Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

*Bangwa Kinship and Marriage* by Robert Brain
Ivan Karp


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logy of occupations or of voluntary associations and to those who categorize their work as urban anthropology.

**Bangwa Kinship and Marriage.** ROBERT BRAIN. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1972. ix + 195 pp., figures, map, photographs, tables, bibliography, index. $17.50 (cloth).

Reviewed by IVAN KARP
Colgate University

Robert Brain’s monograph on the Bangwa of West Cameroun is a valuable addition to the ethnography of West Africa. His description of the unusual and very complex kinship system of the Bangwa will provide considerable grist for the theoretical mills of those anthropologists who continue to debate the various merits of the alliance and descent perspectives. At the very least, the complexities of the Bangwa kinship and political systems can be used to fill the lacunae of a course in Peoples of Africa. It is doubly unfortunate that the exorbitant price will prevent this ethnography either from being used in courses or acquired in most personal libraries.

Brain’s book is, as are most recent studies, a partial ethnography. He writes:

I have made no attempt to cover Bangwa culture as a whole, although it will be made clear that the Bangwa double descent system, their complex alliances engendered by marriage and the system of marriage wardships are rooted in the hard facts of politics and economics. This book is primarily a contribution to Bamileke studies and only incidentally a contribution to anthropological theory [p. ix].

He more than realizes his modest objectives, and, in addition, provides an analysis of a social system in which there is an extreme cultural separation of groups and relationships based on hierarchical and egalitarian principles. This analysis will enable us to examine critically the theoretical contributions of Turner (1969), Douglas (1970), and Hughes (1968) among others. It is unfortunate that Brain does not address himself to the theoretical issues which are relevant to his analysis.

The author clearly sets out the historical, cultural, and political scene. He describes the Bangwa, a Bamileke-speaking group, as mediating economically between the other Bamileke groups of the grassfields to the west and the Banyang and the Cross River peoples to the east. The Bangwa traded grassfields slaves for Cross River oil and European goods. They were able to build politically elaborate trading states on a small scale. These states were oriented to their chiefs who controlled most of the trade by means of wardships which they held over large numbers of their subjects. Brain gives us an excellent description of the manner in which the social relationships of a small subchiefdom are oriented to the chief.

The relationship by which chiefs manipulate trade and their subjects is that of a marriage lord and his ward. Each person is the ward of four different marriage lords. The most important marriage lord is the heir of the original putative owner of an ancestress who was a slave. The Bangwa assume that all Bangwa are descended from a female slave. The other three marriage lords are patrilineal heirs of male members of a person’s matriline; that is, the heirs of mother’s brother, mother’s mother’s brother, and mother’s mother’s mother’s brother.

Relations between agnates operate primarily within the political-jural domain and contrast very strongly with the friendly and personal relations that obtain between a small group of uterine kinsmen called an atsen ‘ndia.

Marriage is a complex affair involving elaborate customary arrangements and what is one of the most expensive and complicated systems of bridewealth payments in Africa. The marriage lord-ward relationship is the key to understanding the institutional context of the political strategies of chiefs and notables. Brain’s discussion of the political and economic significance of marriage is very detailed and informative. His analysis of the different hierarchical and egalitarian components in Bangwa relations with their mother’s brothers is an advance in a topic on which it appeared that almost everything had been said.

The discussion of the manner in which status terms from the domain of politics are utilized in the domain of kinship could have
been more detailed since it is really the crucial point in Brain's discussion of the relationship of the kinship and political systems. This issue will no doubt be covered in further publications on the political and religious systems of this fascinating people. One hopes that these publications will appear in a less expensive format.

References Cited

Douglas, Mary

Hughes, Charles C.

Turner, V. W.


Reviewed by RICHARD C. SCHMIDT
University of Oregon

In 1965 Usher concluded his Banks Island economic survey report by calling for the development of "concepts and models for the realistic and meaningful analysis and solution of the problems of arctic peoples" (1965:114). This is the burden of the present three-volume work which follows closely Usher's 1970 doctoral thesis in geography at the University of British Columbia. The present work is also a follow-up on the changed conditions in Sachs Harbour (the main settlement on Banks Island, Northwest Territories, Canada) since the impact of the 1965 report was felt. Usher's work has two great strengths. First, there is the comprehensive presentation of a vast amount of data gathered over a twenty-seven month period. There are sixty-seven tables and 111 figures and a detailed format similar to the original Area Economic Survey format, which was geared to the practical problem of evaluating the foundations for any planned socioeconomic development in the Canadian North.

Second, there is his attempt to develop a theoretical framework for a new approach to northern development. The bulk of my comments will refer to some of the significant problems this approach reveals about the development of policy. Usher's work should stimulate new research as well as critical debate.

Volume 1 deals with the origin of white fox trapping as a viable resource base for the community of Sachs Harbour. Usher claims that it is the most successful trapping-hunting community in North America. Successful means that white fox trapping is both ecologically feasible and economically rewarding to the Eskimo trappers (mean annual gross income $8,500) as well as important to the Canadian GNP (total annual value of wild fur being approximately thirteen million dollars). In other words, here is an ideal trapping economy with few viable economic employment alternatives to drain away the energies of trappers. In other areas of the North such draining has produced economically depressed communities full of ex-trappers and ex-hunters.

While Usher does realize that the entire trapping industry must be considered, his orientation is such that he must also focus on the white fox market which is of primary importance to the Bankslanders. With a wider focus one would not find the objectively ideal conditions of Sachs Harbour but rather systems subjectively idealized as