

REFERENCE CITED

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Paul Sillitoe, *Social Change in Melanesia: Development and History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xx, 264, illus., index. US\$65 cloth; \$24 paperback.

Reviewed by Paul B. Wohlt, Ball State University

Undertaking to introduce someone to the salient characteristics of a culture area must seem a daunting task. Does one systematically catalog culture traits, provide several in-depth case studies, or frame the enterprise in terms of issues, themes, or overarching theoretical propositions? Clearly some combination is required and Paul Sillitoe's strategy (so far at least) has resulted in two books. In the first, *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia* (1998), each chapter utilizes a traditional ethnography to illustrate a Melanesian theme like swidden cultivation, big-men, and sorcery. In the second, reviewed here, he selects topics such as land rights, mining, and missionaries; draws from relevant writings, usually a classic ethnography from Papua New Guinea (PNG); and examines related current issues from contact to the present. The focus is development in historical perspective where development is firmly a case of forced change. His template is to look at technological innovation, its social consequences, and indigenous rationalizations.

There is a major thread running through the exposition. Sillitoe repeatedly contrasts the Melanesian complex of egalitarianism, sociopolitical exchange, and kin-constructed social environments with Western hierarchy and socioeconomic individualism. The imposition or attraction of the latter becomes a central feature in understanding the issues surrounding most topics, from entrepreneurs to personhood.

The first two chapters set the groundwork for later topics. Development is contextualized as change "which assumes the adoption of improved technological procedures and more effective institutional arrangements" (p. 3), which seems to imply a rather linear notion of evolution. In an apparent aside, Sillitoe takes to task applied anthropologists who are not firmly connected to some other discipline (for example, agriculture or medicine) as naive practitioners of social engineering. Next follows a tidy account of European contact (nice map), then whalers, traders, blackbirders, missionaries, and colonialism—right through independence.

In the third chapter, the viewpoint moves to the “grassroots” level. Using his own work with the Wola (Southern Highlands, PNG), Sillitoe provides a fascinating account of history through their eyes. For the next four chapters he remains, more or less, at the “village” level, the traditional anthropological unit of analysis. Starting with technological change among the Siane (Simbu, PNG), he makes an unfortunate foray into formal economic models following Fisk, but comes back to examine cultural and social factors that “encourage ‘modern’ socioeconomic institutions to emerge, and facilitate economic take-off” (p. 73). Turning to land rights he promptly critiques the modernization model for its formalist implications. Working from the Tolai case (New Britain, PNG), there is an examination of how the strong Melanesian connection to inalienable land clashes with developers’ insistence on individual tenure. Business is next (from Finney’s work in the Eastern Highlands, PNG). Sillitoe considers the way big-men’s development as entrepreneurs is usually truncated once renown and traditional social standing are achieved. To go further would be antiegalitarian. The last “village” topic is the possible transition from tribespeople to peasants. Here he argues that sociopolitical exchange and egalitarianism will undercut the development of class structure (Eastern Highlands again) while warfare prunes fixed capital accumulation. The national level, however, is another story.

Beginning with chapter 8, “Mining, Misunderstanding, and Insurrection,” Sillitoe broadens his view to consider more fully issues at the national and international levels. Ranging more widely in Melanesia than in previous chapters, he describes extractive forces at work and concludes that they are inevitably leading Melanesians to a centralized life. Participatory development might mitigate the transition and anthropologists might have a role in defending people’s interests. Issues surrounding forestry, migration, cargo cults, and missionaries receive a similar treatment.

In considering forestry (West Sepik, PNG), the conflict between Western notions of compensation as a contract (fixed, final, formal) and Melanesian reciprocity (negotiated, continuing, imbedded) is nicely presented. Similarly, he alleges, developers and planners see Melanesian groups as cooperating for the benefit of individuals, sharing the profits of joint labor, when they should be recognizing that people operate as individuals within the constraints of reciprocity and egalitarian ideologies, sharing products produced as well as received within groups and networks. Reflections on possible ways of using that perspective conclude the chapter.

Because there is little industrialization to provide jobs, migration to urban areas leads to a kind of dead-end tribalism of gangs and payback rather than an upward pathway to affluence. There is little room at the top for the nascent elite. Sillitoe portrays cargo cults as eminently rational, intellectual

responses to change within the context of the clash of Melanesian equality and Western inequality (the John Frumm cult, Vanuatu). Missionization (Methodist minister George Brown, New Ireland and New Britain) results in a distinctly Melanesian brand of Christianity that seems to bridge this gap, on the one hand instantiating the alien idea of failure and on the other contributing to physical and psychological health.

In the last two chapters the incompatibility of egalitarianism and hierarchy are again invoked. Customary behaviors represent barriers to development. Corruption, law and order problems, and elections without radically different agendas characterize a sort of developmental paralysis. A consideration of *kastom* and identity (Kwaio, Solomon Islands) and the thoughts of Bernard Narakobi leaves the reader with a slim hope that somehow Melanesians will find a viable and enduring Melanesian Way, but not without human suffering in the transition.

Since this book and its previous companion are said to be written for the reader with some, little, or no background, they would presumably be candidates for college texts. Some background to *Social Change*, however, would certainly be desirable. Each chapter contains highly compressed explanations of terms, models, or theories. This can be very misleading. For example, his representation of evolutionary "theory" sounds almost unilineal and goal driven.

The book is constructed from a series of university lectures. Although they are well integrated as chapters and flow easily from one to the next, they retain the flavor of that style of discourse with asides to explain relevant ideas, small barbs at unidentified categories of persons (like developers or the media), and advice concerning the appropriate uses of anthropological knowledge. At the end of each chapter is an extensive list of books divided by subthemes from the chapter. What is disturbing about this arrangement is the distinct lack of detailed documentation. Presumably it is a response to being written for those of some, little, or no background. A book that gives every appearance of being a scholarly product (and certainly is) should not leave the reader to ponder whether it fulfills the role of popularized anthropology, introductory text, or scholarly integration.

Nonetheless, having finished the book one might well feel a certain command of various Melanesian themes and some familiarity with the entwining threads of discourse at this point in the story of Melanesian continuity and change.