

Denise O'Brien and Sharon W. Tiffany, eds., *Rethinking Women's Roles: Perspectives from the Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Pp. xiii, 237, index. \$28.50.

Reviewed by Victoria Joralemon, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

This volume contributes a number of ethnographically rich case studies to the growing anthropological literature on women's roles, statuses

and experiences. The product of two Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania symposia (1979 and 1980), the assembled studies aim to “understand and incorporate women’s experiences into the anthropological and historical discourse about Pacific Island social systems” (p. 5). The majority of the eight articles deal with contemporary, indigenous women in Melanesian societies; two historical contributions deviate from this general theme to examine the roles of expatriate and missionary women.

Melanesian societies, frequently noted for their sexual stratification, disparities, and antagonisms have proven over time to be fertile ground for innovative and provocative research on women in society. The articles in this volume build upon these strong foundations and contribute to ongoing discussions about women in the domestic and public domains; women’s strategies to achieve economic and social power in male-dominated worlds; the various factors that shape the social valuation of women and their changing roles; and women’s place in overarching conceptual and ideological systems.

The articles are notable for bypassing a direct concern with female pollution and sexual antagonism and instead delving into various political, socioeconomic, and ideological issues. As a group, the assembled studies also give the reader a sense of the substantial diversity of the position of women in different Melanesian societies, ranging from the more egalitarian (and, in some cases, matrilineal) island societies (e.g., New Britain and the Solomons), to the more stratified New Guinea Highlands communities.

In a theoretically stimulating article (“The Denigration of Domesticity”), Strathern cautions us against the recent preoccupation with the notion that women must participate in extradomestic (i.e., public) spheres of power and influence in order to be considered “proper persons,” persons of “value.” Implicit in this trend, she says, is a Western cultural bias that denigrates domesticity. The domestic domain is viewed as infantilizing, inhabited by “less than full persons” (i.e., women and children) who are closer to nature than to those things that constitute culture. Strathern argues that the nature/culture paradigm does not represent how Hageners (Highlanders) themselves perceive their world and that Hagen women (who contribute within the domestic sphere and lack extradomestic spheres of power) are full, autonomous, cultural beings.

McDowell takes the concept of complementarity, which she notes is frequently and uncritically used to describe male/female relations and gender roles, and uses it to explore Bun (Eastern Sepik) gender relationships in three interrelated cultural contexts: subsistence/economics,

behavioral/social interaction, and ideological/conceptual systems. Her analysis should serve as a model for others seeking to understand how males and females complement each other to constitute a “totality” of humanness.

Nash’s data on the matrilineal and relatively egalitarian Nagovisi (Solomon Islands) challenge the commonly accepted position that female concentration in subsistence agriculture and male domination in cash-cropping and marketing are invariably associated with a lowering of female status and the gradual replacement of matrilineal with patrilineal institutions. Focusing on the social context of work and its cultural valuation, she proposes that Nagovisi women’s garden work is highly skilled, socially valued, and, although household-oriented, is publicly acknowledged (there is no clear distinction between public and domestic spheres). She also notes that matrilineal institutions have remained strong both because of the high valuation of women’s contributions and because men can only acquire cocoa cash-cropping land from their wives’ matrilineages. Her discussion of the underpinnings of high female status in Nagovisi is not completely convincing, however, due to her exclusive focus on “work” to the exclusion of other factors that shape women’s status (this after acknowledging that women’s status is “multifactorial”). Most important here is that Nash fails to connect women’s food production (the source of high status) to the larger social/prestige context in which it figures so prominently (e.g., “food production is central to all wealth”). One is left wondering how forces at work in this broader socioeconomic context impinge upon female valuation.

Counts and Sexton examine women’s strategies to acquire social and economic power, respectively. Counts argues that suicide is not an act of deviance in Lusi society (New Britain), but a culturally appropriate political strategy adopted by powerless persons (mainly women) to redress wrongs done to them and to sanction men’s behavior (through the avenging actions of kin and others following the suicide). Sexton interprets the “Wok Meri” (“women’s work”) movement (Eastern Highlands), a savings and exchange system, as a collective response by women to their deteriorating economic status since the advent of male-dominated coffee cash-cropping. Although males control strategic productive resources (coffee trees and land), women, by virtue of their labor contributions, are now claiming a small portion of their husbands’ coffee earnings. This money is added to small amounts of money earned from selling vegetables and deposited in a “Wok Meri” account. At the end of an extensive ritual cycle that ties together a large number of such groups, women invest their accumulated funds in profitable economic

enterprises similar to those in which men invest. Sexton proposes that women's increasing control over capital will work to alter the present structure of gender relations.

On the basis of a content analysis of Melanesian and other Pacific Island ethnographies, O'Brien aptly demonstrates that much of anthropological discourse is biased toward the male perspective and either ignores, denigrates, or is ambiguous about women. Examples from the classic studies of renowned scholars (e.g., Firth, Whiting, Meggitt, and Sahlins) are particularly appalling. O'Brien notes that female-authored ethnographies typically give a much more well-rounded view of males and females in society and concludes that the anthropologist's gender is an important factor structuring his/her "objective" perceptions.

The articles by Forman and Boutilier, which deal with expatriate and missionary women, although important historical contributions, do not coalesce well with the other studies in this volume. Boutilier reconstructs the contributions to frontier society of eight expatriate European women in pre-World War II plantation/administrative circles in the Solomon Islands. Forman examines the course of change over time in women's (both indigenous and expatriate) growing participation in South Pacific churches. While all of the other studies focus on indigenous Melanesian women and/or ethnographers' perceptions of them, these last articles deviate substantially from this theme and their inclusion weakens the volume's overall impact.

Nevertheless, this volume is an important addition to the expanding literature on women in Melanesia and the Pacific. The studies clearly demonstrate that, if our goal is to achieve meaningful insights into human behavior and society, women's experiences and contributions must be incorporated into anthropological analyses. The volume's major attribute is that it sensitizes us to the fact that women are strategic and vital components in human social systems, even in strongly patriarchal, male-dominated societies.