

*PAPUA NEW GUINEA*

FISCHER, HANS. *Geister und Menschen. Mythen, Märchen und neue Geschichten* [Spirits and humans. Myths, märchen and new stories]. Materialien zur Kultur der Wampar Papua New Guinea 2. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1994. 374 pages. Appendices of vernacular texts and variants to the main texts, bibliography, maps. Paper DM 78.—; ISBN 3-496-02546-8. (In German)

*Geister und Menschen* represents the result of a lifetime of work among the Wampar. Hans Fischer reports that he made his first contact with the Wampar people nearly forty years ago, in 1958. Since then he has made seven return visits of varying durations and pursued the task of collecting versions of myths as they have changed or been preserved over time. Between his visits he has published books concerning kinship, material culture, first contact, new religious movements, and division of labor according to sex; he has also compiled a dictionary. There is no doubt of Fischer's earnestness in investigating the Wampar.

Fischer's first volume in the present series mentions that the earliest identification of the Wampar was during their raids on coastal peoples in 1907, when they wiped out several tribes. The Wampar account as well as the official and missionary accounts of the development of this contact is also presented in volume 1. This, the second volume, presents the oral literature in a serious and systematic way, starting with stories of the mythical primal period and proceeding to stories of spirits and heroes. Fischer ends with a discussion of the difference in stories of the present time. The myths and stories have the advantage of being quite short, mostly less than a page. He presents twenty-six myths, eighteen spirit stories, fifteen stories of great men, and eight contemporary stories. In contrast to the mixture of Tok Pisin and vernacular used in volume 1, here all stories are presented first in German translation and then in the original vernacular, with different typefaces for each. Fischer gives an interesting exegesis of each story, which amounts to a kind of ethnology where vague effects in the myth are shown to be of cultural or demographic significance.

In this collection Fischer attempts to demonstrate the proper way to go about collecting myths, for only when proper details are available can a Papua New Guinean motif index be established and suitable cultural and philosophical conclusions be drawn. He asks a lot of myth collectors, setting for them the goal of collecting as nearly as possible *all* the stories in a given society and presenting them as objectively as possible under the ideal of *Überprüfbarkeit* (the ability to be checked). Fischer's criteria for the scientific collection of myths are presented with reference to a chart on pages 214-15. He takes a random selection of fifty-one publications from Papua New Guinea that concern myths (including two of his own earlier books) and shows the shortcomings of each. There is no doubt that his criteria are of considerable validity and will cause an embarrassing examination of conscience in anyone involved with the compiling of mythical culture. According to Fischer, the full and exact original-language text must be presented in its cultural context and in the context of its recording; otherwise the reader will flounder in the dark trying to deal with summaries in another language made in accordance with the objectives of a foreign ethnologist. Many versions need to be collected, for this alone will yield the most likely reading. Narrators must be presented as personalities, since peculiarities sometimes derive from these personalities. Finally, an attempt must be made at fullness of recording, so that every possible story is available for analysis and comparison.

I was bothered from the start, however, by external political and economic considerations. Why, for example, should I concern myself so much with the minute details of Wampar mythology out of the 854 SIL-recognized languages in Papua New Guinea? How is the money to be found for such a careful publishing job? I assume Fischer would be impatient with such questions, as he brushes off the topics of publishability, the interests of a professional press, and possibilities of financing (239). The question he sets in reply is: What

will the state of ethnology be as a science if authors fail to meet his minimum requirements by looking for generalizing conclusions before they properly gather data and by concerning themselves more with their own reputations than with the openness and accuracy of their material? No ethnologist claims to have a complete collection of stories for any society, so how can proper generalizations about mythology be made?

No one can accuse Fischer of just presenting his left-over fieldnotes. He has tried to illustrate what the thorough collection of myths should be like, and has worked over his material in a number of contexts. He comes to the rather startling conclusion that the most popular myths, those that he has collected in the greatest number of variants, are also the most widespread in terms of the motifs found in Papua New Guinea. This leads to the old problem in anthropology of deciding whether a particular phenomenon is widespread because of a process of diffusion or because there are certain similarities in the human condition everywhere. He also denies that myths represent "the creative imagination of a people" (cf. 241, with reference to Roy Wagner) or are the "charter" of a culture (30), since the most important myths are the most generic. But only a full and precise collection of myths and stories can begin to give any evidence for such philosophical thoughts.

While full credit must be given to Fischer for the earnestness of his methods and goals, as well as for his sheer industry and single-mindedness in his task, it should be observed (this is, after all, *überprüfbar*) that the myths of the Wampar represent quite a limited situation that does not apply to all of Papua New Guinea. Fischer found, for example, that the Wampar had no significant cultural connections for their myths — not to rituals, not to the surrounding geography, and not even to land ownership. All of these are burning concerns of mythology in other parts of Papua New Guinea. What is a contemporary Sepik *haus tambaran* (cult house) without a passionate struggle for land rights through the medium of half-secret mythology? What is "the sorrow of the lonely and the burning of the dancers" (SCHIEFFLIN 1976) without geographical mythology in the Papuan Highlands? And how can cargo cults be so attractive without implications of myth and ritual? One thus cannot necessarily recommend that Fischer's finely developed myth-collecting methodology be adopted for other areas of Papua New Guinea, where the different nature and role of myth may demand looser approaches that are more oriented to content than to linguistic analysis.

Fischer wishes to collect ever more versions of his stories, especially now, in what seems to be the twilight of Wampar mythology. But is he seeking an exactness that is not appropriate for this topic? Is he not in danger of hijacking black thinking for white purposes? He already notes that contemporary Wampar youths do not even know their own names or the meaning of those names; he also admits that interest in mythology in Papua New Guinea is a very German thing (217).

Full marks, then, to Fischer for showing us what care and industry can achieve, and for revealing a certain lack of earnestness in earlier ethnology. But Wampar studies should take a more modest stance among the rich resources of Papua New Guinea. Another type of research is needed: not one that floods the field with fine editions, but one more responsive to need and more applicable to other cultures as well.

#### REFERENCE CITED

SCHIEFFLIN, Edward

1976 *The sorrow of the lonely and the burning of the dancers*. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland.

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