



Stealing People's Names: History and Politics in a Sepik River Cosmology (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology)

Simon J. Harrison

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Among the people of Avatip, a community in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, the most prestigious and valued forms of wealth are personal names. In this intriguing study, Simon Harrison analyzes the significance of names in the context of Avatip ritual, cosmology, and concepts of the person, and shows how the Avatip system of names parallels the gift-exchange systems of many other Melanesian societies. In ritualized debates, which form the arena of Avatip political life, rival leaders and the groups they represent struggle in oratorical contests for the possession of strategic names, and as they do so, continually manipulate myth, ritual and cosmology. By exploiting the inner possibilities of this symbolically constituted economy, these competitive processes over the past century have been progressively transforming the political system from a relatively egalitarian type to one based on hereditary inequality and rank. The author offers a critique of the analytical separation of economy and the symbolic order, arguing that it obscures the processes of political evolution in Melanesia and disguises the fundamental similarities underlying the sociocultural diversity of the region.

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