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978-0-521-58836-2 - An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia: Culture and Tradition

Paul Sillitoe

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An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia

Culture and Tradition

Melanesia is a fascinating culture area, and has always been a popular fieldwork site for the anthropologists, including W. H. R. Rivers, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson. A surprising number of the most important theoretical contributions to the subject were also first formulated with reference to Melanesian studies, and undergraduate students today still learn much of their basic anthropology from Melanesian examples. Paul Sillitoe's *Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia* of which this is the first volume, is intended for students and general readers with some grounding in the issues and ideas that inform the discipline. Each chapter focuses on a topic common to many cultures in the region, such as the role of so-called big men, ancestor cults, male initiation, and exchange, and these ideas are fleshed out with apt ethnographic examples. The range of materials handled is quite exemplary, and each case is provided in sufficient depth to make good sense of it for readers not already familiar with the region. This book will be useful as an introductory or intermediate level for undergraduate courses in general anthropology, and Pacific cultures.

PAUL SILLITOE is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Durham. He has conducted extensive anthropological field research in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. His books include *Give and Take* (1979), *Roots of the Earth* (1983), *Made in Niugini* (1988), and *A Place Against Time* (1996).

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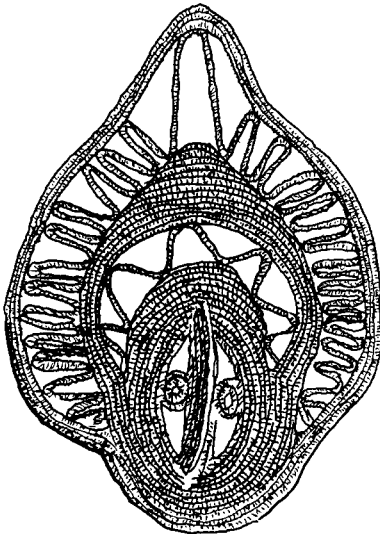
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Department of Anthropology, University of Durham



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For friends in Melanesia,
heirs to *ol pasin bilong tumbuna*

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The logo featuring in this book is based on a yam mask from the Maprik region of Papua New Guinea.

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Thereafter he mooned about the Java Sea in some trading schooners, and then vanished, on board an Arab ship, in the direction of New Guinea . . . He remained so long in that outlying part of his enchanted circle that he was nearly forgotten before he swam into view again in a native proa a portfolio of sketches under his arm. He showed these willingly, but was very reserved as to anything else. He had had an 'amusing time', he said. A man who will go to New Guinea for fun – well!

Joseph Conrad, *Victory: An Island Tale*

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Preface

Melanesia is a region in the south-west Pacific Ocean, occupying about the same area of the globe as Europe. Another name for the region, which dates from the early days of Western exploration, is the Black Islands. It reflects the region's place in the European imagination, from its discovery up to the present day. Among the impressions that inform its reputation are images of wild people, savage and primitive, who revel in black customs, and the legends emphasising dark customs live on. Even as the twentieth century comes to a close the region continues to exercise this fascination. Reports of undiscovered primitive people still appear in the Western press: 'A nomadic Stone Age tribe believed to be untouched by civilisation has been discovered by a government patrol in wild mountainous jungle of Papua New Guinea . . . Naked, except for a few strips of bark and leaves, the Liawep people . . . [were] found last month living in bush huts under a large human-faced rock which they worshipped as a god' (*Independent* 26 June 1993). This book aims to help replace these imaginative excesses with an understanding of this region's intriguing cultures built up by anthropologists working there over the past century. An anthropological **introduction** to the indigenous peoples and cultures of Melanesia, it is intended for both those who have some background in anthropology and those with none.

Readers with some grounding in the issues and ideas that inform the discipline may have heard something about the engrossing ethnography of Melanesia and wish to learn something more about it. The region has played a prominent role in the history and intellectual development of the subject from its inception. It was one of the first places where extended fieldwork, now acknowledged as the hallmark of anthropology, was practised, by the Russian Miklucho Maclay on the coast near present-day Madang in 1871 (not, as many students of anthropology are erroneously taught, by the well-known Pole Bronislaw Malinowski, who worked in the Massim nearly fifty years later). The varied ethnographic reports produced since then, being informed by their authors' backgrounds, the ideas prevalent when they wrote, and so on, constitute not

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a consistent record but a patchwork body of knowledge which presents an overview text like this one, with some interesting challenges. Those with no previous knowledge of anthropology may also wish to learn something about Melanesia, and to this end the book includes brief introductory comments on anthropological topics such as the study of stateless polities, non-centralised dispute resolution, swidden agriculture, rites of passage, and so on, to set the ethnography in a broader disciplinary context.

The book will contain little new for those familiar with the region. The exception is the proposal that we drop the term ‘ceremonial exchange’ and stop talking about ‘gift economies’ because these are inappropriate to the practices to which they refer and cloud important issues. They are confusing not only to an introduction to the region but also in intellectual debates about it. Instead it is suggested that we refer to sociopolitical exchange (or sociopolitical modes of exchange, complementing the well-known domestic mode of production). It focuses on traditional or premodern aspects of Melanesian society, reflecting in considerable part the region’s ethnographic record, in which accounts of these institutions feature prominently. Several anthropologists have been privileged to observe some Melanesian societies before they started to change enormously following extensive contact with the outside world and have written accounts of largely ‘traditional’ cultural orders. They represent the classic ethnography that has contributed to Melanesia’s anthropological celebrity and engaged the imagination of the general reader.

The intention is **not** to suggest that Melanesian societies were ever static. Although many anthropologists have written in a one-time frame, few if any of them thought that the societies they studied had no history and were not experiencing change. The rate of change in premodern contexts would have been slow on the whole, certainly as viewed from the brief time spans of most anthropological fieldwork. Furthermore, the full force of the change consequent upon the intrusion of the Western world may not have been felt for some years after initial contact, and it is in this interval that anthropologists have observed and reported on relatively traditional societies. Many of these cultures have subsequently changed considerably as a consequence of what anthropology contemporarily calls globalisation; modern communications are allowing the world’s cultures to influence one another as never before.

Recent interest in globalisation has focused on the recontextualisation of aspects of Western life and the associated technology as people struggle to incorporate them into their own cultural traditions. The

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other side, commonly heard in the South-West Pacific, is people's lament for the loss of their cultural identity in the face of this global onslaught. This book chimes in with this lament. Throughout Pidgin-speaking Melanesia, people commonly refer to their culture as *pasin bilong tumbuna* (literally fashion belong ancestors or our ancestors' customs) and talk about the need to maintain *kastom*. They perceive that they are losing their cultural identity. The documentation of traditional aspects of their cultures is not, from this perspective, any romantic essentialism harking back to some 'primitive' past but a record that will feature crucially in their search for their cultural identity in a rapidly changing world. We can sense something of the same concern and confusion over these trends worldwide in the apparent strengthening of the resolve to protect ethnic and national identities. This preoccupation with safeguarding distinct cultural characters while simultaneously embracing worldwide shifts of perspective and influence reflects something of the intriguing human urge to reconcile opposites: becoming the same yet remaining different.

A wrestling with opposites characterises a considerable part of Melanesian social life. It gives rise to some intriguing paradoxes which contribute to its ethnographic fascination. There are the region's fluid categories, which not only challenge our conception of classification but even call into question attempts to define it geographically or characterise sociocultural groups within it. There is the tension evident in stateless political contexts between individuals' desire to press their own advantage at the possible expense of others and their concern with maintaining amicable social relations with them. There is the resolution in sociopolitical exchange of the potential conflict between competition and sociability. There is the existence of inequalities within fiercely egalitarian social environments. There is the paradoxical behaviour of people in disputes, vigorously siding with their relatives while simultaneously pressuring them to reach agreeable settlements. The emphasis on socially integrative reciprocal relations has a disruptive aspect too, expressed in the revenge ethic, and the violent lives of some relate to initiation ceremonies in which kinsmen, with parental connivance, terrorise and abuse young relatives towards whom they normally act protectively.

Some scholars have argued that many anthropologists have largely overlooked history, but few if any have ever denied that the history of the region must be significant in understanding it. It is just that reliable historical documentation has been sparse in many regions until relatively recently. There is little evidence of the changes that had occurred before Europeans arrived, except for that to be gleaned from oral histories,

which are shallow and frequently feature mythical elements that are difficult to assess, and archaeological finds, which are currently sparse and difficult to interpret. When the full force of outside contact is felt, the pace of change increases dramatically and that change, unlike precontact history, is documented with the start in a Western sense of a historical record.

In relation to historical contexts and time frames, it is pertinent to note that the ethnographic accounts in this book are presented in what anthropologists call the **ethnographic present tense**. This is a convention in anthropology that has been criticised, but the criticism appears to be founded on a misunderstanding. The ethnographic present is **not** intended to suggest any timeless premodernity; it represents the time around which the anthropologist conducted the fieldwork and produced the ethnography in question. Few anthropologists neglect to document the changes that have occurred since European contact (for example, the use of steel tools and other manufactured goods) and may rely on people's memories for information on practices recently ended (for example, on stone axe technology, head-hunting rituals, and so on), and they customarily report this information in the ethnographic present, as relating to what they, or the people with whom they live, have witnessed.

The anthropological convention of the ethnographic present obviates the need for constant and confusing changes of tense in writing and justifications for the use of one tense and not another. On some occasions what anthropologists study becomes history before they even commit it to print; this is particularly the case where tribal societies change rapidly in the modern world. The ethnographic record in their notebooks becomes a pastiche of what was observed and has passed into desuetude, what continues, and what has been modified, and it is difficult to know how to handle information on a society of which some aspects have changed while others continue. In the Massim region, for example, people continue to participate in an anthropologically renowned exchange institution called the *kula* but in contexts radically different from the one first reported; whereas people once travelled in outrigger canoes and communicated with conch shells, today they use outboard launches and telephones. What is past and what is present?

The change that occurs over time, particularly following the outside world's intrusion, further promotes sociocultural variety. No society is unchanging, and documenting the variation that occurs over time inevitably presents problems; this is the essence of history as a discipline. These problems are compounded throughout the South-West Pacific by the startling diversity of cultures found here. This variety contributes to its fascination for anthropologists, but it presents further difficulties for

an introductory text like this one. The problem is how best to acquaint the reader with this ethnographic variety. This book addresses this conundrum as an ethnographically founded introduction to the region, not a comparative sociology, reflecting the author's experiences as a fieldworking anthropologist.

Each chapter discusses a topic common to many societies throughout the region using ethnographic data on one society as an illustration. The ethnographic example serves to draw out issues relating to the topic that are common across Melanesia, while playing down any local idiosyncrasies. This approach mirrors the state of our ethnographic knowledge of the region which is patchy, and is preferable, I think, to one that attempts a broad comparative overview that might give the false impression of comprehensive ethnographic coverage. It would also result in a burdensome catalogue of available ethnographic evidence which, rather than furthering understanding of Melanesian society, would hinder it with a flood of miscellaneous ethnographic illustration.

This approach limits this introduction to a relatively small range of ethnography in its exploration of regionally relevant themes. The implication is not that it includes in the author's judgement the best and omits the rest. Many excellent anthropological studies have been undertaken in Melanesia, but an introduction like this must restrict its coverage. Two concerns guided the selection. One was to achieve a good spread geographically and culturally across the region, and the other was to select studies that dealt in sufficient detail with the topics to be addressed to draw out themes central to the region. Some very difficult choices had to be made in the light of these considerations. Readers of this book who are stimulated to read further will find a wealth of ethnographic writing on Melanesia awaiting them.

It is probable that some readers, in addition to taking exception to the selection of ethnographic material, will also disagree with the selection of topics. Again, although limitations of space have resulted in the omission of some topics from this introduction, it nonetheless covers those that I think are central to achieving a balanced introductory understanding of the Black Islands and their people. Despite Melanesia's cultural variety, there are constant underlying themes detectable across it. A prominent one, for instance, is the centrality of the exchange of things in social life. Certain classes of objects are very important to Melanesians. They vary greatly from one place to another, ranging from strings of button-sized sea-shell discs arranged in tyre-like coils to ochred crescents cut from pearl-shell valves and from elaborate ornaments of dogs' teeth to enormous decorated yam tubers, but the contexts in which people transact them and the principles underlying

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their exchange are similar everywhere. Other themes covered range from gather-hunting to swidden agriculture and from beliefs in ancestor spirits and fear of endemic sorcery to acephalous politics and informal dispute-settlement procedures.

A *caveat* may be in order here. Each chapter is not a potted ethnography on the society featured. No attempt is made to cover everything from kinship to religious beliefs, economic organisation to political order, and so on. The ethnography selected is used only to explore the theme of the chapter, and to elicit points of general relevance to the Melanesian region. This approach again reflects the nature of the region's ethnographic record, which contains considerable information on some issues in some cultures and little to nothing about others.

Every effort is made to remain faithful to the ethnographic facts as recorded in the literature, but the ethnographer's interpretation of these facts is not always presented without criticism or revision. Some might argue that it is too optimistic to imagine that one could remain true even to the ethnographic facts, because what constitutes them is not necessarily clear. All ethnographic accounts inevitably include an element of subjectivity. Anthropologists' observations are partial, and they always interpret them to some extent. Therefore their upbringing, gender and so on, as well as the intellectual preoccupations current in the age in which they write, condition the ethnographic record. Contemporary post-modern criticism questions the status of the descriptions and explanations of outside observers of what they think they see and hear in other societies, arguing that there is an involuntary subjective element and unavoidable ethnocentric judgement in any selection of ethnographic 'facts' and their interpretation according to the intellectual canons of an alien culture. The rapid turnover of theories in the social sciences, each informing interpretations differently and focusing attention on varying ethnographic issues, exacerbates this inconsistency. There is no escaping this criticism. It relates to the critique of Orientalism and the metropole's definition of the Other. This introduction compounds it with its arbitrary selection of ethnography depending on the availability of ethnographic research judged relevant to points I consider important for understanding something about the anthropology of Melanesia. Perhaps the justification for this presentation and interpretation of a selection of ethnography from Melanesia is that one Westerner's illusions are as valid as another's, and furthermore, that the encounters of several other anthropologists who have worked in the region conform closely to my own experience.

Whatever the philosophical status of anthropological knowledge, this introduction puts a particular spin on the ethnographic facts. The

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objective is to develop a coherent perspective of Melanesian society. Although this interpretation tries not to privilege any time, theory, or perspective but to cover both dated issues such as culture and personality and topical ones such as gender and inequality, it attempts to set these within the context of some relevant current post-modern theoretical preoccupations. It would be inappropriate, in a text like this, to engage in the 'deconstruction' of works to reveal how the personal backgrounds and current intellectual interests of ethnographers inform their interpretations of other cultures, effectively substituting one illusion for another. Nonetheless, it is important for the reader to be aware of these contentious interpretive issues. To this end, the following accounts include apposite comments on the ethnographers and their times to contextualise the record. Another device adopted is to remind readers, at appropriate junctures, of the tendency to draw conclusions on the basis of one's own experiences by drawing parallels between the Melanesian institutions discussed and episodes in readers' own lives.

It is my hope that this book will not only be interesting and informative but also may stimulate further reading on this fascinating and relatively little-known part of the world. Each chapter concludes with some references for further reading on the ethnography and topics discussed. The book comes from a range of university lecture courses with a Pacific content that I have given over several years, notably a first-year course entitled 'Anthropology and Ethnography', and a second-year one entitled 'Regional Studies: Oceania'. I thank the students who attended these series of lectures for asking questions and making comments that helped, sometimes inadvertently, to clear up issues and clarify my presentation. I also thank my wife, Jackie, for reading through the manuscript, commenting on its suitability as an introduction and improving on the text where necessary to make it clearer. Assistance from Durham University Publications Board with meeting the costs of the plates is gratefully acknowledged.