

Andrew Beatty, *Society and Exchange in Nias*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. xiv & 322 pages.

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The theoretical focus of this splendid work is the notion of exchange, which we see exemplified here in the context of marriage alliance, social stratification, and prestige. Empirically its locus is the feast of merit, a famous institution in various societies of Southeast Asia. Ethnographically we are informed (in great detail) about the people of central Nias, more particularly those of Sifalagö, the largest village in the Susua valley, among whom Dr. Beatty carried out field research for twenty months. Documentation on the islanders is extensive, and the publications of Professor Wolfgang Marschall, Father Johannes Hämmerle, and Bamböwö La'iyä, a Niasan himself, have provided us with a wealth of information on the populations living to the south. But at the time of Dr. Beatty's arrival in March 1986 central Nias was the least-known of any region on the island. The copious data in the book under review has completely changed this situation, and whoever reads it will be given one of the most complete accounts for any Indonesian population of how the foregoing institutions define a society. Central Nias was also, it appears, the only place on the island where merit feasts were still regularly staged, and as a result we now have the best set of data on merit feasts for any Southeast Asian peoples.

Descent and marriage as modalities of exchange provide Dr. Beatty with his theme for Part One ("The Social Matrix"). Nias has a patrilineal mode of descent, which includes provision for clans and lineages; contracts asymmetric affinal alliances; and uses a relationship terminology that, while not prescriptive, does nevertheless intimate some asymmetry. These are some of the institutional features that, in combination with the organizing force of exchange, readily provide anthropologists with the possibilities of comparative insights into similar features found in highland Burma, along the Indo-Burmese border, in central Sumatra, and among many societies of eastern Indonesia. One possibility Dr. Beatty himself actualizes: through his ethnographic prism of central Nias the Leach/Lévi-Strauss conundrum, according to which certain wife-givers might have no one to give them wives and some wife-takers might have no one to take sisters off their hands, is shown to be a chimera. I refrain from providing Beatty's resolution here; but merely remark *Society and Exchange in Nias* is worth consulting for this exposé alone.

Another theoretical contribution made involves the contrast some analysts discern between elementary systems and complex systems. The empirical analysis in this book adds conviction to the view that it is a fallacy to characterize them as absolutes. Nias kinship, the author cogently argues, incorporates a system that merges elements of both allegedly polar types. He explains how, although marriage between a man and a woman of his wife-taking affines (e.g., his FZD) is prohibited, the Nias version of asymmetric alliance lacks any positive injunction obliging men to look for wives among their wife-giving groups. Terminological prescription is also absent. These qualities of the alliance system he links with the transitive nature of the formal relation between wife-givers and wife-takers: "If A has given a wife to B, who has given a wife to C, A is therefore automatically considered wife-giver to C, independently of whether A gives a wife to C directly on a later occasion" (p. 59). This assimilation of direct and indirect wife-givers (a basic feature of Nias marriage) is one of the features of this society that offers intriguing contrasts with the asymmetric systems in the regions remarked above, where nontransitive systems of alliance exist. These, of course, permit the closure of cycles in such a manner that (in principle) group A gives wives to B

which gives wives to C which gives wives to A. Another difference inheres in the symbolic attributions of the presentations exchanged by wife-givers and wife-takers. In eastern Indonesia, to take one regional instance, the former give “feminine gifts” and receive “masculine gifts” while for wife-takers the opposite is true.

Descent and marriage’s role in enhancing political integration is the theme of Part Two (“The Politics of Exchange”). Most social relationships on Nias imply debt (“Niasans, like Leach’s Kachin, tend to characterize social relations in terms of debt” [page 183]), and exchanges typically require quantification. Indeed, regulation of measurement is so essential to the conduct of all kinds of exchanges that Dr. Beatty assigns an entire chapter (Eight) to discussing the distinctive ways in which rice, gold, pigs, and prestige payments are quantified. This quantification he then interprets in terms of human/spirit relationships, the explanations of misfortunes, and ethical behavior—a complex that leads Dr. Beatty directly to consider the feast of merit.

Ambitious politicians acquire status and the titles that come with it by amassing whatever resources they can assemble and expending them in feasts. All but the poorest men own the wherewithal to sponsor one of these undertakings, and even individuals unburdened by the yoke of ambition will do so if only to pay off sundry debts they have accumulated. There are, therefore, merit feasts and there are merit feasts. Men who sponsor small-scale enterprises (up to thirty pigs) earn lesser titles; the more motivated ones sponsor major feasts (*ovasa*) and acquire greater titles. Through this institution the latter—who it would seem to me bear some affinity with the Melanesian “big men”—get to exercise authority in their village, which they rule subject to the consent of its residents and with the cooperation of more traditionally established chiefs.

The competitive strivings of the ambitious can be intense, and, in contrast to south Nias where a hereditary ruling class exists, tend to consolidate certain families, whose males have achieved political eminence, into a distinctive social stratum of authority. The leaders of these chiefly or noble lines of descent glorify their fame by having megalithic monuments erected and by building massive houses in which they and their descendants reside.

Many formal disquisitions on political systems and virtually all structural analyses of marriage alliance ignore the machinations of individuals and deprecate their involvement in the systems’ functioning: structure very definitely overwhelms process. Among the merits of Beatty’s study is that we see how the author’s abstractions of the Nias exchange system are grounded in the pragmatic realities of personal ambition, group cooperation, and men’s fear of retribution in the afterlife and shame in this life.

The vagaries of individual behavior are represented in a number of case histories and interpreted within the context of the ethnographic reality portrayed, so that the reader gets an impression of “life in the round and on the ground,” which counterpoints and advantages the more abstract generalizations offered. The result is an outstanding contribution to the anthropological scholarship of Indonesia; one in which the matching of ethnographic exactitude with analytical acumen has produced theoretical findings of major significance.