

Paul Sillitoe, *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia: Culture and Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xxiii, 254, illus., bib., index. US\$22.95 paperback.

*Reviewed by Roger Ivar Lohmann, Western Oregon University*

Designed for use in courses introducing peoples and cultures of Melanesia, this text offers a neat package that samples fourteen different societies, each paired with theoretical topics within ethnology. Chapters average fifteen richly illustrated pages each, and are for the most part clearly written and accessible for an audience that has no familiarity with Melanesia. The case studies are drawn only from Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya, which somewhat limits the book's scope as an introduction to greater Melanesia. However, I commend Sillitoe's general accomplishment here, which succeeds in giving a sense of both cultural variation and continuities within the region.

The first chapter gives geographic, human biological, and linguistic backgrounds, concluding with a discussion of the peopling of the region. The remaining chapters provide an ethnographic tour of different Melanesian societies; each stop made serves to illustrate a different element of social life. The first pair of these chapters (2 and 3) considers lowland and mountain peoples from the perspective of ecological anthropology, ethnoscience, and caloric-energy approaches to foraging, horticulture, and pig raising. Psychological

anthropological approaches, including enculturation and the life cycle, provide the axis for a discussion of Manus Island in chapter 4.

Sillitoe then explores economic themes in a series of chapters, including the Massim *kula* ring (chapter 5) and Highlands exchanges (chapter 6). Pointing out the difficulty of fit with economic anthropological theories, he emphasizes the social and political nature of these exchanges. Moving more explicitly to political anthropology, the next chapter depicts the big-man system on Bougainville.

Chapter 8, on technology, is set in the eastern Highlands. At the end of a section titled "Stone Tools" is the only and brief mention of netted string bags as "perhaps the artifact more than any other that characterizes Melanesian culture" (p. 118). This important subject is reduced to a misplaced tack-on, and as string bags are women's tools, those interested in material culture and women will be disappointed. Chapter 9, on gender relations among the Melpa, is probably the weakest in the book. Rather than focusing on gender per se, there is a large section on women, followed by a long digression into descent-group structures. When gender relations are briefly covered, the focus is limited to mechanisms that keep men, though dominant, from mistreating women, giving the chapter a sugar-coated taste.

Chapter 10, on dispute settlement among the Kapauku, presents several cases and discusses the limitations of applying Western legal concepts in "stateless" societies. Here Sillitoe broaches the important Melanesian concept of compensation and the principles of equivalence and payback. The following chapter covers the importance of sorcery and witchcraft with the Dobu as the case study. He presents the classic African-derived distinction of the two terms based on intent of the magician, but though he cites Michele Stephen, Sillitoe neglects to mention her updated definition based on Melanesian patterns, in which social acceptability of the practice forms the basis for classification. Warfare and cannibalism are next considered, illustrated by Yali ethnography. Here he discusses the ways in which Melanesian fighting has qualities of both warfare and feuding.

In the last three chapters, Sillitoe discusses religion: first, initiation rites among the Iatmul, in which he provides a helpful diagram of van Gennep's and Turner's versions of rites of passage; second, religious healing and medical anthropology among the Orokaiva; and finally, a thorough discussion of models of myth, using the Baktaman as the case study.

While this book has many virtues and is useful as it is, it will dissatisfy many readers on several counts. I mention a few issues that stood out for me, in the hope that this valuable teaching tool will be improved and appear in a second edition.

Sillitoe is directing this book at Western university students, which is

fine. In so doing, however, he frequently compares Melanesian peoples to “us” and the way “we” live. I found this usage disconcerting as I read, realizing that in attempting to relate to a European audience, this approach also excludes the Melanesian (or for that matter, any non-Western) reader. This book serves as an excellent survey; it will be much improved by speaking to interested students everywhere.

Sillitoe, aware of the expectations of his presumed audience, makes a point to describe Melanesian polities with their great-men, big-men, or chiefs as “stateless”—not having what “we” have. This tends to reify the ideal types of stateless versus state as a binary pair with nothing in between. It tempts the reader to see “statelessness” as a problem in which what did not exist in pre-contact Melanesia is to be explained as a lack, as opposed to accounting for what political systems did exist. A more-refined consideration of the range of human political systems, and how they can develop from one into another, would easily correct this.

Sillitoe presents a mainly “before contact” view of these peoples, quite literally in the case of the many excellent photographs, all of which show people in traditional dress. Readers are bound to walk away with the impression that there has been little impact on people’s lives from government, capitalism, missions, revitalization movements, and so on. He uses the ethnographic present tense to represent “the time around which the anthropologist conducted fieldwork and produced the ethnography in question” (p. xx). But he does this in a context in which it is unclear who the anthropologist is and what time period is being discussed—and the ethnographies considered were recorded decades apart. We usually do not find out which ethnographies are being used as sources until reaching the bibliographies at the end of the chapters, so it is difficult for the reader to orient oneself. The minimized use of references in the text saves little space but greatly reduces this book’s usefulness as a general resource. References to the positions of “some writers” without explaining who they are prevents interested students from proceeding to examine threads that interest them.

Sillitoe sometimes misses opportunities to clarify important theoretical issues in anthropology, or weakly outlines controversial points. For example, in discussing the difficulty of classifying different physical types within Melanesia, he does not relate this to the weaknesses and strengths of using ideal racial types in general. At other times, his theoretical discussions are rich and relate the Melanesian material to various quandaries and accomplishments of theoretical ethnology in general. In particular, his discussions of exchange and myth offer forays into a variety of theoretical approaches that bring the ethnography alive as more than simply a collection of facts about groups of people.

Where it succeeds, this book provides an excellent sampling of both Melanesian peoples and the theoretical concerns that anthropologists have brought with them to these islands. This book covers an incredible amount of ground with admirable conciseness, giving it tremendous appeal for anyone desiring a quick overview of precontact Melanesian life. I can recommend it for use in courses on Melanesia, and indeed I plan to use it myself, as a foundation for discussions that can be enriched with lectures and more in-depth readings.