

## Review

ected discussions of land claims, in some cases denying women their traditional input into deliberations of the community, upsetting the balance of power between the sexes important in traditional society. These essays point, once more, to the connection between perception and power. But they highlight the difficulty of interrogating accepted views and of changing them, they also show how important it is to attempt to see and think for oneself. Believing can be misleading, but believing can also make one see what is not there.

Fay Gale, to quote her again, could not recollect her personal experience of the independence, dignity and evident social and cultural power of the Aboriginal women she met with the theories which gave them only a marginal position. In this case the intelli-

gence and integrity of the researcher and others like her became a political resource, helping revise views of women's role in Aboriginal culture. Just as importantly, it liberated them from that other aspect of the racist ideology, the romanticism which regards only 'traditional' Aboriginal culture as truly Aboriginal and regards that culture as immutable and unchanging. The light these essays throw on the way women have adapted to change while attempting to preserve what is essential in their culture illuminates the work of other Aboriginal women like Roberta Sykes.

These are two significant books. But reading books, while it is something, is not enough. As Marx has it, it is not enough to understand the world, what matters is to change it.

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## A lingering suspicion Humphrey McQueen

### Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia

Bruce Kapferer

Smithsonian Institution Press, \$US29.95

MUCH AS I APPRECIATED THE whimsy of contrasting the Lucky Country with the man from whose name the word serendipity derives, Bruce Kapferer's choice of Sri Lanka and Australia is largely autobiographical. He had studied the former and was born in the latter. One or two passages recall the temper of Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* and it is possible that a more open, self-reflective mode would have overcome some of the book's problems.

Poking fun at Bruce Kapferer's attempts at comparative analysis of Sri Lanka and Australia would be too easy a way around the puzzle of why such a dismissive response to his book is not entirely undeserved. Several genuine points of comparison exist, and Kapferer carefully avoids pretending that racial prejudice in contemporary Australia can be rated on the same scale as the bloodshed in Sri Lanka. Indeed, his refusal to repeat the inverted chauvinism of those who claim that Australia is the most sexist and racist society in the world leads him onto judgements worthy of greater consideration by better informed scholars.

Slips like comparing Australia's official war histories with the sacred books of the Sinhalese are rare. Instead, Kapferer sticks to indicating how class and ethnicity cohere inside each culture. He sides with Australian

critics of the multicultural lobbies, while supporting the dissolution of the Anglo-Celtic hegemonies.

Twenty years ago, this book might have been welcomed as a brave attempt to look at Australia from a novel perspective. Certainly, its attention to racism would have been bracing at a time when we had abandoned the White Australia policy without giving up discriminatory controls over migration, when we had only begun to think how we were going to beat Portugal in the race not to be the world's last colonial power, and when we were still busy congratulating ourselves for altering the constitution to remove certain limited discriminations against Aborigines but were scared stiff of what was then called 'black power'.

Today, the thinness of Kapferer's empirical resources is so obvious that there is a danger of losing sight of the point he raises about the relationship between people and state. In comparing Australia Day with Anzac Day, Kapferer concludes that the former is the 'day of the state' while the latter is the 'day of the nation'. Like much else in Kapferer's chapters on Australia, matters are not so simple. Anzac Day and Australia Day are simultaneously days of the nation and days of the state. Since the bicentenary, Australia Day has lost one of its populist aspects: henceforth the holiday will fall on 26 January and no longer be a moveable feast celebrating the long weekend. Equally, Anzac Day has become another public holiday and is no longer the most solemn day of our year.

Such shifts and conflicts deserve more attention than Kapferer gives them in what

often amount to little more than unthought-out memories of what Australia was like when he was growing up. Kapferer waxes theoretical on Anzac Day drunkenness, for example, without suspecting that getting drink licences the ex-digger to forget and to remember. If Kapferer wishes to write about his native land he will have to give it as much attention as he has Sri Lanka. Being born in a stable doesn't make you a horse.

The fact that he recognises that industrial-urban societies are open to the anthropological inquiries normally reserved for the primitives is a point in Kapferer's favour. Instead of being a marginal native, he has become a marginal Australian. Yet he is a long way from being one of those expatriate academics whose prejudices against Australia would be risible if they were not attached to power and funds.

Clarity is not enhanced by frequent but poorly introduced references to the ideas about equality advanced by the Chicago conservative, Louis Dumont. Kapferer's rendition of Dumont's ideas so muddies what was already a confusing position that both seem to be in need of a first-year course on the individual and society. Perhaps, then, Kapferer could avoid writing any more paragraphs like the first one on page 174, which is too long to cite in full and too convoluted to yield a sample sentence.

A chapter on Blainey rejects the more predictable line of attack against his alleged racism but is also free from the detailed background investigation that would allow Kapferer to escape from the exegesis on *All for Australia* that he uses in an attempt to cover up his knowing so little about the social and personal sources of that contretemps. (Now that Blainey has published his *The Great Seesaw* his worries about ethnic diversity can be appreciated as part of a wider concern about the direction of Western culture.)

A further index of the differences in the depth of Kapferer's understanding of Sri Lanka and Australia appears in the texture of the prose in the two sections. Sometimes, the writing about Sri Lanka becomes complicated but is never obscure. The quality of the author's acquaintance with Sri Lankan cultures means that he can raise theoretical issues without floating off into speculations or being sidetracked in anecdotes that often should have been integrated into the principal text. The Australian material confirms the maxim that there is no such thing as a good idea badly expressed, only confused ideas expressed perfectly.

In the midst of a paragraph on the Azaria Chamberlain case, Kapferer asserts that 'The facts are immaterial'. What he means, and rightly, is that the facts of that case are immaterial to the particular point he was making. Yet suspicion lingers that the broader assertion applies to his entire section about Australia.

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