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978-0-521-77141-2 - Social Change in Melanesia: Development and History

Paul Sillitoe

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Social Change in Melanesia

Development and History

This book is a companion volume to *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia* (1998). It gives a clear and absorbing account of social change in Melanesia since the arrival of Europeans, covering the history of the colonial period and the new post-colonial states. Paul Sillitoe deals with economic and technological change, labour migration and urbanisation, and the formation of the modern state, but he also describes the sometimes violent reactions to these dramatic transformations, in the form of cargo cults, secession movements, and insurrections against multinational companies. He discusses contemporary development projects but brings out associated policy dilemmas. He reviews developments that threaten the environment, and implications for local identity, such as a tourist industry that romanticises 'primitive culture'. This fascinating account of social change in the Pacific is addressed to students with little or no background in the region's history and development.

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), *A Place Against Time* (1996) and *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia* (1998).

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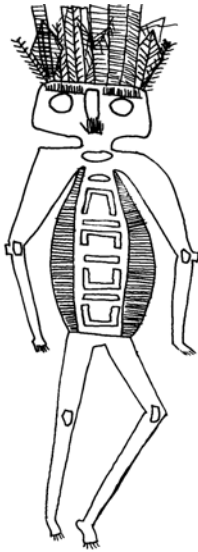
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For Melanesian friends
coming to terms with a rapidly changing world

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The logo featuring in this book is based on the contemporary steel sculpture on the wall of the Rural Development Bank of Papua New Guinea at Waigani.

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Both these white men looked on native life as a mere play of shadows. A play of shadows the dominant race could walk through unaffected and disregard in the pursuit of its incomprehensible aims and needs . . . a barrier against the march of civilisation. The poor folk here did not like it . . . a great step forward, as some people used to call it with mistaken confidence. The advanced foot had been drawn back, but the barricade remains . . . but then it is the product of honest fear – fear of the unknown, of the incomprehensible.

Joseph Conrad, *Victory: An Island Tale*

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Preface

Melanesia's peoples evidence a legendary and bewildering variety; several hundred languages, the product of millennia of local differentiation, are spoken in the region today. The indigenous societies are similar, however, in being small-scale and kin-ordered; they are stateless tribal societies in which sociopolitical exchanges of wealth such as pigs figure prominently on occasions such as marriage and death.

This book is an anthropological introduction to the post-contact history of these intriguing societies. An earlier volume, *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia* (1998), has described the region's traditional cultural orders. Like that book, this one is intended for both those who have some background in anthropology and those with little or no knowledge. Each chapter serves as a vehicle for some contemporary theme, and brief introductory comments on modernisation and dependency, nationhood and cultural identity, participatory development and indigenous knowledge, ethnicity and Orientalism, economic development and urbanisation, millenarian movements and religious change help to set the ethnography in a wider disciplinary context.

Again it also further attempts to dispel misunderstandings that are common about Melanesia and which are voiced regularly in the Western press, for example:

Neighbourhood disputes do not last long in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. If someone irritates you, a local *sanguma*, or hired assassin will kill him or her for the price of a stick of home-grown tobacco. For good measure the victim can also be eaten . . . 'In some cases, people are sacrificing then eating their own children' . . . Despite more than a century of work by Christian missionaries on the margins of this untamed and mountainous country, the old beliefs and superstitions still run deep. 'It is hardly surprising that these people are confused', said one long-term resident. 'They've gone from the Stone Age to helicopters in one generation. Most of them never owned a bicycle before they saw a helicopter.' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 23 August 1998)

In contrast to the earlier volume, however, this book is not solely anthropological. It deals with issues and problems that have traditionally

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been the concerns of human geography, sociology, development studies and economics. It is in relation to these other disciplines that present-day anthropology is having to establish its identity as ethnographers increasingly find themselves working in rural regions or urban centres where extensive externally influenced social change has occurred and people's lives are markedly different from those of pre-contact times. In these contexts local people frequently experience problems of cultural identity, and similarly anthropology is having to shift its focus. Along with these societies caught up in rapid social change, anthropology is having to ask itself what it is.

The discovery of the Melanesian islands by Europeans set in train a process of rapid social change. The nature of this change is unique to the region; its cultural heritage and history have set it off on its own trajectory; it is not simply repeating the experiences of European societies. Through modern communications, the world's cultures are influencing one another as never before, and at the same time there is increasing concern worldwide for the protection of ethnic and national identities. Throughout Melanesia people point with regret to the loss of their 'ancestors' customs'. The documentation of their cultures is not, from this perspective, a misplaced emphasis or a romantic gesture harking back to some 'primitive' past but something that can be of crucial importance in their search for cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

A distinctive feature of anthropology is its pursuit of comprehensive coverage (what some writers call holism). It tries to set issues in a broad cultural context and from their consideration postulate generalisations applicable to human social behaviour. Accordingly, its approach to social change is not just a critique of historical narratives but an examination of the social implications of development interventions. Although the predictive record of anthropology and the social sciences generally is not a good one, this active engagement with often intractable problems reflects a tendency not to be satisfied with mere academic debate. Intellectual debate does help, however, to give direction to research intended to inform development interventions. What, for example, is the role of technology versus ideology in social change? Is it technical innovations that lead to new social arrangements, or is it the unending conflict between opposed ideologies founded on differing values and views?

It has recently been suggested that many anthropologists have largely overlooked the history of the region but in fact it is just that reliable historical documentation has only relatively recently become available. There is little evidence of the changes that had occurred before Europeans arrived except for that in oral histories and archaeological finds which remain sparse.

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It is estimated that the first human beings arrived in Melanesia 50,000 or more years ago, coming from South-East Asia during the Pleistocene era. We assume that these people lived by hunting and gathering and envisage them slowly spreading into the South-West Pacific moving gradually from the west to the east, occupying the region over several thousands of years. The people who made the pottery now called Lapita ware started arriving, again from South-East Asia, about 4,000 years ago and they are assumed to be of the same stock as those who went on farther east to populate Polynesia. Some writers have tried to divide the population into biological racial types, each corresponding to a different wave of prehistoric migration into the region, but these distinctions are dubious. However different the various racial stocks were originally, they have since interbred extensively. 'Race' as cultural difference or ethnicity is, however, relevant to understanding the region, having recently emerged as an issue with the outside world's intrusion.

No society is static, and documenting the changes that occur is problematical and these problems are increased by the cultural variation found in Melanesia. This variety makes the region interesting for anthropologists but gives further problems in structuring an introductory text. The strategy adopted again is that each chapter takes a topic common to many places throughout the region, such as attitudes to land, and discusses it using one society in particular. As with *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia*, two concerns guided the choice of material: first, to ensure a good geographical and cultural distribution; and, secondly, to select studies covering the topics in adequate detail. While the region displays startling cultural variety, there are constant underlying themes detectable across it, from labour migration to cargo cults, cash-cropping to mineral exploitation, and so on. I use these studies to represent these wider themes in Melanesian society. The choices were difficult, for there are many excellent studies on Melanesia.

I tried to remain true to the ethnographic evidence, although sometimes I offer reinterpretations. Contemporary post-modern criticism suggests that this is inevitable in the interpretation of any ethnographic 'facts'. Anthropological theory contributes to this process. It is now evident with hindsight that anthropological interests and concerns are largely driven by contemporary Western concerns of the moment. The current emphasis on social dynamics and process, the centrality of history and identity issues, all reflect our perception of rapid social change and preoccupation with globalisation, our need to try and account for it. Other topical issues concern sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity, which have come to the fore as the environmental costs of industrial development have become increasingly obvious and urgent.

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It is my hope that readers will not only find this book interesting and informative, but also be stimulated by it to read further on this fascinating and relatively little known part of the world. Each chapter therefore concludes with some references for further reading on the topics discussed. The book arises from a series of university lectures and I thank the students who attended them for asking questions and making comments that helped to clarify issues. I also thank the National Research Institute at Waigani in Papua New Guinea and particularly Colin Filer, Head of the Social and Cultural Studies Division, for inviting me to take up a Visiting Professorial Research Fellowship which afforded me the opportunity to revise and add to this manuscript while living in Port Moresby. As always, I thank my wife, Jackie, for reading through the manuscript, helping to ensure that it meets the requirements for an introduction, and improving on my expression besides assisting with countless editorial revisions. Assistance from Durham University Publications Board with meeting the costs of the plates is gratefully acknowledged.