southern perspectives on the New Guinea Highlands

RENA LEDERMAN—Princeton University

The Production of Inequality: Gender and Exchange among the Kewa. LISETTE JOSEPHIDES. New York: Tavistock, 1985. x + 242 pp., maps, figures, tables, notes, glossary, references, index. $35.00 (cloth).

Fabricated World: An Interpretation of Kewa Tales. JOHN LEROY. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. xii + 319 pp., map, tables, figures, appendixes, notes, references, index. $28.95 (cloth).

Kewa Tales. JOHN LEROY, ed. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. xxv + 251 pp., illustrations, appendixes. $21.50 (paper).

With a few exceptions, the anthropologists who initiated research in the New Guinea Highlands during the 1950s and 1960s conducted fieldwork in the northeast (for example, among the Siani) or the northwest (as among the Mae Enga, for example). The studies which emerged from this work have shaped our understanding of the Highlands generally. Anthropologists working in the main population centers of the northern Highlands treated “clans” (territorially based, exogamous groups whose unity is expressed in idioms of brotherhood and genealogy) as dominant institutions; clan structure and process defined the social structure there, even though Africanist structural models were frequently found to be inappropriate and exchange relations were recognized to be important. In many of these societies clans are essentially communities of men in which women have only secondary rights (an arrangement that seriously qualifies Highlanders’ anthropological reputation for egalitarianism).

The books under review all concern the Kewa-speaking peoples of Kagwa, in the Southern Highlands Province, a part of Papua New Guinea that had largely been ignored by anthropologists until the 1970s. Emerging contrasts between the northern and southern Highlands promise to deepen our understanding of the structural complexity of Highland societies by shifting the focus away from clans in different ways. In a number of southern Highland societies (for example, Wiru, Mendi, Wola), creating corporate groups is not the privileged finally of social action, even for men; a less centralized social organization prevails, in which clan leaders (Big Men) are less prominent than their northern counterparts, and the extra-clan ties of community members are foregrounded, or else exist in explicit tension with “brotherly” solidarity. Despite the relative de-emphasis on clanship, these southern Highlands societies are comparable to their northern neighbors in other ways (for example, degrees of economic intensity or male/female polarization and inequality).

While The Production of Inequality and Fabricated World both contribute to this sense of structural complexity by elucidating contradictions in Kewa society, they are extremely different in subject matter and analytical stance. Lisette Josephides’ study, a critique of Kewa ideology from the comparative perspective of political economy, explores the roots of gender inequality. Her book is notable for illustrating how the structure of rural Kewa social relations has been reproduced through the medium of postcolonial economic and political institutions. John LeRoy offers us an analysis of 81 Kewa folktales in Fabricated World, accompanied by Kewa Tales, a volume of enjoyable translations. Treating the tales as a species of literature and also
as a local model of society, he maps their structure and makes accessible their cultural references by means of ethnographic description. Fabricated World, in particular, is notable for its reflexivity, a style meant to parallel that of the tales themselves.

Neither Josephides nor LeRoy is content to describe the surface characteristics of the phenomena under study; both deny that what people do and what they say are simple reflections of one another. But while Josephides is concerned to expose how the Kewa create an ideological “smokescreen” that “euphemizes” their social reality, LeRoy believes that Kewa folktale are a kind of “auto-anthropology.” Imaginatively distancing people from their lived experience and turning the powers unseen in everyday life into tangible beings, the tales transfigure that experience in ways that enable people to understand themselves better.

Following the structural poetics of Barthes, Todorov and others, LeRoy believes that Kewa folktales (lidi) cannot be interpreted individually, but must be read “intertextually.” Consequently, he does not devote chapters of Fabricated World to the analysis of individual tales or types of tales. Readers interested in particular lidi are referred to Kewa Tales. Instead, LeRoy demonstrates convincingly that lidi are formed through the selection and combination of a number of stock episodes (or “sequences”). He identifies 11 types of sequence, and each chapter in Fabricated World is given over to the analysis of a single type, drawing on examples from various tales. Each type of sequence gives expression to a moral or ethical dilemma within a social domain (like siblingship or marriage and affinity). Sequences refer, for example, to improper relations between brothers, between brothers and sisters, or between sisters-in-law. They play out the implications of virilocality for women, or of differential access to wealth for clansmen. They dramatize the dire consequences of broken promises.

Although lidi are apparently quite amenable to formal analysis, LeRoy charts a course midway between a strictly literary dissection of the tales’ logical order and an interpretive search for their meaning. As he notes, “The view that the objective study of narrative should not deal with extranarrative causes, meanings, or references quickly runs into difficulties when applied to an exotic literature” (pp. 7–8). Nevertheless, LeRoy stresses that the tales do not simply reflect Kewa practice, but represent it as truthful fictions. Metaphoric statements about Kewa realities, the tales make possible the articulation and contemplation of contradictions that the Kewa live with every day, but do not otherwise put into words. As it happens, the dilemmas with which the tales deal bear in interesting ways on those with which Josephides is concerned.

According to Josephides, Kewa social structure constitutes a complex articulation of equalizing and hierarchical relations, an important point also made in other recent works on inequality in the Highlands (for instance, Andrew Strathern 1982). In particular, she argues that an ideology of equality among clansmen—which could be mistaken for a description of the society as a whole—obscures decidedly unequal relations between the sexes.

Kewa men and women vigorously assert that they work for themselves and produce things for their own use. Nevertheless one of their most important products—the pig—is rarely consumed by its producers, but usually enters into the exchange system as a gift during marriages, mortuary prestations and other clan-sponsored festivals. Kewa women may “own” pigs (p. 118), and the rules of exchange acknowledge female productive efforts by specifying that they be compensated with gifts when pigs they are caring for are slaughtered. But Josephides points out that since pigs change hands many times before they are slaughtered, and many men and women contribute to the production of each animal, it is possible that some of those with production-based rights in pigs may not be compensated adequately (p. 208).

Josephides believes that exchange—not just market exchange but even putatively “reciprocal” gift exchange—inherently involves the alienation of products from their producers (but see Sahlin 1974, Chapter 4). Insofar as Kewa women may not participate in clan prestations—by virtue of being “peripheral sojourners” in clans, with no rights to clan land and no voice in clan meetings—the ideology of reciprocity within this political domain acts as a “smokescreen” obscuring what is really the economic exploitation of women by men. Ideologically,
women (like men) are understood to control their own labor, and exchange is considered an equalizing relation. But from Josephides' critical perspective, women's labor is controlled indirectly by a political process from which they are excluded and over which they have no control.

While it is clear that women are not real members of clans, the data Josephides presents concerning Kewa men's and women's exchange practices are ambiguous and raise questions about local concepts of property and personal autonomy. On the one hand, in the pig kill context, women and men both told Josephides that men decided on the distribution of goods, and men appeared to have the practical power to go against their wives' wishes. On the other hand, Josephides' actual observations of distributions did not substantiate assertions of exclusive male control (pp. 196–197). While Josephides emphasizes that a woman cannot 'transact independently and create debts towards herself' with the pork her husband gives her to distribute during the pig kill, nevertheless 'most women did say that their own obligations had to be fulfilled' in their husbands' distributions, and at least some Kewa women had exchange obligations of their own about which they had strong feelings (pp. 127–128, 130). For example, at one pig kill Josephides observed that a woman claimed pork that her mother-in-law 'thought was coming to her so that she could discharge her obligations' (pp. 127–128). The latter's son intervened to redirect pork to his mother. He is quoted as saying, 'We can't have the old woman being shamed because she can't pay back her debts. It's not right' (p. 128).

But what sorts of obligations and debts do women have in Kewa society? Apparently, certain female obligations are recognized and respected by (at least some) men; perhaps there are also types of debts that men do not recognize as such but that women nevertheless claim?

These questions are not addressed directly in Josephides' ethnography. This may be because she has centered her analysis on clan-(male-) dominated domains—like the pig kill which, in preccolonial Kewa society, was staged to establish a group's political identity in new settlements after war-related dispersals—and does not devote equal time to a description of domains of life (such as the household) in which men and women together (or just women) participate. She has chosen this emphasis following Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead who argue

that some form of asymmetry favoring men is present in all cultures, and that women's perspectives are to a great extent constrained and conditioned by the dominant ideology. The analysis of the dominant ideology must thus precede, or at least encompass, the analysis of the perspective of women [1981:x].

The strength of Josephides' strategy is its foregrounding of existing relations of power. But in the effort to demystify institutions and ideologies assumed from a comparative perspective to be hegemonic, and to avoid the distortions possible in one-sidedly woman-centered analyses (p. 99), she risks overlooking the existence of alternative (perhaps even critical) local perspectives on the social order.

Nevertheless, some suggestions concerning alternatives can be gleaned from Josephides' ethnography, and still more from LeRoy's Fabricated World. They turn on the local meaning of "domesticity" (for want of a better term) and its relation to the male-dominated domain of public ceremonial life. While they cannot satisfy our curiosity concerning the female exchange obligations referred to above, these gleanings suggest that women do not entirely share men's idioms and values, and that neither women's nor men's commitments are simply encompassed and constrained by the clan community.

Thus, in a section concerning Kewa men's and women's descriptions of themselves and one another, Josephides quotes a man saying that women "just want to consume all the time, they don't care for politics or the name" (p. 127). And a woman told her, "Men are interested in celebrating the group name in these pig kills, but women are only interested in eating pork" (p. 135).

Similarly, LeRoy comments that women hardly take part at all in the events of the pig kill, but mostly prepare food or stand on the sidelines. Young unmarried women do participate actively by joining in male parades and by forming their own circle dances. However, neither
kind of participation simply supports the men’s efforts; each exists in counterpoint to them—the one harmonious and the other dissonant. Although men consider their own parades “to be primarily a celebration of politics and business, they welcome [the young women’s] intrusions, which may lead to betrothals.” But they

are not at all pleased with the girls’ circle dances, complaining that the songs are offensive. Young women do not, in fact, treat the pig kill as solemnly as men, nor do they respect its political definition. In their songs they too celebrate pig killing, but they sing about consuming pork rather than about exchanging it, and these gustatory interests often seem to conceal sexual ones. When bold, the songs provoke critical remarks and groans from men. Emotional needs, physical comforts, and other “domestic” matters have their place in ceremonies, so women seem to say [Fabricated World, p. 190].

There appears to be something of a conflict between men and women over the definition and evaluation of this situation.

Despite male disparagement and their own self-denigrating disclaimers (“We are just women . . . We can’t tell you anything; just women’s things.” Production of Inequality, p. 128), women’s preoccupation with consumption is likely to be neither trivial nor purely negative (a denial of sociality). But what does it mean? In neighboring Highland societies and among the Kewa as well (as the tales make clear), food is an ambiguous object and references to it may point to concerns other than the “physical.” In everyday contexts, the production and preparation of food is largely in female hands; Kewa women’s affirmation of consumption in ceremonial contexts, in the face of male objections, may be a way of making a claim on their products even there. Claims and counterclaims are possible because food is simultaneously of the household (where commensality and hospitality may initiate gift relationships between individuals both within and between clan communities) and of the public sphere (where its exchange constitutes male-dominated groups and their relationships).

Nor is the meaning of other aspects of domesticity self-evident, since they are defined in terms of local distinctions and relations which also need to be discovered. Implied in LeRoy’s anecdote is an active tension between the “domestic” (which in Kewa culture implies an individualized, outward orientation toward affines in other communities) and the “political” or ceremonial (that is, a collective, inward orientation to one’s own clan and community), a tension which LeRoy follows through at some length because it is a central theme in the tales.

Kewa communities are composed of several clans and are defined politically by cooperation in periodic pig kill festivals. In keeping with a theme pervasive in the southern Highlands, the festivals actualize community life which, according to LeRoy, “tends to dissolve into domestic, particular concerns” otherwise. He concludes that for both the clan and the community, “a major preoccupation is the threat that individual autonomy poses to group cohesion” (Fabricated World, p. 41), a point made also by Josephides in her description of her field community’s pig festival. LeRoy notes that many Kewa tales represent this social tension spatially

as resulting from a dialectic between a centripetal pull—toward that center of fraternity and cooperation that is, ideally, the euru [clan], its men’s house, and its ceremonial ground—and a centrifugal flight away from this center—toward zones of relative isolation and autonomy, namely the family houses, the gardens, the forest and, beyond, the neighboring community and the relatives one may have there [Fabricated World, p. 41].

In effect, the tales articulate a dialectic parallel to that articulated by Josephides, but with different associations and implications. In the tales, “men” and “women” do not confront each other as such, but rather as siblings, spouses and affines (a point Josephides notes about the Kewa, but does not emphasize). Ghosts (who may represent elders or affines) and murderous, forest-dwelling “poor men” pose threats to brotherhood in the tales, which also dramatize strong cross-sexual bonds between brothers and sisters. For Josephides’ opposition between female production and male appropriation and exchange, the tales substitute domesticity/ceremony and identify sisters as a source of wealth for men. However, the tales imply that the domains of domesticity and ceremony are related both hierarchically and complementarily; and they stress the problematic and conditional nature of sisterly beneficence.
What are we to make of this? To assess the tales as models or interpretations of Kewa society, we need to know more about the *lidii* genre than its content and form. We need to know who tells the tales to whom, why, and with what effect. LeRoy provides us with some interesting facts. It turns out that *lidii* are usually told when children are present (that is, by our definition, in "domestic" settings), and are told skillfully by both women and men. While the tales are not specifically a "women's literature," still they appear to be more closely associated with a female "voice" than with a male one. This may account for the foregrounding of certain themes (such as the association of marriage and death) and of structural contradiction and ambiguity generally; for their settings (Kewa homes and gardens, and the distant places that evoke women's marital residential movement); and for the prominence of women and the absence of Big Men as actors in the tales. *Lidii* also contrast with *ramani* (legends: community-specific historical narratives), a genre typically told by prominent men who consider it the more important of the two:

The influential and older men of Karapere, who preferred to narrate legends, left me with the feeling that tales had but slight importance; such inconsequential stuff could well be left to women and children [Fabricated World, p. 25].

That is, the *lidii* could have been ignored as a "muted" genre. LeRoy chose to focus on them not because he was interested in exploring an interpretation of Kewa society different from that expressed by Kewa leaders, but because he found their form attractive (literary structure was clearer to LeRoy in *lidii* than it was in *ramani*). In any event, through his exploration of the themes and metaphorical imagery of the tales, his readers end up overhearing snatches of Kewa self-criticism (threats to exogamy, to exchange and to brotherly community), and glimpsing "the face of anti-structure" (p. 44). *Lidii* demonstrate that the Kewa do not only euphemize their social relations, but also have means of reflecting upon their contradictions. Indeed, the critical thrust of Josephides’ analysis has its analog in what LeRoy suggests is the essentially "tragic" message of Kewa tales: "Virtually all the tales proclaim" that "society is flawed" (p. 241).

Given this message, and in view of Josephides’ analysis of Kewa society, it would have been interesting to have been able to compare male and female versions of particular stories. Judging from the neighboring Mendi, these versions can differ in significant ways (see Lederman 1986). It would have been interesting to learn about the contexts in which particular stories are used by different kinds of narrators. Unfortunately, because he could not collect *lidii* in natural, domestic settings (they were recorded at his house), LeRoy does not give us much information about the tales' performative aspects. Not knowing how men and women differently tell and "read" the tales limits what the tales can tell us about local perspectives on the contradictions and inequalities Josephides identifies. And LeRoy's own interpretations are less convincing than they otherwise might have been.

LeRoy calls *lidii* a "home grown social science," suggesting a similarity between them and the social analyses offered by Josephides and himself. But being of the culture as well as about it, *lidii* need not refer only to actual events and relations (as outsiders' accounts must to be valid). They may also explore the boundary between experience and possibility. Whether the Kewa understand themselves better or becloud their circumstances through them, the tales provide partial access to intra-Kewa dialogues concerning their own practices, and a sense of how Kewa men and women live with (and reproduce or contest) their inequality. One hopes that further work will reveal more about what the Kewa are saying to one another, and especially what they consider worth arguing about.

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submitted 11 August 1986
accepted 12 August 1986

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