

*Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions*, by G W Trompf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. ISBN 0-521-41691-4, xx + 545 pages, figures, maps, tables, photographs, notes, bibliography, indexes. us\$59.95.

Anthropologists are not the only practitioners of ethnography anymore. Cultural difference is increasingly celebrated and anatomized, and scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds have been called to represent other people's ways of life and worldviews. This hefty volume, written by an associate professor at Sydney University's School of Studies in Religion, is an interesting example of what might be called para-anthropology. Although rooted in an interpretation of Melanesian religions, the book ambitiously attempts to account for a gamut of Melanesian social practice, ranging from warfare to exchange, to legal codes, to marriage custom, to etiology. Where anthropologists apply their term *culture* to designate the universe of what they purport to describe, and also evoke "culture" as an ultimate causal force, Trompf instead employs *religion*. His tactic is to conceive of religion "much more as a people's 'way of life' than merely worship or approaches to the 'non-empirical realm' in particular" (xv). This ingressive definition of religion, like anthropology's culture, permits Trompf to discover religious sensibilities and motives almost everywhere in island life.

Trompf's aim is to "better understand the modern history of Melanesia . . . by analysing those forms of ratio-

nality that have been bequeathed by archaic, primal traditions" (25). He locates one primary religious principle to account for the contours of that modern history. This is "payback," or the "logic of retribution" in terms of which Melanesians perceive life as "a continuous interweaving of gains and losses" (1). (He recasts, here, previous anthropological totalized readings of Melanesian societies in terms of "reciprocity" or "opposition scenarios.") Trompf uses this model of positive and negative payback to organize his discussion of Melanesian religiosity cum culture. The book is divided into three historically organized sections: precontact "Tradition," colonial "Cargo Cultism," and postcolonial "Modernization." Each section is further divided into a discussion of negative payback (eg, revenge, reprisal, and recrimination), positive payback (reciprocity, redemption, and money-making), and payback as a pervasive epistemological principle that Melanesians resort to in order to explain illness and health, death and well-being. Although the book's declared focus is Melanesian religions, most data in fact come from Papua New Guinea, where Trompf once taught. (The volume recaps much of his earlier writing.) Evidently, the book only slowly made its way into print, as it refers to publications dating back to 1983 as "recent."

In many ways, this is Christian ethnography—a genre that was once not uncommon in the days of early missionary-ethnographers. Trompf's narrative thesis is the transformation of "primal," "tribal," or "small-scale" Melanesian societies by Christianity

and other forces of modernity. The volume's religious perspective is distinct and, in many ways, germane given contemporary Christian influence in many island societies. Most Melanesians are Christians, and a religiously—as opposed to anthropologically—informed ethnography recasts cultural interpretation in interesting fashion.

Ethnologically, however, the book rubs up against current anthropological attitudes. Trompf pointedly rebukes materialist theories of human behavior and also notions of primitive irrationality (eg, of cargo cultists). Retribution is a religious “logic.” It boggles the mind, nowadays, to figure who Trompf believes might still advocate either hard economic determinism or crazed native mentalities to explain Melanesian religiosity. Trompf also offers, here and there, a variety of gratuitous religious typologies, descriptive generalizations, and formal models, nearly all of which he apologizes for as inadequate and incomplete (which they are). They function decoratively and occasionally, it seems, to inspire his religious interpretations with a social scientific aura—a ghost that much of humanistic anthropology has now exorcised.

The most conspicuous difference between Trompf's religious ethnography and ruling anthropological approaches is his attempt to contain island lifeways within the bounds of a single explanatory principle: almost everything in Melanesia works as it does because of the logic of payback. The volume combines an extraordinary, even numbing, assortment of ethnographic detail with a simple, unitary,

explanatory premise. Anthropology, lately, has fretted over its previous renderings of “culture” as an organized, holistic system. Disciplinary interests encourage a search for cultural multiplicity, internal ambiguities and contradictions, and partial truths. Trompf's discovery of a solitary Melanesian logical structure may help reveal the common foundations of apparently disparate cultural features (eg, illness belief and bridewealth), but it can wash out differences and inconsistencies within island societies.

Trompf also borrows a little functionalism, in addition to structuralism, from an earlier anthropology. The logic of retribution functions to maintain the boundaries of local groups or “security circles” (within which people engage in positive payback, and between which they perpetrate negative paybacks including revenge killings and warfare). Functionalist explanation, too, can digest cultural variation and incongruity, all of which is interpreted as feeding the same basic social need.

As a religious ethnographer, Trompf is a therapist. He is not just interested in tracing the history of Melanesia in light of payback logic, but also in curing social ills—in particular, the problems of youth-gang crime, theft, rape, and political corruption that beset Port Moresby, Trompf's erstwhile hometown. The implicit question here, is why Christianity has failed in Melanesia. Melanesians are Christian, but not yet always Christian enough to renounce revenge, payback killing, tribal warfare, and the like. Trompf's answer is that people are still too traditional (the logic of payback persists)

and also sometimes too modern, having shot right through Christianity into secular humanist criminality. His suggested therapy is increased moral education and acknowledgment of Melanesia's pervasive payback logic—that “most of the problems and most of the best answers to them revolve around ethics and moral choices” (458). Trompf is a Tocqueville in Melanesia, but his criticism of payback may be less compelling, in future readings, than that earlier pundit's anxious appreciation of democracy.

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*Tradition and Christianity: The Colonial Transformation of a Solomon Islands Society*, by Ben Burt. Studies in Anthropology and History, volume 10. New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994. ISBN 3-7186-5449-0, xii + 299 pages, maps, figures, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. US\$ 58.

Despite a current profusion of theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich ethnographies, the field of Melanesian anthropology still gives scant attention to the now all-pervasive role of Christianity in most corners of the region. This well-written book on the Kwara'ae of Malaita by British anthropologist Ben Burt is a most welcome and engrossing exercise in just the opposite direction, taking issues of Christianity in the context of Kwara'ae “tradition” as its main substantial focus and analytical challenge. The book is a joy to read; the text is clear,

uncluttered, and easily accessible to a wide audience, and the copious photographs form an engaging, complementary chronicle in their own right.

The book builds on research carried out by the author since 1979, including fieldwork periods in Solomon Islands totaling about a year, and is the first general book-length ethnography of the Kwara'ae, who are one of the major linguistic groups of Solomon Islands. Constituting a rich historical account of more than a hundred years of colonial and postcolonial transformations of Kwara'ae culture and society, Burt's book is in some ways a parallel to the late Roger Keesing's recent *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy* (1992). The Kwara'ae of Kwai district described by Burt remain “a people fiercely attached to the tradition of their ancestors,” but unlike their neighboring Kwaio “pagans” they are now predominantly Christians who have “adopted with [equally fierce] conviction a new religion which contradicts some of the fundamental values of this tradition” (1).

Not unexpectedly, then, Ben Burt's major aim is “to document and explain how and why [the Kwara'ae of Kwai] have transformed their society by changing their religion” (1). This initial question is not an easy one to answer, but it does set the tone whereby the author persistently and lucidly brings to the forefront the agency and active, innovative role of generations of Kwara'ae through processes of confrontation, resistance, compromise, and reorganization, leading to their creation of a “new social order through which [the Kwara'ae]