



Compte rendu de *Notes on the cognitive texture of an oral mind: Kitawa, a Melanesian Culture* de G. M. G. Scoditti

Diane Losche



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/7860>

DOI: 10.4000/jso.7860

ISSN: 1760-7256

Publisher

Société des océanistes

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2017

Number of pages: 356-358

ISSN: 0300-953x

Electronic reference

Diane Losche, "Compte rendu de *Notes on the cognitive texture of an oral mind: Kitawa, a Melanesian Culture* de G. M. G. Scoditti", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* [Online], 144-145 | 2017, Online since 15 December 2017, connection on 15 March 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/7860> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/jso.7860>

This text was automatically generated on 15 March 2021.



Journal de la société des océanistes est mis à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Compte rendu de *Notes on the cognitive texture of an oral mind: Kitawa, a Melanesian Culture* de G. M. G. Scoditti

Diane Losche

REFERENCES

SCODITTI G. M. G., 2012. *Notes on the cognitive texture of an oral mind: Kitawa, a Melanesian Culture*, Sean Kingston Publishing, Wantage, UK, 307 p., bibliogr., index, glossaire, ill. couleur, foreword Pierre Maranda.

- 1 This volume is the third monograph by Giancarlo Scoditti on Nowau culture, following *Kitawa. A Linguistic and Aesthetic Analysis of Visual Art in Melanesia* (1990) and *Kitawa Oral Poetry: An Example from Melanesia* (1996). In this volume Scoditti continues his long-term analysis of the island of Kitawa in the Milne Bay area of Papua New Guinea, with a particular focus on the aesthetic composition of Nowau cultural artefacts both visual and verbal. His major focus here, as throughout his project, is on Kitawan polychrome canoe prowboards. While most of the volume is devoted to an analysis of the boards and the oral poetry related to the boards, attention is also given to patterns and designs used on the body and head.
- 2 Scoditti worked very closely with two Nowau men, Towaitara Buyoyu and Siyakwakwa Teitei, both now dead, in his study of the aesthetic concepts of canoe making and structure. For Scoditti the polychrome boards are visual texts, with Towaitara, the composer of these texts, and the master composer of his culture, creating “masterpiece” prowboards, and Siyakwakwa the interpreter of these texts. Scoditti presents the former as the great artist, the latter the great scholar. Some of the most engaging writing in this volume comes when the author speaks of the two men:

“There are two characters in these collected notes whom I regard as my co-authors Towitara Buyoyu and Sikakwakwa Teitei, Towitara, as his favorite pupil has told me, is now a constellation in the sky, a destiny reserved for mythical heroes, great musicians, poets, singers with exceptionally good voices and famous engravers of polychrome prowboards for ceremonial canoes. Siyakwakwa has gone to Tuma, a small island north-west of Kitawa, the abode of the ‘souls with closed eyes’: he left his village in March 2003, shortly before my return.” (p. XIII)

3 One can only admire Scoditti’s long-term project involving fieldwork from 1973-2007. Here he approaches the problem of how the aesthetic templates of Nowau culture are generated by an individual artist and then transmitted from one generation to the next. He is specifically interested in the way in which the design of a canoe board is transmitted in this, an oral culture. The major question of this study is: How does the template for a design come to be generated by an individual artist, and regenerated through time, to others – an important and challenging question to pose about any cultural system.

4 The volume is beautifully illustrated with Scoditti’s pencil and ink drawings and is rich in ethnographic detail. There are brilliant observations, theses which in themselves would merit much discussion, for example:

“On Kitawa it is space that memorizes and visualizes time, and the marks left by time are in a sense spatialized; they are marks that become concrete, visual.” (p. 131)

5 This statement is an intriguing and important thesis, but surely one that requires substantial discussion, however the author moves on rapidly. This tendency to make categorical statements without accompanying elaboration will alienate some readers.

6 Scoditti’s study is centrally informed by Kantian aesthetics, a kind of *Critique of Judgement* in Melanesia. He introduces his notion of Nowau aesthetic categories as mental mechanisms, or schemas, in his Preface:

“Towitara and Siyakwakwa: Two men who throughout their lives planned their images according to mental mechanisms proper to an oral culture inherited from their ancestors...” (p. XIII)

7 Mind and reason, schema and model are Scoditti’s way of framing the concepts of this cultural aesthetic and its transmission and these terms are constants throughout the book. The author suggests that the ceremonial canoes created by Towitara are Kitawa’s masterpiece form: “the equivalent of a Gothic Cathedral” (p. 19) in an echo of Wilhelm Worringer’s famous study, *Form in Gothic*. Scoditti elaborates his notion of a masterwork as a cultural template:

“Just as a Gothic cathedral encapsulates in its architecture a particular religious and philosophical conception, a given way of perceiving relations between man and god, and just as man perceives his complex relationships with Nature, so a ceremonial canoe, especially with its four polychrome boards, embodies a set of similar values which Nowau culture, and the culture of the ritual exchange, considers fundamental to its very existence.” (p. 37)

8 This study is sure in its sense that there are mental mechanisms, coded categories of mind and aesthetics that it is the anthropologist’s job to discover and elaborate. These categories or mental schemas, according to these Kantian premises, can also be universal. Thus Scoditti is quite comfortable with sentences such as:

“This demand for balance could also be interpreted as a metaphor for man’s tendency to find an inner balance of his own...” (p. 35)

- 9 Designs of decoration of the head are also seen as a reflection of categories of mind and reason. Whether one finds Scoditti's work persuasive will depend on one's willingness to engage with his particular philosophical take on Nowau culture and aesthetics. The weakness of this analysis is not his use of Kantian categories per se but his failure to interrogate or critically engage these analytic categories in this context. This seems an especially acute absence given the huge range of criticism about Kantian philosophy available. Scoditti's reliance on the concept of mental categories is embedded into the overall structure of the volume as seen in chapter headings such as "The Mental Faculties and the Definition of the Oral Image", "Mind, Reason and the Unwritten Cognitive Philosophy", "The Poetic Formulas and the Reason" and "Crowns and Corollas as Visual Metaphors of the Mental Faculties".
- 10 The volume's lack of critical engagement with its own analytic framework in turn has an effect on how Scoditti's ethnographic material is read through this Kantian lens. I was dissatisfied with the author's failure to clarify how he got from the verbal explanations provided by his amazing informants: poetry, visual images, etc., to his particular Kantian reading. It is not that the author leaves out information provided by his informants, in fact the volume is beautifully rich in this kind of ethnographic detail, but rather than the steps by which he arrives at his notions of mental categories, the reason and aesthetic schema of this "oral mind" from their own articulations and interpretations, is not clear. Thus one has to take for granted his premise that their words reflect mental schema – but one wonders if there are not other, more appropriate ways in which to conceptualize this system. A clearer separation between his ethnographic material and his Kantian reading along with a more transparent explanation of the methodology used to get from the ethnographic material to this gloss would improve this rich and detailed study.
- 11 Scoditti's summation is that Nowau aesthetic categories and their cultural transmission can be best understood via the model of the logarithmic spiral of the *Nautilus pompilius*. This conclusion is, like the volume, an interesting and challenging thesis, which should generate much discussion.
- 12 In sum, this is a challenging but fascinating ethnographic study rich in detail that will be of interest both to specialists in Oceania as well as to scholars of philosophy, aesthetics and cognition.
-

AUTHOR

DIANE LOSCHE

University of New South Wales