

Strings of Connectedness: Essays in Honour of Ian Keen

edited by Peter Toner

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Review by Ingrid Slotte
School of Global Studies
University of Gothenburg

Ian Keen is well known and respected within his field of Australian Aboriginal anthropology. Over a span of four decades he has published widely on Aboriginal religion, kinship, social organisation and language, with a particular focus on the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land. Other areas of research and publication include land claims, Indigenous people in 'settled' Australia and Aboriginal economies at the time of colonisation.

This volume is a Festschrift, initially compiled to mark Keen's 75th birthday in 2013, comprising a collection of 13 chapters in honour of his academic achievements by former graduate students and one current colleague. The chapters are organised chronologically, in order of Keen's connection with the contributors. With one exception, the chapters concern Aboriginal Australia, four of them being focused on Arnhem Land. While the volume may have appeared more coherent by concentrating on Aboriginal Australia alone, the chapters reflect Keen's wide span of research interests and reinforce the utility of Keen's key concepts, even beyond Australia.

The volume opens with a foreword by Nicolas Peterson, friend and colleague, who initially recruited Keen to The Australian National University. It traces the outline of Keen's career, his early days as a graduate student, first fieldwork at Milingimbi in Arnhem Land in 1974, and later his time as a lecturer at the University of Queensland and at The Australian National University, all

interspersed with Peterson's personal reflections and anecdotes. Being a graduate student of Keen myself in the 1990s, the foreword certainly conjures up some nostalgic memories of people, places and a vibrant academic environment.

The editor's introduction is particularly helpful in providing a detailed overview of Keen's production, key ideas and areas of research. Themes which reflect the contributors' connection to Keen's work include ambiguity in Yolngu ritual language, the dynamic and fluid nature of Yolngu social life where individuals negotiate their positions through 'strings of connectedness' and 'the incommensurability of Western European and Aboriginal tropes' (p. 13). The contributors also refer to Keen's emphasis on empirically grounded research, comparative method and the need to question the value of orthodox anthropological concepts such as 'clan', 'phratry', 'tribe' (pp. 9, 103).

There are four chapters on Arnhem Land, the region where Keen did his initial fieldwork. Craig Elliott examines Marrangu Djinang cosmology and the spirit beings Mewal and Merri, demonstrating that religious understandings of the characters fluctuate and are far from static, resonating with Keen's notion of conceptual ambiguity. Toner focuses on ritual music and demonstrates in detail that Yolngu performances are not following a set formula, but are contextually based, claiming inspiration in part from Keen's analysis of the dynamic nature of Yolngu sociality. Bentley James analyses the Yolngu use of the concept of 'märr', arguing that its meaning is far more complex than just 'spiritual power', echoing Keen's 'call for greater attention to local tropes and idioms' (p. 236). Louise Hamby, together with Gumbula, an Indigenous man from Arnhem Land, provides a chapter on the history of art collecting at Milingimbi. What were the motivations by collectors during different time periods? What were the motivations of the local Yolngu people who participated in the trade?

Other chapters in the volume resonate with Keen's wide range of interests beyond Arnhem Land. Trigger presents two cases of land claims in the Gulf of Carpentaria where succession to land has taken place according to traditional law, while Levitus's chapter explores how the advent of land rights changed 'the terms of engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people', from labour force to landowners.

Diana Eades was Keen's first graduate student and contributes a chapter on the understanding of Aboriginal identity by judicial officers in the criminal court system, referring to Keen's volume *Being Black* (1988) as groundbreaking work. Paul Burke's chapter surveys a Warlpiri female diaspora and the choices that some women make as they break with traditional expectations and move away from Warlpiri country. Heather McDonald traces the history of development of Christian dichotomies such as good and evil, heaven and hell, from their

earliest beginnings, beliefs that are now presented in the churches at Halls Creek as ‘universal truths’, affecting how Aboriginal Christians in the local community categorise themselves and their Indigenous spirit beliefs.

The diversity of topics is a continuing feature of the volume. John White presents a historical chapter on the economy of the Yuin people, in the Eurobodalla region, New South Wales, at the time of colonisation and applies a comparative model developed by Keen, examining regional ecology, economy and institutions. Patrick McConvell provides a highly detailed linguistic chapter, considering the historical diffusion of kinship terminology, in particular affinal kin terms, across northern Australia. Uhlmann’s chapter is the ‘odd one out’, being the only chapter in the book concerned with an area outside Australia. He presents an ethnographic study of university Arabic grammar instruction, and inspired by Keen’s material on Yolngu metaphors, he points towards the ‘incommensurability of two systems of knowledge’.

The volume ends with an afterword by Borsboom, another Arnhem Land colleague, praising the ethnographic contributions as ‘thick description’, followed by a very useful appendix, listing all of Keen’s publications.

I recommend this volume as a valuable resource – it brings the reader an excellent overview of Keen’s production, and contains insightful chapters on Aboriginal Australia of interest to both anthropologists and historians. In reading the chapters and contemplating the ‘strings of connectedness’ between Keen and his former graduate students, I could not help but reflect on the production of academic knowledge, how fields of knowledge and research are defined and ‘inherited’, and how new questions and fields are generated in the process. Two volumes in the same genre which immediately come to mind are the volumes in honour of Les Hiatt (Merlan et al. 1997) and the volume in honour of Nicolas Peterson (Musharbash and Barber 2011). Together with the present volume, they display the work and influence of three ‘generations’ of anthropologists – as Hiatt supervised Peterson’s doctoral thesis, and Peterson in turn supervised Keen’s thesis.

References

- Merlan, Francesca, John Morton and Alan Rumsey 1997, *Scholar and Sceptic, Australian Aboriginal Studies in Honour of L.R. Hiatt*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Musharbash, Yasmine and Marcus Barber 2011, *Ethnography and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge, Essays in Honour of Nicolas Peterson*, ANU E Press, Canberra.

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