

Frederick K. Errington and Deborah B. Gewertz, *Articulating Change in the "Last Unknown."* Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995. Pp. xvii, 196, maps, photographs, bibliography, index. US\$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

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Errington and Gewertz address the phenomenon of the negotiation of personal value on the part of Duke of York Islanders in Papua New Guinea. Using penetrating analyses of both everyday and out-of-the-ordinary events, the authors show that an important component of life on Karavar Island and elsewhere in the Duke of Yorks in the 1990s is a struggle to define a sense of identity and worth in the context of a social environment replete with "isms," including (or having included) colonialism, postcolonialism, capitalism, nationalism (in the form of parliamentary democracy), revivalism, and individualism.

In such a milieu, the question of identity is not only not easily answered, but the answer can change. Is one, for example, a Karavaran Islander or citizen of the independent nation-state of Papua New Guinea? Yes, both; but who determines the salience and concomitants of each status? This leads to the issue of worth. Many Karavarans and others find that this question leads to contradictions. Is a sense of worth to be found, for example, in self-interested capitalistic prosperity or in pursuing more "traditional" routes to success?

My use of quotation marks in the previous sentence is intended to echo Errington and Gewertz's caution to be careful when thinking about terms like "tradition." Indeed, the authors begin this book by arguing against the

fallacy of essentialist thinking that so often underlies terms such as “traditional” and “modern.” More specifically, Errington and Gewertz point out that, before the arrival of European influence, Duke of York Islanders never lived in a “fragile Eden,” nor have they ever been trapped in a system of “inflexible tradition” (pp. 1-18). The rest of the book is an elaboration of this argument against essentialism: in the same way that it is an error to imagine an undifferentiated precontact setting, so also is it a mistake to imagine an undifferentiated postcontact setting. Instead, Duke of York inhabitants, like people most everywhere, are shown to engage in efforts to find satisfactory answers to identity and worth questions. In so showing, Errington and Gewertz provide an extremely compelling assortment of evidence against that most profound of essentialisms, that between “them” and “us.”

Errington and Gewertz have assembled a series of anecdotes, incidents, and episodes--all nicely bundled in half a dozen chapters--that serve to illustrate the struggle for a sense of identity and worth in the (formerly colonial and now postcolonial) context of power and wealth disparities in one corner of twenty-year-old Papua New Guinea. After the introductory essay addressing tradition, the authors introduce us, in chapter 1, to reports penned by Australian patrol officers in the 1950s and 1960s and the sense of deficiency engendered in many islanders by the actions of the patrol officers. We also see that resistance to such devaluing took place when some individuals were so successful at emulating Europeans that they became the Europeans' political and economic competitors.

In chapter 2, a conflict erupts over shell money when a European entrepreneur wishes to take large amounts of it to Europe for resale. In this episode, issues of identity and worth are writ in the use of shell money: whence its value? From Europeans who wish to purchase it (that is, convert it into cash) and then transport it thousands of miles away, or from local people who use it on both an everyday and ritual basis? Chapter 3 is a discussion of local people's caricatures of their own ancestors during a skit depicting the arrival of the first European missionary--the Reverend George Brown--over a century ago. In portraying their ancestors as babbling savages, the actors express, among other things, an awareness of the kinds of changes that have taken place over the last hundred years as well as a slap at the perceived naive and degrading European image of Melanesians as being somehow “pre-cultural.” (In 1991 I witnessed a very similar dramatic rendition commemorating the Reverend Brown's 1876 arrival on New Ireland, and am struck by the ingenuity and subtlety of Errington and Gewertz's analysis.)

Chapter 4 addresses a phenomenon occurring in many parts of Papua New Guinea: the emergence of evangelical and sometimes fundamentalist forms of Christianity within the context of older, more established forms. In

the Duke of Yorks version, a syllogism is set up such that the old form is to the new form as colonialism is to nationalism. Within the context of such an understanding, questions of identity and worth become especially poignant. Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which Duke of York Islanders deal with new political and economic elite. A generation ago, such elites were largely exogenous; in the 1990s, new political and economic inequalities exist within villages and even descent groups. The concluding chapter looks to the future and suggests that the interest in and the room to maneuver around questions of identity and worth will not be going away anytime soon.

This book has an extremely wide range of uses. Easy to read, it could be used in undergraduate classes. But it is theoretically sophisticated and serves as a reminder to graduate students and professionals that peoples' continuous negotiation of self-worth does not hold still for us to pick up and turn over in our hands at our leisure: just as there never was an Eden or rigid social order, neither is there a contemporary single blueprint for action as people encounter new political, economic, and religious forms.

One need not be a Melanesianist to appreciate this book. The phenomenon that Errington and Gewertz elucidate is not limited to the Duke of Yorks. For anyone interested in instances in which nationalism has replaced (or is assumed to have replaced) colonialism, capitalism has replaced (or is assumed to have replaced) traditional forms of exchange, and individualism has replaced (or is assumed to have replaced) the collectivity, this book will make excellent reading. One may occasionally be troubled by the authors' global assertions about people's motivations--for example, "Though they did celebrate, greet, and contribute [in a skit about the arrival of the first European missionary], it was in such a way that their compliance became critique of the circumstances enforcing that compliance" (p. 85). But these are experienced ethnographers, and there is no reason to imagine that they have not, to use their phrase, "gotten things relatively right."