

## Book reviews

**Giancarlo M. G. Scoditti**, *Kitawa – A linguistic and aesthetic analysis of visual art in Melanesia*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990. viii + 457 pp. DM 268,00 (hb.).

Reviewed by Gunter Senft\*

Have you ever seen a Trobriand *masawa*-type canoe – or maybe just a picture of it in Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic masterpiece *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*?<sup>1</sup> If you have, I am sure that you were fascinated by the exquisitely carved prowboards of these big outrigger canoes. The Italian ethnographer Giancarlo Scoditti (hereafter: S.), having seen some of these prowboards in the Pigorini Museum in Rome, was so impressed that he decided not only to study how the Trobriand Islanders carve them but also to unravel their hidden symbolism. To this end, he carried out extensive field-work on Kitava,<sup>2</sup> one of the Trobriand Islands, in 1973–1974 (13 months), in 1976 (6 months), 1980 (3 months), and in 1988.

Ever since 1977, S. has been publishing results of his research (1977, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1984a, b, 1988, 1990a). In 1990, S. published the monograph under review here. In general, it draws heavily on earlier monographs (1984b; 1988), and includes a chapter that was published before in a somewhat different form (1983, with J. Leach). It is somewhat peculiar that the two books published in Italian are neither mentioned nor listed in the bibliography of the monograph under review, which – for a broader audience – is published in English.

As announced in the subtitle, the book has a twofold aim: It claims to present not only an 'aesthetic analysis of visual art' (probably one of the most difficult things to do), but also to give a 'linguistic analysis' of this art. It is mainly because of this latter claim that I am reviewing S.'s book: Ever since

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g.: Malinowski (1922), plates XXI, XXIII, XXIV, XXVI, XLI, XLVII, XLIX, LV. See also Narubutal (1975).

<sup>2</sup> Scoditti writes 'Kitawa'; however, sticking to the orthography I developed for Kilivila on the basis of my Kilivila phoneme analysis (Senft 1986: 11 ff.), I refer – by the way in accordance with Malinowski and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (*Micropedia* Vol. 11, 1986: 936) – to this island as 'Kitava'. If not indicated otherwise, I will always use my own Kilivila orthography in this review.

1982, the present reviewer has been studying (in the field and in his study) the language and the culture of the Trobriand Islanders; some time ago I published the first grammar and dictionary of Kilivila, their language (Senft 1986). Therefore, after giving an overview of what S. offers in this monograph, I will first, and rather briefly, comment on his 'aesthetic analysis', and then in some more detail discuss his 'linguistic' analysis of visual art in Melanesia. S.'s aesthetic analysis basically amounts to an interpretation of the symbols carved on the canoe prows, which in turn relies on how his informants described them. Therefore, almost everything in his aesthetic analysis is dependent on his linguistic analysis.

After an introduction where the author describes how he hit upon his topic and where he presents rather briefly his somewhat idiosyncratic methodology (based on ideas forwarded by Louis Hjelmslev and the Prague structuralists), he gets down to the analyses he calls 'semiotic' (chapter 1), introduces the area of his field research and justifies his choice (chapter 2). He then describes the Kitava carver's typical career: from childhood via initiation, apprenticeship, status as a master-carver, to death (chapter 3). After discussing the techniques of carving (chapter 4), S. presents his analyses and interpretations of the canoe prows (*tabuya*) and the canoe boards (*lagim*) and their coloring (chapters 5, 6, 7). An attempt to unveil the 'aesthetic philosophy' and the 'metaphors' of Kitava carvers (chapter 8) is followed by the author's summarizing and concluding remarks. The book then presents three texts S. refers to as 'Aesthetic conversations' (pp. 207–369), a 'Lexicon: Nowau-English/English Nowau' (pp. 371–385), 71 figures and maps (62 of which can be found in Scoditti 1984b), a bibliography, and an index (which refers only to pages 1–210).

Before I comment on S.'s 'aesthetic analysis', I must correct a number of – non-linguistic – mistakes:

First of all, Kitava does not belong to the Marshall Bennett Group, as the author claims;<sup>3</sup> Kitava is one of the Trobriand Islands (Senft 1986: 9; *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropaedia* Vol. 11 (1986: 936) and *Britannica Atlas* (1986: 165)).

S. claims that "the child is not carried in the arms but on the back" (p. 12); this is simply wrong, as can be seen from Senft and Senft (1986: 131) and also in a recent film by Wason and Weiner (1990) on the Trobriand Islanders.

The author classifies the white reef heron as "Demigretta sacra" (p. 138); the common zoological classification is "Egretta sacra" (Grzimek 1980, Vol. 7: 191).

<sup>3</sup> Scoditti himself does not seem to believe in this geographical assignment; see p. 16, where he refers to the close cultural links of Kitava to the other Trobriand Islands; see also p. 21 and p. 23, where he mentions, in connection with the ceremonial *kula* trade, the Marshall Bennett Islands as a stopping point for canoes coming from Kitava (!) and where he refers to the 'Marshall Bennett route'.

Discussing symbols carved on the *tabuya* canoe prow, S. refers to Schmitt-Rottluff's engraving 'The girl in front of the mirror', claiming that the girl "is looking in the shiny surface at a face and body that are not 'hers'" (p. 141); this is simply incorrect (see figure 278 in *Expressionisten Sammlung Buchheim* 1981).

There are no 'gods' in the indigenous Trobriand belief system (Malinowski 1916, 1926, 1974) and thus there is no "god-hero Monikiniki" (p. 183) and there is no "moon goddess [who] is also a symbol of chastity" (p. 142f.). As to the beautiful myth of Imdeduya and Yolina (three versions of which I have myself collected and transcribed, but not yet published), it is quite reasonable to understand Imdeduya as the woman that turned into the moon, and Yolina as the man that turned into the sun after he left his wife Imdeduya because she committed adultery (see also Kasaipwalova 1980 and Leach 1981). Within the Trobriand Massim culture, the ethnologist is on safe ground when referring to figures like Monikiniki, Imdeduya, and Yolina as 'culture heroes'.

On page 161, the author refers the reader to figures 20 and 68, implying that these photos show one and the same canoe board; this is not the case: the photos show two different *lagim*.

I wonder whether S. ever sailed in a Kitava canoe; if he did, he should know that these outrigger-canoes have neither 'stern' nor 'bow'. What matters is that the outrigger is always windward; if necessary, the mast and the sail are moved from one end of the canoe to the other.

Finally, I cannot refrain from mentioning that Kant's first name starts with an 'I' and not with an 'E' (pp. 2 & 452).

I will now turn to a brief discussion of Scoditti's 'aesthetic analysis of visual art in Melanesia'.

The author's aim is to describe the "aesthetic grammar of Trobriand [not Marshall Bennetts!, GS] art" (p. 5, see also pp. 80, 82f.) – metaphorically using – like so many others – the technical term 'grammar' for referring to some sets of rules and regulations. These rules and regulations do not only affect the act and the art of carving itself, but also the whole life of a carver.

S.'s account of what makes a man on Kitava a carver is very interesting and accurate, indeed; he also documents some magical formulae that are most important for the initiation of a master carver to be. However, there is a big misunderstanding of the concept *megwa* and, alas, the description of the initiation rite is incomplete. S. translates *megwa* as "poetic formulae" (p. 32) or as "ritual words" (p. 374); however, already Malinowski described the concept behind this word as "the 'magical performance', the 'spell', the 'force' or 'virtue' of magic ..." and translates it quite often simply by "magic" (1922: 424, 523). It seems as if S. attempts to avoid these connotations, but his translations are simply not apt to grasp the complex concept; moreover, he is obviously<sup>4</sup> not familiar with the *biga megwa* concept that covers all the verbal

<sup>4</sup> see especially p. 97, footnote 7.

aspects of Trobriand magic (Senft 1986: 126; see also Senft 1985 a,b). Although S. quotes Kasaipwalova (1975), he does not explain, nor elaborate on, the concept *sopi*, which – according to Kasaipwalova (1975) and to my informants – is crucial for a carver's initiation rite because it explains the 'flowing' (*sopi* literally means 'water') of the master's expertise and knowledge into his pupil's mind. Unfortunately, S. does not give the names of the magical formulae he quotes; thus, it is impossible to find out whether the carvers use these formulae as their *kweguva'elu* magic, the magic that constitutes the most powerful part of the verbal aspect of the initiation rite.

The author's descriptions and analyses of the symbols that are carved on the canoe prows are very stimulating, and I am sure that he succeeded in overcoming the severe restrictions in access to such knowledge (Campbell 1978). However, reading the relevant chapters, one has the impression that S. is arguing from the Kitavan – 'emic' – point of view, because he always refers the reader back to the data presented in the 'aesthetic conversations' part of his book. I will comment on this part below in detail. Here, it must suffice to say that the comparison between the Kilivila texts and Scoditti's translations reveals that the author always refers to the 'explanations' and 'metaphors' he gives in his translations; the original text only gives the respective technical term without any metaphor or further explanation. Thus, one has to know the language to realize that the author actually argues from an 'etic' point of view – and that therefore his admittedly interesting and stimulating interpretation is not different in quality from the speculations on these canoe prows as suggested, e.g., by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1984: 822f.). Having realized this, one misses a comparison of his interpretations with other etic – and equally disputable – interpretations of Trobriand art such as offered, e.g., by Patrick Glass (1986, 1988) in his rather academic discussion of the so-called "Trobriand Medusa" (p. 139). By contrast, S. does not even mention the only publication by a Trobriand Islander on the topic (Narubutal 1975). Moreover, it strikes the reader that the most important concept in Scoditti's interpretation of the *lagim*, the reference to the culture hero Monikiniki and/or Mwata (e.g. pp. 67, 121), remains unexplained and undefined (just as does, incidentally, the 'kula ring'<sup>5</sup> referred to in chapter 2).

For someone familiar with the Trobriand culture it is rather irritating that S. is not aware of the sexual connotations that go with the *masawa* type canoes and that also find their expression in the *lagim*. However, he does mention these sexual components (e.g. pp. 104, 119, 123, 145 footnote 9) and

<sup>5</sup> Malinowski (1922: 81ff.) describes the *kula* as "a form of exchange ... carried out by communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands, which form a closed circuit. ... articles of two kinds ... are constantly travelling in opposite directions. In the direction of the hands of a clock, moves constantly one of these kinds – long necklaces of red shell, called *soulava* ... In the other direction moves the other kind – bracelet of white shell called *mwali* ...". See also Leach and Leach (1983). By the way, *kula* is a verbal expression which translates as '(you) go'.

presents with his photographs 41, 42 and 43 the most explicitly sexual *tokwalu* figures I have ever seen so far on a *lagim*. The name of the canoe, *masawa*, is already a veiled reference: *mwasawa* with a labialized word initial sonorant, translates literally as 'fun, game', however, it is also used to refer to the love play between man and woman. S. does not seem to know this; he does not even mention *masawa* as the general name for these big outrigger canoes (but see Scoditti 1990: 233). Moreover, given his interest in art it is rather surprising that S. does not realize the apotropaic (i.e. evil-avoiding) function of the *tokwalu* figures on the *lagim* (compare e.g. Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Wickler 1968, Devereux 1981, especially in connection with photos 41 and 43).

To finish this criticism of S.'s 'aesthetic analysis' it is hard to understand why the photographs in such an expensive book are held in black and white, even though 'the colours of the *lagimu* and *tabuya*' are discussed in a chapter of their own. From a semiotic point of view, a whole sign system is lost with the photos in black and white.

My preliminary conclusion as to the aesthetic analysis echoes the author's, when he states that it "may or may not be 'true'", that "[W]e can agree (or disagree ...)", and that all in all "... we tread on thin ice" (p. 197f.).

Now let us turn to S.'s 'linguistic analysis of visual art in Melanesia'. The author himself claims that "a profound knowledge of the language is regarded as crucial for an understanding of the symbolic meaning of a (graphic sign), as well as of its aesthetic value" (p. 208); here I can only agree.

However, there is no proof of the author's 'profound knowledge' of the language he refers to as 'Nowau'. 'Nowau' must be the name some Kitavans use to refer to their variety of Kilivila (also called Kiriwina and earlier Boyowa), the language spoken on the Trobriands. I have never heard the name 'Nowau' used on the Trobriands myself; also Lawton (1978: 4), who lived for years as a missionary on Kiriwina Island, refers to this local variety of Kilivila by the term 'Kitava'; still, 'Nowau' may well be a term Kitavans use to refer to their dialect (see also Senft 1986: 8ff.). However, S. does not differentiate between 'language' on the one hand, and 'dialect' or 'local variety' on the other hand. Moreover, he does not give any information about the Kilivila variety he calls 'Nowau' and its position with respect to other varieties of the Kilivila language itself and of the languages Budibud and Muyuw that, together with Kilivila, constitute the Kilivila language family (Senft 1986: 6ff.).

The author claims to have done a "phonetic analysis of the morpheme" (p. 27) and to have transcribed the Kilivila texts into a version of IPA. He does not present any grammatical analyses, however, and his speech data are not transcribed in IPA, but in an orthography that is never explained, but which seems to be partly oriented on the orthography Lawton used in his translation of the New Testament into Kilivila (Lawton 1979). However, S. does not mention Lawton; hence he alone must be responsible for the rather

weird parsing of lexical entries which is reflected in his orthography (see below).

The word-list attached as a kind of appendix to the monograph does not list all the Kilivila words presented in the first 210 pages of his book (see e.g.: *bwebwekena* (p. 4), *diu* (p. 19), *lagai* p. 72), etc.); if the 'lexicon' mentioned the lexical items in the Kilivila texts from the second part (pp. 211–263) it certainly would have more than just 7 + 7 pages. Indeed, referring to the two word-lists 'Nowau–English' and 'English–Nowau' as a 'lexicon' is very misleading (see e.g. pp. 371 ff.: "aku = aku; b = will; i = he; i = lw. (???); i = it, i = she; i = they"; etc. (for an explanation of what is meant by 'b' and 4 out of the 5 occurrences of 'i', see Senft 1986: 29 ff.).

On page 209 the author refers to "the interlinear translation" of the Kilivila data; however, the interested reader will look in vain for a morpheme-interlinear translation. Thus, I am afraid the Kilivila data can only be used by a handful of non-native researchers – but even they have to keep in mind that S. "deleted from the Nowau text" his "own part in the conversations, because" he "judged it more important to establish clear sets of Nowau conversation than to 'correct'" his "Nowau ..." (p. 209); that this procedure must further impair access to the data is self-evident.

Without a morpheme-interlinear version it is rather difficult to judge how free S.'s translations are; as I now will show, they are indeed rather free.

On pp. 34–36 (see also p. 174), S. translates:

*Ura vila yeigu* as 'my self I', and then as 'you are transformed into me'. Now, *vila* does not mean 'self'. There is an emphatic pronoun *vilegu* which translates as 'myself' and must be parsed as '*vile-* + the 1st person marking affix *-gu* of the series of possessive pronouns indicating intimate degree of possession' (Senft 1986: 57 ff., see also 51 f.). This emphatic pronoun is only used by female speakers; male speakers have to use the form '*tole-* + affixes of the series of possessive pronouns indicating intimate degree of possession'. *Vila* translates as 'her vagina' or simply as 'vagina'. Thus, the phrase should be translated as 'My (her) vagina I'; a freer translation may run 'I am my own vagina'. This utterance can be interpreted as a reference to the speaker's – here the carver's – own creative power, but there is no transformation whatsoever from one person into another implied in this statement – there is simply no instance of the 'you' to which S. refers in his free translation.

The phrases presented in Conversation A (ST 26, p. 212): "I megei, igau, i sekai gu, na kaui. I mili, i megei, i sekai gu" are translated as "He mixes the red betel in the black ebony mortar, then he offers the mixture and I taste it. Yes, he mixes the red betel in the black mortar, murmurs the ritual words and offers me the red mixture (he offers me the gifts of a carver)" (p. 267).

Now let me present these phrases – transformed into the *biga galawala* variety my grammar and dictionary are based on – in my own Kilivila orthography and with its respective morpheme-interlinear translation:

Imigai, igau isakegu, lakau. Imili, imigai, isakeigu.  
 I-migai                    igau i-sake-gu    la-kau  
 he-whisper (magic) then he-give-me PAST. I-chew  
 i-mili    i-migai                    i-sake-gu  
 he-crush he-whisper (magic) he-give-me.

A free translation of these phrases may run: “He whispered magic, then he gave it [= the crushed betel nut with the magic whispered over it] to me. I chewed it. He crushed [the betel nut with the pestle in the mortar], he whispered magic, and he gave it to me”. Even with the explanatory notes in brackets, my free translation is clearly different from S.’s translation. True, everything mentioned in S.’s translation describes the situation the utterances refer to adequately; but what he presents as a translation is just not uttered. Almost all of S.’s translations can be criticized in exactly the same manner.

This criticism becomes rather serious with respect to the author’s overall aim pursued in this book, if we realize that Kilivila terms like *tokwalu* (e.g. p. 225), *duduwa* (p. 245), *weku* (p. 246), etc., are translated as ‘carver-hero and his companion’ (p. 293), ‘the horrible mouth’, ‘the mysterious bird’, etc. These terms refer to symbols carved on the canoe prows; the Kitavan artists, S.’s informants, use them as technical terms only. The translations reflect the author’s interpretation, but his analysis is based on his own interpretation, reflected in his translation of the carvers’ respective technical terms, not on what the carvers actually said. Thus, his arguments are based on circular reasoning.

But the worst linguistic mistakes found in this book still remain to be corrected. S. probably misheard *bwala* for, or confused it with, *dala*. He translates *dala* (p. 230) first incorrectly as ‘house’ (‘house’ in Kilivila is *bwala*) but then gives the correct translation (sub-clan) in brackets (p. 302). Judging from his glosses, it seems he also misheard *ina* ‘mother’ for *yena* ‘fish’ (p. 194).

On p. 199, he analyzes the verbal expression *a busibusi* as ‘the first person singular *a* ‘I’, prefixed to the continuous present *busibusi* ...’. To say the least, this is a rather blunt analysis (with a wrong parsing) of Kilivila verbal expression that is unmarked with respect to aspect and/or tense (see Senft 1986: 36ff.). With the same verbal expression S. creates a rather speculative derivational morphology, comparing the verb stem *-busibusi-* with the noun *usi* ‘banana’, claiming that “*a busibusi* ... recalls the curving of the banana ...” (p. 192).

On p. 176 he refers to the subject prefix for 2nd person *ku-*, which is unmarked with respect to aspect and/or tense as “the second person singular of the demonstrative pronoun *ku* ...”, and on page 179 he refers to the same prefix as “the second person singular of the personal pronoun *ku* ...”. His list of personal and possessive pronouns on the same page is incomplete and rather confusing (see Senft 1986: 46–68).

Finally, to illustrate the oddities in S.'s grammatical analysis: on page 188 reference is made to the expression *nano gu*. This noun consists of the noun stem *nano-* and the affix of the possessive pronoun series indicating intimate degree of possession for 1st person, *-gu*; *nanogu* translates as 'my mind, my intelligence' (see Senft 1986: 335f.). The author analyzes this expression as follows: "The word *nano*, which in the poetic formulae of Towitara is declined with the possessive pronoun *gu*, which denotes an inalienable possession, is normally used in the sense of 'mind' ...". However, obligatory possession does not equate with declension.

I do not want to continue this list of mistakes and of incomplete and confusing analyses, nor do I want to go further into S.'s mistaken presentation of affixes as words in their own right. I think my criticisms clearly show that there is something much less than a 'linguistic analysis' of the data presented in this monograph. By the author's own words in the quote given above, "a profound knowledge of the language is regarded as crucial for an understanding of the symbolic meaning of the (graphic signs), as well as of its aesthetic value" (p. 208). My criticism of S.'s linguistic analysis hence has severe consequences for the quality of his 'aesthetic analysis'.

To sum up, the author presents an interesting interpretation and a description of the graphic signs to be found on the canoe boards carved on Kitava. He also presents interesting linguistic data, but these can only be used by someone familiar with the Kilivila language. The monograph also presents excellent pictures of Kitavan canoe prows, but (as I said) unfortunately, these are not in color. With this monograph, Scoditti submits an interesting – personal, and *etic* – interpretation, which is at times rather speculative (on some occasions even daring), at other times quite convincing. However, this book is not what its subtitle promises; it does not offer a linguistic analysis of visual art in Melanesia, something which has consequences for the purported aesthetic analysis as well.

I would like to finish this rather critical review with a few remarks in Kilivila I want to address to the author of the monograph I have just reviewed: *Sogu, lubegu, m ginigini itutu nanogu. Nanogu imwau, taga adoki kunukwali aginigini mokwita. Gala kugubuluva. Akalubelim. Taga avaka mokita mokita, kida.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ["My colleague, my friend. Your writing has made an impression on me. I am grief-stricken, but I think you know I write the truth. Don't feel annoyed. I want to be your friend. But the truth is the truth, right?" – Editor's note]



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**Umberto Rapallo**, *Metafore animali e mondo eroico nel 'Cantare di Aneirin'*. Pisa: Giardini, 1989, 218 pp. Lit. 40.000.

Reviewed by Enrico Testa\*

The compilation of elegiac, lyrical and epic poems known as the *Canu Aneirin* (CA) is an outstanding representative of all the pre-Norman British literary tradition. It is an exemplary text for the greater Cymric area, which is much wider than present-day Wales. The CA text poses several textual problems: its relation to the previous oral tradition; its estimated date (possibly 12th century, with some parts from the 9th or 10th); and, above all, its obscure language, which at times makes understanding and translating very difficult. In order to answer some of the queries listed above, mainly those concerning lexical structure, Rapallo (henceforth: R.) has chosen an innovative approach. Seeking to define the all-important role of the 'hero' considered as a "*Privatfigur* of suffering and moral significance" (p. 20), he examines the animal metaphors as defining factors in the functional economy of CA.

The aim of this operation is not only the examination of the animal imagery pertinent to the 'heroic' ideal in Celtic culture, but, above all, a better understanding of the narrative and of the discourse structure of CA. The author advocates an interactionist view of animal metaphors, which aims at an understanding of their links with other figures of speech, attributes, formulaic expressions, and in general, with any outstanding contextual reference. The premise in R.'s work is that recurrent animal metaphors are markers of coherence and cohesion in the overall structure of the text; this assumption enables him to explain the most obscure areas of CA, to trace the texture and wholeness of the text, and to determine "l'intenzionalità dell'

\* English translation by Mafalda Stasi.

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