This book is a most readable and stimulating contribution to the academic literature on Fiji.

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**This is an ambitious and rewarding work, described by the author as “an experiment in a new kind of ethnographic interpretation regarding those critical and perennial problems centered on the norm of reciprocity, the incest taboo, and women’s roles in reproduction” (ix). By taking into account “the meaning of women’s labor in cloth production and of women’s political control over significant reproductive areas of cultural life” (ix), the theoretical thrust of the book is the development of a theory of exchange which shows that gifting is much more complicated than anthropology’s concentration until now on the “return of the gift.” Successful attempts to keep particularly precious objects out of circulation both create and confirm relations of social hierarchy. In following the paradox of “keeping-while-giving” into the realm of social and political relations between men and women, Weiner illuminates the significance of cross-sibling bonds in many Oceanic societies. The taboo on physical relations between siblings has often masked their symbolic incest mediated by ritual, gifts, and natal family possessions, which ensure the fertility of each sibling through the services of the other and, thus, the creation of future generations of people, descent lines, and kinship groups.**

The four substantial chapters focus the theoretical discussion on the Maori Hau, and on cloth production and social reproduction in other Polynesian societies. The hierarchical social formations are contrasted with more egalitarian communities in a section entitled “The Defeat of Hierarchy: Cosmological Authentication in Australia and New Guinea Bones and Stones.” Individuals from these societies are not allowed to accumulate wealth objects or construct, thereby, relations of hierarchy or preeminence for themselves. Finally, the author readdresses the kula institutions of the Melanesian Massim to show how ardently exchange partners desire to hold on to a particular kula valuable as long as possible, for even twenty or thirty years, a whole generation, “as if it were inalienable” (133), even though the shell must eventually reenter kula exchange.

Weiner’s canvas is admirably wide and covers a number of places within the culture areas of Australia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Her field observations are patchy, being drawn from the Trobriands at various times from 1971 to 1991, and include four months in Western Samoa. Her own data, augmented by a great deal of secondary material, are played against the west-
ern theoretical formulations of Mauss, Malinowski, and others. Her conclusions suggest that keeping-while-giving has been an important part of western economies since the time of ancient Greece. The widening of Weiner’s intellectual horizons, beyond the scope of her papers on the manufacture and control of cloth in the Pacific published over the last ten years, reflect the influence of many colleagues on her present work, most notably that of T. O. Beidelman, Fred Myers, and William Mitchell. Fabrics manufactured by women are seen not only as trade items but as political and even sacred repositories of wealth and are viewed comparatively within western and non-western intellectual traditions.

The book is a source of stimulating discussion and rich insight, particularly to those interested in hierarchy, gender, and polity formation. It is hardly possible in a necessarily brief review to do justice to the many facets of this study, or not to quibble with several of its more persistent generalizations. One concerns the use of the term *inalienable*, blazoned in the title and used consistently to describe objects that clearly are not inalienable, but are meant to be passed from group to group. If these objects were inalienable there would be no game, as Weiner admits in several places: “Hoarding one’s shells [or fine mats] in order to guard them from circulation so that they are truly inalienable defeats the very processes that constitute authority and renown” (146). It is somewhat perverse to keep using the term.

The set of objects that most concern her are not inalienable but unique, often named, valuables that gain lustre by their provenance, history, and the number and significance of the social events in which they have played a part, such as large ceremonial exchanges, marriage alliances between high-ranking people, or retribution and appeasement for killings. If people keep such possessions within a kin group, they may demonstrate their power; but, competition of the group with other groups is the only avenue for establishing the ranking of one above the others. Nor is exchange the only avenue of competition, as is sometimes implied. War and conquest also alter power relations, which are then publicly affirmed by an exchange of valuables or by the victors’ seizure of distinctive sets of valuables associated with the losing side.

Similarly, Weiner’s concern to establish the importance of women’s production and control of valuables in her argument threatens at times to become overly materialist. Statements such as “Possessions like these are what strong political hierarchy is made of” (130) are plainly too bald. They overlook the salience of sets of beliefs and social relationships that buttress and express hierarchy, without which the objects themselves would not have the efficacy or importance she wishes to impute to them. More measured is her claim that “In Oceania, the development of ranking and hierarchy depends upon the work of women in their economic roles as the producers of wealth and, most important, in the power of their sacredness in confirming historical and cosmological authentication” (153, italics mine).

Weiner’s analysis may be extended from the exploration of many different
productive and reproductive contexts within one society to the relations between polities, while still giving as much attention to the exchange roles of men and women as siblings as kinship theory has given to their roles as spouses. Within Weiner’s general propositions, particular differences between closely related societies may be pursued most profitably. Comparisons between Samoa and Tonga, for example, the latter Polynesian society rarely mentioned by Weiner, may be instructive. The orator chiefs in Samoa were able to acquire power through gifts and payments of fine mats for their services to their sacred chiefs, the ali‘i, whereas, in Tonga, their counterparts acquired no comparable political functions through mats or other material means.

Mats in Tonga appear to be less a form of currency than objects of high symbolic value. Many of them were taken from Samoa, which produced more valued and finer mats than ever were produced in Tonga. Weiner quotes kula players as saying that “many men died because of kula shells” (136). When Princess Salamasina was invited to Tonga in the late 1950s by Queen Salote to view an exhibition of fine mats briefly on show from the Tongan palace collection, she wept when she recognized a mat that had been missing from her Malietoa line for many generations. The named fine mat (‘ie malo) was a mat of state and, like many others, had been carried to Tonga as a prize of war or to accompany the marriage of a high-ranking Samoan virgin. Salamasina said to the queen, “men of my family have died for that mat, and it has been here all the time.” Such was the price for having been thought to have kept a valuable mat away from subsequent Samoan exchanges. Far from being regarded as inalienable possessions, the cost of keeping an object that is meant to be given can be life itself. Weiner has raised many interesting issues by her documentation and discussion of the ways in which people try strategically to keep-while-giving, weighing the risks of exposure and being deprived of the object against the rewards of being recognized as powerful enough to possess it—for a time.

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This is a peculiar collection of essays that begins with a rather silly postmodernist introduction, follows with a group of case studies adhering largely to some variant of a political economy perspective, and ends with a conclusion that seeks to bridge the gap between the introduction and the rest of the volume.

The introductory essay by editor Robillard is an amazing example of postmodern nonsense. As with his chapter on aloha shirts (to be discussed later), it is difficult to tell whether the chapter is meant as satire or to be taken seriously. Arguing that there is no constant or generalizable pattern to social