

Verena Keck, ed., *Common Worlds and Single Lives: Constituting Knowledge in Pacific Societies*. Explorations in Anthropology. Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998. Pp. vi, 417, bib., index. US\$22.50 paperback.

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### **Culture, Agency, and Knowledge in the Pacific**

The contributors to *Common Worlds and Single Lives: Constituting Knowledge in Pacific Societies* cover a broad range of contemporary anthropological issues using the analytic frame of understanding knowledge and how it is and has been constituted in the Pacific. The volume is the product of a session held at the Conference of the European Society for Oceanists, in Basel, in 1994. Editor Verena Keck divides the volume's sixteen chapters into seven parts, with an introductory chapter that serves as a theoretical frame for the papers.

In her introduction, Keck discusses current and historic anthropological conceptualizations of "culture," "ethnicity," "agency," and "knowledge." In this excellent essay she draws out some of the current analytic threads concerning these conceptualizations and demonstrates their importance to anthropologists working in the Pacific. By confirming the relationship between these anthropological ideas and local constructions and experiences of identity, personhood, history, change over time, Christianity, modernity, and "the other," and the incorporation of "new" knowledge into already existing systems, Keck substantiates why the papers in the volume hang together as a coherent whole, in a way that is not the case in many edited volumes.

The volume's prologue is an essay by Raymond Firth. Firth begins the essay by laying out some philosophical issues surrounding the discussion of knowledge. He then argues that all inquiry into knowledge in Oceania must face two major questions: First, how is knowledge transmitted, and second, how is knowledge distributed? Next, he discusses the relationships between knowledge and perception and knowledge and identity using linguistic data

from Polynesia. Finally, he raises a series of questions about the quality of information concerning knowledge when it is presented by ethnographers, concluding that Oceanic ethnography is neither fact nor fiction but rather something more complex altogether (p. 50).

The second part of the volume, "Embodied Personhood," contains ethnographic papers by Borut Telban and Andree Grau, and an ethnohistoric paper by Christina Toren. Telban writes about the collective and personal identity among Ambonwari villagers in Papua New Guinea. He relates the Ambonwari conception of *kay*, which he describes as "way, habit, manner, ritual, being" (p. 55), to concrete social practices including hunting, fishing, following taboos, and healing. He stresses the bodily nature of *kay* while demonstrating the "other aspects of human existence, such as custom, past, mythology, society, individuality and so on" that are part of how people in Ambonwari conceptualize personal and collective identity (p. 65). Grau looks at dance among the Tiwi of northern Australia as both a cultural and biological form of knowledge. He shows that Tiwi knowledge of dance is intimately connected to Tiwi knowledge of kinship and that "the kinship dances were truly kinship in action" (p. 88). Toren, building upon an earlier paper in which she argued that social relations in Fiji are not fundamentally hierarchical but rather "constituted in terms of complementary and opposing concepts of equality and hierarchy" (p. 95), examines precolonial notions of self in relation to the power of the ancestors as manifest in the materiality of land fertility and the actions of the living.

The third section of the volume, "Changing Life Histories," includes ethnographic papers by Andrew Strathern and Lisette Josephides. Strathern is concerned with "life history" as a genre of ethnographic inquiry that may work to ground the sometimes-abstract anthropological discussions of self or personhood in concrete "embodied contexts of time and change" (p. 119). He argues and then demonstrates, using life history narratives from Papua New Guinea, that local personal narratives of life experiences can and do tell us much about culture, personal identity, change over time, and local knowledge. Josephides is concerned with how social groups acknowledge the actions of members and others within the conventions of their shared culture (p. 137). Using "stories" or "portraits" she demonstrates how Kewa of the southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea create their own cultural lives.

The fourth, and perhaps most interesting, section of the volume, "Local Recasting of Christianity," includes ethnographic papers by Anna Paini and Monique Jeudy-Ballini. Paini explores change in the discourses and practices of Christianity in a village on Lifu, in the Loyalty Islands. She argues, after a "thick" ethnographic section, that "Lifuan's' religion should be considered as an indigenous strategy for thinking about the world and defining oneself within

that world” (p. 193). She then demonstrates how religion, in the complex form that it has taken in this place, serves as a nexus for culture, identity, history, change, and modernity. Jeudy-Ballini, in her chapter on the relationships between whites and the Sulka of East New Britain Province in Papua New Guinea, shows that the process of the appropriation of representations of “the other” is a dual process in which both white missionaries and the Sulka are implicated.

The fifth section of the volume, “Experiences Outside Worlds,” includes a historical paper by Ronald Adams and ethnographic papers by Brigit Obrist van Eeuwijk and Beatriz Moral. Adams is concerned with Tannese labor recruitment in the second half of the nineteenth century. Beginning with pre-contact Tannese ideas about otherness and the outside world and moving through post-European contact, Adams traces the relationship between journeys or voyages taken by Tannese with the emergence of new local forms of identification and new local forms of political and social consciousness. Obrist van Eeuwijk is concerned with the relationship between Kwanga traditional interpretations of fertility and procreation and interpretations engendered by modern health care. She shows that the Kwanga, of the East Sepik Province in Papua New Guinea, practice medical “pluralism” employing traditional and “Western” medical cures when they seem appropriate and at the same time maintain a notion of “*kastom*” to acknowledge a difference between traditional and nontraditional knowledge. In demonstrating this she suggests that while medical pluralism is one way of understanding medical choices among the Kwanga, wider political forces—not always directly related to medicine—shape human experiences of reproduction and procreation. Moral examines the status of Chuukese women within the frame of the traditional and the modern. She argues that over time women’s power has been weakened, there has been an increased control over women’s sexuality, and women have become less protected. She does not argue that these changes are an “evil” of modernization but rather that the current status of women is a “hybrid born from past and present” (p. 281).

The sixth section of the volume, “Appropriating New Forms of Knowledge,” contains ethnographic papers by Pierre Lemonnier, Milan Stanek and Florence Weiss, Eroc Vembrix, and Ingerd Hoem. Lemonnier argues that among the Ankave-Anga, of the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea, local political forms and offices are “still evolving” and that these forms, as knowledge enacted through particular cultural behaviors, are locally generated and imported from elsewhere. Stanek and Weiss analyze the strategies employed by Iatmul migrants who have moved to Rabaul, New Britain. Using the life story of one successful entrepreneur, they raise questions about knowledge and adaptation and the relationship between “culture” and social

change. Vembrix, in a paper on the ideology of “development” among the Tiwi of Melville Island, discusses how the creation of a new township was tied to local and external politics: Knowledge about both was merged with both cultural understandings and the desires of the local Tiwi leadership and then expressed in the form of political action. Hoem discusses the use of a new cultural form—popular theatre—in Tokelau, which works to order local ideas about change and ideology, which come from overseas. She shows that performance is related to knowledge and political action.

The volume’s epilogue is an essay by Marilyn Strathern, titled “The New Modernities.” Strathern’s essay, while standing as a separate paper, draws together many of the themes brought out by the other papers in the volume. She discusses the anthropology of individual inventiveness and the relationship between social hybridity, individual action, and knowledge. This lengthy volume is quite good: The threads that Keck draws out in her introductory essay can be seen moving through the entire volume and then in the end M. Strathern ties them together in a way that forces the reader to ask new questions.