

deficient conventions of Guam's canonical historiography prevent it from providing much more illumination than any of the battery of its elder texts. Perhaps Rogers' natural impulse to write within the parameters of the long-entrenched canon is understandable. One can only hope that future histories of Guam will not be able to circumvent consideration of the innumerable historical representations and interpretations that the Chamorro people have performed in their history.

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*Die Große Insel: Südpazifische Lebensgeschichten. Autobiographische Berichte aus dem südöstlichen Salomon-Archipel seit 1914* [The big island: South Pacific life histories. Autobiographical reports from the southeastern Solomon archipelago since 1914], by Doris Byer. Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1996. ISBN 3-205-98441-2, 522 pages, plates, notes, maps, bibliography. DM 98.

Doris Byer, an Austrian ethnologist teaching at the universities of Vienna and Graz, has produced a remarkable ethnographic history of Owa Raha (literally "Big Island")—also known as Santa Ana, located in the southeastern corner of the Solomon Islands. Although the book purports to reveal the coping strategies of an island community dealing with mostly European influences (such as missionaries, colonial officials, and traders), it turns out to be much more than the dust-cover

may reveal. Indeed, Byer's account reveals much about the resilience of the Owa Rahans (numbering roughly two thousand in 1991), who weathered through their tight-knit matrilineal descent system many of the changes affecting their island—an argument that sits well with a number of recent scholarly monographs that focus on the interplay of anthropology and history in the Pacific Islands. Byer, however, seeks to establish her reputation by proposing an unconventional method—biographies—to collect, conceptualize, and ultimately write about the past in the Pacific Islands. Additionally, her work provides a unique angle on the self-reflexive vogue of recent anthropological studies. What could be considered, on one hand, a restudy of the ethnologist Hugo Bernatzik's fieldwork experience on the island in the 1930s, intrigues by the very fact that Bernatzik was her father. Her inquiries into the Owa Rahan histories also result in an inquiry into her own past.

Byer's self-ascribed methodological intervention attempts to tackle the perceived shortcomings of prior Anglo-American analyses of oral histories (and presumably oral traditions). Historians trained in the Davidsonian mode of history at the Australian National University department, while bringing to the forefront the indigenous experience in the Euro-American encounter, still remain deeply rooted in western historiography. Echoing recent and not-so-recent criticism, Byer argues that this school turned highly recruited Pacific Island students into western-educated *homo academici*.

Equally problematic, in her view,

are recent discourse-analytic approaches emerging out of anthropology departments around the United States. In this case researchers do indeed attribute more significance to individual informants' statements, yet they are, more often than not, divorced from the context in which they were uttered. These utterances are therefore ultimately subjected to alien models and meanings. Attempting to transcend the problematic duality between ethnographer and informant, Byer focuses on life-(hi)stories told by selected inhabitants. She eschews the term *interviews* (whether structured or unstructured), preferring instead less hierarchical dialogues or conversations (*Gespräche*). She aims at "a writing of history defined neither by their or our horizon—a [writing process] which means 'us' as well as 'them.' And the [end product] should be read by 'both of us'" (32).

This task, however, is easier said than done. Byer's initial queries, asking her interlocutors to talk about "their life" (72), often lead to confusion and periods of drawn-out silences. She overcomes these periods of silence by presenting her conversation partners with a set of pictures taken by her father in 1932–33. A further methodological predicament emerges through Byer's limited knowledge of the Owa Rahan vernacular (Kahua). Consequently, she has to depend on interpreters, well versed in Pidgin and English, to facilitate the conversation. Byer readily admits her shortcoming, revealing rather than concealing the involvement of the interpreter in the highly charged dialogues.

Byer supplements her life-(hi)sto-

ries with archival material from the Solomon Islands, London, and Hawai'i. The archival material has limitations that she willingly acknowledges: "written documents illustrate [merely] the problems of the white men" (101). Although her book is roughly chronological, much of Byer's work is devoted to the (apparently) unabridged life-(hi)stories. She seeks to involve leading male and female characters from the island, not only to offset the obvious gender bias in earlier ethnohistorical work, but also to illustrate the changing roles of women in the community. Byer challenges the notion that "modernization" has liberated women from the shackles of tradition. Educational and occupational changes have undermined the leading role women played in these domains. But the transformations brought by Christianity, colonialism, and commerce, have strengthened rather than undermined the matrilineal descent ties on Owa Raha. This is best illustrated by the arrival of a German trader, Heinrich Küper (also known as Henry Kuper) on the island. Kuper's ties to the Owa Rahan community were solidified by his marriage to a local woman (Kanana). In the literature about the island, including the writing of Bernatzik, Kuper appears as the virtual tyrant of the island. He figures prominently in the life-(hi)stories of Byer's interlocutors, who recall him as a powerful person. Powerful as he was, however, the conversations reveal that his authority was vested in the lineage of his wife, Kanana. The British colonial administration allowed people of European descent to acquire a more prestigious "European Status"—a

status to which Kuper and his sons readily ascribed. Kanana, on the other hand, never relinquished her “native status,” which insured her continuous access to customary land.

Byer aims to transcend the hegemony that Kuper and his sons have established over the historical and anthropological resources on Owa Raha. Bernatzik, for instance, had to stay with Kuper and his family on the island in the 1930s. Kuper and Kanana became his main informants. Whenever Bernatzik attempted to bypass Kuper’s authority, massive tensions between the two would arise. These tensions would induce Kuper to denounce Bernatzik’s carnal relations with two minors on Owa Raha. Although Bernatzik was never convicted of the charge, the accusation itself, recorded in the colonial archives, once again reminded Byer of her personal connections to the island’s past. Henry Kuper’s last surviving son, Albert Wote Kuper, seeks to replicate the Kuper-Bernatzik relationship with Doris Byer. Byer even offered him the possibility of becoming the second author of the book. But once Kuper realizes that his version of the past does not sit very well with that of other people interviewed by the Austrian ethnologist, the relationship between the two deteriorates to the point where he demands cash from Byer.

Perhaps this book may not be as innovative as Byer would like, especially since two prominent researchers working along similar lines, Richard Price and Klaus Neumann, are conspicuously absent from her bibliography. But there is much to be found in

this work that does add to the field of Pacific studies. Her attempt to bridge the silence dividing three generations of Owa Rahans who shared their experiences with Byer would warrant an English translation, if only to make her book at least partly accessible to those to whom it is dedicated—the future generation on Owa Raha.

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*Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma*, by Vilsoni Hereniko. Pacific Islands Monograph Series 12. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press and Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1995. ISBN: 0-8248-1655-2, xiii + 197 pages, figures, photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$32; paper, F\$15.

The focus of this innovative ethnography is the female clown who presides at weddings on Rotuma, the tiny northernmost island in Fiji. Selected by the bride’s family, the clown is the supreme ruler of the wedding celebrations. Entertaining the celebrants with her antics, she also is empowered to command the guests to obey her embarrassing commands. Hereniko is concerned not only with the wedding clown’s performance but in her waning power in response to western influences. He succeeds in demonstrating that her cultural origins, while no longer remembered by the Islanders, are probably sacred and related to the culturally prestigious fine mats made by women and exchanged at weddings.