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## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

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Geoffrey M. White, *Identity through History: Living Stories in a Solomon Islands Society*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, no. 83. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. xvi, 270, illus., bibliography, index. US\$21.95 cloth.

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### Person and Collectivity in Narratives of Conversion

THIS BOOK IS SITUATED at the intersection of three recent trajectories of analysis in Pacific anthropology and history. The first is the relation between indigenous and European genres of telling history, the second is the dialectic between Christianity and tradition in the constitution of contemporary identities, and the third is the articulation between person and collectivity in Melanesian ethnography, and in social theory more broadly. These are integrated in White's concept of "conversion narratives"--those stories that tell of first contacts with missionaries and the subsequent conversion to Christianity by the people of Santa Isabel, in the central Solomons. White is interested generally in telling the past: how people narrate, dance, and sing their history for the present. But the most frequent and compelling narratives on Santa Isabel are about conversion, rather than about, for example, national independence or World War II (although White has written extensively about the latter elsewhere).

I will concentrate on his concept of "conversion narratives"--but first a few preliminary observations. Until now our knowledge of the Solomon

Islands has been focused further east, in particular on the island of Malaita where the ethnographies and histories of Keesing, de Coppet, and Burt have been situated. There has been important ethnography done in the west since Hocart was there in the early twentieth century (1922, 1931)--Scheffler on Choiseul (1965), Hviding at Marovo Lagoon, and Dureau on Simbo (1994). But this book will help to reorient some of the present theoretical debates towards the west. White evocatively recaptures his own first contact with Santa Isabel in 1974. The reader is invited to sail along with him on the *Ligomo*, a typical cargo/copra vessel, as it chugs up the coast. We witness not just the island's topography and vegetation--the patterns of lush rain forest in the interior, the precipitous ridges and deep valleys descending from the mountains--but the visible traces of root-crop gardens inland and coconut plantations on the coast and the concentration of people by the sea rather than in the remote, deep forests, the *dak bus*.

The arrival story that most engages White in this book is not his own, but those about missionaries--arrivals that reconfigured the difference between the coastal and interior peoples as the difference between *solwota* and *bus*, between accommodation and conversion to the beliefs of the strangers as against resistance and recalcitrant heathenism. This difference does not have the same present pertinence as on Malaita, by Keesing's account (for example, 1992), since in Santa Isabel there are no traditionalists, no resistant heathens in the mode of the *kastom* Kwaio. From 1861, following the arrival of Bishop Patteson at Bughotu, the work of indigenous catechists like Wadrokal and that of European missionaries like Penny and Welchman resulted in the total conversion of the island to the Anglican Melanesian Mission. Their success was partly due to the escalation of raiding and head-hunting in the preceding era. These practices, though ancestral and endemic, intensified dramatically with the arrival of European traders who procured turtle shell and bêche-de-mer in exchange for steel tools, particularly weapons, such as axes and guns. As a result those groups and leaders who had best access to the new technologies of violence dominated others. So Simbo and Roviana dominated Santa Isabel and Choiseul, and those on the coast of Santa Isabel at Kia and Bughotu dominated the Cheke Holo speakers of the interior--taking not just skulls but live captives as "slaves."<sup>1</sup> From the 1860s onward, intensified raiding and massacres resulted in successive movements of refugees, deserting the area between Kia and Maringe Lagoon. In this "flight from death" some barricaded themselves in high fortified settlements, others fled to the southeastern tip. This massive dislocation of people provided fertile ground for the Christian message, although as White suggests, the Christians used the power of violent force as much as they argued against it.

There are many Santa Isabel stories that retell the events of such conversions in a variety of genres. In his preface White introduces us to the most stark and simple form--the school essay. In response to White's question, "What was life like in Santa Isabel before the church came?" one boy wrote in part:

Beginning in the past, our ancestors, our fathers and mothers did not understand the love (*nahma*) that we know today. And they didn't know about the togetherness (*fofodu*) of the present time either. They did know about killing people . . . and about fighting

But life in the past was extremely difficult. People did not live in happiness (*gleale'a*) or love. Nor did they sleep calmly (*blakno*). If they were traveling or sleeping, they could not forget their clubs, their axes or their spears. (P. 8)

Here White exposes two canonical features of conversion narratives. The first is the imputed antithesis between "now" and "before," the now characterized by love, togetherness, and happiness, the before by fighting and cannibalism, hostility between local groups, and chronic anxiety. This extreme, even "overdrawn," antithesis is not found in all such narratives, many of which are far more subtle and ambiguous in their rendering of the transformation from the "time of darkness" to the "time of light." Secondly, this example makes clear how such narratives not only mutually constitute present and past but also the relation between person and collectivity. As White expresses it, "Present and past, self and other are joined in mutually defining relations" (p. 9). But the relation is rarely so simple as the identification of the speaking subject as "self" and the ancestor as "other." Rather the speaking subject, the "I," is elided in the "we" of a demarcated collectivity, and the ancestors are differentiated not only into good and bad persons but a single ancestor might be differentiated into recuperable and repugnant aspects.

Most stories of conversion are not communicated as texts, written with a pen and paper, but rather are told, embodied and enacted, in ways that connect persons and places. Thus, soon after White first arrives, Knabu men take him deep into the forest on a tour of sites sacred to both ancestral and Christian religions, first to Sithalehe where ancestors were offered crops, pigs, and sometimes humans. At this shrine Father Hudson Lagusu demonstrates the use of the altar in human sacrifice, and several men tell grisly stories of decapitating victims and of warriors drinking blood and cooking flesh (p. 37). Such sites have salience not just as mnemonics of ancestral practices but also as places where ancestral and Christian powers are still in

contest. Despite the eclipsing potency of God, the sacred power of such sites is still credited and manifest in ghostly appearances, in the inexplicable movement of objects or the appearance of snakes. White stresses how, although European missionaries tried to discredit the efficacy of ancestral powers, indigenous catechists were more likely to admit them in order to demonstrate the superior efficacy of God by banishing spirits or neutralizing their powers: "ghostbusting" as White dubs it.

White's early guided tour of such places--sacrificial altars, sites of old ceremonial houses--is accompanied by narrative commentary from his guides. Narrative and landscape are thus rendered indissociable; stories are spatialized. "In our short journey a sequence of place names codified a sequence of historical events" (p. 39). But importantly, this itinerary/ history is not always shared. Such old shrines and relics may be boundary markers between groups, used to support contesting contemporary land claims, rather than nostalgic evocations of a shared space and past.

Thus, the "we" in conversion narratives is as problematic as the "I." White's recounting of the epic of the Knabu people evokes how a "closed dark" community was opened to the "light" of Christianity. But this is not just a story of the combat between the peaceful Christian missionaries and the violent warriors of old. It is also a memorial to Matasi Iho, the good chief, and his wife, whose intervention stopped violent warriors from killing the indigenous catechist, Gagai. Such stories are often told, or rather sung as a lament, expressing sorrow both for dead ancestors and places of past residence (cf. Feld 1982). But evoking particular ancestors and place names as they do, they also tell the history from a position that is partial in both senses. So Forest retold the Knabu epic at a feast that was simultaneously to celebrate a wedding, Pentecost, the day Christianity arrived, and the day Iho allegedly died. The life of the married couple and the good of Christian conjugality were thereby linked to the life that Iho delivered by his conversion. There is not just a generalized appeal to the values of the church and of the good Christian person: Christianity is localized and grounded by particular genealogical attachments. In remembering Matasi Iho (his maternal grandfather) accepting Christianity, Forest is legitimating a claim to the chiefly preeminence of Iho and his descendants, including himself (pp. 40-51).

In the latter part of the book White insists on the dramaturgical quality of many conversion narratives. These are not disembodied texts but situated performances, particularly as laments or skits that focus on the moments of first interaction between European missionaries or indigenous catechists with ancestral heathens. Very often clowning skits satirize the naivete of their ancestors--their failure to comprehend the meaning of prayers, hymns, or baptism, or their ignorance about clothes and goods. The old

colonial joke about cannibals wanting to eat the boots as well as the bodies of their stranger-victims is here replayed in local form (p. 142). But in this caricature of their heathen ancestors, White also detects a reflexive play with the deprivations and conflicts of the living (p. 143). To amplify the lack of wealth or the dark passions of the past is also to stress the persistence of inequalities or the potential of gossip, sorcery, or violence in the present. Thus, it is not only ancestors who have good and bad qualities, but narrating subjects and their audiences are divided between their good, moral Christian aspects and their potential for devilishness.

One of the most compelling chapters of this book is chapter 8. Here White counterposes three indigenous narratives with that recorded in the diaries of the missionary Welchman of his ascent in 1890 to the "bush" chief Figrima in his fort at Khakatio to bring the word. Two indigenous narratives --one told and one written--employ similar core episodes exemplifying Welchman's approach, Figrima's resistance, and his eventual acceptance of the missionary. Like the Knabu epic, they counter-pose the violence and death that Figrima authored with the familial solidarity and life that Christ promised. Both these narratives and a third sung version employ shared core metaphors-- of violence versus peace, death versus life, darkness versus light. Both the spoken and written narratives use the trope of the darkness and closure of the fort as a physical instantiation of pre-Christian society being opened to the light of the missionary. Both stress the barring of the fort and the chief's shouting abuse or offering armed resistance. Both stories emphasize the sacred power of Welchman--for Sati it is exemplified in his walking stick; for Hagiera it is amplified by acts of prayer throughout the ascent, and manifest in his power to subdue the armed warriors simply by shaking their hands. In both accounts it is Figrima who visits Welchman and accepts his word. They diverge in significant ways, too. Hagiera, who writes his history, is descended from Figrima and dwells on his ancestor's chiefly power rather than on his propensity for killing and cannibalism. On the other hand, the late Sati, in telling his version of the story, does stress Figrima's violence and also confers on his own ancestor, Kofuthara (one of Welchman's guides), a more prominent role (pp. 156-168).

But the differences between both these narratives and Welchman's own account are even more telling. Welchman records no acts of resistance by Figrima and does not mention that he prayed en route. He writes that he was "summoned" by the chief rather than that he forced entry or that Figrima came to him. From his account it emerges that at first he had no direct contact with Figrima, who stayed behind a screen, and that his later conversations were dominated by benign exchanges of goods rather than abuse. As White concludes, "In the local histories, Welchman emerges as an

even more heroic figure than in his own description" (p. 172). Thus, paradoxically, although stressing the agency of locals and especially chiefs in their narratives of conversion, Santa Isabel narrators heroize and amplify the power of the missionary.

As White shows, conversion narratives are saturated with the power of chiefs. But the chiefs of whom Santa Isabel people speak are not, White claims, those of conventional anthropological parlance. *Jif* in pidgin reflects a mutual accommodation of indigenous and exogenous concepts of leadership. Chiefs in the past had more wives, more shells, bigger houses, and the authority both to summon warriors and to order death. It was chiefs who mediated relations between living persons and spirits. They "covered over" others and were elevated above them. They were seen as necessarily dominant in a way that differed from the ideal ordinary person, who refrained from dominance. But, although associated with height and haughtiness, they were still expected to be empathetic.

Contemporary chiefs are still seen as towering over others and as endowed with the power of unseen or enchanted forces. It is these dimensions of chieflyness that Christians have valorized, opposing them not only to the warriors of old but also to the government chiefs and police of the colonial period. In the motivated assimilation of church chiefs to pacific, empathetic chiefs and government chiefs to violent strongmen, there was clearly a contest between church and colonial state for hegemony. Moreover, in this process, the mission's own use of violence and force was elided. Thus Soga, newly converted, imposed conversion on others. He no doubt sought new sacred power in the church as well as a place of refuge and protection. Yet, ironically, although represented as a paramount chief and a peacemaker, Soga enforced his message of peace by armed raids on those who would not convert.

The recent revival of the position of paramount chief provides compelling evidence of the salience of chiefly values in the present. Despite some local opposition to the idea of a single chief for the entire island, when Bishop Dudley Tuti was installed as paramount chief in 1975, more than two thousand people attended the ceremony. And, true to form, the ritual included some of the key events of conversion narratives--recounting the missionary's approach, violent rejection, followed by acceptance and ultimate conversion. In one version the man of God was Bishop Selwyn, who cured Soga of an illness with drugs (one local interpretation being that they were antimalarials). This retelling of the early events of conversion legitimated the installation of Tuti and condensed the connection of person, power, and local identity. Thus, White interprets his installation as an integration of ideas of chiefly leadership and church power: Tuti wore both chiefly shell

pendant and bishop's cross. Rather than being perceived as a foreign institution, chiefs and paramount chiefs were seen by their supporters as of *kastom*, since chiefs were always mediators with the outside and agents of new knowledge and power. Moreover, this local revival was indissociable from the national debates about *kastom* and chiefs before and after independence in 1978. The very contestation about the notions of the paramount chief and later the national Council of Chiefs made them central in debates about tradition and development.

This book is a valuable addition to the historical anthropology of the Pacific. Firstly, it warns us against the imputation of that tired dichotomy, tradition and modernity, in our dealings with notions of *kastom* and culture in the contemporary Pacific. The essentialist notion of "tradition" that this entails exoticizes others as it denies them agency in their own historical transformation (see Linnekin 1992; Jolly 1992). But we might also add that a reified notion of "modernity" also essentializes Europeans, denying the conflict between colonial agents that emerges clearly here in the contest between *lotu* (church) and *gavman* (government). It also occludes the divergencies and varieties of modernities. Secondly, White insists on the pervasive process of self-representation through history, as against those theorists who would caution us not to find self-awareness, or notions of culture and history, where they do not exist (for example, Strathern 1988:9). There is no doubt that the very arrival of anthropologists, in White's words, "provokes" acts of self-representation and reflexivity. There is no doubt, too, that the way in which local people use the notions of *kastom* and *kalja* (loosely, "culture") are derived from English words. But it is important to insist as White does that this capacity for reflexivity is not just a response to colonial processes. *Kalja* is not the same as culture but rather a pidgin appropriation of an English word and concept, its meanings reworked in local conversations and political debates. Thirdly, the book is innovative in the way in which it links the broader cultural history of collective conversion with constructs of personhood. White highlights the centrality of the narrating subject in telling history, the way in which Santa Isabel persons are relational rather than those individuated selves who allegedly inhabit modernity. Moreover, he links this dynamic constitution of subjectivity with moral notions of good and bad persons, and shows how such polarities cut across the portentous partition between *bifo* and *nao*, heathen and Christian.

But still there are ways in which the book fails to satisfy. The genre of writing sometimes moves rather awkwardly between situated and embodied storytelling and disembodied analytic reflection. More consequentially, White doesn't do enough to critically connect his original material and innovative

insights with the central controversies in the three analytical trajectories I referred to at the start. Quite often he alludes to debates rather than fully engaging with them. Thus, the counterpoint between indigenous and European ways of telling history could have been taken further. For instance, White alludes to Sahlins (1985) in passing, criticizing his "structural history" as disembodied, separated from both political and emotional realities. But White does not vaunt the richness of his own materials sufficiently nor extend this critique. For example, the identification of the speaking subject and the ancestor that Sahlins perceives in "heroic history" could have been productively compared with the more subtle and complex processes of identification and differentiation that White discerns between speaking subjects and listeners, named and valorized ancestors, and unnamed and negated ones. White conveys the sense always of a partial history<sup>2</sup> from the viewpoint of a particular collectivity or person and even a speaking subject, split between their light and dark sides.

Again, the full import of White's argument against the dichotomized language of tradition and modernity, *kastom* and Christianity, might have been better realized if he had chosen to engage with the work of the late Roger Keesing more directly. Undoubtedly, such dualisms do pervade the consciousness of *kastom* people more than of Christian adherents. But Keesing tended to rely on these dualisms unduly in his analysis and in so doing could denigrate Christian adherents such as those with whom White worked. White has obviously chosen not to develop an argument with Keesing but in so doing evacuates some of the force of his own analysis. Keesing's last and, in my view, best book, *Custom and Confrontation* (1992), was published after *Identity through History*. But as a pair they offer equally persuasive if different approaches to the salience of colonial history in the present and the dialectic between *kastom* and Christianity in the forging of contemporary Pacific identities. In 1992 Keesing not only reiterated but refined his views on resistance and on the hegemony of colonial discourses, preeminently Christianity, in the lives of contemporary Solomon Islanders. White rhetorically insists that "Christian ideology has not been simply passively recorded on Pacific minds like a tape-recorder left running in the background of a Western conversation" (p. 179). It is unclear to whom he imputes such a view. But he might have strengthened his rhetoric to argue with those who stress hegemony rather than agency in the construction of contemporary identities.

Finally, it may seem strange to say that this book doesn't go far enough in dealing with the problematic relation of person and collectivity. This after all has been the central focus of much of White's other writing within that tradition of transcultural psychology that is highly suspicious of both the epistemological premise and the normative ideal of the individual in Western



psychology. And indeed this book has much to say about the relational form of the Santa Isabel subject in opposition to any who might imagine that individualism automatically accompanies Christian conversion or commoditization. But again I craved a greater engagement with the controversy about the relation between person and collectivity that has ensued since the publication of Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift*. This important and influential work constructs the Melanesian person as different from, if not the antithesis of, the Western individual. But the Melanesian person so conceived lives beyond the colonial histories and the collective biographies that White recounts. White finds a similarly relational rather than individuated self on Santa Isabel, but his subject emerges in the context of remembering colonial and postcolonial history rather than one that is detached from or unable to retell such memories.

### NOTES

1. I bracket this term since I doubt that it is apposite. Dureau (1994) notes, for example, how many captive "slaves" were adopted by local families and were treated in ways very similar to local children. Some were seen as appropriate victims for the human sacrifices required by the ancestral religion--at the death of chiefs or in launching war canoes, for example. But on occasion, "slaves" became influential ritual specialists and, according to Rivers, on Vella Lavella some were "chiefs" (Dureau, pers. com., November 1994).

2. "Partial" here implies both incomplete and told from an interested viewpoint (cf. Thomas 1990).

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