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Anthropology's History and Other Good Stories

The reviews of ***Identity through History*** by Pascal Boyer, Margaret Jolly, and Lin Poyer offer a welcome opportunity to reexamine some of the books aims and approaches. Given that issues of history and identity are even busier sites of anthropological activity today than they were five years ago, this is also a chance to reflect on problems that beset work in the area generally. Each of these reviewers offers perceptive comments that do as much to articulate as to critique. In addition, Jolly and Poyer give significant comparative perspectives from their own substantial research in the Pacific.

Jolly locates ***Identity through History*** at the intersection of three trajectories in contemporary anthropology: indigenous and European historical practices, the interrelation of custom and Christianity, and the ethnography of person and collectivity. This is an astute summation. One could rephrase these themes either upward in terms of the book's general concern with identity formation or downward toward more particular problems of Melanesian ethnology, such as leadership (big-men, chiefs) or social movements (Christianity, cargo cults).

The tension between these rephrasings marks the book's attempt to reach multiple audiences. In the end, however, it is clear that the audience is primarily that of professional anthropology. How could it be otherwise, for a volume presented as number 83 in the "Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology"? In retrospect, however, even a volume published in such a comfortable academic niche could have benefited from more attention to the problems that now arise in the more complex publics of contemporary ethnography.

A Genealogy

A brief biographical note about the advent of my research on Santa Isabel may help to locate the book within the longer sweep of anthropology in Melanesia and the Pacific. I first traveled to the Solomon Islands in 1974, with my entry made easy by British administrators working at the end of the colonial era. After previous fieldwork assisting Theodore Schwartz in Papua New Guinea, I had selected the Solomons as a good site for dissertation research based on advice from Harold Scheffler and Roger Keesing. Keesing had made a brief trip to Santa Isabel, where no anthropology had been

done previously, and had noted the Maringe area as an interesting location for future research.

At that time, the possibility of doing primary documentation in an anthropologically "unknown" area had strong appeal, even though I had originally planned to work in a community where I could draw on prior research for a more focused study of social cognition. Numerous projects had been undertaken in the Solomons by such notable anthropologists as Ian Hogbin, Raymond Firth, William Davenport, Torben Monberg, Roger Keesing, and Harold Scheffler, as well as Douglas Oliver and Eugene Ogan on Bougainville. Yet Santa Isabel had been overlooked. The overlooking is revealing. Whereas the small and remote Polynesian outliers within the Solomons archipelago had been extensively studied by Firth, Hogbin, Monberg, and Richard Feinberg (to be joined later by William Donner on Sikaiana), major islands such as Santa Isabel and Makira had been bypassed.

One reason for this is that Christianity was generally not regarded as a relevant subject for anthropological inquiry. To the extent that anthropology defined itself in terms of the study of difference, and specifically of non-Western difference, Christianized islands were regarded as less important sites for ethnographic work. Postwar anthropology in the Pacific was primarily interested in the study of ***traditional*** culture, accessed through the unconverted or the memories of the old. None of the essays in the book ***Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*** (Lawrence and Meggitt 1965), for example, dealt with Christianity as a primary focus. With the exception of Hogbin's ***Experiments in Civilization*** (1970), the only major works focusing on Christianity in the Solomons were produced by missionary scholars (for example, Tippett 1967; Whiteman 1983). And the aim of the latter to provide enlightened advice to the missions and churches tended to remove them from mainstream theoretical debates.

Let us hope that in some not-too-distant future an intellectual historian will chart anthropology's ambivalent treatment of Christianity in Pacific cultures. Recent work in the Solomons shows a sharp turnaround in this respect, with Burt's ethnography of the Kwara'ae on Malaita focusing on local Christianity (1993), as well as the recent dissertation by Christine Dureau on Christianity in women's lives in Simbo in the western Solomons (1994). Within the last twenty years, the field has moved from deliberate avoidance of Christianity as a form of Westernization or contamination to focused research on Christianity as a site of transaction between indigenous and foreign meanings, or local and state interests and so forth (Kaplan 1995). Seen as an ***indigenous*** religion, local Christian practices are increasingly interpreted as modes of resistance to the state and global development (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Inverting the old modernization / assimila-

tion paradigm, interpretations of local culture as resistance are now practically de rigueur in anthropology and cultural studies.

While I can't say that my initial interest in Santa Isabel had much to do with the significance of Melanesian Christianity, once I began fieldwork on the island it was unavoidable. The salience of Christian identity and of collective memories of conversion asserted themselves in a variety of ways. But there is more at issue here than the discovery of what is relevant, locally. More important is the recognition--now widely acknowledged--that cultures are not bounded systems, but processes of meaning-making that mediate both understanding and power in everyday life. In light of this, the focus for extended fieldwork has shifted from the explication of discrete cultures to the analysis of cultural encounters and transactions where meanings and truths are produced--however problematically--in public discourse.

Anthropologies of Conjuncture

Jolly notes the contrast between my account of Santa Isabel society and Roger Keesing's writing about the militantly pagan Kwaio of neighboring Malaita island. Although Keesing's book ***Custom and Confrontation*** had not yet been published, the Kwaio politics of custom he describes represents an important set of contrasts with the Isabel situation. Jolly is correct in suggesting that I could have exploited this contrast more effectively, not only to highlight differences between a society that incorporated Christianity and one that resisted it, but also for the purpose of sharpening a theoretical argument about how to study identity formation under conditions of colonization, decolonization, or globalization.

Identity through History argues that moments of cultural encounter, such as the arrival of missionaries and subsequent conversion to Christianity, constitute particularly salient points of cultural production, especially in regard to the formation of collective identities. In other words, such moments offer a strategic focus for understanding understanding, for cultural analysis. Talk of identity tends to bubble up in the spaces between cultural systems, where transactions in objects, emotions, and ideas may unsettle established orthodoxies and create new possibilities for social life. As otherwise solidified categories jostle against one another, they may be reformed in attempts to accommodate new social, political, and economic conditions. In the case of Santa Isabel, to be a "Christian person" in the mid-twentieth century was to open up a set of potentials for positioning oneself and one's community in relation to wider regional, national, and global horizons.

In Melanesia, one of the indexes of the salience of cultural production in spaces-in-between is the use of pidgin terminology in colonial and postcolo-

nial societies. Pidgin originates precisely between groups who lack shared communicative knowledge, expressing ideas that become relevant in the borderzones of intercultural relations. Words such as ***kastom, kalja*** (culture), or ***sif*** (chief) in particular point to understandings of self and other that mediate relations between indigenous and Western, local and foreign, and so forth.

One of the liabilities of the metaphor of "pidginization," however, is that it connotes simplification. If anything, Christianization adds greater complexity to both local and foreign cultural forms, producing transformations of indigenous practices that remain situated in local institutions while linking them to new fields of meaning and power. To interpret them requires knowledge of a broader range of contextualizations, to be explored through vernacular languages ***and*** newly emergent formations.

Jolly perceptively notes that there is an undeveloped argument between my analysis of the active way in which Isabel people have appropriated Christian practice for their own purposes and the commonly stated view that Christianity tends to overlay, suppress, or otherwise erode indigenous religion. Both Jolly and Poyer cite the sentence that criticizes analyses of 'Western" ideologies as impositions on non-Western minds: "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" (p. 179).

As Jolly surmises, Roger Keesing's writing on the Kwaio was one of the targets of this assertion. Given his role as an advocate for the pagan Kwaio in their efforts to resist the colonizing forces of church and state, it was inevitable that he would focus on the corrosive power of the colonial government and Christian missions. As a result, he tended to paint the remainder of the Solomons with the broad brush of cultural invasion and hegemony. But such interpretations tend to foreclose possibilities for comparative analysis of other kinds of localized negotiation and appropriation (cf. Thomas 1991), including comparisons between varieties of Solomon Islands Christianity.

In focusing the book on constructions of identity, other, more traditional subjects of anthropology get dispersed in the writing. This may be the reason for Poyer's comment that the book fails to deal directly with religion. This is somewhat puzzling, given that the central trope is that of a religious identity--the Isabel "Christian person." What, then, might constitute a more satisfying ethnography of religion? The question raises the perennial question in comparative studies: is any generic English-language concept (in this case, that of "religion") a good point of departure for the investigation of non-Western knowledge practices? Ironically, Keesing, in his book ***Kwaio Religion*** (1982), answers in the negative, suggesting that the global category "religion" may get the ethnography of spirit practices off on the wrong track.

But Poyer's comment does raise an important aspect of the book's treatment of Isabel Christianity. That is, the book could do more to explore the personal meanings and conflicts associated with Christian norms for individual islanders. More attention to the experiential dimensions of Christianity could illuminate the negotiation of Christian forms across generations, genders, or ideologies. Narrative passages such as that of the Isabel man relating his harrowing encounter with bush spirits help to break up the kind of generalizing that presents a seamless picture of communal identity as monolithic, untroubled, and easily internalized by an entire population.

My interest in the emotional meanings of Christian identity ***is*** concerned with exploring the personal significance of cultural practices such as church rituals or mundane talk of being a "Christian person." The personal and pragmatic dimensions of such cultural constructions are particularly evident in activities where emotions are close to the surface, and even the subject of active manipulation. For example, fears of sorcery and forest spirits are the context for many of the Christian practices discussed in the book. Persistent attempts to cleanse the environment of malevolent spirits represent a religious discourse that combines moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

Person / Self / Identity

A central problem running through the book is the significance of core metaphors of the person, primarily those expressed in identities such as the "Christian person" ***(naikno Khilo'au)*** or "paramount chief." The argument is that such constructs do not gain their significance from structural relations with other, contrastive categories (such as "heathen" ancestors), but from moral discourse on a wide range of subjects, from sexuality to illness to social relations. Poyer alludes to this when she notes that "self-understanding and collective representations are never far apart" in the book.

Historically the kinds of social theory that inform anthropological inquiry have tended to split the social universe into opposed realms of personal-individual-psychological and public-collective-social. The argument of ***Identity through History*** is that public culture in general, and historical discourse in particular, mediate these realms. By focusing on historical practices and narratives, the book shows how statements about the past locate the self in social time and space, at the same time as they create collective identities in wider arenas of intergroup politics.

Conversion narratives are about the transformation of an imagined community of local Christians from heathen to Christian. Such stories remain salient for most people and communities in Santa Isabel today (more on this

below). They are histories ***of*** and ***in*** conjuncture that not only ***represent*** moments of encounter, but may ***re-create*** them in acts of retelling. In other words, this is a kind of living history, or a way of reliving history, where the identity and authority of speaker and audience are reconstructed in moments of performance.

Jolly's attention to my own arrival story is relevant here. My presence in the Maringe area of Santa Isabel re-created a set of structural relations between insiders and outsiders, natives and Europeans, that is also the subject of conversion stories, concerned as they are with transactions between local and foreign actors. The fact that a new, somewhat anomalous foreigner can be brought into the very same spaces where first encounters with missionaries took place and regaled with stories of that time works not only to reaffirm those categories, but also to domesticate the foreigner according to locally-authored scripts.

This bit of reflexive storytelling is a strategic section of the ethnography. But it is one that I only added at a later stage of writing, having originally regarded the events of arrival as too obvious and preliminary to be of much importance. Rather than distorting the cultural order, however, my presence turned out to be a useful example of precisely the sort of situation that evokes identity talk, where local and foreigner negotiate their mutual relation. And what better type of foreigner than an anthropologist with a declared interest in custom to provide an audience for stories about the transition from native past to modern present?

The book is also concerned with "why" questions. Why are conversion stories so compelling for certain people and communities at particular moments in time? Why are they repeated? These questions raise competing theories of power and person, calling for choices among varieties of discourse analysis and theory. Acknowledging that structures of power determine who may speak about what when, and hence what subjects gain space in the collective consciousness, such regimes of authority do not account for the interests, emotions, and desires of everyday experience.

Even in such an abstract exercise as the school essay quoted by Jolly, the object of memory is the subject of history. History is not only a topic, but the medium for articulating a culturally constituted subjectivity. The imagined subjectivity of the boy's ancestors, projected into the past, works to represent affective dimensions of the self. By attributing emotions of fear to the past and love to the present, the essay formulates a sense of self-understanding that is not only understood, but desired. In this way, historical discourse presumes more complex forms of agency and subjectivity than is often the case in theories of discourse as power.

Boyer comments that I have avoided making the book's methodological commitments explicit. To some extent the book is captive to the very subject of narrative with which it is concerned. Written in conventional ethnographic style, it works at smoothing over disparate types of cultural, linguistic, and cognitive data, weaving together local voices and historical narration in a more-or-less continuous stream. Another approach would have been to exploit such disparities, drawing attention to the multiple agendas at work here. Fracturing the writing in this way might have had the effect of opening up more discussion of issues of agency and hegemony.

As written, it is still possible for Boyer to conclude that the book conceives of agency "at the level of the islanders as a whole, trying to produce some collective identity." To the contrary, ***Identity through History*** attempts to go beyond the binary of individual/communal and conceptualize the self and agency in more transactional and mediational terms. It does this by focusing on communicative practices that make up social identities and cultural selves. As noted by Boyer, such a focus requires rethinking the tools generally associated with "methodological individualism." Individualism begets psychologism in its drive for "underlying" or "inner" realities as the ultimate source of agency and motivation. At the risk of oversimplifying, the book argues that analysis of individual thought and action cannot be adequately served by a theory of agency confined to internalized cognition and motivation. Such individualism is particularly inadequate in societies where subjectivity is constantly constructed within intensely interpersonal social environments.

The attempt to complicate the binary of individual and society is supported by recent developments in the study of cognition that show everyday mental processes to be embedded in loosely structured contexts of talk and interaction (for example, Hutchins 1995). The theory of self that looks to transactions in meaning as a critical process in identity formation builds upon a parallel shift in approaches to cognition generally. Cognitive anthropology has evolved from an early interest in mapping concepts and categories (a tradition now partially reincarnated in schema theory) to an interest in practices of representation that mediate comprehension, thus linking cognitive process to social activity and history.

Traces of the earlier lexical-semantic approach to cognition are evident in the books analysis of leadership categories using techniques that represent key terms by mapping them in spatial diagrams showing semantic similarity. It is surprising that none of the reviewers for this forum chose to evaluate this aspect of the books methodology--what Poyer mentions as its "unex-

pected foray into scaling and clustering techniques that connects ethnopsychology and social roles." It may be that this part of the book is passed over because the data are presented only as "heuristic" and not representative of anything inside peoples' heads. It may also be that these methods are just unfamiliar and anomalous enough to resist easy characterization. Whatever the case, the book does argue that these findings reinforce arguments about the centrality of identity models made in other, more discursive ways throughout the book.

The diagrams of similarities among words such as "chief," "priest," or "headman" may be imagined as a set of family resemblances among related categories. Such data demonstrate a degree of cultural coherence and, yes, of psychological reality, for concepts that are otherwise dispersed across a complex terrain of situations and genres. Boyer is correct in pointing out that the book does not develop the implied argument: that conceptual models inform, and are informed by, public negotiations of culture and identity. However, the short lexical foray into an artificially constructed semantic space does serve an expository purpose. It draws attention to the need to relate conceptual process to social-historical process--an issue that has been perhaps the central problem for Vygotskian psychology. Whereas Vygotsky and others articulated theories of mind as mediation, there have been few attempts to locate cultural models in the ***longue durée*** of a particular community's social history. By focusing on the middle ground of public constructions of identity, rather than on the personal negotiations of individual careers, the book asks, "How does mediated understanding affect the outcome of political process?' and, conversely, "How do political relations constrain the production of understanding?'

As noted by each of the reviewers, my approach to these questions focuses particularly on efforts to define (or "revive") traditional chiefs. Talk about chiefs, whether in the form of conversation, narrative, or ceremonial activities, turns out to be particularly salient for the negotiations of power and authority that occur at the intersection of nation-state and local polity. One of the difficulties with such an approach, however, is that the ethnography itself becomes another vehicle for reproducing local hegemony.

The Conditions of Culture

Noting the book's constructivist bent, Poyer asks what happens when one gives up the solidity of positivist readings of person or culture for an interpretive never-never land where "everything shapes everything" or, to paraphrase the old woman who argued epistemology with William James, where "it's interpretations all the way down." Whether one seeks explanation or,

more modestly, interpretation, choices ***do*** have to be made about how to ground readings of culture. Poyer's "nagging suspicion" that the volume has somehow skimmed over the material and political underpinnings of all this elaborate identity work is made increasingly relevant by the rapidly devolving demographic, ecological, and economic trends in the Solomon Islands. One does not have to go far to find this materiality. Her question, "Why do politicians--especially national politicians--support chiefs?" is much to the point in light of the fact that chiefly revival is overtly aimed at seeking the recognition of central authorities within the state.

The book argues that chiefs have enjoyed renewed currency in the imaginary of the postindependence nation-state because of their structural position mediating local and state political systems and, more specifically, because of their role as arbiters of descent and land ownership. As is common in the development picture for many small, non-Western nations, the Solomon Islands' economy after independence has been marked by increasing debt and dependency, offset only by massive resource extraction. The current resource crisis is caused by a rapacious multinational logging industry that has rapidly become the biggest earner of foreign revenue. As logging has increased at a breathless pace, widespread corruption and ecological degradation have come with it.

There is abundant irony in the postcolonial predicament of the traditional chief. Chiefs, regarded as the embodiment of local community by many, are legitimized as authorities over land matters within the apparatus of the national political system and so become a possible means for the type of privatization and commodification requisite to contractual arrangements with multinational corporate interests. Recognized by national law, traditional chiefs provide a channel for foreign capital (and its connections in national government) to tap desired resources in island economies.

Whereas this interpretation captures the macropolitical context for reviving traditional chiefs, it tells very little about how and why the traditional chief becomes a meaningful or desirable figure within ***local*** social worlds. The analysis of chiefs as nodes in relations between inside and outside, local and state, or indigenous and foreign, makes it possible to examine chiefly identity as a point of mediation that both draws upon and transforms enduring themes in Isabel society. Talk of chiefs invokes something old to make something new--and something useful--in an evolving contemporary world. This has been the cognitive / cultural / political work of the category "chief" throughout colonial history Indeed, much of the book deals with interactions between the colonial centers and rural peripheries that make up the shifting contexts for local movements.

The paramount chief is the most prominent, and densely coded, example of this process. Here the metaphor of "invention," as in the "invention of tradition," fails to capture the more complicated processes of accommodation and incorporation that are always bound up in such transcultural mediations. As Jolly notes in her comment on my description of the ceremony to install Bishop Dudley Tuti as paramount chief, "This retelling of the early events of conversion legitimated the installation of Tuti and condensed the connection of person, power, and local identity." The book attempts to explore the personal and emotional significance of chiefs without losing sight of the fact that they are embedded in global transactions of nation-state and world church. The seductive aspect of work on dominant symbols, however, is that they are likely to appear as "given" or natural, rather than as constantly constructed or negotiated.

The problem of focusing on the most prevalent, public histories, such as the chief-centered, church-centered constructions of the paramount chief, is that they obscure other formations. I am more acutely aware now than I was when I wrote the book of the silences that surround the resonant voices of storytellers talking about Christian conversion and the rise of priests, catechists, and Christian chiefs as the focal point for the island's "new" Anglican society.

Poyer makes the point that the stories that occupy me in this book were the stories that I encountered first and most often. There is good reason for this. My own efforts to discover and record were directed by people who not only had the authority to speak to me as a relatively high-status outsider, but who were themselves actively working at reproducing a desired discourse of local identity. What is left unstated is that dominant histories are not the only histories, that they succeed by virtue of solidifying particular views and marginalizing others. Although these histories may mask some of the uncertainties and contradictions that underlie Santa Isabel identities, they are never finally victorious, they never achieve complete hegemony. If they did, history would stop and we would not see today the kinds of innovation that are transforming the island in ways that make the neat picture of an indigenous Christian chiefly identity almost nostalgic.

This issue of cultural hegemony is related to the question that Poyer raises about the differentiation of multiple politics of culture. Poyer wonders whether there might be "systematic political interests at play (economic? age? gender? descent line?)" in the "broadly conceived vision of Cheke Holo culture." There certainly are such interests; and the book deals directly with only one: descent. In working with people from several distinct lines of descent, I examine the ways multiple identities, positioned within a

hierarchy of social categories, may express both difference and commonality within a single context. Narratives of conversion are not simply texts, they are grounded histories of specific descent lines. The book argues that such histories can simultaneously represent the distinct identities of localized descent groups while affirming the basis for shared identity in a common Anglican Christianity.

Other dimensions of Poyer's question merit examination. Of the various internal relations and tensions that might complicate the overly neat portrait of Isabel identity painted in the book, such as between men and women, young and old, or those in the cash and subsistence economies, the most obvious absence is gender. Poyer calls this as it is: "the nearly complete absence of women as actors or speakers." Despite my attempt to rationalize this silence, women's voices are muted here. In part, this is because the book focuses on the type of male-centered heroic narratives that are produced repeatedly as collective history.

The point that Poyer and Jolly raise, however, is worth underlining. From a methodological perspective, a cultural analysis of dominant narratives ***requires*** attention to the margins and silences, so as to illuminate the contexts in which dominant forms do their work of naturalizing meaning and power. Such an analysis would focus on the tensions that arise between dominant images and the experiences of others, such as women, youth, or in-marrying spouses, who find them to be less relevant or satisfying to their lives. Another source of variation that deserves mention is that of regional difference. It is important to keep in mind that the book is based on intensive work in only one locale--a portion of one linguistic / geographical area. Similar work undertaken elsewhere would produce alternative perspectives on identity formation in Santa Isabel. These qualifications should not, however, overshadow the observation that the prevailing, chief-centered narratives of Christianization in Santa Isabel have enjoyed monumental success during the mid-to-late twentieth century. The mythic stories discussed in the book represent a kind of "consensus model" shared by a remarkable cross section of the islands diverse population.

Possible Futures

What type of theory might emerge from this book (and others like it) to take on questions about self-understanding and the historical conditions of political and economic change? Poyer raises the intriguing possibility that historical ethnographies such as ***Identity through History*** might work toward generalizations about historical narrative and its relation to the dialectics of

meaning and politics. On the one hand, such generalizations are capable of informing current work on the role of narrative in mediating cognition and self. On a regional basis, we now have enough materials to embark on more deliberately comparative work, with future studies to aim at identifying the direction of particular historical formations.

From my vantage point in Hawai‘i, where colonial history has become the principal framework for the movement for Hawaiian sovereignty, one could hardly ask for a more contrastive set of cultural histories than that typical of Santa Isabel in the 1970s and that taking root in Hawai‘i during the same time period. Whereas both represent narratives of colonial encounter and transformation, with missionaries and chiefs as central actors in the drama of change, one offers a narrative of incorporation and progress while the other is a narrative of subjugation and ethnocide. Although these seem so remote from one another as to make comparison impossible, they can be usefully compared as narratives that utilize common conceptual and rhetorical strategies, yet support distinct types of cultural politics. The comparison of multiple historiographies can open up new questions about the role of history in mediating the culture and politics of identity.

With regard to this book’s ethnographic concerns, what can be said about the future. of the forms of collective identity dominant in the Santa Isabel of the mid-to-late twentieth century? Given that the book portrays the chief more as a topic of ambivalent and contentious talk than as a solidified category, it would be mischievous to attempt to forecast the political futures of chiefs on the island. The position of chief harbors a number of potential trajectories. On the one hand, it is capable of exerting real influence on the course of sociopolitical change. On the other hand, if circumstances push in other directions, chiefs could become a kind of folkloric relic, touted in governmental rhetoric but marginalized in the realpolitik of state-sponsored development. But as long as there is talk and rhetorical attention given to chiefs, they will remain relevant to self and community.

To return to the theme raised at the outset, the salience of chiefs and the shape of Isabel identity generally will not be determined within bounded cultural systems, but in the borderzones between local and state, indigenous and foreign. Although it is important not to overlook the power of the local and the mundane, it is the transactions and transmigrations of Isabel men and women moving across the borders of island and nation that are stimulating much of today’s cultural innovation. New evangelical churches and local adaptations of reggae music are good examples of the kinds of cultural formation now emerging in the quickening pace of mass-mediated images traversing the island’s borders.

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