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Many ethnographies over the last decade have explored links between identity and history. The topic is popular and timely, letting us address vital questions about historical and ethnic excuses for violence, and also offering rewarding material for new interpretive approaches in anthropology.

Geoffrey White, who has written on ethnopsychology, ethnohistory, and culture change in Melanesia, puts "narrative texts and practices at the centerpiece" (p. xi) of ***Identity through History.*** His analysis focuses on key "meaning-making activities" (p. 13) that he identifies as the best avenues to understanding how culture--specifically, personal and group identity represented through shared history--gets made.

White's distinctive contribution is to connect his analysis of the social pro-

duction of meaning with consideration of the person. Although we have a sizable body of literature about the construction of group identity, and we also know something of the politics that produces history, White chooses to explore the link between "selves" and their society, a relatively understudied element of the identity-history interaction. White's previous work in ethnopsychology (for example, 1978, 1985; White and Kirkpatrick 1985) contributed to the current understanding of how personal selves are created in culturally specific ways; in *Identity through History* he turns his view outward to ask how culturally constituted selves constitute their cultures. There is a certain inevitable complexity here, bordering at times on the bemusing, but it is a complexity that we cannot ignore: it must simply be slogged through for a few years until, on the other side, we can see some clarity in what currently appears to be a maze of "everything shapes everything."

White chooses to enter the maze by way of narratives. Two sorts of narratives form the "centerpiece" of the book, and both are introduced in part 1, "Orienting." First--the first narratives White encountered on Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands, the first that older people wanted to tell him, the first chronologically, given his starting point, and the first cultural facts he deals with--are conversion narratives. These are dramatic oral histories of the introduction of Christianity to Cheke Holo speakers, the resistance of chiefs, and their final agreement to accede to and promote Christianity. The second sort of "narrative" is the performance of chiefs, in feasts and anciently in rituals, but most notably in the 1975 installation of the Anglican Bishop Dudley Tuti as paramount chief of the island.

Chiefs are central to Santa Isabel historical sensibility and cultural sentiment. To understand why chiefs hold this important role--one easily ignored in Melanesia, where studies of big-men have focused on economics and coercion--White examines historical tales of famous chiefs, local views of chiefly personalities, and chiefly activities. The political scientist will remain frustrated with the loose structure of local leadership, but it must be admitted, after White's exposition, that there is a lot of "talk" about chiefs. Whatever they do or do not do, they are certainly symbolically vital to local communities. This, White says, is because chiefs "are a focus for ideas about persons, power and political institutions--a site where indigenous and Western practices mutually shape one another" (p. 52).

Much chiefly activity today involves feasts, which invoke two aspects of history and identity: shared descent and shared Christianity. These are explored through conversion narratives, examined in part 2, "Transforming." In these chapters White provides readable narrative of his own about the spread of Christianity. Santa Isabel society was "in jeopardy" from well-armed raiders in the late 1800s. Cheke Holo speakers responded to the vio-

lence by fleeing to the far southeast or to fortified refuges in the interior. It was in the context of sustained violence that wiped out whole communities and left regions depopulated that the Anglican Melanesian Mission mounted its evangelical campaign. It succeeded due to widespread desire for peace and by the emergence of a few relatively powerful leaders who aided the mission after becoming Christians. The few European and many Melanesian missionaries worked through local leaders, providing symbolic support for chiefly power in the form of a novel Christian identity. White details the activities of the early Christian chief Monilaws Soga, missionary Henry Welchman, and the first Isabel priest, Hugo Hebala. He explores how, in the first decades after conversion, traditional magical practice, shifts in residence, church construction, and changes in feasting patterns and leadership were negotiated and transformed as islanders built a society and a way of understanding themselves that they saw as distinct from the violent and "heathen" past. The idea of a "Christian person" emerged in tandem with the fact of a Christian (and, simultaneously, a colonial) society.

In part 3, "Narrating," White looks again at local history, this time with an explicitly interpretive gaze. Isabel people tell and act out stories about conversion and conceive of themselves (in a common conversion idiom) as "new" people. As such, they must remember what "old" people were like and recount how "old" became "new"--thus the centrality of conversion narratives to identity. Since conversion was large-scale and rapid, both "selves" and society were "made new"--so conversion stories have public meaning and are often acted out as skits at feasts. White analyzes both skits and narratives closely, allowing us to see in what terms and with what emphases local constructions of history are presented today. True to his rejection of simple dualisms, tradition is as important as change in these analyses--we see, for example, that descent remains important, as people emphasize the role of particular ancestors in promoting Christianity. In chapter 8, White examines the oft-told story of missionary Welchman's 1890 visit to the hill fort of Chief Figrima to introduce Christianity. White compares several indigenous versions and then adds Welchman's diary to the mix.

These conversion narratives resemble those we know from elsewhere: savage and ignorant heathens concede the power of the Gospel and transform their lives. As White acknowledges, this is how foreign missionaries painted the scene.

> But Christian ideology has not been simply passively recorded on Pacific minds like a tape-recorder left running in the background of a Western conversation. It is instead actively interpeted in local contexts and put to use within culturally constituted spheres of in-

> terest and activity. . . . A key ingredient in the success of the Melanesian Mission in Santa Isabel was the ability of local communities to appropriate Christian symbols and still reconstruct the conversion experience as one that was generated from within. (Pp. 179-180)

This happens through the symbolic power of chiefs. Thus, White says, as he moves toward the final section ("Revitalizing"), it is most appropriate that chiefs are today key symbols for novel explorations of links between tradition and modernity, ***kastom*** and Christianity and democracy.

So we come to what White considers a major symbolic event for Santa Isabel, though it has had little practical import. This is the 1975 installation of Anglican Bishop Dudley Tuti as paramount chief--a position that existed at the turn of the century and again in the 1930s both times as a result of collaboration between an influential Christian chief and a European missionary. Although Christianity was instrumental in transforming Isabel culture, it was partly through cultivating chiefs that Christianity succeeded--so chiefs, now viewed as traditional, were vital to the Christian transformation (this is one of many ironies White points out, though they are not ironies to Isabel people).

The church and the colonial state contended over governance on Santa Isabel, ending for a while in a dual system of secular headmen and church chiefs. White explores the complexity of various types of leaders today in an unexpected foray into scaling and clustering techniques that connects ethnopsychology and social roles. But this is prelude to the description of the installation of the bishop as paramount chief in "rites of renewal" (chapter 10, p. 209). The idea of paramount chief combines religious and secular power, the mediation of national with local concerns; it is both a creation of colonial entities and a "standardbearer" of traditional ***kastom*** (p. 210). The odd thing is that Bishop Tuti in his own persona already did all this. The paramountcy was a role created for him--or, at least, because he was who he was. White explores the specificity of time, place, and person coming together in a discussion leading up to his investiture. The ceremony itself was carefully choreographed and heavily symbolic--very much a story that Isabel was telling itself. In the telling, certain links between history and identity were made explicit. At the same time, the major question--the political status of the paramount chief, or of any chief--remains obscure.

"The approach taken here," White writes in his conclusion, "suggests that narratives of the past do pragmatic work as cultural tools building both self-understanding and sociopolitical realities" (p. 241). Movement to establish paramount chiefs has taken place on other islands in the Solomons over the past decades. Although the political role of chiefs remains unclear, ideas of

chiefs as bearers of ***kastom*** have a continuing and even expanding hold on national and local consciousness. As Christian chiefs transformed the islands in the last century, so chiefly Christians provide opportunities for transformation in this. White sees the establishment of paramount chiefs as another in an unending set of "meaning-making activities" which "[open] up possibilities for reconfiguring relations between localized identities and the institutions of church and state" (p. 242).

White explicitly connects the formal ritual of the bishop's installation ceremony with "ordinary language and metaphor" (p. 245)--because the story of conversion, "told' so dramatically in the installation ritual, is also constitutive of very local identities and indeed of personal identities. For example, the elderly recall the abandonment of sorcery fears in their own lifetime, and Cheke Holo intellectuals reanalyze traditional beliefs to find precursors of Christian teachings. Self-understanding and collective representations are never far apart in White's book; the "socioemotional" and the sociopolitical are mutually constitutive. This approach, White suggests, may be useful wherever shared histories, formed in colonial context, provide grounds for sentiments of cultural distinctiveness.

The most profound impression of this book on the non-Melanesian specialist is how far we have come in rendering explicit and thus complex what might once have looked like an invitingly straightforward task of "interpreting" culture. Culture, tradition, history, identity--these are impossibly vague and slippery concepts, yet we have made surprising strides in working with them. Geoffrey White has written a sophisticated, wide-ranging analysis that reflects on both the personal and the national, that contributes to ethnopsychology, to regional studies, and to global inquiries into culture change. He does so without cluttering our path with another unique theoretical model useless beyond its original application--yet he hews consistently to a line of thought that shapes new intellectual tools for all those interested in that mysterious cycle that eternally reproduces both persons and cultural systems, reproduces them in recognizable form, yet with constant variations. The book is written in elegant, readable prose, yet it deals with dauntingly complex content.

Consider: in the introduction we are presented with all the elements entailed in this "ethnography of identity formation" (frontispiece). If we accept White's plan to set narratives at the center--it is his book, after all--we must admit that the thicket could equally be entered at any of a dozen points: selves, community identity, Christian conversion, chiefs, or culture change. White must deal with them all before he can achieve his goal ("to explore those processes--both conceptual and social--that make identity and history out of experience" [p. xii]).

Is it a question of how these elements relate, in some hierarchical fashion? Or could one, really, start anywhere, simply producing a different sort of book if one set ethnicity, or chiefly politics, at the center? Anyone trying to represent local visions of identity or history has to make such choices. One can simplify the picture by focusing on key symbols, for example, or take on the challenge of assigning priority by suggesting hierarchies of meaning (approaches that I used in *The Ngatik Massacre* [Poyer 1993]). Others have proposed models of cultural systems or sought chronological starting points. White has chosen not to make Cheke Holo understandings more manageable by reifying or simplifying them, although he clearly considers some representations more "central" than others. He begins with narratives, not because he is making a grand argument for narrative as the heart of symbolic analysis, but because this was the "talk" in which islanders engaged: "By noting that local traditions and social change are focal topics of conversation in meetings and other contexts, we may begin to ask how culture and history are constituted in subjectivity and social process" (p. 29).

One sort of theoretical writing in anthropology has been the constant antiphony between those who focus analysis on material factors and those who write mostly about meaning. The cry for rapprochement is heard repeatedly, yet when we actually set to work, we usually find it easier to center our efforts on one or the other. White describes both his field experience and the basics of Isabel politics and economics, but he remains firmly committed to a study of meaning rather than sociopolitical action, While acknowledging the complexity of his analysis, and accepting that White has chosen to write a cultural and symbolic study, there is still a nagging suspicion that some material and political underpinnings might make a different picture of much of what happens here. What, for example, is the economics of church-state interaction (in light of the importance of land ownership and commercial development)? Why do politicians--especially national politicians--support chiefs? Just what do actual, specific chiefs actually do? ***Cui bono*** the establishment of a paramountcy? White does allow for some ambivalence about this innovation (pp. 244-245) but is clearly less interested in whether there might be systematic political interests at play (economic? age? gender? descent line?) than in presenting a broadly conceived vision of Cheke Holo culture. Nor is this inappropriate: if interpretive analysis is to be done, we cannot abandon the idea of shared culture to the acknowledged reality of special interests. Yet, if meaning is made through symbolic representations in stories, skits, and chiefly feasts, it is also made through economic transactions and political deals.

History is made through public representations, and it is no surprise that its meaning in the Solomon Islands is much like that of many other postcolo-

nial Christian societies. White gives us another example of people who talk about "the bad old days," while clinging to certain icons of that time as valuable indicators of "our culture." Do we have enough examples of this--and other, related, ideas of the past-- to begin comparative work, to generate testable ideas about differences in visions of history? Or do we continue to interpret each case on its own ? I wonder, for example, whether there might be some generalizations possible about a society's vision of its past and the time that has passed since a dramatic shift in lifestyle. (First, soon after the shift, all that is past is seen negatively, "progress" is all. As time goes by, the past becomes differentially valued, with some elements continuing to be disdained while others gain virtue with hindsight. Then--and perhaps contributing to a climate that will produce a new transformation--the past takes on the glow of a golden age.) White does not enter into generalizable speculation either regional or global, although he implies that the case at hand could contribute to both.

Two other topics I will mention only briefly. First, and very important, is the nearly complete absence of women as actors or speakers in this book. White acknowledges their absence in a paragraph in his preface (p. xii), but it must be asked whether this suffices. He indicates briefly the symbolic importance of matrilineal descent (pp. 33-34) but does not otherwise include gender in his symbolic analysis or in his discussion of sociopolitics. An expert in Melanesia may be able to judge to what extent White's analysis, or even the events and stories he recounts, are applicable to women. But those not intimately familiar with the area may wonder whether all this talk of chiefs, politics, and church is not simply "men's business" rather than a central concern of the entire community, A second and related issue is that of life-course. Since conversion was relatively recent here--within the last century--what is the effect of generational shift and the life stage of individuals on interpretations of the past?

White's book is a sophisticated and pathbreaking addition to work in history and identity. By adding ethnopsychological considerations to more familiar ways of studying ethnohistory and ethnicity he has illuminated much more clearly the mechanisms through which culture and cultures are created and renewed. Like all reviewers, I wanted more of topics that interest me. In this case, the chapter the author did not write, to my regret, would have been entitled "Religion," and it would have explored more directly this most important of meaning-making activities.

Religion is curiously understudied by symbolic and interpretive anthropologists, indeed, by all anthropologists, in recent decades. There is no mystery about this, given the pervasiveness of academia's secular orientation. Still, as we seek answers to how meaning is produced and reproduced, it

seems self-defeating to stubbornly talk all around religion without directly engaging it. After all, for many of the cultures we study--and certainly Santa Isabel is among these--a religious sensibility is at the heart of what gives life meaning.

Not that White ignores religion. The transformation from "heathen" to Christian is at the center of conversion narratives, conversion skits, the symbolism of the paramount's investiture ceremony, and the chiefly ideal. White examines all of these--but as narrative, as performance, as ethnopsychology and chiefly representation, not as religion. Santa Isabel is a Christian island; more, it is Anglican. What does it mean to be a Christian, an Anglican? Perhaps White assumes that most readers know. But can we assume that we understand what this religion means to a Cheke Holo speaker? I am curious to know what an Isabel Christian believes, what s/he thinks is distinctive and characteristic of this religion, how exactly it differs from pre-Christian philosophy, how it shapes personal and community life. White includes fascinating discussion of what it means to be a "Christian person" (pp. 48, 128-129), but does this tell us what Isabel Christians believe, and what that belief means for social action?

Most exciting in White's treatment of religion are his ideas for a new approach to what we call "syncretism"--a problematic term, since all religions are in some sense "new" and grafted onto preexisting traditions. Whereas Europeans in Melanesia tended to see Christianity as a substitute for traditional practice, "indigenous specialists see a confluence of models and methods," and Christian practices were themselves transformed as they transformed local life (p. 114). The relationship between ancient priests and chiefs, and Christian priests and chiefs, is one fascinating example.

If Christianity is transformed by being believed on Santa Isabel--as indigenous belief is transformed by conversion to Christianity--why do we continue to be surprised by juxtapositions of Christianity and tradition? Certainly Isabel people seem to understand quite clearly that the two speak to each other--as White demonstrates neatly in his discussion of the difference between the European missionary efforts to destroy ancient ritual sites and the Melanesian Christian actions to baptize spirits and incorporate stones from old shrines into churches (for example, p. 107). Especially in describing Bishop Tuti's investiture as paramount chief, White is struck by the entwinement of tradition and Christian belief. White calls them "these often oppositional facets of identity" (p. 236); "a distinctive feature of the Santa Isabel paramount chiefship . . . is its ability to encompass elements of both indigenous ***kastom*** and Christianity, providing a somewhat unique set of political possibilities for leaders who combine the authority of church and tradition" (p. 240). Thus, while strongly contesting--and providing good evi-

dence to counter--"inclinations to dichotomize 'tradition' and 'modernization' " (criticized by White on p. 29), he himself runs the risk of dichotomizing "tradition" and "Christianity." Our deconstruction of "modernization" has been valuable in allowing studies such as ***Identity through History*** to forge ahead with illuminating the processes of social change and the practices of cultural creation. One next step is the deconstruction of a relatively unexamined concept of religion, opening the door for similarly sophisticated studies of the role of personal belief and community commitments in historical and cultural processes.

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