses the 1999 Darwin Festival of a play called *Trepang*, based on the historic trading between Macassan (Indonesian) and Australian tribesmen (Yolngu). *Trepang* is a sea-cucumber which was the main object of trading between the two peoples. The drama offers a window to reveal how two distinct cultures met, exchanged and traded goods, ideas and values. What was a real tour de force for the director (Andrish Saint-Claire) is that he used natives from both societies to reenact these historic meetings – all songs, dances and texts are performed by indigenous actors in their respective languages. After this theatre play, the director was called by an artists’ group to direct another staged event called *Fire*, fire burning bright. The play concerned a killing of Australian cattlemen who were charged with killing a cow; in retaliation their bosses poisoned them and burned them. The staged drama, played entirely by descendants of the victims, is an actual reinterpretation of the horrific event and at the same time reveals the “very ambiguous relation between Indigenous people and Whites in this part of the country” (p. 93). Based on this, the author ends his chapter with a plea for a “theatrical anthropology” – a model based on that of Victor Turner who espoused earlier a dialogic study by molding performances and daily life.
- 6 In Chapter 6, “You Can’t Keep it to Yourself ”: Indigenous Australian Artistic Strategies in France, 1983–2006,” *Arnaud Morvan* deals with the way in which Australians have been presented and/or represented in France through their art works. 1983 was a historic starting point when a group of Warlpiri men (from Lajamanu in the Tanami Desert) were invited for the exhibition *D’un Autre Continent: Australie, le rêve et le réel* at the Musée d’Art Moderne. They created a traditional ground painting and together with Yolngu dancers from Yirrkala in eastern Arnhem Land performed at Peter Brook’s Théâtre Des Bouffes du Nord. A truly historic moment!
- 7 Following this line, in “Urban Strategies and Artistic Performances” *Géraldine Le Roux* describes the new art scene in France and the way in “which the artists played with the definition of their Aboriginality in the world of international art” (p. 124). Being an anthropologist and a museum curator, Le Roux is exceptionally well poised to describe the changing landscape of Aboriginal or Indigenous art scene both at home and abroad. As we learn from her, Aboriginal artists received help by the new social reforms of the early 1970s financially encouraging and promoting their art forms. In 1987, several artists trained in Western art techniques, from New South Wales and Queensland managed to create the first artistic cooperative, the Boomalli Aboriginal Art Residence Cooperative. Among its main objectives were to fight Eurocentric definitions, primitivism and arbitrary classifications of Aboriginal art that had been established by Westerners over the course of centuries. In the author’s expression “to decolonise” the works and reveal their emotive and political power (p. 129). However, the 1990s were also times of flux and closures as several artists decided to take on new vistas. In 2004 a new artists’ collective called proppaNOW has started with the idea of creating oversea exhibitions and study trips for artists and at the same time to express their frustration with the way in which Aboriginal culture has been represented thus far. Le Roux analyzes several art object – created by Richard Bell, Fiona Foley, Clinton Nain among others - in detail which affords a real feeling as to what these artists are all about.

Unfortunately, the reader is not provided with the possibility to visualize these important art works.

- 8 In the next chapter, written by Wayne Jowandi Barker, an Australian indigenous (actually of mixed parentage) songwriter and film-maker, we learn about similar concerns from an insider's perspective. Titled "Shake-a-Leg: Aboriginal Festivals and the International Stage", the author describes the highly successful 1992 Stompem Ground indigenous festival he organized with others. This started the career of such acclaimed performers as the country/folk band the Pigram Brothers, a group that became the first Aboriginal group included in the Australian Music Industry's Hall of Fame in 2006. Another international star orchestra, Youthi Yindi, similarly trace its founding back to Barker's milestone Stompem Ground festival. We also learn about how the artist traveled to France, met his future wife (actually one of the editors, Barbara Glowczewski), and how he organized many festival venues in his new home as well as elsewhere.
  
- 9 Through chapters 9 and 11, the authors discuss in one way or another notions of authenticity and politics as they relate to indigenous festivals. Glowczewski and Henry argue in "Dancing with the Flow: Political Undercurrents at the 9th Festival of Pacific Arts, Palau 2004" that the best way to understand this festival is to look at how "participants confront profound existential contradictions in their attempts to reconcile tensions between tradition and modernity"(p. 159). Palau, a small island with a population of 20,000, has become famous for organizing a milestone event with over 2,700 members from 26 countries. With a troubled history of various colonial empires (Spain, Germany, Japan), the Palauans are proud of their heritage which is equally multifarious. In a fascinating example, the authors discuss the difference between the Japanese Nanyo-Odori (South Seas Dance), a dance adapted by Japanese travelers and tradesmen who spent time in the Pacific earlier, and Matamatong, a Micronesian dance performed by a team of Palauan women elders at the Festival. This gendered dance, originating perhaps around 1914 with the end of the German occupation in Micronesia, is accompanied by songs in a mixture of Palauan, Japanese and English. What is remarkable is that while the Palauan women perform the steps of this popular dance today by imitating the marching step of US soldiers, the Japanese version includes steps that resemble that of the German soldier's marching step (the goose step)! Similarities as well as differences aside, these performances raise important questions about authenticity and heritage and about the ownership of intellectual property. More importantly, however, such festivals "provided a discourse that attempted to counterbalance the fragmentary effects of modern nation-state politics in the Pacific, by celebrating linkages, and relationships of exchange" (p. 179).
  
- 10 In chapter 10 and 11, Wolfgang Kempf deals with the importance of Pacific festival (The First South Pacific Festival of Arts Revisited: Producing Authenticity and the Banaban Case"), and Jari Kupiainen addresses notions of staged performance ("Kastom on Stage is not Staged Custom: Reflections on the First Melanesian Arts and Cultural Festival). Kempf argues that the first South Pacific Festival of Arts in Fiji was all about the politics of authenticity that "sought to regulate and monitor boundaries of articulation in the art of indigenous societies in the South Pacific, thereby preserving the ideal of a pure cultural essence" (p. 178). He illustrates this by focusing on the Banaban stick dance (te karanga) as it was first performed on stage by skilled dancers stressing their legitimate tradition and ethnic autonomy. All this has led the Banabans to a "strategic

essentialism” (G. Spivak) - “cultural practices of constructed authenticity that fundamentally matter for surviving as an ethnic group” (pp. 185-186).

- 11 In a similar fashion, Jari KUPIAINEN describes the historic 1998 first Melanesian Arts and Cultural Festival – *Spirit Bilong Melanesia* – in Honiara in the Solomon Islands. With the central theme of “One People, Many Cultures,” the festival was explicitly a regional celebration, organized by locals for the locals, and not for an imagined Western audience. The “kastom” of Melanesia (a large region with a population of approximately 10 million, and with a linguistic diversity of over 1300 languages!) is a concept that emerged in the 1930s to oppose the British who were bent on getting rid of the traditional way of life and rituals. By relying instead on pre-Christian mythology, singing and dancing, Melanesians saw their kastom as a means to subvert colonial strategies and by so doing to achieve communal self-definition and autonomy against outside pressures.
  
- 12 Chapter 12 by Alexandre Soucaille (“The Forest, the Warrior and the Dancers: Staging the Question of Indigenous Peoples in India”) discusses India which is a little far from the previous chapters both in its approach and themes. Yet, it is a fascinating treatment highlighting special problems the notions indigenous and tribal causes in India with special reference to the Adivasi and the hero freedom fighter, Birsa Munda. Through a brief discussion, Soucaille analyzes the significance of a statue, known as the Hazaribagh Lake and installed in February 2000. It depicts two Adivasi women dancers together with a man playing a drum. What is significant is that after erecting the statue a public outcry followed about hierarchy, indigenes and femininity (the dancing women are bare-breasted). This is certainly not the powerful staged myths of Australians described in previous chapters neither is the wholesale elevation of Aboriginal artwork into the international art market. As illustrated by Soucaille, however, the Adivasi situation in India does represent a different facet of local and minority struggle that will provide anthropologists with plenty of materials for the coming decades to come.
  
- 13 I was very happy to find a chapter on little-known Siberian tribes, the Khanty and Mansy, of which a few scholarly analyses exist in English and very little on their performing arts. This is more so since I was able to visit Hanty Mansisk in 1995 and had a chance to witness several local feasts as well as a traditional ritual sacrifices. I have not been able to see the bear ceremony described by Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg (“From Good Fortune to Khanty Identity: The Bear Games”) in his chapter but since many descriptions of it exist in Hungarian – Hungarians have an in depth knowledge of the Khantys since the mid-19th century, when the first Hungarian research conducted fieldwork there apparently focusing on proving the linguistic relationship between Hungarian and the Finno-Ugric tribes such as the Khanty and the Mansy – I was more than eager to read the recent analysis by Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg. The author, who conducted fieldwork among the Khantys during 2004-2007 and finished his PhD dissertation in 2010, vividly tells the tale of what happened to this small tribe in Siberia under various political systems. Khanty use their newly discovered bear festival “to construct an image of themselves, their own image” in this post-Soviet time (p. 241). By rejuvenating their former hunting ritual complex, are they successful in fending off the onslaught of deforestation, oil and gas companies, and environmental destruction of their sacred land? I am somewhat more pessimistic than Normand de Chambourg who closes his chapter with the following sentence: “So

long as ritual games perpetuate life and the balance of Creation, Khanty people will inhabit the Land” (p. 242) and I hope that he is right.

- 14 All in all, I must admit that I enjoyed reading through this large volume and found the many case-studies interesting with several unique facets of artistic and tribal concerns. I think that it will make a nice companion to the book I co-edited on festivals (S. Kuechler, L. Kurti, H. Elkadi eds., *Every Day's a Festival!: Diversity on Show*, Sean Kingston Publisher), a volume that offers plenty of European case-studies with India and Australia included. I was not set off by the fact that “The challenge of indigenous peoples” focuses only on Asia (and only some parts of it) since there has been a rather awkward tradition in anthropological publishing for volumes produced as a spin off of workshops and conferences in which the editors attempt to cover everything. This is of course why reviewers often bemoan over the lack of cohesion and homogeneity in conference proceedings. Now here is a model how to do it right; it would have been totally presumptuous to include a chapter on the Americas, Africa, or Europe (although there is an obvious European dimension here both in the material analyzed as well as the primarily European authors). By so doing, Glowczewski and Henry produced an interesting book that is both more homogeneous in its content and scope and more skewed toward a specific readership in anthropology of Asia, art and performance studies.
- 15 Finally, I believe that this edited collection will take its well-deserved place on the book shelves among important treatises on arts, festival and tribal (world?) performance. With all the fascinating details of performance practices, revivals and festivals, including many forms of music and dance, the 14 chapters offer outstanding examples in the anthropology of arts and performance illustrating how theory and ethnography could be interwoven into a coherent volume. There are a few small points that I as a non-specialist in Asia and tribal areas would raise. The “spectacle or politics” in the title, I would argue, would have made more sense as “spectacle and politics” because it is obvious from the chapters that both are significantly present in most cases discussed. This becomes very obvious from the final chapter written by one of the editors, Rosita Henry (“Creative Networks: The Poetic Politics of Indigeneity”), who nicely summarizes issues on politics, performance and indigeneity. Moreover, I kept looking for more detail and analyses of some of the dances, songs and artwork discussed by the authors especially since these areas are legitimate subjects of interests in the anthropology of dance, and ethnomusicology. This especially is true for readers who are not specialists in the tribal areas analyzed but are interested in the anthropology of arts. My final point concerns visual anthropology for a scholarly volume of this magnitude and scale produced in 2011 sorely misses visuals (aside from the colorful cover). These would have offered readers a better sense of the magnificent variety of traditional and recent performances, festivals and dances. I certainly hope that a new edition could counter this by having a DVD attachment with songs, pictures, dances and maps (!) that would make this excellent collection a true milestone in the anthropology of performing arts.

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