

PACIFIC STUDIES

SPECIAL ISSUE:
CHILDREN OF KILIBOB
CREATION, COSMOS, AND CULTURE IN NORTHEAST NEW GUINEA

Vol. 17, No. 4

December 1994

INTRODUCTION

Thomas G. Harding
University of California at Santa Barbara

David R. Counts
McMaster University

Alice Pomponio
St. Lawrence University

At an annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, one of the contributors to this volume made her first-ever presentation at a scholarly meeting. The session was devoted to a discussion of cargo belief in Melanesia. During the question period following her paper, the presenter was asked a question by a short, rotund man sitting near the rear of the hall. "I wonder if you could say what you think of the approach to cargo cult taken in the work of [another anthropologist]?" She hesitated, and then responded, "Well, I know [his] work, of course, but I think Peter Lawrence's approach, especially in *Road Belong Cargo*, is much more useful in explaining *my* data." There was an intake of breath from the audience, and the presenter thought, "Oh, damn! That's him." The questioner merely nodded and resumed his seat. Following the session, Peter Lawrence walked to the front of the room and introduced himself.

THE AUTHORS in this volume present and analyze selected myths of seven peoples of the Vitiaz and Dampier Straits region of northeastern Papua New Guinea. Our purpose is primarily ethnographic. Most groups titled the eleven myths by the names of their chief protagonists--members of a cate-

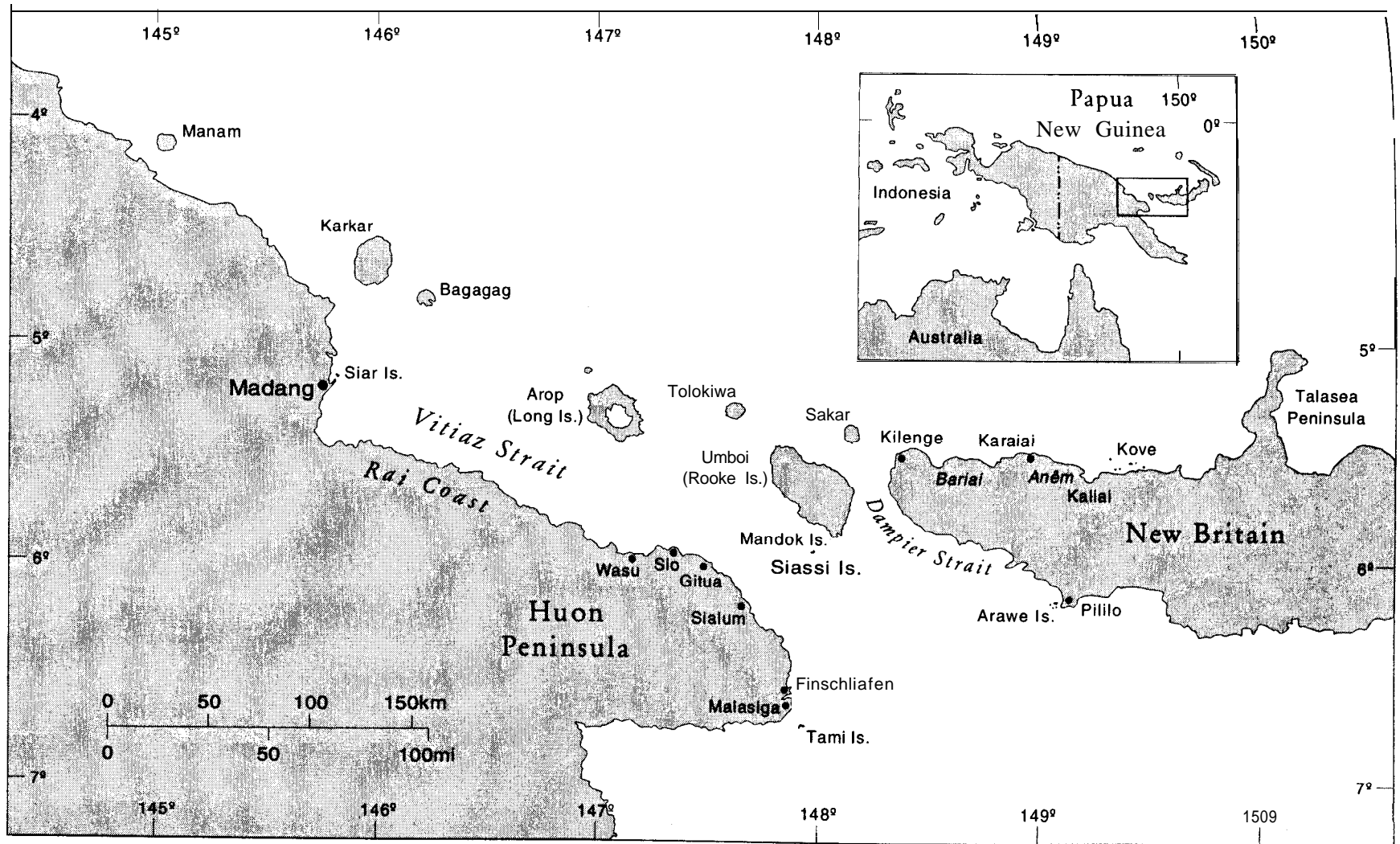
gory of superhuman beings commonly described as culture heroes by folklorists and ethnographers. All are in some sense origin myths that describe and explain important features of the human cultural order. As such, they embody historical truths as held by their narrators and by at least substantial majorities of their modern audiences. Some of these myths have cargoist implications. All of them have importance for their tellers today.

The seven societies from which these myths originated are the Takia of Karkar Island; the Sio of the north coast of the Huon Peninsula on the New Guinea mainland; the Mandok of the Siassi Islands; the Kowai of Umboi Island; and the Bariai-Kabana, Lusi-Kaliai, and Anêm of northwestern New Britain. The peoples of these societies live along a broad arc of the northeastern part of Papua New Guinea adjacent to the area well known to anthropologists and others through the seminal work of Peter Lawrence. There is much common ground in the ways of life of these peoples, and they share common historical experiences in colonial and postcolonial New Guinea.

For the most part, they are villagers practicing shifting cultivation of root and tree crops and producing cash crops of coconuts, coffee, or cocoa. They range from very small societies--the five hundred or so Mandok Islanders and the even fewer Anêm of New Britain--to the more than thirty-five thousand people of Karkar Island. Some members of these societies reside away from their home region, attending school or working in government or private employment. With the possible exception of the Mandok (Pomponio 1992), all of the societies are characterized by essentially egalitarian, kin-based social systems, and they possess some variation of the big-man-type leadership system well known in Melanesia. Finally, they are all linked in a multicentered regional trading system (Harding 1967b).

A century ago and more, each of the seven societies (with the exception of the Karkar Islanders) had knowledge of and relations with one or more of the others. Over the past century, the scope of interrelationships has grown enormously--with the establishment of the colonial and (in 1975) national state, the spread of Tok Pisin as the lingua franca, radio transmissions in Tok Pisin, motorized sea transport, and migration for work and education. People now are more familiar with the cultural features of other societies of the region. They draw on a common store of narrative themes and are familiar with many of the myths, legends, and folktales of other societies, including some of those recounted in this collection. They are active collectors and discussants of their own and others' oral literature.

The few narratives presented here represent a tiny fraction of the corpus of myths and folktales possessed by these groups. The authors have chosen these tales because they are important to the people who consented to be our hosts. They particularly wanted us to hear *these* stories to help us under-



Map 1. The northeast New Guinea region.

stand their thinking, their lives and experiences, their aspirations, and their frustrations. Our goal in this volume is to convey those understandings.

Each article in this special issue treats a different society, recounts different myths, and is written by a different author. No article can present a comprehensive picture of any one culture, given the multiplicity of purposes that myths serve. After all, a similar exploration of the "way of life, mythology, and developing experience" based on two dozen myths from another northeastern New Guinea society, the Tangu, required a book of nearly five hundred pages (Burrige 1969).

Our goal here is not to assemble a large corpus of myths for analytical purposes. None of the contributors to this volume is a folklorist, nor have our respective ethnographic projects, with few exceptions, focused on mythology. Our original research ranged from local politics to economic development, from social change to language. Nevertheless, myths, mythic beliefs, and allusions to both traditional and reformulated narratives frequently became important components of that research.

Are we to assume, then, that myths are on these peoples' minds in their everyday lives? We think Peter Lawrence would have answered "yes!" As part of his claim that among the peoples of southern Madang Province, religion "is an essential ingredient and a paramount intellectual interest in their daily lives," Lawrence added that "they spend a great deal of time examining and debating the meaning of traditional myths and Christian Scripture, and any possible combination of them" (1988:15). The articles to follow support Lawrence's claim.

All of the articles were inspired by Peter Lawrence's work on New Guinea seaboard religions, starting with his classic *Road Belong Cargo* (1964). Lawrence was the first anthropologist to take these stories seriously and to analyze their didactic and epistemological value to the people who told them. In his analysis, the major story line was central to cargo cult activity in the Madang area during the 1940s and 1950s. The present volume analyzes this mythic corpus from its contemporary relevance to a range of societies from Karkar through north-central New Britain. Each article selects different contributions Lawrence made to the study of myth and goes beyond them for a contemporary look at the function and value these stories have for different peoples.

Traditionally in Melanesia there were regular occasions for reciting myths. In the Trobriands (Malinowski 1955:102), among the Madang islanders (Hannemann 1949:17), and in Sio (Pilhofer 1961:159; Stolz n.d.: 90), for example, certain myths or sets of myths were told during the growing season to encourage the growth of crops. In Madang and Sio, the myths were to be recounted only at night and at the appropriate time of year, lest the maturation of the narrators themselves be unnaturally accelerated.

None of the myths discussed here, so far as we know, were operative myths of this kind, linked to events in the annual ritual or productive cycle. Rather than being a corpus of instrumental tales, then, the set assembled here might be referred to as central motif myths: they reside in the memories of numerous members of each of the societies represented here, to be drawn on in debates about morality, rights to important resources, change, the past, the problem of whites, and so forth.

From at least the time of European intrusion, the peoples of Papua New Guinea have told myths and alluded to mythic beliefs in response to a wide variety of events. The Apollo moon launch, for example, is widely known among Papua New Guinea's villagers and continues to evoke discussion with mythic context, including the proposal that the moon landing was achieved on the basis of secret knowledge contained in traditional New Guinea myths (cf. Lawrence 1988:16).

Quite beyond any explicit attempt to elicit traditional narratives, ethnographic inquiry frequently evokes mythic expressions. Queries and observations that seem, to the ethnographer, only remotely connected to mythic beliefs may in fact touch on fundamental considerations and preoccupations. People turn to myths in order to explain, to justify, or perhaps to question what ordinarily--but for the vexing presence of an ethnographer (or a missionary)--is taken for granted. It therefore seems safe to say, with Lawrence, that myths *are* never very far from people's minds.

Both Lawrence and Burridge have argued that myths are part of a people's intellectual life. Myths, Burridge advised, are "reservoirs of articulate thought" (1967:92). Our interest is in the particular parts of those repositories that people have drawn upon in thinking about their traditional and changing lives.

Although we espouse the study of myths as part of a people's intellectual life (though not, we emphasize, to the exclusion of other approaches), oddly, this has not been a prevailing fashion in the anthropological study of myth. Indeed, the intellectualist perspective with which anthropology began, in the work of E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, was decidedly out of fashion during the middle part of this century, including the time when some of us began our Melanesian research in the 1960s. "Neo-Tylorian"--meaning intellectualist--was for many a pejorative term (see Horton 1968). The usually unspoken view underlying this attitude was that if myths conveyed the thoughts of nonliterate peoples, such thinking, from the perspective of Western science, appeared to be fantastic, childish, and absurd. It was far better, therefore, to emphasize the social functions of mythic belief so as to be able to express admiration for the sociological ingenuity and good sense of exotic peoples, rather than the intellectual functions that seemed so poorly served.

A sociological approach to religion, myth, and thought--its effectiveness demonstrated by Malinowski and Durkheim--was thus also consonant with what was held to be a liberal view of indigenous peoples. The loss occasioned by the dominance of the sociological approach, however, was deplorable from both scientific and humane standpoints. With respect to the former, it simply wrote off a universal reality: namely, that all human groups possess complex intellectual systems. As for the latter, the result was often very illiberal, as in the racist remark of a government anthropologist in New Guinea, "The poor native hates to think" (F. E. Williams, quoted in Lawrence 1988:14).

In recent decades the reestablishment of the study of intellectual life, including the intellectual functions of myth, has become a broad and growing movement. Although we do not want to create our own story of culture heroes, it is fitting to give credit to such scholarly leaders of this mythic renaissance as Peter Lawrence and Kenelm Burridge in Melanesia, Claude Levi-Strauss in South America, Robin Horton in sub-Saharan Africa, and G. S. Kirk in the ancient world (see various citations in the references).

In addition to our interest in the intellectual life of the people who have been our hosts, the other concern that brought us together was to explore how differently a common pool of narrative events may be played out in the lives of seven neighboring and otherwise similar groups of people.

Two major story lines are treated in this volume. The first involves the familiar tale from Lawrence's book of two (sometimes more) brothers, Manup and Kilibob (names and spellings vary). A fight between them causes one to leave home and embark on a creative odyssey along a specific geographic route. Along the way, the protagonist creates plant, animal, and sometimes human populations. In the much more comprehensive and lengthy versions presented here, he teaches important skills and introduces technological innovations, subsistence activities, heterosexual sex, and a multitude of dances, languages, songs, rituals, and various other cultural forms (see articles by McSwain, Pomponio, and Counts). He may be a trickster, a womanizer, and a rogue. Through his travels, the legend also describes significant geographical, cultural, social, and economic "facts of life" according to a more general cosmogony/cosmology.

The second major theme involves a snake-man protagonist who is both a creator and moral arbiter of (western and central New Britain) society (articles by Counts, McPherson, and Thurston). Through his experiences, we learn of the trials and tribulations of *human* and thus moral persons when they confront nonhuman and amoral beings who also inhabit the New Britain cosmology. The protagonist's name, and sometimes corporeal form, changes with the episodes and geographical locations. Some names to look for include Mandip, Kulbob, Moro, Mala, Kapimolo, Titikolo, Aragas, and Namor.

The themes and cultural values expressed in both major story lines are not unique to this area of the Pacific. Indeed, cognate episodes, names, events, and values occur in Pacific mythology from New Zealand to Hawaii. What we are calling here the Kilibob-Manup myth is part of a large mythic complex known across Melanesia as “the myth of the two brothers” or “the hostile brothers” (Poignant 1967:96-100). Analogues occur across New Guinea (J. Barker, pers. com., 1993; Harding and Clark, this volume; Lawrence 1964; McSwain 1977; McSwain, this volume; Pech 1991; Waiko 1982). They even occur as far west as Timor (E. D. Lewis, pers. com., 1989) and as far northeast as Micronesia, in stories of the trickster Oliphat (Good-enough n.d.; Lessa 1961; Poignant 1967:74-77).

In *Road Belong Cargo*, Lawrence argued that the Yali cult of the Rai Coast was an expression of underlying relations assumed in the philosophy of the southern Madang people and that that philosophy could be understood by considering the events played out and messages encoded in the myth of Kilibob and Manup. The contributors to this work came together in San Antonio in 1989 having, for the most part, accepted Lawrence’s argument. Further, most of those who participated in subsequent Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) sessions in Hawaii and Victoria, British Columbia, thought, as Lawrence had, that alternative but recognizable versions of Kilibob and Manup were to be found in each of the societies neighboring the Rai Coast peoples where our group of anthropologists had worked.

The title “Children of Kilibob” grew out of Pomponio’s understanding of Melanesian concepts of heredity and ethnobotany, along with other contributors’ understandings of their relationships to the late Peter Lawrence, who “planted” or “spawned,” as it were, certain ideas in the anthropological world about Melanesian epistemology. In Tok Pisin the polysemous phrase *pikinini bilong en* (child of him/her/it) has many applications. In gardening it is applied to seed yams and parent yams. In human families it can have the obvious connotations but also can denote adoption, since in many societies parentage is as much (or more!) a function of feeding and nurturing as it is of coital reproduction. The phrase can also connote proprietary precedence and ownership--of objects such as canoes or trade routes, and of important forms of knowledge such as ritual procedures, spells, and other forms of technical knowledge.

It is important to note that the metaphor as here applied does not imply that we (or Lawrence, for that matter) attributed any more authenticity or authority to Lawrence’s version of the myth than to versions we collected, however much later in time. (As a matter of fact, the version Lawrence collected is shorter than some--see articles by McSwain, Pomponio, and Counts.) Lawrence’s approach was innovative, however, and did set in

motion some specific ideas that laid the foundation for much of the ethnographic work to follow in this area. We can therefore ascribe to Peter Lawrence the title of "*papa*" (father, owner, proprietor) and call ourselves the "*pikinini*" as descendants of that intellectual foundation.

There was no small measure of dismay, then, when we first presented our papers in Hawaii and discovered that the coherence we had expected was not there. If the myths that each contributor was presenting were indeed each one of the "children" of Kilibob, they must have had very different mothers, for they did not look much alike!

Each myth brought to the discussions by a contributor was a coherent, plotted sequence of events, and each had been suggested to the author because of the cultural significance it had for the people from whom it was collected. And there was overlap. In the articles to follow, the reader will find that, over and over, there is a critical scene that sets in motion a tragedy. There are two possibilities among the stories presented here. In the first, a youth playfully fires a projectile (spear, arrow), and while searching for his lost property, he meets and is seduced by a senior woman whose relationship to him is tabooed. In the second, a wife's human curiosity and sense of marital rights, duties, and obligations impel her to break a taboo and view her (unbeknownst to her) other-than-human husband, thus shaming him into desertion. Each "scene" is embedded in stories with very different plots and has radically different consequences and interpretations, depending on the society from which it is drawn.

A second recurring theme is the snakelike guise of the hero who becomes a victim. He sometimes appears explicitly as what Thurston here dubs the "herpetanthropoid" --part-human, part-snake; sometimes as the youthful and beautiful trickster hero who is able to don or discard an old and diseased second skin as part of his trickery.

A third theme is that of loss: loss of the time when life was Eden-like, loss of productive rights in material goods, loss of human power to control the world.

A fourth theme addresses the nature of what Hallowell (1967) called the "behavioral environment" of the culturally constituted "self." Each myth lays out the content, nature, and function of important objects and beings in the world. These are not always constant or visible, but they *are* ever-present. The message stated bluntly is "things are not always as they seem." Wise people therefore proceed with caution.

Finally, each myth explores, either implicitly or explicitly, the boundaries of moral behavior and the consequences of violating those boundaries. While this theme is most fully developed in the myths related here by Counts, moral behavior and what it requires with respect to relations with

others--those who are not our kin, not our color, not our species, not our *kind*--is a powerful concern for the relations between the Takia and the Waskia (McSwain); for the Sio in relations with their trading partners (Harding and Clark); and in the relations of Umboi Islanders with *all* their neighbors (Ploeg). It is the explanation for why the Mandok must trade for their living (Pomponio). For the Lusi and Anêm peoples of Kaliai (Counts and Thurston), relations with others seem in the forefront of their concerns. The Bariai-Kabana (McPherson) are also concerned with morality, but it has more to do with relations between generations than with outsiders.

If the foregoing are the common scenes and themes that emerge from consideration of our contributors' myths--like similar still photos taken from very different moving pictures--what are the differences in context and plot, and must we account for them? We can do so only speculatively and in the most general way. For example, Harding and Clark speculate in this volume on the reasons why Male--the Sio hero--did *not* become the focus of cargo activity as did his analogues in many other areas, including Kaliai. Ploeg's Kowai tale of Mala is poignant in its explanation of why Mala is *not* respected and could *never* be a big-man. Some groups (e.g., the Mandok, described by Pomponio) ascribe some differences to the fact that other people own different episodes and different stories. The simple conclusion is that we cannot account for the differences.

The authors and editors wish to record our special indebtedness to the late Peter Lawrence. Peter was the teacher of one (McSwain), and friend, mentor, and colleague to all of us. The sessions at the annual meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) between 1989 and 1991, which produced the articles included in this volume, were the product of discussions between Pomponio and Peter Lawrence. Were it not for his untimely death in 1987, not only would Lawrence's influence on the articles presented here be even more profound than it is, but he would have been an active participant in the ASAO sessions. Peter was to have co-chaired the series of "Children of Kilibob" sessions at meetings in Kauai, Hawaii, and Victoria, British Columbia. Even without his physical presence, Peter's spirit animated the sessions that led to this volume, as did his approach to the central myth that he explored in *Road Belong Cargo--the Myth of Kilibob and Manup*. His intellectual presence was palpable; his physical absence was profoundly regretted by us all.

When we began the series of meetings that culminated in this work, we believed, as had Peter Lawrence, that we were assembling a set of myths about two brothers whose adventures, misadventures, agreements, and disagreements would provide the canvas on which the peoples of northeast New Guinea, the Vitiaz Strait, and northwestern New Britain had painted

their intellectual and philosophical concerns. In fact, we had no such unifying mythic figures. We had instead the palette from which these peoples have chosen their colors while painting very different scenes. These myths are, nevertheless, about the children of Kilibob. Some are explicitly so (see McSwain), but in a larger sense, all of them are. As children (or new yams) may resemble but do not replicate their genitors, analyses in this volume owe their birth to Lawrence's treatment of Kilibob and his children three decades ago.

Thus we offer this volume as an ethnographic contribution to the study of myth in Melanesia and to the more generalized Pacific, though we believe it has importance beyond ethnography. Each story line is classified locally almost without exception as a "sacred history" across the area in which it is found. The story's content imparts codified information about cosmogony/cosmology; about concepts of humanity, morality, and personhood. Some episodes outline the Vitiaz Strait trade network and explain ethnic diversity and intergroup relations. Important skills, technology, and subsistence activities can be traced to other episodes, as can population migrations and other symbolically encoded cultural and ethnohistorical events pertinent to their tellers. Regrettably, some of this detail lies far beyond the limits of this volume and must await analysis elsewhere. Especially important here are those versions that address the effects of European colonial domination and Papua New Guineans' attempts to understand and mitigate them. Finally, we should remember, in addition to all of the scholarly, historical, and sacred aspects of these stories' importance, that the people who tell them also enjoy them for the lively and entertaining plots they contain.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The guest editors would like to thank Mary Haught and Jean Deese for their patience, forbearance, and determination in translating computer files from several different software programs, and Renée Murphy for the reformatting and typing assistance that got this manuscript completed. Sharlene Rohter of The Institute for Polynesian Studies deserves a purple heart for careful yet compassionate editing and production management. Laurie Olmstead helped collate the references. Marie J. Zeidler drew the maps; St. Lawrence University and McMaster University financed them.

The editors of Pacific Studies would like to acknowledge the receipt of a generous grant from the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania to facilitate distribution of this volume for classroom use.