The late Annette Weiner revealed in her important *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (1976), that Malinowski had misunderstood the Trobriand Islands. Far from being under the thumbs of their men-folk or imprisoned in the domestic sphere, Trobriand women held a status equal to men. By not paying sufficient attention to what women actually do and by overvaluing the male symbolic domain, Malinowski had overlooked a fundamental reality. Weiner argued that other Melanesian societies were equally due for non-androcentric reassessments. She went further. In the Trobriands one finds an example of “universal womanhood” – a place where women had developed their full natural potential. Viewed honestly, the Trobriand Islands thus provided Western men and women with an example of womanhood in a non-patriarchal setting: a demonstration of the inherent strength within women.

I thought of Weiner’s ethnographical reappraisal of the Trobriands as I read Don Tuzin’s engaging, provocative and ultimately discomforting study. The books have much in common, even as they reach for contradictory conclusions. Weiner celebrates the centrality of women as the biological and symbolic progenitors of an ever-reproducing community. Tuzin mourns the loss of male domination in a Sepik society, linking the recent abandonment of the elaborate male cult (*Tambaran*) with societal breakdown and death. Like Weiner, however, Tuzin wants to convince us that the experiences of a distant Melanesian people hold direct lessons pertaining to the battles over gender in our own society. As in Papua New Guinea, he claims, masculinity in the West is slowly dying. And, as in New Guinea, many are eager to finish it off for good.

This is Tuzin’s third, and probably final book on the Ilahita Arapesh. Ilahita is a huge village (by New Guinea standards) of some two thousand people located in the East Sepik Province. Tuzin was fortunate enough to begin his work in Ilahita just as a magnificent *haus Tambaran* (men’s spirit house) was being erected in preparation for an initiation the following year. This exhilarating and exhausting experience provided convincing evidence of the authoritarian power of the *Tambaran* over most aspects of local life, a power demonstrated in the thousands of hours men lavished upon feasts, speeches, construction and artistry; in the brutality of the initiation rites; and in the unstinting hostility expressed towards women. In 1985, Tuzin returned with his family after a thirteen-year absence. Eight months earlier, a group of senior men “killed” the *Tambaran* by revealing its secrets before women in a church service, denouncing the cult as the work of Satan.

*The Cassowary’s Revenge* opens with Tuzin’s troubled return to Ilahita. His thirteen years “of writing, lecturing, and nostalgizing added up to an emotional investment in all that the villagers were seeking to destroy” (pg. 5). The sense of hurt went to a deeper level as Tuzin observed the anguish of old friends, both “traditionalists” and those who had embraced the new revival, as they struggled to restore or create order in the chaos left by the withdrawal of the *Tambaran*. On the surface, the event seemed to mark the triumph of a long missionary campaign to replace the cult with evangelical Christianity. But the fervor of the revivalists, and the social disruptions their enthusiasm caused, proved too much even for the missionaries. In any case, as Tuzin shows in a nuanced discussion of the South Sea Evangelical Mission in Ilahita, the revivalists found mission Christianity to be too timid. They were looking for the Apocalypse that would break the “Stronghold of Satan” (pg. 32). The revivalists were not content with overturning the *Tambaran*; they needed to vanquish everything associated with it. Since the *Tambaran* was predominantly a secret male cult, this entailed a concerted attack on the ritual privileges of male cult initiates, including control over fertility magic and sexuality. Suddenly released from the authoritarian hold of the *Tambaran*, young men and women of all ages found themselves liberated to make their own choices and to talk back against the
accustomed control of their male elders. For their part, males discovered that without the
sanction of the cult, physical violence provided their sole resort to retain control.

The demise of the Ilahita Tambaran was spectacular, and thus fully in keeping with the
cult itself, one of the most elaborate ever described in the region. Tuzin goes to some lengths in
the central three chapters of this book to show that the Ilahita cult was not only unusual, it was
of recent birth and in many ways destined to die. The charter myth of the Tambaran concerns
Nambweapa’w, the cassowary-woman of the book’s title. Tuzin argues that the story is a
variation of the Swan Maiden story, found in various renditions throughout the world with the
important exception of large parts of Oceania. He believes that the story diffused into the Sepik
region via Malayan intermediaries sometime in the mid to late nineteenth century. The Ilahita
version of the story varies from both generic swan maiden tales and even from versions told by
neighbouring peoples in its heavy stress upon male legitimacy and moral vulnerability. It is no
coincidence that the elaboration of the Nambweapa’w story occurred at the same time as the
Ilahita imported and elaborated the Tambaran cult practiced by their neighbours and that
Ilahita itself grew to its enormous size.

The story of Nambweapa’w resonated with key cultural themes concerning death,
spiritual powers and marriage, and thus served as a key support for the authoritarian Tambaran
regimes. But the story also expressed the key contradiction of the cult. The Tambaran derived
its power from the first woman; a secret kept from today’s women. Just as the first woman
crushed the head of the first man, after discovering his deception, so too was the Tambaran
itself ever at risk. The myth told of Nambweapa’w two sons, punished for disobeying her, one
sent to America. In 1984, then, the revivalists followed the prophecy told in the cult’s own myth.
The leaders of the movements – most of whom were women – killed the cult. And within a few
months, Tuzin arrived from America and was inevitably identified by some with Nambweapa’w
long-lost son.

While Tuzin obviously failed to bring the hope-for millennium to Ilahita, he does assume
the prophet’s mantel in the final two chapters of this book. The death of the Tambaran turned
the world upside down and represents the final long-feared (by men at least) revenge of
Nambweapa’w. Under the old regime, men’s fear of women was nurtured by their perceived
need to dominate them. The complex, laborious and often excessively violent demands of the
cult sublimated much of their aggressive impulses, “resulting in a relatively low incidence of
actual violent acts by men against women.” In the new order, the men no longer fear women
and thus no longer dominate them in the forms of “ritual menace and rhetorical violence.”
These have been replaced by the “real thing.” In post-Tambaran Ilahita, wives have turned on
husbands who, without recourse to ritual sanctions, rely on their own fists. From valuing their
wives as vital links between kin groups, they have come to see them as “chattel” to be bought
and sold. The ironic outcome of the cassowary’s revenge, then, “is not the liberated savagery of
women, but the unsublimated savagery of men” (pg. 177). Things are falling apart, and the
present mix of church, state and commercial options open to the Ilahita are unlikely to provide
disrupted lives with a new social centre.

Tuzin saves his most provocative prophecies to the final chapter, “Sanctuary.” The
parricide of the Tambaran marks the death of masculinity in Ilahita. But masculinity is dying
elsewhere, nowhere more visibly than in the United States. Just as the Tambaran was allowed
to whither for a decade before its murder, so to American males have lost their exclusive
occupational and associative prerogatives during the twentieth century, “culminating in a
traumatic, ideological assault on masculinity during the latest generation” (pg. 187). Just as the
end of the male cult unleashed the demon of domestic violence upon Ilahita, the “assault” on
male privilege has had unforeseen negative consequences contributing to family breakups,
sexual abuse of children, drug wars, racism and even the growth of the radical militias. Without
“sanctuary” to air their insecurities and anger against women, many men, Tuzin asserts, will
turn to actual violence.
Tuzin makes these assertions, but he does not try hard to substantiate them or to win
over skeptical readers. He no doubt recognizes that most readers will find his social analysis of
the ills of America unconvincing and distasteful (as indeed I do). Unlike Weiner’s triumphant
celebration of “universal womanhood” as expressed in the Trobriand Islands, Tuzin has written
an elegy on the death of masculinity as dramatized by the Ilahita Arapesh. The book ends in a
dirge of defeat. In the death of the Tambaran, Tuzin believes, we can perceive a universal
insecurity within men which, if not addressed, can lead only to disaster. Not unlike the Ilahita
Tambaran cult itself, however, Tuzin’s construction of the death of universal manhood appears
grossly out of scale with its surroundings, obsessively focused in its ideology and overbearing in
its hyper-vivid prophecies.