Review: Gilbert Herdt
University of Chicago

The founding of modern anthropology was based in no small measure on work conducted in Melanesia and the island of New Guinea in particular, a colonial history that prefigures this new and important book by cultural anthropologist Bruce Knauft. Melanesian studies might be said to have opened with the "problem of comparison" created by the Cambridge expeditions to the Torres Strait (*Reports* 1901-1935), that multidisciplinary natural history survey undertaken by riverboat at the beginning of this century by such Victorian figures as British anthropologist W. H. R. Rivers and colleagues, all key players in the scientific establishment of the day. However, it was the first true fieldwork that forged anthropology, as dramatically and brilliantly presented in Malinowski's ethnographies of the Trobriand Islands' people off the southeastern coast of the island, starting with *Argo-*

nauts of the Western Pacific (1992), and carried cultural study far beyond those of his teachers and mentors who had conducted the riverboat reports a generation earlier. By entering into the village, and uncompromisingly making native-language study and lived experience new standards for the representation of the Other, Malinowski paved the way for a kind of thinking in positive science and popular society, regarding the project of comparison in human affairs.

That is the story that lies behind the critical efforts of *South Coast New Guinea Cultures.* Nearly a century has passed since the Cambridge expeditions; their colonial and scientific establishments are eclipsed by new Pacific nations and scientific paradigms that debunk the project of comparativism and indeed the very fabric of anthropology itself, the stepchild, as it were, of old. How fitting, then, that a book so self-consciously dedicated to the question "How can anthropologists describe and compare ethnographic regions?" (p. 3) should take as its object the ethnically dense and least known region of island New Guinea--the south and southwestern coastal traditions of the Papuan Gulf and hinterlands--so culturally complicated to assess that after a thousand pages of that extraordinary and maddeningly multilayered work, *Dema,* on the religion and society of the Marind-anim peoples, the late great Dutch anthropologist, Jan van Baal (1966), would throw up his hands at the seeming "contradictions" of Marind-anim belief and mythology, and especially the metaphysical "dark side" of ritual sexuality--both same- and opposite-sex erotics, that troubled his Calvanist heart. Of course, van Baal felt an obligation to worry over these matters, having been the last governor-general of Dutch West New Guinea, a fact over which he took glee; by his own admission he was disturbed by these practices, especially "ritual homosexuality" and the "promiscuity" of ritual defloration and heterosexuality, which caused him in the 1930s to take action against certain ritual practices during his reign. What a sea change has occurred since that time, that both the colonial figures and the ethnography, and their scientific worldview, are called into question and by turns rejected.

By the early 1980s, and the discovery that a variety of Papuan peoples participated in a symbolic complex of ritual sexual beliefs and practices, it was possible to launch a new comparative project, *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia* (Herdt 1984), whose aim was the positive comparison of these groups. Many of the volume's authors, as Knauft notes, were themselves distinguished elderly anthropologists, such as van Baal (the oldest among them at the time), who wrote from the perspective of their generation without marked disjunction from the colonial past, save for the symbolical and a somewhat more enlightened attitude about the scientific reporting of sexuality in anthropology.

Here is where Knauft's work both ends an earlier era and begins a new one. He embraces the tendencies of postmodem study, a certain bittersweet taste that one must definitely acquire a taste for, one that Knauft obviously savors. His work is critical, however, particularly of the "practice" theories influenced by French poststructuralism and social theory, He employs these ideas in a generally interesting and useful way, without the wholesale egestion of anthropological theory of the past current in postmodernism. Thus it is not surprising that research paradigms and their ethnographic accounts should be shaken up by the effort to locate this new examination of New Guinea in "postmodern" discussions of cultural expression. Knauft rather convincingly achieves his conceptual goals in a general way; for, as he concludes of his analyses in chapters 7 and 8, "The objectivist assumption that classification is a transparent window upon reality is untenable" (p. 217). Perhaps this is, in a nutshell, the real aim of the book, condensing ethnographic material with conceptual worldview.

Let us take, for instance, Knauft's achievement in the reconsideration of the diverse ethnographies of the Marind-anim peoples of southwestern New Guinea (chapter 8). This is to be admired, for it is specially impressive. The immense effort to catalogue and interpret this work by van Baal, in his magnum opus (1966) and nearly a generation later in his chapter in *Ritualized Homosexuality* (1984), shows the intelligence of a dedicated ethnologist. No one since van Baal has understood this corpus so well, as anyone brave or feckless enough to attempt comparative studies is wont to know (see Herdt 1984 and as revised in 1993). Knauft lays bare key points, particularly regarding the men's ritual cults, the famous Sosom and Mayo organizations. By linking ritual and myth, he puts into practice his own practice theories, through the construct of what he calls "enacting myths"--a kind of ritual implementation of the main beliefs and ideas of the cults in military, societal, and sexual actions, such as the famed head-hunting expeditions that resulted in the obtaining of captives, their personal names for the heads, kidnaped children. These are all manifestations of the expansion of the Marind across decades along the Papuan Gulf studied by a variety of comparative scholars from the time of Paul Wirtz, Roheim, Haddon, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and up through Alan Dundes, Keesing, Herdt, Lindenbaum, Marilyn Strathern, and now Knauft. A kind of detailed microdemographic and ethnological comparison yields some generally significant validations of insights from before, such as the precarious fertility status of the Marind people. Thus, Knauft writes, "Marind illustrate a dialectic spiral between the enactment of culture in the material world and cultural responses to its own actualization" (p. 171).

Besides the comparative reformations of *South Coast New Guinea Cul-*

tures, what interests me most is the conceptualization of customary same-sex practices, also known as ritual homosexuality, within the broader Melanesian circle. The reports of these customs are scarce and often skimpy, even muddy, since anthropologists seldom collected detailed material on sexual behavior and rarely went beyond the anecdote in understanding same-sex relations. The exceptions to this generalization in the extant work include Williams (1936) and notably van Baal (1966, among other works). My own work among the Sambia (Herdt 1981), followed by the ethnographic survey in 1984, showed the outlines and limitations of the work in this area up to the early 1980s (and since updated in a 1993 edition). Early study of age-structured homoerotic relations--the canonical mode of sexual relations between males in Melanesia--was typically conducted in the naive context of mixing Western prejudices with local knowledge and ontologies and practices, but without the critical benefit of explicit comparisons to sexual cultures in other parts of the world, including those of Western nations. This is problematical, however, since the anthropological concepts utilized --especially "homosexuality" itself--contain the marked categories and unmarked or implicit assumptions that preoccupied Western discourse at the time. Thus, the categorical. "homosexual" as instantiated in nineteenth-century medical discourse and as used in New Guinea descriptions, including my own, is overburdened with the intellectual baggage of the past. Knauft recognizes the issue but decided, perhaps wisely so, to stay out of quagmire debates regarding what is or is not "homosexuality." But by doing so, of course, he reproduces the very fabric of positive categories that he opposes. Granted, the task of elucidating the phenomenon of same-sex relations from the customs of one tradition through the tropes and ontological understanding of another was the bane on post-Freudian culture and personality work, such as the classical and rare but highly flawed report of Devereux on the Mohave Indian berdache (1937), a product of his dissertation research. This I have shown elsewhere (Herdt 1991), and Knauft's book, coming as it does in the midst of such conceptual change, is placed in the difficult position of deconstructing categories or inventing new ones in anthropology's rediscovery of sexuality (Vance 1991).

Knauft is no stranger to these issues. As I have written before (Herdt 1993), his work shows remarkable and bold scholarship and insight, first because of his keen interest to expose colonial and postcolonial agendas that comes out of the postmodem perspective, matters incumbent upon the use of the category "homosexual." Second, Knauft consistently illuminated same-sex relations in his important Gebusi ethnography (1986), to a point more extensive than any other Melanesianist, with the exception of the present author.

Knauft has reexamined the historical situation on Kiwai Island at the mouth of the Fly River, reviewing one of the most important nineteenth-century cases of Melanesian rites. His critical reconstruction of the general pattern, distribution, and frequency (in maps and estimates) of boy-inseminating rites among adjacent societies along the southern coast of Papua is a great achievement. For example, he has rather effectively argued against the inclusion of Kiwai Island culture among groups that traditionally practiced boy-inseminating, and he systematically deconstructed each piece of ethnographic evidence on the Kiwai set out in my 1984 review. He builds a strong case that Kiwai Islanders never practiced the custom. Here as before, the main effect of this effort is to establish that only the Keraki (Williams 1936) and other tribes *west* of the Fly River participated in the practices.

How frequent and pervasive were these precolonial patterns of boy-inseminating rites? We can never be sure and the facts are still open to question, much as they were in the time of the first speculative theory on the matter, set out in Alfred Haddon's introduction to *The Kiwai Papuans of British New Guinea* (1927). We do know that boy-inseminating rites, like the serial male/female sexual relations of certain ritual occasions in southwestern Papua, profoundly troubled many of the early white colonists. It is difficult for us to adequately gauge the tremendous toll that Western agents and missionaries have taken with respect to these practices, including their suppression by force and their subsequent practice in secret. Knauft claims that the total population related to the precolonial practice of boy-inseminating was 39,768 individuals--itself a remarkable figure; how accurate this is I cannot judge. Some writers, such as Schiefenhovel (1990:411), also provide different estimates of the incidence of total ethnic groups that practiced the custom in Melanesia; he uses my 1984 figures to estimate 3 percent of all cultures, based upon an arbitrary number of a thousand cultures, but then he explains that the "real" figure was probably much higher. Why he thinks this is unclear. The point is that these are all educated guesses and we should not place too much credit in them due to the lack of accurate historical information.

The strides made in detailed ethnographic analysis and comparison, as witnessed in the core of *South Coast New Guinea Cultures,* especially part 2, the "critique chapters," as well as chapter 9, "Symbolic and Sociopolitical Permutations," are impressive demonstrations of erudition. These merit the study of all serious students of Melanesia. Among the key observations of Knauft's work are the immense diversity and fluidity of the region, which he rightly balances against a similar flex in the highlands; the claim that culture is no simple "reflex" of south coast ecology, even though environmental patterns facilitated the emergence of certain symbolic complexes, such as raid-

ing (pp. 220 ff.); a strong and consistent emphasis upon social inequality and political organization, taking a lead from Godelier regarding the importance of "great men" among the Baruya and other Anga peoples; and a complicated but interesting argument that "fertility" as a symbolic theme is generative of ritual activity in these parts. I was disappointed, however, that Knauft chose the conceptual approach of generally ignoring the psychocultural dynamics of agents, and the issue of the desires of these cultural objects, which was of great interest to van Baal. In particular, in spite of Knauft's strong critique of comparativism, he does not ultimately succeed in deconstructing that enormously essentializing category "fertility," which to my mind remains opaque and obligingly signifying of Western norms.

Nearly a hundred years following the famed Cambridge expeditions, then, a new generation of anthropologists have thus come to question not only the natives' ideas about sexuality and culture but the very construction of transparent categories, as instantiated by that riverboat crew who would objectify and quantify the natural history and customs of Melanesia, leading to the science of comparison known as anthropology. Clearly, this book represents the somewhat more reasoned and reticent approach of reinventing key elements of comparative study, rather than dismissing them or totally rejecting the epistemology in which they take place. Knauft's book is a new challenge to positivism and relativism in cultural study; and while it does not completely lay to rest the problems that are raised in the effort to rethink comparison in the context of New Guinea studies, it must be placed alongside a small handful of excellent and pathbreaking studies, such as Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988). For the student of comparative ethnography in this part of the world, Knauft's book is a *tour de force,* a gift of unusual proportions in a culture area already embarrassed by comparative riches. For the specialist in the area, as well, the effort and study involved are to be admired, and the manifestations of a keen eye at work must be acknowledged at all times even though, in the end, the theoretical and conceptual achievements remind us of how far we have to go in making a science out of fieldwork.

REFERENCES

Baal, Jan van

1966 *Dema, Description and Analysis of Marind-Anim Culture.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

1984 The Dialectics of Sex in Marind-anim Culture. In *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia,* ed. G. H. Herdt, 128-166. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Devereux, George
1937 Institutionalized Homosexuality among the Mohave Indians. *Human Biology* 9:498-527.

Haddon, Albert C.
1927 Introduction to *The Kiwai Papuans of British New Guinea,* by Gunnar Landtman, ix-xx. London: Macmillan.

Herdt, Gilbert H.
1981 *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
1984 Ritualized Homosexuality in the Male Cults of Melanesia, 1862-1982: An Introduction. In *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia,* ed. G. H. Herdt, 1-80. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1991 Representations of Homosexuality in Traditional Societies: An Essay on Cultural Ontology and Historical Comparison. *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* part 2.
1993 Introduction [to paperback edition]. In *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia,* ed. G. H. Herdt, vii-xliv. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Knauft, Bruce M.
1986 Text and Social Practice: Narrative "Longing" and Bisexuality among the Gebusi of New Guinea. *Ethos* 14:252-281.
1987 Homosexuality in Melanesia. *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* 10: 155-191.

Malinowski, Bronislaw
1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific.* New York: Dutton.

Reports
1901- 1935 *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits.* 6 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schiefenhovel, Wulf
1990 Ritualized Adult-Male/Adolescent-Male Sexual Behavior in Melanesia: An Anthropological and Ethnological Perspective. In *Pedophilia: Biosocial Dimensions,* ed. Jay R. Feierman, 394-421. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Strathern, Marilyn
1988 *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Vance, Carole S.
1991 Anthropology Rediscovers Sexuality: A Theoretical Comment. *Social Science and Medicine* 33 (8): 875-884.

Williams, Francis E.
1936 *Papuans of the Trans-Fly.* Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.