

Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives, eds Pamela J Stewart & Andrew Strathern, ASAO Monograph Series, No. 18, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa, 2000. 320pp. ISBN 0-8229-5716-7 (p/b); ISBN 0-8229-4115-5 (h/b) USD19.95 (p/b); USD45.00 (hardcover).

Identity Work is based on papers on the theme 'history, biography, and person' originally presented at conferences of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania from 1996 to 1998. In most of the chapters anthropologists discuss personal life stories narrated to them by Pacific Islanders.

In their 'Introduction', the editors review literature on concepts and methodology, especially considering various ways of understanding individuals as social actors, and issues in the study of cultural differences in the meaning of biographical narrative. This is a finely nuanced analytical discussion, valuable for the specialist reader but perhaps not sufficiently engaged with the substantive chapters to have strong appeal to most students of Oceania. For an overview of issues that the case studies highlight, readers are likely to find Geoffrey White's 'Afterword' more helpful.

Part 1, titled 'Self Changes', includes essays on how individual women have negotiated their personal development in social fields of constraints and opportunities created by rapid social change. Barbara McGrath presents Alisi's story, detailing her ambitions and frustrations in resisting pressures to conform to traditional Tongan norms of marriage and family life, and the compromises she eventually feels compelled to make. Stewart and Strathern tell of two women of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, Konda and Yara (a daughter of the famous big man Ongka), who turn to the new charismatic churches in their efforts to escape the restrictions of their traditional 'gendered existence', especially polygynous marriage. In church activities they achieve new and respected roles. Indeed their life choices illustrate 'the immense contemporary significance of these churches and their influence on the shaping of biography, history, and personhood in Hagen today' (57).

Louise Thoonen's study of Maria in interior Irian Jaya also deals with one woman's determination to break from traditional expectations by



seeking modern education and independence away from her home village, in this case mainly through the Catholic church. The chapter is especially interesting for its examination of individual experience of initiation ritual and its impact on the initiate's subsequent life. After years of suppressing it, Maria made creative use of that experience in contexts of social change. Religious visions led her to combine aspects of the traditional rite and its associated knowledge with her Catholic identity and ritual practices to create a prestigious career as spiritual healer in her region. The church, having helped her to escape the confines of tradition, finally offered Maria a means to reconcile with her people. Thoonen's essay elegantly demonstrates how self-narratives can illuminate connections between personal and social dynamics.

Part 2, on 'Male Leaders', begins with Strathern and Stewart's comparison of two big men of Mt Hagen (Ongka and Ru), highlighting different understandings of male leadership roles: the assertive, egotistical and domineering achiever, and the more restrained and diplomatic mediator who 'deals with moral problems by reconciling people to one another' (83). For both kinds of leader, winning popular respect for their *nomos* (mental strength and efficacy) and ability in arranging gift exchange is crucial, and while Ru's self-presentation 'corresponds more to a "relational" model of the person, Ongka's to an "individual" model ... both are behaving relationally and/or individually in a context-driven manner' (90). The self-accounts also show how Ongka's and Ru's 'concepts of personhood' have been altered by their experiences with Christianity. By the late 1990s, the transformations taking place in Hagen 'were creating new patterns of influence and leadership and were leaving both Ru and Ongka behind as representatives of the old regime' (94).

In contrast to this picture of a weakening of traditional life diminishing the power of customary leaders, Karen Sinclair writes on how Matiu Mareikura achieved prominence by combining his family heritage as grandson of a prophet and as a Catholic, with leadership in the Maori cultural renaissance and land rights movement. For many Maori, Matiu's personal career was the potent embodiment of their collective being, displaying how to reconcile in their lives the cultural and ancestral past, the colonial encounter, and their contemporary experiences, indeed



'how to wage a war for identity' (118). Revered as 'an exemplar of Maori cultural endurance and persistence' (103), he offered a model of leadership for modern times.

Part 3, titled 'Agencies', includes the final three essays. William Rodman recounts the story of Nicodemus, a central figure in the millenarian anti-colonial movement Na Grial on Santo Island in Vanuatu. The self-narrative presents an account of the movement's ending in the rebellion of 1980, an account that challenges the official version, alleging that several deaths the government leaders explained as accidents were actually murders. This claim 'has helped shape the postcolonial political climate in the rural areas' (155), sustaining in many places a mood of distrust towards the state. Nicodemus's story well illustrates the importance in Pacific history writing of detailed study of the 'subaltern perspective'.

Richard Scaglione and Marie Norman write about Moll, a leader of the Abelam people in the Sepik district of Papua New Guinea, describing his remarkable career from the time of earliest Australian intrusions, through the Japanese occupation, the consolidation of Australian rule, and finally the independent Papua New Guinea state. Moll's story shows up the inadequacy of the simplistic contrast between resistance and accommodation often drawn in accounts of 'subaltern' reactions to colonial domination. His socialisation in an egalitarian society determined how he responded to the exigencies and opportunities created by the imposition of hierarchical systems. His adaptations illustrate a variety of modes such as 'evasion, deception, persuasion, co-option' that are conventional strategies of social action in his traditional society (136-7).

The last case study in the book, set in the Northern Mariana Islands, explores the relation between collective and personal biography, by focusing on a group's strategic narrative about an historical individual. Juliana Flinn tells of how a Carolinian community created the biography of an ancestral chief in support of their claims to an entitlement to special status on the island of Saipan where they have become marginalised by other settlers. Aghurubw had heroically led his fellow Carolinians to settle there long ago, and he continues to 'epitomize valued Carolinian manhood, embodying values of strength, bravery, wisdom and concern





for others' (161). His revitalised importance was amplified by accidental damage to his burial site by a Japanese tourism company, a violation that Carolinian leaders have sought to exploit for maximum advantage in their contemporary struggle. This essay, like Sinclair's on Maori leader Matiu, is a most interesting contribution to the literature on the politics of tradition and identity in Oceania.

Geoffrey White's 'Afterword' is a compelling analysis of some general dimensions of the cases and their implications for our critical appreciation of the life history method. He cogently observes that 'as culture has come to be regarded more as contestation and struggle than shared meaning or text, problems of the individual person, of subjectivity and agency, have resurfaced as central objects of interest—a place to look for a better understanding of moment-to-moment negotiations of cultural meaning . . . In one way or another, each essay deals with tensions among multiple, often competing identities' (174–5).

It takes little reflection to recognise that in the context of rapid social change, involving so much movement and crossing of old boundaries, bringing new opportunities and encouraging ambivalence toward 'traditions', self-narratives about life dilemmas and choices ought to have a central place in the study of Pacific Islander experience today. But, as White stresses, understanding the meaning and significance of self-presentations will always be problematic, for they do not provide 'an unmediated picture into people's lives'. They are selective in recall, contingent on changing contexts affecting the narrator's interests and motives, and influenced by the presence, expectations and methods of the anthropologist, and they require cross-cultural translation and interpretation. We need to be very aware of 'the degree of indeterminacy and ambiguity, as well as the power relations, that always accompany representations of others' (185).

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