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THE CONTENT OF CULTURE - CONSTANTS AND VARIANTS - STUDIES IN HONOR OF ROBERTS, JOHN, M. - BOLTON, R

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Author
BURTON, ML

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Content of Culture: Constants and Variants: Studies in Honor of John M. Roberts by Ralph Bolton

Review by: Michael L. Burton


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Nicaragua and beyond, lacked the basis to place the contemporary conflict in proper historical context. This book grew out of a collaborative project between a group of German academics (including the three co-editors) and a Nicaraguan research organization (CIDCA), meant to rectify this relative ignorance of Atlantic Coast history. The German team worked in four archives in three countries—the United States (Moravian Church Archives, Library of Congress), Germany (Moravian Archives), and Britain (Public Records Office), and gathered a wealth of primary documents, from which the ones published here have been selected. The collection also includes a number of landmark official documents in Coast history and excerpts from some key published texts. These materials are well presented, with carefully researched, extremely useful notes of clarification. Although we cannot easily assess what was left out, the collection certainly includes some gems: a British Consul’s description of the Mosquito government in 1848, ending with the recommendation that the young king “be shelved”; a missionary account of ethnographic observations on “trra-ethnatic tension between “Tawira” and “Sambo” Miskitu; a revealing series of (conflicting) reports on the Mosquito Convention (1894); a funeral eulogy to General George Hodgson, Creole hero of the 1926 revolution. The volume will be of great value to anyone seeking general historical background on the Atlantic Coast, and to specialists as a reference book. Crucially, it also will allow Nicaraguans, and especially Atlantic Coast people, to learn more about their own history, a right denied by their region’s dual marginality (in relation to Managua and to the imperial powers). It perhaps is unfortunate in this regard that the German language documents (approximately 150 pages) are left untranslated, thereby limiting their accessibility to Coast people, who often have English-language reading skills.

The first 90 pages contain three articles, each corresponding to a portion of the documents and to a discrete historical period. The articles are competent, but seem to fluctuate between merely reviewing events, and summarizing the documents’ highlights, and putting forth synthetic historical analysis. I expected a more sustained effort at the latter, given the articles’ length, and the authors’ excellent historical work published elsewhere. Two important and suggestive insights do emerge from the essays. Von Oertzen’s review of British presence on the Atlantic Coast to 1860 offers a fascinating discussion of the brief but influential career of Patrick Walker as British Consul (1844–48). A grasp of Walker’s “civilizing project,” meant to bring the Mosquito government and society into line with liberal principles of the day, helps us to make better sense of his two persisting legacies: the recruitment of Moravian missionaries (to act as a further civilizing influence), and the reinforcement of the Creoles’ (Afro-Caribbean English-speaking people) ascent in the Coast ethnic hierarchy, bypassing the Miskitu. Wunderlich treats the crucial period between 1860 and the early 20th century, when the Nicaraguan state annexed the Coast (1894) and the region came firmly under U.S. dominion. His account of the last years of the Mosquito government reveals the extent of inter- and intra-ethnic strife, which strengthened the Nicaraguans’ hand, and surely helped to undermine effective Indian opposition to the annexation.

All three articles would have benefited from a less static notion of “tradition” and ethnic identity, and a more reflective analysis of the relationship between culture and power. These problems are evident, for example, in von Oertzen’s assertion that Walker’s civilizing project had greater success among Creoles, because it ran up against “the inertia of Indian traditions” (p. 38); and in Rossbach’s claim that the missionaries’ involvement in Coast politics “arose from a lack of native political leaders” (p. 42). In addition, rather than simply reminding us that the documents are “biased” and “distorted,” they might have examined the more complex problem of how power relations between the Coast people and westerners structured the “reality” that the latter perceived.

One of the last documents is a 1924 Miskitu petition to the U.S. Department of State, complaining of oppression by a “race of people [the Nicaraguans] far more uncivilized than ourselves.” They ask that “the great U.S. government [above all other civilized Governments] . . . help to make us, as all other nations in need Free from Bondage” (p. 449). Did the Miskitu have a “national” consciousness in 1924? Does their stance toward the United States reflect strategic deference, cultural hegemony, or some combination of the two? What connections are there between these past tensions with “uncivilized” Nicaraguans and the contemporary conflict? Such questions, and many others, await a thorough ethnohistorical study of the Coast, which as the authors remind us, has yet to be written. The documents here provide a tantalizing window on the rewards that such a project would bring.


MICHAEL L. BURTON
University of California, Irvine

This book is based on a 1981 conference in honor of John M. Roberts that was held at Claremont, California. It contains chapters by anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists, many of them Roberts’ students or collaborators. The festschrift volume is organized around the major topics of Roberts’ research and will be of interest to researchers in psychological anthropology, cognitive anthropology, cross-cultural human development, and expressive culture. Most of the articles are reports of empirical research. While they are variable in quality, several of them are outstanding contributions to social science.

Jack Roberts made important contributions to culture theory, as well as to psychological and cognitive anthropology. While much of his work was concerned with intracultural variability, he was especially interested in cross-cultural replication of
intracultural patterns. His published work, listed in a bibliography, shows a great diversity of research topics, publication outlets, and research collaborators, and the 28 chapters effectively mirror the diversity of his work. Given this diversity, the volume achieves a high degree of coherence.

Roberts’ work on expressive culture began with a series of studies of games. Many of these were done in collaboration with Brian Sutton-Smith. Together, Roberts and Sutton-Smith proposed the conflict enculturation hypothesis, which states that games are models of conflicts engendered during enculturation. The first chapter in the volume, by Brian Sutton-Smith, titled “Games as Models of Power,” summarizes this work and provides an affecting description of Roberts’ research style.

Several other chapters are concerned with human development, including an interesting study by Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry of competitive games in adolescence; an article by Melvin Williams on Salish children’s games; and a nicely done factor analysis by Lambert and Tan of children’s strategies for solving puzzles, using data from the “Whiting’s Six Cultures Study.” From this group of chapters, the one that stands out is Robert and Ruth Munroe’s study of sibling order in Kenya. This article compares Abaluyia sibling order patterns with those described in the American psychological literature. While replicating the main finding of U.S. studies—a general decrease in cognitive performance from first-born to last-born—the Munroes find some subtle and interesting differences, which they trace to cultural differences in child-care practices.

From games, Roberts generalized his thinking to all kinds of expressive culture. He was notable for highlighting the expressive component of activities as diverse as sports, driving, flying, music, oaths, proverbs, tourism, deities, and machinists’ work. Many of the articles in the volume follow this tradition. These include papers on sports by Bolton and Chambers (Norwegian orienteering), Miller and Hutchins (boardsailing), Widmeyer and Loy (tennis), Hales and Paup (badminton and squash), and Hoffman (gliding). There are also two articles on expressive aspects of religion, by Garry Chisholm and Jan Braggard, and two articles on folktales, by Benjamin N. Colby and Ralph and Charlene Bolton.

A leader in the development of cognitive anthropology, Roberts was best known for his use of quantitative and experimental methods to study cultural sharing and variation. The volume contains two excellent pieces in this genre, one by D’Andrade and the other by Romney and Weller. D’Andrade discusses the sharing of cultural items, proposing the use of conditional probabilities to study the distribution of cultural items. Here the question is the likeliness that one person will know a cultural item given that some other person knows it. D’Andrade argues that cultural items are more likely to be completely shared, or unique, than partially shared. He finds support for his hypothesis using data from Roberts’ study of Navajo households (“Three Navaho Households,” Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 40[1959]:1-88) as well as his own data on beliefs about disease. D’Andrade’s conclusions about the nonindependence of cultural items are very important for culture theory, as is his conclusion that small samples of informants are sufficient for measuring the amount of sharing within a population.

Romney and Weller’s chapter is an early contribution in a series of articles that culminated in their work on cultural consensus (A. K. Romney, S. C. Weller, and W. H. Batchelder, “Culture As Consensus,” American Anthropologist 88[1986]:313-338). Unlike D’Andrade who is concerned with the sharing of individual items, Romney and Weller study the replication of a structure across samples, finding high replication of a kin-term structure across U.S. and Mexican fifth-graders and university students. The chapter introduces an important new method for testing the replication of structures, Hubert’s Quadratic Assignment Technique (see L. Hubert, Assignment Methods in Combinatorial Data Analysis, Marcel Dekker, 1987). Since 1981, this method has been widely used for a variety of anthropological problems.

In sum, the volume contains many chapters that report on empirical research using sophisticated methodologies and often building on Roberts’ research interests and findings. It is an accomplishment to have brought so many different people together to produce such a focused effort. It is too bad that it took so long for the volume to be published.


ROBERT A. PAUL
Emory University

This book consists of nine articles. Six are explorations of ethnographic data: Lila Abu-Lughod’s on Bedouins in Egypt, Geoffrey White’s on A’ara speakers in the Solomon Islands, Arjun Appadurai’s on Hindu India, Donald Brenneis’ on Hindi speakers in Fiji, Judith T. Irvine’s on Wolof, and Margaret Trawik’s on Tamil untouchables. The other three articles include an introduction by the editors, Catherine L. Lutz’s consideration of engendered emotion, and Daniel V. Rosenberg’s critique of several recent influential attempts to redefine the study of emotion. Most of the articles are very well written, and the ethnographic data are uniformly interesting: the book is a contribution of high quality and would make a good starting point for those seeking an entrance into the current state of thinking about emotions from a certain widely represented point of view.

That view, shared by most of the contributors, to some degree or another, with the editors, argues that “emotion,” for reasons having largely to do with deep-seated presuppositions of Western ethnopsychology, has been thought of as inner, private, individual, rooted in biology and individual psychology, and therefore less amenable than other aspects of