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This is a brief comment, and will end with a request for explanation, rather than with a critical assessment of White's monograph. ***Identity through History*** should and will be read from various standpoints, as a detailed study of representations of conversion and colonization in the Solomon Islands, as a comment on the chief's role in postcolonial Melanesia, and as an articulate comment on the contribution of local histories to local identities in the Pacific. Being unfamiliar with these aspects of regional history and ethnography, I will comment on the most general and theoretical points addressed in the volume. ***Identity through History*** provides a solid description of the ways in which the local production of history on Santa Isabel is also a production of identity Obviously, this description is informed by a series of par-

ticular theoretical commitments, some of which are implicit. Now it seems to me that the connection between these theoretical points and the particular facts White wants to highlight is, in some cases, less than compelling. At some junctures, the general framework actually stands in the way of a more illuminating analysis. This apparent discrepancy may be entirely justifiable, in terms of particular features of the situation described; hence the request for additional information.

White's book is an attempt to explain local discourse about colonial history and conversion, in a explanatory idiom that would avoid some misleading assumptions conveyed by anthropological categories, for example, the assimilation of the traditional and the perennial. He also wants to avoid dichotomies commonly projected on such societies, such as that between big-men and chiefs. To White, many such anthropological constructs are of little explanatory value, and their denotation in local ideologies is rather problematic. In the particular case of colonial encounter and conversion, it is both difficult and necessary to avoid a description in which Pacific societies are construed as both traditional-perennial and passive, whilst the locus of agency resides solely in external historical dynamics. This is particularly important in terms of understanding the construction of identity: as White demonstrates with great force, no understanding of identity in the Solomons is possible without a detailed description of local histories, that is, of the processes whereby people produce a significant account of the events of conversion and colonization. This is very much in keeping with recent developments in the ethnography of the area, emphasizing history as a local discourse, reactions to colonization as an assertion of identity, and conversion as appropriation rather than mere imposition.

White also mentions a series of theoretical filiations that are important in the construction of his argument. These include a general interest in "meaning-making" activities and in the social processes underlying such activities. Also, White wants to stress the "constitutive" or creative role of these activities, like the telling of personal anecdotes or the elaborate narratives of conversion. As he puts it, such narratives "do not simply represent identities and emotions. They constitute them" (p. 13). This is consistent with White's insistence, throughout the book, that the inhabitants of Santa Isabel are creating local understandings and forcefully reconstructing conversion to Christianity. Finally, a proper description of such activities requires that we go beyond the implicit methodological individualism of much anthropological theory. Personal narrative on Santa Isabel often takes the individual as a metonym for constructing group identity, what White calls the "communal self-hood" of historical narration.

These assumptions, in my view, might lead to some paradoxes and at

some points hinder a satisfactory description of local historical dynamics. For instance, let me briefly consider the installation of Bishop Tuti as a new "paramount chief" in 1975. As White shows convincingly, this event is emblematic in that it combines the idioms of ***kastom,*** in which chiefs are conceived as protectors in the islanders' dealings with the external world (including the spirits), and that of "modern" structures of power: church and administration. Moreover, the fact that the event pertains to an "invented tradition" is clear to all participants, yet this does not in any way undermine the significance of the ceremony. The central message of the event is that of the general reinterpretation of conversion, found in historical narratives. Preconversion times are characterized by violence and magical power, and conversion brings peace and somehow recruits the potency of former chiefly authority to that renewed social order. As White himself points out, there is no need for subtle interpretative techniques to extract such meanings from the ceremony: "Invented ritual tends towards self-conscious sophistication, leaving little to the interpretative imagination. In the gift-giving sequence [in which various dignitaries presented the new paramount chief with symbolic gifts], each presentation framed its own significance with an accompanying utterance to the effect: 'Take this symbol of activity X.' The gifts of government and indigenous leadership were even labeled 'symbols' in the written program" (p. 229).

This description is the source of my uncertainty, and in my view raises a question that could be addressed to White's volume in general (in much the same way as the installation of a new "paramount chief" is emblematic of local understandings of conversion). The particular meanings conveyed through historical narrative, skits, and anecdotes are very clearly displayed in the situations described by White. So much so, in fact, that at some points it seems that we are dealing with some form of forcefully constructed and displayed ideology, which presents itself as the only natural, plausible, and meaningful reading of the history of the island. Indeed, this is what most historical ideologies do or try to do. However, to the extent that this discourse is presented as constructed, as a manifestation of agency, it is difficult for the reader (this reader at least) not to wonder by what processes or in what ways it actually gains preeminence. That is to say, one wants to know what agencies are involved here, and in what manner their particular understandings become authoritative.

At this point, it seems to me that White's theoretical commitments are damaging. "Agency" has been conceived at the level of the islanders as a whole, trying to produce some collective identity. This assumption seems dangerous in that it tends to obfuscate questions of legitimacy and author-

ity in an idiom of participation and "communal self-hood." Obviously, this is the idiom in which the local understanding of conversion is presented. But it is not necessarily adequate to its explanation. In other words, we know that local historical discourse produces a particular description of the conversion. But it also produces a particular description of itself, which we may not want to take at face value. If we do, we run the risk of giving a paraphrase of the ideology, rather than an explanation of its occurrence. Here I am not alluding only to the dynamics of domination, although they must be important in the constitution of such crucial discourse. I am also concerned with what one could call the cognitive dimension of these narratives, skits, and ceremonies. Not all narratives or performances are equally relevant or salient; not all of them are perceived as inherently "traditional" (that is, inherently pertinent to present circumstances). White himself addresses questions of categorization and salience in his description of the various categories of authority (pp. 202 ff.), and one might perhaps need a similar attention to individual representations in the description of historical discourse.

The installation of Bishop Tuti as the new paramount chief on Santa Isabel is presented by White (and by the participants) as a powerful symbol of unification, perhaps even identity, between artificially separated sources of legitimacy. To the outsider, however, the ceremony may seem to celebrate the fact that ***kastom*** authority, once perceived as competition or danger, has become for the "real" authorities, church and administration, so unimportant that participation in its rituals can be used as an innocuous political gimmick. Obviously, I am not entirely serious about this suggestion; all I want to say here is that White's theoretical stance makes it difficult to evaluate the relevance of such alternative, perhaps caricatural readings of the situation. Emphasizing "communal self-hood" may lead to neglecting the tensions on which it is built. Also, White's insistence on the "construction" of cultural "meanings" leads to blurring the distinction between what happens to local political dynamics by virtue of people's understandings and what would happen regardless of those understandings.

This very limited discussion cannot do justice to the number of crucial theoretical and ethnographic points raised by White's book. As I said above, this is mainly a request for clarification. Can we assume in this case that the self-image of a constructed ideology is a good index of its actual constitution? Can we explain its occurrence and success by the communal process of self-persuasion it depicts? These are naive queries, but they are legitimate ones, in that White's book deserves to be read outside the limited readership of Pacific studies and will therefore raise questions of this type.