

BOOK REVIEW

Semelai Culture and Resin Technology. Rosemary Gianno. New Haven, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1990. 238 pp. \$40.00 (cloth).

This big, beautiful book is, I think, destined to become a classic of its kind. Gianno has managed to integrate technical expertise from several fields into a clear and unpretentious analytical exposition of a hitherto neglected mode of exploiting tropical rainforest. The book is thus important both because its ethnographic focus is novel and because its analytical sophistication is exemplary.

The problem which initially engages Gianno's attention is that, although people almost universally use resins, prehistorians often cannot identify them and, in the absence of ethnographic data, would be unable to make many inferences about patterns of trade and production even if they could. This ignorance is particularly debilitating to tropical archaeology, since tropical resins survive better in archaeological sites than those from temperate zones, which (except for amber) are mostly pine resins and therefore come in smaller bits and do not polymerize. Gianno's solution is first to present a number of ways to identify and characterize resins, including both vernacular and technical English vocabularies, as well as chemical and spectrometric analyses. Partly because of her ethnoscientific skills and partly because she writes clearly, she makes attentive readers comfortable with kinos, triterpenoids, limnetic variables, Fourier transforms infrared spectrometry and other arcana not usually part of an anthropologist's vocabulary or conceptual apparatus. Throughout the book she defines each term likely to be unfamiliar as it arises.

The rest of the text concerns a particular mode of producing and trading resins, in its cultural context. The people involved are Semelai, Aslian (Austroasiatic)-speaking people of west Malaysia who have been extensively involved in producing and trading resins for centuries, at least. This section includes a meticulous ethnoscientific study coupled with descriptive accounts of the many Semelai techniques. These descriptions are careful enough that, after reading them, readers should be able to identify and collect resins themselves. The apparently effortless integration of qualitative and quantitative data is impressive.

The text proper is less than 150 pages long. Five wonderful appendices make up about 50 pages more. The rest comprises maps, plates and an index. The only annoyance is the fault of the printer rather than the author. The table of contents lists the maps and plates at the end of the book, although they appear at the beginning. Not all the species mentioned in the text occur in appendices listing species mentioned in the text. A palm is *Livistona kingiana* on p. 134 in the text but *L. kingii* on p. 201 of the appendices. The printer supplies readers with a sticker to amend the misinformation on the copyright page. It is a shame to mar so opulent a production of so fine a study this way. It would also be useful to have a longer index for readers interested in matters outside the main emphasis of the book.

My few niggling complaints about the text itself have to do with cross-cultural connections, especially etymologies, which Gianno as an ethnoscientist alludes to but does not consistently follow up. For example (p. 41), *papaq* comes from

a Malay word meaning "confused;" in some dialects of Semelai, another Aslian language, it refers to "sexual insanity" and a cognate of *ktet* refers to vaginal prolapse, all germane to the context Gianni is discussing. She puzzles over the word *riway* in a list of words derived from Malay and referring to aspects of the psyche, although cognates of *riway* in other Aslian languages also refer to "souls." Although the names of the characters in the Semelai dema myth (pp. 46-47) are Islamic, dema myths are common throughout Southeast Asia and adjacent Melanesia and are almost certainly preIslamic. The wise-fool character Paner (e.g. 132-133) also occurs among Btsisi', another south Aslian people. As Pak [P]andir (Malay "Dummy"), he also appears in textbooks read by Semelai and Btsisi' children. This sort of comparison, however, really lies outside the tight focus of Gianni's book, and omitting it does not seriously affect her interpretation.

Similarly, the suggestion in chapter 3 ("Semelai ecology, culture, and society") that Semelai kinship might be "derived from" a Malay one (p. 39) may puzzle readers unfamiliar with Benjamin's structuralist analysis of west Malaysian kinship systems as variations on a theme. While this analysis is an interesting intellectual exercise that clarifies similarities and differences among coexisting systems which have affected each other, it lacks historicity or explanatory value. As is common in contact situations, much of the Semelai vocabulary of kinship is of Malay origin but the underlying structures seems to remain distinctively Aslian; pidgin languages form the same way. Not only are core Semelai terms clearly Aslian but the terminological system as a whole involves an unusual bifurcation by relative age, analogous to the bifurcation by relative sex in some "Iroquois" systems, a dimension found among other Aslians but not, as far as I know, among Malays, who are Austronesian speakers. Gianni recognizes this dimension but dismisses it, without explanation, as "minor." Another "unusual feature" (p. 41) is the "collapse" of children and parents into a single generation, which Gianni suggests must be "quite recent." It was reported among Btsisi', another South Aslian people, thirty years ago; again, it is a structural feature found among Aslians but not, as far as I know, among Austronesians. In short, Semelai kinship structure seems distinct in origin from its Austronesian counterpart, though the systems are tending to converge as political and economic pressures bring Semelai into the Malaysian mainstream.

Especially in chapters 5 and 8 Gianni examines whether traditional Semelai methods of exploiting rainforest are viable in modern Malaysia, raising the question of Semelai attachment to their current swampy lands. Malaysian law, like the British law from which these provisions derive, does not recognize Aslian land rights. Tradition and the scanty archaeological evidence suggest a hiatus in occupation around 1700 AD, due, Semelai say, to a great flood. Intensive slave raids by Minangkabau and Mendiling, outlawed in 1915 but continuing for several years thereafter, may have pushed Semelai back into the swamps. British resettlement policy during the Communist insurgency of the 1950s again displaced the people. Current government policy, which involves replacing rainforest with commercial plantations, is again disrupting whatever "normalcy" may mean to Semelai, who are themselves resigned to the destruction of their forest resources. Under the circumstances, the persistence of Semelai as a people is remarkable. It is less remarkable that, like their neighbors, the foraging Batek, they can

demonstrate no long term attachment to their land. One interpretation of ancient Malay tradition (adat), derived from ancient Sanskrit and Muslim law, would involve special treatment for Semelai as "ancient inhabitants" of their territory anyway; but the pressures of development and the weight of history make such an interpretation unlikely. The short answer to the question of viability therefore is "no."

Still, Gianni argues that tapping is an extremely efficient use of the forest, even more sustainable than controlled lumbering or farming. Lumbering not only destroys part of the forest but stimulates Semelai to "harvest" trees, e.g. for eaglewood, to "get as much wood as they can before the forest is eradicated" (pp. 97, 140). The availability of chainsaws makes this harvesting easy. By contrast, says Gianni, tapping is less labor- and capital-intensive than lumbering or intensive agriculture. Moreover, she argues, given the fluctuating markets and erratic demand for tropical products, depending on a diverse tropical forest is safer than depending on monocropping.

I suspect, however, that people in charge of development in Malaysia or anywhere else in the world are unlikely to read this book or to be influenced by its arguments. I know of no country whose politicians readily change course because of academic treatises. Anthropologists and ecologists, however, will find it an invaluable reference which sets high standards for future research.

Robert Knox Dentan
State University of New York
University of Buffalo
Amherst, NY 14261