James B. Watson, *Tairora Culture: Contingency and Pragmatism.* Anthropological Studies in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea, No. 5. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983. Pp. 346, illustrations, index. $35.00.

Reviewed by Rena Lederman, Princeton University

This book is the first ethnography in a series sponsored by the New Guinea Microevolution Project, a cooperative venture of ethnographers, archaeologists, a linguist, and a geographer, organized to produce controlled comparative analyses from several perspectives of a number of geographically proximate cultural/linguistic groups in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. James Watson is well known to readers of the literature on Highlands peoples as the editor of an early

collection of articles assessing the state of Highlands research (Watson 1964) and as the author of articles on Highlands prehistory and social organization (Watson 1965, 1970, 1977). In the mid-1960s Watson initiated a debate concerning what sort of precolonial developmental history might account for the present-day social and economic character of Highlands societies. While his specific argument that the introduction of the sweet potato *(Ipomoea batatas)* brought about a "revolution" in Highlands social and economic life was soon contested by various scholars (Brookfield and White 1968), and while subsequent archaeological reconstructions of the long-term prehistory of the Highlands (Golson 1977, 1981, 1982) have subsumed that debate, Watson's thesis proved to be an exceptionally productive framework for analytical synthesis. Moreover, his more general argument about the competitive character of Highlands social process—what he dubbed "the Jones effect"—has held up very well, and is somewhat taken for granted, at least in the anthropological literature on the central Highlands.

In *Tairora Culture,* Watson provides readers with a detailed social organizational analysis of one of the several ethnolinguistic groups living in the Eastern Highlands, an area perhaps already familiar to readers from the works of Shirley Lindenbaum, Sterling Robbins, Richard Sorenson, and others. A very brief discussion of the Northern Tairora "cosmos" (the local conceptualization of social geography, including the relative positioning of the human and nonhuman space, and something of the way in which social history might be read in that landscape) in chapter 2 and a much longer description of Northern Tairora material culture in chapter 3 both help to contextualize the main, primarily sociological, concerns of the book. In the following four central chapters Watson describes two Northern Tairora social collectivities (phratries) statistically and processually, and analyzes how such collectivities are formed and ideologically sustained in spite of (really, because of) an ever-shifting membership.

Perhaps the most important analytical argument this book contributes to our understanding of social process in the Eastern Highlands is Watson's account of the regular transformation of kin into strangers and strangers into kin (see especially chapters 5-7). The historical/cultural conditions of Northern Tairora society—at least at the time of Watson's fieldwork, about thirty years after the colonial administration banned indigenous warfare—are small polities and an expanding population. The fissioning of political units, the emigration of groups of people to new (already occupied) territories, and their incorporation into their hosts' communities are extremely common facts of life there. Watson

suggests that this systematic and regular process of social realignment, entailing the "erosion of kinship," has in fact become more common with pacification. He considers two issues in detail: first, why and how the Northern Tairora replace insiders ("kin") with outsiders, and second, how a sense of transgenerational continuity is created for local political groups despite their shifting membership.

On the first issue, Watson points out that outsiders are readily accepted into Northern Tairora communities because the communities' small size makes them vulnerable to demographic fluctuations if they simply rely on natural increase, and their members are always concerned to maintain a certain level of group strength. Furthermore, the recruitment of outsiders is deemed advantageous because they arrive with a clean slate (no grievances exist between them and existing group members); because they readily become a local source of spouses; and because they come as "clients" of "strong-men" (local leaders), and not —as is the case for existing community factions—as rivalrous equals.

Watson very clearly demonstrates a dialectical relationship between this strategy of augmenting group strength and the relatively high rate of community fissioning and out-migration. Immigrants both strengthen the community of kinsmen and weaken it; they are a source of tension that can itself precipitate fissioning. Strong-men play key roles in this process. As elsewhere in the New Guinea Highlands, Tairora leaders derive at least a part of their local strength from the extra-local exchange partnerships that they create; they may depend on friends from distant communities for support in internal factional disputes. But in Tairora, this process is carried further than in other central Highlands societies to the west (e.g., Mae Enga, Melpa, or even Mendi). As elsewhere in the Highlands, the dynamics of personal exchange networks may work against local community solidarity as a contradictory outcome of efforts to strengthen the community; but in Northern Tairora communities, strong-man rivalries regularly result in the creation of new communities.

Watson asserts that despite recurrent in- and out-migration, the Northern Tairora conceptualize the bonds of community in terms of "kinship." In chapter 7 he explores their idioms of relationship, paying special attention to ways of asserting the genealogical continuity of local polities (their "dogma of descent"). This discussion might have been more helpful had it come earlier in the book, since the problematics of distinguishing "kin" from "non-kin" in this society is a theme that weaves its way through most of the text and bears on the central analytical argument. Before chapter 7, this reader had no reason for believing

that the Tairora themselves conceptualized community membership in terms other than coresidence and cooperation—which are not necessarily nor specifically "kinship" ideas. Chapter 7, however, provides some sense of Tairora idioms of shared substance and transgenerational continuity. But this discussion is disappointing for its abstraction from the particular sociopolitical contexts in which these constructs are used. Despite his specific concern for the *functional* efficacy of descent idioms in fostering group unity, Watson provides little analysis of performance in social situations. As a result, his assumption that the efficacy of Tairora descent dogmas should be measured in terms of group unity is not convincingly validated with reference to *Tairora* intentions.

Instead, Watson provides a condensed cultural account. Tairora idioms of shared substance include references to common links to the land, and to the various effects of the transfer of blood, semen, and food; these, along with a stress on nurturance or "education," constitute the Northern Tairora notion of "kinship" in Watson's account. This discussion is also disappointing. Watson appears to be arguing against a set of assumptions about the "somatic" basis of "kinship" or "genealogy" that few of his readers are likely to have. Consequently, he develops his case for the multiplex and nonbiological character of Tairora kinship notions extremely slowly. It is odd that he does not draw support from the wider literature on descent constructs (e.g., Schneider 1973) or from excellent analyses of the relationship between descent, locality, and other metaphors of shared substance in cultures elsewhere in the Highlands (e.g., Strathern 1973). Reference to some of this literature might have allowed him to get to the heart of the matter more quickly and to present Tairora notions in more depth.

These omissions are unfortunately characteristic. Despite providing provocative and interesting data, *Tairora Culture* is generally weakened by its lack of attention to the relevant post-1970 literature on the Highlands. With the exception of references to other volumes in the same series, the vast majority of works cited derive from the 1960s and earlier. In fact, so completely does the book avoid even indirect allusion to the relevant ethnographic concerns and discoveries of the past decade or so that many nonspecialist readers may miss the book's contemporary value and interest. For example, in his introduction Watson emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the "intersocial field" and not just to "habitat and provisioning," a very general allusion to the concerns of anthropologists interested in "human ecology" (an approach influential in Highlands research in the 1960s and early 1970s). While Watson's position is unexceptional in anthropology generally (in the 1960s or the

1980s), it might have had a particular, local relevance for Highlands researchers ten or fifteen years ago. Now the issue has no punch, On the other hand, Watson does not call attention to more recent and ongoing disputation among Highlands researchers about the relative importance of corporate groups and exchange networks, an issue to which this book contributes much of interest.

Watson says at the outset that he wants to consider his material in its own right; even so, consideration of recent research might have suggested implications that would have strengthened the analysis, especially given the explicitly comparative objectives of the project of which this work is a part.

In a way, however, the limitations of *Tairora Culture* are symptomatic of a problem evident in much of recent Highlands anthropology. The patchiness of Highlands research in the 1950s and early 1960s made possible a number of provocative comparative syntheses (e.g., Watson 1964); the explosion of research since then has, with a few exceptions (e.g., Brown 1978; Rubel and Rosman 1978), inhibited comparative analysis. Researchers concerned with other parts of Melanesia—the Massim, Vanuatu, the Sepik—have begun to respond to a similar situation with conferences, conference volumes, and works of regional comparison and synthesis. Highlands researchers need to follow suit. As they do, they will surely have to take account of ethnographic works like *Tairora Culture.* With its emphasis on the dynamic, structural significance of exchange networks, Watson's analysis of Northern Tairora social process clearly has comparative implications well outside of the Eastern Highlands.

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