

Amirah Inglis, *Karo: The Life and Fate of a Papuan*. Canberra: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies in association with Australian National University Press, 1982. Pp. xviii, 143, illustrated. A\$10.95.

Klaus-Friedrich Koch, ed., *Logs in the Current of the Sea: Neli Lifuka's Story of Kioa and the Vaitupu Colonists*. Cambridge, Mass: Press of

the Langdon Associates; Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978. Pp. xviii, 110, illustrated. A\$9.90.

A decade or more ago Pacific historians aspired to write "island-oriented history" and placed the balance of interest on "the Islanders themselves." To do this properly was easier said than done, and no doubt for this reason such terms are bandied about much less these days. More recently, however, a small number of "self accounts" by islanders have become available: that is, edited transcripts of taped interviews between an anthropologist and the islander concerned. One of these autobiographies of sorts is the book subtitled *Neli Lifuka's Story of Kioa and the Vaitupu Colonists*.

Most of the book actually deals with the first fifty-six years of Neli's life, before he ever set foot on Kioa. Born in 1905, Neli was typical of twentieth-century Tuvaluans in that he spent many years of his life working overseas, though the range of his experiences is perhaps out of the ordinary. During his adult life he worked at the phosphate diggings at Ocean Island, in the government school at Vaitupu (his home island), for the Americans during World War II, and after the war as native magistrate at Vaitupu, then for the Colonial Wholesale Society throughout the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Finally in 1962 he assumed the position of headman at faction-tom Kioa, the small island off Cakadrove Province in Fiji, which had been purchased by the people of Vaitupu in 1947 from their wartime savings and then settled piecemeal as a commercial venture.

Neli emerges from his own account as a man of uncommon ability, yet flawed by fundamental failings and contradictions. He was one of those turbulent spirits, born to lead but incapable of following, at odds with himself as well as with others. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than during his tenure as the energetic and reforming native magistrate at Vaitupu during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Taking advantage of his position of authority he became a law unto himself, dispensing justice high-handedly on many occasions ("I was the boss of my community"), holding illegal drinking parties ("I had a little celebration with my staff in the courthouse"), and even committing adultery in the church with the elderly pastor's wife ("Well, I do know that she started it"), until eventually he was fired by the colonial government (under duress from Vaitupu's traditional leadership) as an example to the rest of the community. This is the most valuable section of the book, a striking example of the tendency of native

magistrates in the then Ellice Islands to confound the authority of their office with personal power for its own sake. It also brings out Neli in his true colors: too much of an individualist, too intransigent, and too arrogant to care about maintaining the community support so necessary to leadership in a Tuvaluan context where the social contract prevails.

Neli's "self account" could have turned into a worthwhile and informative book had the material been handled more rigorously and with greater discretion. Instead the book is beset with problems. First, Neli's outline of his life is too sketchy to provide a framework for the narrative. Even if Koch did not always possess detailed knowledge of the events and range of situations encompassed by Neli's career, there was still scope to apply interview techniques to flesh out his story. This raises an associated problem: Koch claims to have collected forty-eight hours of testimony on tape, yet the lightly-edited narrative can be read in one not-too-strenuous sitting. It is also disturbing to see that Neli was allowed to blatantly use the final chapter as a vehicle to criticize his opponents on Kioa, many of whom are still alive. He verbally smites them hip and thigh, yet they are given no right of reply. This does give an indication of the strength of feeling that existed between rival individuals and groups on Kioa, but other, less hurtful, ways could have been found to let Neli make his point. Given the history of factionalism on the island, Neli Lifuka's published apologia is unlikely to contribute toward community well-being, and in the circumstances it is fortunate that few, if any, copies have found their way to Kioa.

There is no doubt, whatever the counterclaims of his critics, that Neli finally got the development program on Kioa underway. But to offset this achievement was Neli's typically abrasive and unaccommodating style of leadership and his tendency (not brought out by Koch) to work behind other Kioans' back in implementing the development program. This was mentioned to me with some feeling by members of a delegation of Kioans visiting Vaitupu when I was doing fieldwork on the island in 1978.

Logs in the Current of the Sea would have been a more useful book had Neli's testimony of 1969 been published promptly rather than nine years later, only two years before his death. This delay underscores the continuing need for another full-scale study of Kioa, and I hope it is not too long in coming because the ongoing, if perplexing, saga of this unique, resettled community badly needs updating: it has received little mention in the scholarly literature since G. M. White presented his findings almost twenty years ago (White 1965). I also hope that Neli's story will encour-

age the publication of further “self accounts” of Pacific islanders--not necessarily those of leaders--but better presented than this one.

Unlike *Logs in the Current of the Sea*, Amirah Inglis’s account of the legendary Papuan, Karo Araua, is not a “self account” but a conventional biography. It is an engaging little book, somewhat overpriced in terms of size and production but well worth the money when it comes to the more important consideration of quality. It is more an extended essay than a book: the text proceeds at a leisurely pace yet can be read at a single sitting. ‘Because the book is both entertaining and instructive, it is hoped that its price won’t deter buyers and readers in Papua New Guinea.

Karo, born a year or so before Neli Lifuka, came from the gulf area of Papua. In a society that placed a premium on tough male virtues he had a reputation of being *ivora rovaea* (very savage), eventually becoming village constable (and a much feared one) and later a member of the Armed Constabulary. In a fit of rage he committed his first murder, shooting a fellow constable in an argument over who should carry a mailbag. Out of jail, he soon found himself having further brushes with the white man’s law, which culminated in a second jail sentence for the audacious robbery of a safe from a government station. He then committed the crime that sent him to the gallows: the murder of his jailer and the man’s wife and child. It is the singular way in which Karo went through life, and to his death, that assumes significance in this biography, which details his defiant stance towards the extraordinarily repressive native legislation of the interwar Australian administration. That Karo is now enshrined in legend and song indirectly speaks volumes about Papuans’ perceptions of Australian rule. Karo died but in death gained a victory. As Mrs. Inglis observes, “though Papuans are now Papua New Guineans and the government is no longer a colonial one, they still sing and enjoy to hear the story of ‘white foreigners’ brought down or at least made to sit up and take notice of a Papuans man with traditional strengths” (p. 120).

Karo is the type of book that so easily could have fallen flat on its face. Instead, Karo himself emerges convincingly, and this is partly so because Mrs. Inglis succeeds in integrating the details of her subject’s extraordinary life with both his cultural milieu and the colonial context. She has also largely overcome the relative dearth of written sources on Karo by interviewing people who either knew the man or participated at one point or another in the train of events. This alone makes the whole effort of writing the book worthwhile because these informants are likely to have passed away by the time another biography of Karo appears, if indeed another one is ever attempted. Unlike Neli Lifuka’s account, which

is of passing interest except to a few specialists, Mrs. Inglis's *Karo* will be of lasting value and deserves a wide and varied readership.

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REFERENCE

White, G. M. 1965. *Kioa: An Ellice Community in Fiji*. Eugene: Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon.