

In my opinion, the only misleading aspect of this book is the cover photo, which could easily be interpreted in the wrong way: researcher Pamela Stewart is sitting on a chair and looking down on two men on an aluminum box, where one of the men is watching the other writing a text. Readers are informed that the photo, suggested by the editorial director of the University of Pittsburgh Press, is intended to show a form of collaborative relationship in the field and is to be understood “in counterpoint to the cover of *Writing Culture*” (edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, 1986), which shows Stephen Tyler writing in the field. Yet without venturing into a comprehensive photo analysis here, to me the picture appears inappropriate as an illustration of equal cooperation—which, after all, is one of the book’s chief intentions and strengths.

The volume shows the great potential that life-story narratives in anthropology still have for understanding life experiences of actual persons. Particularly fascinating and successful is the interaction of concepts of personhood, history, and biography. The book serves and deserves a wide audience, scholars with an interest in psychological anthropology as well as in the many facets of the life history method, and people wanting to know more about individual Pacific lives and their representation.

VERENA KECK  
*University of Basel*

\* \* \*

*Topics in Polynesian Language and Culture History*, by Jeff Marck. Pacific Linguistics 504. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 2000. ISBN 0-85883-468-5, xviii + 281 pages, maps, tables, figures, appendixes, notes, references. A\$59.95.

*Topics in Polynesian Language and Culture History* is the result of an extended investigation of the relation between languages and the human communities from which words draw their vitality. At its heart is the search for an even better understanding of processes of language change and their implications for the study of culture history. Specifically, *Topics* applies the comparative method of linguistics to explore the dynamics of questions of kinship and cosmology. To this end, Marck marshals data impressively, and if few of his strictly linguistic conclusions startle the nonspecialist—the substantial shared cosmogonic tradition across the linguistic descendants of Proto-Polynesian, the similarity of the ancestral system of Proto-Polynesian to modern East Polynesian and Tongan characterized by a greater degree of lexical specificity of kinship relations—the general approach is extremely suggestive. Indeed, Marck reminds the reader of the centrality of investigations of Pacific languages in form and substance to broader ethnological goals in historical and contemporary modalities. Comparative investigations of language, notably in the form of lexically specified kinship relations, with an eye toward questions of Islander identity and regional social institutions is, Marck argues, not a matter of some hoary collection of dated monographs but a vibrant and viable source of twenty-first-century scholarship. *Topics* thus evinces a

classic mode of scholarship, if until recently somewhat out of vogue, which novel and notably digital technology allows to be reconsidered with potential fruits to be harvested across Pacific Islands studies.

Not an introductory text to Polynesian linguistics, *Topics* nevertheless offers a detailed perspective on recent and long-discussed issues in the study of languages within the region, including issues of chronology and the genetic relations between the languages and, thus, between the speech communities from which those languages draw their life. For one familiar with a Polynesian language the data set is itself remarkable. One without a high degree of familiarity with any Polynesian language will acquire a number of characteristic features of Polynesian languages in general and some of the principle differences between them. Outside the extensive arguments, revisions, and supports provided within the purview of contemporary Pacific linguistic debates, Marck's biggest contribution in this work lies in the application of his fundamentally linguistic method to questions of more general interest. Marck's work is an exemplary application of comparative analytic tools to an ongoing database project, in this case Biggs' POLLEX, a compilation of Polynesian languages. An important methodological move is the joining of a consideration of both diffused and sporadic sound changes—those occurring in only one or two specified and unprincipled environments and importantly sometimes shared between some but not all daughters of a mother language—to regular sound change. Significantly, this extension is a key point of support for a revised standard

model of Polynesian language affinities. Because of the digital character of the POLLEX, its entries offered Marck the chance to apply data-mining tools, allowing lexical items or phonetic patterns to be compared across languages and dialects with a greater degree of breadth than is usually available to the pen-and-paper compiler. Ultimately, such tools offered a more refined analysis of the processes of language change that have occurred in the Pacific and thus of the genetic relations of the languages. Equally important, the reanalysis additionally offered the chance to reconsider issues of cosmology and kinship through the lens of Polynesian lexicons. In *Topics*, the grandfather of linguistic tools—the comparative method—has been shown to be made not less salient by the passing of time but more by the application of novel technologies.

Finally, given *Topics*' synthetic character, there was little consideration of the influences of culture and society on the (ir)regularity of sound change. Such linguistic facts as speech registers and levels, deference patterns, and historical accident (eg, a high status orator with an idiosyncratic pronunciation), among others, really beg a more robust lexical consideration given the ambitious attempt to address issues of kinship, much less cosmology through language-tinted lenses. Marck makes first steps in such a direction when he notes the importance of a certain level of continuing social contacts around Western Polynesia and a consequent recognition of cosmopolitan vocabulary and a bias toward its retention. But such factors really need to be considered in the same level of detail as he has devoted

to the phonetics and phonologies involved if the overall synthetic project initiated from the plateau of the linguistic is to be anything but a dalliance in culture and its regional histories. Precisely here, Marck pays little attention to analyses after the heyday of Bishop Museum-sponsored ethnologies tackling issues of kinship and cosmology through the filter of reconstructive lexical approaches. A glance at research during this “intermediary” period may serve to illustrate where Marck’s work might better be joined to general anthropological inquiries broadly practiced between 1950 and the present. “In major territorial descent groups,” Sahllins once noted, “there is no particular relation between descent ideology and group composition” (*Man*, July–Aug 1965). Hawaiian and New Zealand Māori cosmology and kinship terminology may be as similar as regular sound change allows, but their *cultural expression*, their meaningfulness as lived human practices and experiences, may nevertheless differ by magnitudes—a situation not well considered in Marck’s comparative analysis. Or, considering kinship terminology, the structure of descent and kinship groups, reasonably inferable from linguistic data, does not really address the manner and modes of their combinations in sociopolitical entities, in effect how social groups engage in social practices. Alternately, earlier typologies that sorted Polynesian kinship and descent into *truncated descent lines* and *ramages* might be considered. Such classifications operated at a different level of abstraction from that seemingly available in the (purely) lexical analysis but might,

again, be understood to have a significant bearing on the analysis of the meaningfulness of the linguistic data. The point is clearly that the broadly synthetic endeavor, here linguistic in nature but anthropological in scope, must account for the slippage between what is said (what is recorded or recordable as being “sayable”) and what was or is done by lived and living persons in the islands. To ignore this slippage is to sail dangerously close to a lexical determinism for cultural practices. Manulani Aluli Meyer’s investigation of a Hawaiian view of expanding empiricism in a recent issue of *The Contemporary Pacific* well demonstrates what such a synthesis might achieve beyond a compilation of lexical correspondences (13:124–148).

In summation’s brevity, while the major conclusion of the universal descent of kinship and cosmology from a proto-Polynesian source is confirmed by Marck, the salience of this observation for the particularities of island (group) cultures is not advanced as far as it could be and certainly not as far as Marck himself suggests would be valuable. Because what is exhilarating about Marck’s work is precisely the solidity of its linguistic detail in conjunction with its aspirations to be not merely about language and culture but culture through language, such further work is needed. Still, for the nonspecialist, this synthetic quality is a key and successfully raised feature of Marck’s achievement.

ALEXANDER DALE MAWYER  
*University of Chicago*

\* \* \*