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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Tasmaniytsy i Tasmaniyskaya Problema by V. R. Kabo

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## REVIEWS

*Tasmaniytsy i Tasmaniyskaya Problema*, by V. R. Kabo, Moscow, 1975, Pp. 200.

Any new work on the Aborigines of Tasmania can hardly help being in large part a rewrite of work already published, unless it is archaeological work in new fields — and this is still rare. Even in that special field there is not too much that is quite new. Professor Kabo's little 'paperback' is such a general survey of the known, taking into account the recent research in archaeology of Dr. Rhys Jones and others in Tasmania's north-west. The work consists of nine chapters: 1. 'Introduction', 2. 'Land and people; the problem of origins', 3. 'What anthropology says about the origin of the Tasmanians', 4. 'the entry of the Tasmanians into the world of archaeological research', 5. 'the art of a vanished people', 6. 'material culture', 7. 'economy and society', 8. 'elements of religion', 9. 'the Tasmanian problem and religion', 10. 'conclusion', and finally a bibliography of 275 items, only a minority of which are in Russian.

This catalogue of contents shows a thorough study, as we are used to finding in Kabo's work: one thinks, for instance of his earlier work on the origins of Australian Aborigines.\*

Although the author makes no fresh discovery, the work does present a new attempt at systematizing the less tangible aspects of Tasmanian life. As would be expected, the interpretation of Tasmanian life offered by the author is in terms of present day Russian anthropology, resting on a Marxist-Leninist basis. This is clearest in the chapter on economy and society. The thesis of the work may be summarized as follows: Tasmanians represent a late palaeolithic society and industry, whose long isolation makes them of greater interest. This isolation brought about the genetic-automatic differences between them and the Australians, for they do represent the earliest Australian type. Kabo definitely accepts their ultimate identity with Australians. He makes comparisons with Georgian, American and other types of people to support the thesis. It is this interaction of biological and social processes that brings about the formation of the 'ethoses' involved (p. 182). But "the process of ethnogenesis presents us with a process of formation of social-cultural and anthropological peculiarities of a people, in the course of which social and biological mechanisms not only function in parallel, but also co-function in time and dialectic".

It seems quite impossible for writers on Tasmania to avoid the language issue, which is particularly difficult because it is so badly recorded and there is so little of it. In my view we do not possess sufficient material to produce a Tasmanian grammar even on an elementary level (See my "What do we know of Tasmanian Languages?" in the *Records* of the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, 1960, No. 30). Since then, too late unfortunately for Kabo to use it, N. J. B. Plomley has produced his *A Word-List of the Tasmanian Aboriginal*

\* Proizkhzhdenie i ranyaya istoriya Aborigenov Avstralii. 1969, reviewed in *Oceania* XLIII, p. 160.

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*Languages* (Tasmanian Govt., 1976), which contains all the material there is, very carefully annotated and as far as possible analysed. Such works as these seem to bear out the contention made above, that the real nature of the language will never be known with any certainty. Kabo has followed others in giving comparative lists of Tasmanian and Australian words, but in all these lists there are two fatal weaknesses: first, Tasmanian words from any part of the island are compared with Australian words from any part of Australia, and second, no regular rules of sound interchange are established or even sought. It may be true that there is a small common element — the reviewer feels that this is so, and that it is mostly between Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, but he also is not in a position to prove this by regular laws of sound change. There are too many unknown factors in the proposition. All that can be said is that some comparisons *may* be right! Opinion does seem to be hardening that there is some connection between Tasmania and the earliest stratum of Australia, but it must not be forgotten — as it almost always is — that Australian Aborigines were taken from Australia to Tasmania in the 19th century. The resemblances may be actually late loans, not inheritances. Plomley, for instance, has amongst words for ‘where?’ the word *war* (=w’). This is a Sydney word, and an early Australian root — but here obviously from a Sydney Aborigine who was not recognised as such by the recorder.

Kabo’s book, therefore, does not succeed in solving problems: it may never be possible to do this, and he has tried before in his earlier work. For Russian readers the book will certainly be very useful, and its cheap price (67 kopecks) will recommend it. It is careful in its scholarship and well documented — but it cannot do the impossible, especially if the stages of development postulated by Russian anthropological writers in general, are not fully shared by readers from other traditions.

A. CAPELL