for a more rigorous examination of
variables of social and political context
such as Jayawardena’s study offers.

Kelly’s treatment of the contribution
of the religious dispute to the collapse
of Indian political unity is likewise
limited by insufficient examination of
social contexts. At the time of the dis­
pute tension was building between Fij­
born people who had achieved rela­
tively high economic and social status,
many of them Arya Samajists, and the
new settlers from Gujarati, all ortho­
dox Hindus, who were displacing the
more established Indians in the retail
trade and other commercial enter­
prises. The tension soon erupted into
political competition and deepened
when the sugarcane farmers were
unionized for struggle with the Aus­
tralian milling company (Arya Samaj
leaders supported one union and
Gujarati Sanatanists encouraged
another, and political leaders used the
unions in their competition for the
farmers’ votes). A further factor under­
mining unity was a split between mili­
tant leaders of the farmers, and city­
based leaders who came under greater
pressure to compromise anticolonial
demands in return for the favor of
Europeans and Fijian leaders.

The social, economic, and political
contexts of Indian “discourses” in Fiji
have been more complex than Kelly’s
analysis allows. A closer study of the
Fiji literature would doubtless have
produced a better grounded and more
nuanced account, and one more critical
in its use of the discourse perspective.
Yet, I believe that the weaknesses of the
study arise more from the limitations
and constraints of the rather doctri­
naire school of analysis in which it was
produced. As a spirited exposition of
this genre, Kelly’s study has considera­
ble intellectual appeal. To readers seek­
ing a knowledge of the Indians of Fiji I
would recommend the book but advise
cautions.

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Entangled Objects: Exchange, Mate­
rial Culture, and Colonialism in the
Pacific, by Nicholas Thomas. Cam­
bridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
+ 259 pp, maps, illustrations, notes,
index. Cloth, US$32.50; paper,
US$14.95.

In the past decade anthropological
writing about the Pacific has been a key
site of attention to indigenous histo­
ries, to colonial encounters, and to the
reevaluations of meaning and practice
that Nicholas Thomas so elegantly
terms “entanglements.” Focusing on
material culture, this book presents a
distinctive and rewarding contribution
to ongoing debates. Arguing against
scholarly dichotomies (at many levels:
heavily descriptive studies versus gen­
eral theoretical statements, typologies
of gift societies versus commodity
societies, and causal explanations
privileging local culture versus global
world-system dynamics), Entangled
Objects considers the Pacific region as
a whole (juxtaposing diverse historical
and cultural accounts from across the
Pacific) and seeks to develop what the
author calls “intermediate level
theory.”

In his concept of entanglement
Thomas is most concerned to demonstrate the mutable, historically situated uses of material objects in the conjunctures of various Pacific peoples and European colonizers. Early chapters begin with Marcel Mauss's classic distinction between gifts and commodities and the associated “us” “them” distinction of gift societies and commodity societies. Chapter 1 reviews recent literature on exchange systems (Gregory, Weiner, Miller, Appadurai, Munn, M. Strathern) especially concerned to differ with projects that seek as their main goal to establish typologies of forms of exchange or vehicles of exchange. Rejecting the distinction between gift and commodity societies, Thomas argues that both gifts and commodities are found in all societies. More importantly still, the same objects may be or become either gifts or commodities or both, in ongoing social and historical practice, notably in the “conflicted transcultural history of colonialism” (26). Chapter 2 describes a range of types of Pacific exchange systems, focusing on concepts of alienability, debt, and valuables and emphasizing differences across the Pacific (for example: in Fiji, exchange dominated by “value conversion” entailing the widespread substitution, frequently asymmetric, of different kinds of entities, such as whale teeth and people; in the Marquesas, a more reciprocal pattern of exchange involving like goods, mainly food; and, in some parts of New Guinea, “brideservice” reciprocation of labor and nurture for the same).

The next two chapters focus on the role of objects and exchange in colonial encounters and address the issue of the impact of world system versus local culture in the making of Pacific histories. Chapter 3, titled “The Indigenous Appropriation of European Things” juxtaposes a variety of histories of “entanglements”—of pigs, muskets, whale teeth. Here Thomas insists on the importance of local cultural, political, and exchange systems for an understanding of the agency of Pacific peoples. The types of exchange systems delineated in chapter 2 are seen as important (though never monocausal) indigenous factors influencing the different colonial historical experiences (for example: in Fiji the “value conversion system” contributing to the preservation of chiefship; in the Marquesas the indigenous system of exchange implicated in the “dispersed character” (122) of anticolonial resistance and the dissolution of Marquesan chiefship; in New Guinea certain “brideservice” oriented societies tending to reject wage labor and cash farming). The succeeding chapter describes “European Appropriation of Indigenous Things.” Here Thomas identifies a range of colonizing European (explorer, missionary planter, official) entanglements with objects, from an early, disingenuous curiosity of “explorers” to the “scientific” collecting of nineteenth-century colonial states, where domination and knowledge were inextricably combined.

A postcolonial example of the ongoing entanglement of objects is considered in chapter 5 where Thomas describes the role of cattle and kerosene in marriage exchanges in Fiji and shows how the categories of gift and commodity have come to be used by Fijians (and other Pacific peoples) as
markers in the objectification of tradition and the politics of identity.

Rich in examples and intriguing juxtapositions, the book commences with challenges to an (ostensible) standard anthropology. Some of the challenges are less radical than they might initially seem. There is a tension in the book between the author’s emphasis on the particular, multiple, unpredictable nature of entanglements in Pacific history, and his interest in “intermediate level theory,” a concern to delineate comparative regional types and (at least partial) causal explanations. While rejecting a fixed contrast between gift and commodity societies, Thomas plays with more particular Pacific regional typologies, suggesting them, sometimes even relying on them, but not committing himself to them. As he puts it, “I could notionally have mapped a variety of societies onto a continuum with the Umeda, perhaps, at one end, and Fiji or New Georgia at the other. But my interest in all this is not classificatory; it emerges from the use of these distinctions in a more historical and processual analysis” (81). Similarly, while in chapter 1 he warns of the dangers of essentialism in characterizing societies in terms of cultural logics, in the ensuing narrative cultural specificities become crucial to understanding the agency of Pacific people in the real, complex colonial entanglements of which Thomas writes. These comments notwithstanding, the strength of the work is in its ability to illuminate these complex, entangled histories.

An engaging and creative contribution to the study of material culture and exchange systems, Entangled Objects is also essential reading for anyone interested in comparative studies, colonial encounters, typology, and Pacific history.  

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The Holt, Rinehart & Winston monographs are familiar to anyone who has taken—or taught—an introductory anthropology course in the United States in the past twenty-five years. Edited by George and Louise Spindler of Stanford University, the series has long offered an extensive selection of short, readable, and inexpensive ethnographies suitable for undergraduates. In the effort to describe societies holistically, earlier monographs tended to present social life in neat, standardized compartments—subsistence, politics, social organization, worldview, and the like. The tendency was also to present societies as timeless isolates, disconnected from the “modern world.” The series has matured along with the discipline, however; while still affordable, recent additions are refreshingly problem oriented, less predictable in their format, and very much concerned with each society’s status in the modern global context. Tim O’Meara’s Samoan Planters is one of the best of these.

Well written and enlivened with