In the early 1970s a solitary, peripatetic Jehovah’s Witness missionary occasionally wandered through Awak, the Pohnpei village where I was living and working. Having learned that I did my graduate studies in New York City, where he had trained at his sect’s headquarters, he would sometimes stop to chat. One day, in what seemed to be a moment of exhausted resignation, he unburdened himself to me: He’d been unable to make any progress converting Pohnpeians, he said. His evangelistic approach depended upon offering to prospective converts a vision of redemption that would save them from much suffering in their lives after death. But life on Pohnpei, he had concluded, was so pleasant that the island’s people imagined a largely bucolic afterlife and hence had no interest at all in his wares. He didn’t see how he could continue trying to put the fear of God into them, he lamented, and in fact I never saw him again.

I recount this tale because the late Jay Dobbin’s able survey of Micronesian religion quite emphatically bears this fellow’s story out. Calling attention to the absence of, among other things, cannibalism, ritual sacrifices of living creatures, prolonged fasts and other forms of ritual denial, and witchcraft (which he distinguishes from sorcery), Dobbin speaks of the islands’ traditional or indigenous beliefs and practices as “gentle religions.”

I think it is accurate to call the religions of Micronesia religions of life, inasmuch as they are focused on the practicalities and necessities of daily living. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the elaborate ritual for good crops and therapies associated with spirit-given powers to heal and cure. The distribution and sharing in the bounty of good food was also part and parcel of many religious rituals. Religious ritual certainly reinforced the belief that the proper response to bounty is distribution, not accumulation (220).

His book is, I believe, the first full-length consideration of Micronesia’s religions in nearly a century, a task not undertaken since James Frazer’s little-known or -remembered volume 3 of The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead in 1924. Though Francis Hezel’s contributions to the work are acknowledged on the title page, they are not clearly spelled out, but knowledgeable readers will see them everywhere in both the range of...
Book Reviews

sources put to use and the facility with which relevant comparisons among islands are continually made.

Employing a self-consciously functionalist approach to religion, Dobbin (like Hezel, a Catholic priest) examines a specific set of categories: cosmology, spirits, religious leaders, taboos, change and rituals. He works back and forth between the two basic approaches scholars have almost always taken in discussing anything having to do with the category “Micronesia,” either recognizing significant differences among the different islands and island groups or emphasizing the similarities and continuities among them. The book is organized by region, with separate chapters devoted to Chuuk and the Central Carolines atolls speaking Chuukic dialects, Pohnpei, Kosrae, the Marshalls, Yap, Palau, and Kiribati and Nauru.

Woven throughout the book are several recurring themes and topics that should be of particular interest to specialists in either Micronesia or the history of the Austronesian-speaking peoples. One of these has to do with matters of cosmological organization. While there are of course local variations, most Micronesians shared a notion of the earth as multi-leveled and dome-shaped. This in turn entails careful consideration of the east-west tugs between the mythical locales “Kachau” and “Yap,” sometimes identified with the islands of Kosrae and Yap; influences and movements within the realm between these two poles has brought region-wide cultural and political changes.

Another concerns the essences of supernatural beings. A trio of self-generated “gods” were widely recognized. Ancestral and clan spirits were more numerous and could be accessed via spirit mediums in order to gain ritual and technical knowledge, cure sickness, and supplicate the gods through their connections to them. Navigational knowledge and bountiful breadfruit harvests were particularly sought after.

My only criticism here has to do with what strikes me as a rather uncritical reliance on the scholarship produced during the German occupation of Micronesia, which needs to be treated with special care, I think. German ethnological theory, which had previously given birth to the liberal Boasian paradigm that shaped most English-speaking twentieth-century anthropology, was undergoing some radical shifts at exactly the same time as the Wilhelmine Reich was plunging into blue-water imperialism, changes that mirrored and to some extent drove the social, political and cultural upheavals that led to the worst abuses of German racial thought and practice. In particular, the work of Erdland in the Marshalls and Hambruch on Pohnpei must be viewed more skeptically (Petersen, G. “Hambruch’s Colonial Narrative: Pohnpei, German Culture Theory, and Hamburg Expedition Ethnography of 1908–10,” *Journal of Pacific History* 42 (3): 317-330, 2007).

While this work will appeal mostly to specialists, I heartily concur with what Dobbin describes as his motivation for writing it. “I see one after another Micronesian state or republic trying to ground its teaching and its textbooks in its own cultural heritage” (221). Because religion is such an important part
of contemporary society, it would behoove Micronesians and their leaders to “appreciate a bit more deeply an important aspect of their traditional culture, one that permeated everything else” (221).

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Documentary Film Review


In Girl Model, filmmakers David Redmond and Ashley Sabin tell the story of a 13-year-old aspiring model Nadja Vall, who travelled from her Siberian hometown to Japan hoping to launch her modeling career. They portray the unregulated modeling industry as morally corrupt and exploitative of young girls. In Japan’s modeling industry, the demand for young, tall, blond girls has brought numerous Eastern Europeans to Tokyo. Oftentimes, these girls return to their hometowns with little modeling experience and find themselves in debt to modeling agencies. Some of them are also known to have entered the underground world of child prostitution.

The film begins with a Japanese-sponsored modeling contest in rural Siberia where Nadja was selected to work in Japan. Nadja then travelled unaccompanied to Tokyo but no one showed up at the Narita Airport to pick her up. Despite much frustration and fear (as might be expected from a teenage girl traveling outside of her country for the first time), she managed to navigate her way into a small flat in Tokyo, which she shared with another aspiring model from Russia. For her to legally enter Japan with a work visa, Japan’s immigration control laws stipulated that the modeling agency must provide her with two jobs and US$8,000. Nadja’s contract restricted her not only from travelling, swimming and being out in the sun, but also from growing. That is, the size of her waist, hips, and bust must remain the same—an unrealistic expectation for a 13-year-old girl. Moreover, the contract, which the employer could change from one day to another, was written in Japanese and English, both languages that she did not understand. Unaware that her living expenses would be deducted from her paycheck, Nadja returned home with a debt of US$2,000, after her modeling career did not materialize in Japan. This debt may have resulted in Nadja being sent later on to Taiwan and South Korea.

Interestingly, it was Ashley (a former model) who approached the