

Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts, eds., *Aging and Its Transformations: Moving toward Death in Pacific Societies*. ASAO Monograph no. 10. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985. Pp. 336, references, index. Paper \$14.75. Cloth \$28.00.

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Regardless of the criteria societies use for categorizing people as old, the older segment of most populations throughout the world seems to be increasing-- very gradually in some instances, but increasing nonetheless. Concomitantly, research on aging and the aged has also become more important. While anthropologists have been relative latecomers to gerontology, the body of literature on cross-cultural aspects of aging has grown significantly in the last few years. Published research on aging in Pacific Island societies has been mostly isolated articles in journals and chapters in more general books. *Aging and Its Transformations* is a welcome addition to the data base.

The book originated in a discussion session at an annual meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania and progressed through increasingly formal presentations to this final product. What the editors call "the ASAO process" might easily be called the "anthropology of aging process" as several very basic volumes in this area have developed similarly, such as Cowgill and Holmes's *Aging and Modernization* (1972), Christine Fry's books *Aging in Culture and Society* (1980) and *Dimensions: Aging, Culture, and Health* (1981), as well as Fry and Keith's *New Methods for Old Age Research* (1986). Counts and Counts have succeeded in presenting a coherent treatment of aging in the Pacific, which effectively reaffirms the value of the comparative approach so characteristic of anthropology.

The editors' introductory chapter provides a context from which to view the remainder of the book. Drawing on the literature on general anthropological studies of aging, other Pacific studies, and the case studies in this book, they direct our attention to contrasts between industrial and preindustrial societies, variant criteria for classifying individuals as old, and differential role options and activities. They also suggest the usefulness of such distinctions as healthy versus decrepit per-

sons, domestic versus public spheres of activity, and good death versus bad death for interpreting aging cross-culturally. The themes that structure the book are "the ideologies of aging and death; aging and dying as processes; changes in gender roles as a result of aging; negotiation of status as people grow old or enter the category of the dying" (p. 2).

These themes receive variable emphasis in different sections of the book. Part one is concerned with "Aging and Gender," with chapters by Karen Sinclair on the Maori, Michèle Dominy on New Zealand Pakeha women, and Juliana Flinn on Pulap, Caroline Islands. "Aging, Gender, and Dying" is the heading of part two, which includes chapters on the Marquesas Islands by John Kirkpatrick, the Marshall Islands by Laurence Carucci, the Kaliai of West New Britain by Dorothy and David Counts, and the Vanatinai of Papua New Guinea by Maria Lepowsky. In part three, "Aging, Death, and Dying" is considered in William McKellin's chapter on the Managalase of Papua New Guinea; Dan Jorgensen's on the Telefolmin, also of Papua New Guinea; and Naomi Scaletta's on the Kabana of West New Britain. Part four, "Conclusion," consists of a single chapter by Victor Marshall.

These chapters contribute much to our understanding of the cultural dimension of aging. In the passage through the life cycle, for example, status may be affected by many factors. Gender is one such influence, and one of the more interesting chapters relevant to this issue is Lepowsky's description of the sexually egalitarian Vanatinai. But other factors also shape the aging experience--avoidance patterns, type of descent system, being spouseless or childless, and, most importantly, ideology and cosmology. Several of the authors make very effective use of biographical sketches to illustrate the options, dilemmas, and coping strategies of aged individuals in particular cultural contexts, such as the plight of a widower in Pulap, the potential for a woman to be powerful and highly respected in Vanatinai, and Scaletta's detailed account of a woman's death by sorcery. a

A major contribution of this book is the information it provides on death and dying. Although these issues are typically considered a logical part of gerontology, few cross-cultural studies have provided much detail about whether or how the death of an old person differs from that of other persons. *Aging and Its Transformations* fills some of this void and in so doing gives us rich detail about some of the "complex and exotic cosmologies" of the Pacific, where concepts of death may include distinctions between "loss of life" and "passing away," where natural death is believed not to occur or to be restricted to the very old, where death may be reversible, and where spirits abound in many forms and with the potential for good or evil relationships with the living.

The concluding chapter by sociologist Victor Marshall, "Conclusions: Aging and Dying in Pacific Societies: Implications for Theory in Social Gerontology," is another asset to this book. Much of his discussion focuses on North American social gerontology and the theoretical perspectives that characterize it, for example, age stratification, disengagement, and the "life course perspective." The Pacific case studies clearly demonstrate a concern with the life course rather than a restricted focus on old age only. Marshall seems to appreciate the "emic" approach that anthropologists strive for, in this instance in the elucidation and interpretation of age categories. In considering the social status of the aged as reflected in these studies, he concludes that "age status is situational rather than fixed and achieved rather than ascribed. This leads to a view of the life course, and of passage through the life course, as negotiated" (p. 261). Elaborating on the latter point, Marshall contends that the Pacific Islanders described do not simply follow a predetermined script of age-appropriate behavior according to gerontological theory, but actively negotiate the life course. This point might be debated, but it does follow from the biographical sketches in the book. Finally, his discussion of death is structured around contrasts in North American and Pacific Island attitudes and interpretation of this event and Marshall's own theoretical work on aging and dying. Having begun his chapter with a statement that "theory in social gerontology is not highly developed" (p. 252), Marshall seems to find evidence in this volume and other related research that anthropology has much to contribute to further development of gerontological theory.

Aging and Its Transformations is a valuable resource for Pacific specialists, anthropologists, and other social scientists interested in aging, and should also find an audience among those concerned with worldview. I had scarcely finished reading it when I began using some of the information in my course on the anthropology of aging; others will surely do likewise.