Perhaps the best way to summarize the differences between the two books, and to emphasize their respective qualities, is to say that May’s book is what you recommend to an earnest undergraduate, or to an academic who is coming to the subject of the military in Papua New Guinea for the first time. Liria’s book, on the other hand, is what you recommend to the discerning postgraduate student who is already familiar with May’s book, or to the academic who is an old hand at Papua New Guinea affairs. The incredibly large amount of startling and fresh evidence in Liria’s book, on virtually every aspect of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and its counterinsurgency activities, particularly the negative aspects concerning incompetence, indiscipline, lack of professionalism, crippling rivalries and absence of an esprit de corps, lack of commitment to soldiering, and so on, have to be noticed and carefully garnered because they are usually offered in passing. Not only does Liria write as an insider, with a direct knowledge and understanding of what he is writing about, but as a Papua New Guinea national he is far less inhibited in his criticisms and exposure of national failings. He can afford to be far more forthright in his assessments than can foreigners who want to be able to continue to work in Papua New Guinea or want to be able to come and go.

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In Voices of Conflict, Andrew Strathern takes a broad view of conflict among the Melpa of the Mount Hagen area of Highlands Papua New Guinea, drawing primarily on material collected on several visits to the area between 1981 and 1986. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 present detailed accounts, complete with transcripts of mediation sessions, of three disputes between kin and neighbors. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore regional patterns of conflict such as rivalry between Christian sects, resurgence of tribal warfare, and violence associated with elections. Throughout, Strathern has two concerns. First, he contributes to an understanding of conflict resolution in small societies by exploring the logic of dispute settlement among the Melpa, including the goals and characteristics of talk at various phases of the proceedings, and the factors influencing decisions. Second, Strathern examines the impact of recent economic and political changes, particularly those affecting the Highlanders following Papua New Guinean independence in 1975.

Through the detailed examination of cases in the early chapters, Strathern contributes to a larger literature on conflict resolution in the Pacific and in small communities elsewhere. Overall, he argues that the most important factor influencing the way Hageners deal
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with disputes is participants’ assessment of the potential impact of the dispute on intergroup relations. He argues persuasively that people are most concerned with resolving disputes when they might lead to violent confrontation between clans or sub-clans. Decisions made about particular cases also reflect this concern with regional relations. Thus, in a dispute between two women over a pig, mediators were less interested in the details of the two women’s claims than with the fact that one of the women’s clans needed the pig for a presentation to forestall confrontation with another clan. In an interesting discussion, Strathern considers the impact of this concern with the wider social field on the status of women. Contrary to the usual stereotypes of Highland women, the women involved in this dispute clearly saw themselves as active participants in exchange relationships pursuing agendas independent of male kin; but, ultimately, the women’s fate was decided by male mediators who were primarily concerned with a regional network of relationships also determined by males.

Considerations about the potential of conflict to lead to intergroup violence also shape rhetorical strategies in moots. Many scholars have noted that Pacific Islanders often use indirect or metaphorical ways of speaking. Strathern finds that Hageners prefer metaphorical speech only when evidence is ambiguous and the dispute could lead to violent conflict between groups. When there is considerable consensus about the dispute, or when the relationship between disputants is strong and fighting unlikely, then people prefer blunt, straightforward speech.

Strathern also contributes to a considerable literature suggesting that mediators in many small communities are less concerned with finding the literal “facts” of cases than with constructing “more ideal” versions of problematic events that are “socially true” in the sense of reinforcing patterns of authority, upholding communal norms, and restoring good relations. Strathern again qualifies this generalization by suggesting that Hagen mediators aim for “social truth” only when they think that conflict might lead to intergroup fighting. When disputants are from the same group or have a strong relationship, mediation sessions generally involve detailed consideration of evidence aimed at uncovering the “literal truth” about what happened.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the monograph is to an understanding of the impact of recent economic, political, and social changes on rural New Guineans. Here Strathern takes a pessimistic view, arguing persuasively that recent changes have strained the capacity of Hagen society and have led to increasingly destructive outbreaks of warfare. Strathern suggests that while pacification under the Australians led to a shift from warfare to moka exchanges as expressions of intergroup rivalry, more recent changes have caused a shift back to warfare. There are several destabilizing factors. First, the profitable Highlands coffee industry has produced real inequalities in wealth that lead to new tensions between successful entrepreneurs and a younger generation of well-educated have-nots. Young men now form ras-
The Massim, a collection of remote island communities off the southeastern tip of Papua New Guinea, has long been recognized by anthropologists as a cultural region where the status of women is high. Aware of this reputation, Maria Lepowsky was drawn to the Massim island of Sudest—known locally as Vanatinai, literally “motherland”—on the outer reaches of the Louisiade Archipelago, to study gender relations across the life cycle of both men and women. Conceiving her project as a “holistic, old fashioned ethnographic study” (x), Lepowsky was primarily interested in the material and ideological foundations underpinning egalitarian gender relations and social organization.

In short, Voices of Conflict provides rich case material, which Strathern uses to reach useful conclusions about the logic of disputing among the Melpa and, by implication, in other Pacific societies. The most valuable contribution of the book lies in enhancing understanding of the recent outbreaks of violence in Highlands Papua New Guinea and in other areas of the country, and of the impact of recent changes on rural New Guineans.

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The Massim, a collection of remote island communities to redress economic inequalities through theft and vandalism. New wealth has also brought greater access to illegal guns, in turn causing increasing intergroup violence: clans that might before have sought nonviolent resolution to disputes now feel superior gun power will help them accomplish their goals through warfare. Furthermore, possession of guns—some of them from homemade pipes and hardwood—has widened the scale of warfare; groups with fewer guns extend their network of alliances to protect themselves from the superior gun power of their enemies. A second destabilizing factor is the presence of new government and church institutions that have weakened the authority of indigenous political and ritual structures. In one case, for instance, a man successfully resisted community pressure to pay compensation in a dispute by threatening to take the case to a higher level court that everyone suspected would not uphold the local consensus. Similarly, people avoid exchange obligations by becoming members of Christian churches that oppose such exchanges. A final factor contributing to the escalation of intergroup conflict is the national political system. Hageners have embraced electoral politics with a vengeance, turning elections into yet another contest between clans. But electoral districts involve more people than did traditional forums for intergroup competition and so create new contexts with the potential to erupt into large-scale violence.

In short, Voices of Conflict provides rich case material, which Strathern uses to reach useful conclusions about the logic of disputing among the Melpa and, by implication, in other Pacific societies. The most valuable contribution of the book lies in enhancing understanding of the recent outbreaks of violence in Highlands Papua New Guinea and in other areas of the country, and of the impact of recent changes on rural New Guineans.