The subject of nationalism is more pertinent than ever in the era of postcolonial, post–cold war politics, and a volume on nation making in Melanesia seems almost ideally suited to exploring some of the cultural forces that have made it so. First of all, Melanesia is home to the greatest density of languages and cultures anywhere in the world, thus posing an extreme case of the challenges faced by nation states concerned to forge a sense of common identity among diverse ethnic and cultural constituencies. Second, the independent states of Melanesia are all newly formed—emerging in the 1970s and 1980s—offering an opportunity to study nation making in the formative moments of statehood.

As once-marginal colonial outposts recently ushered into the club of modern nation states, Melanesian countries today present a distinctive mix of institutions created to govern small, isolated communities and contemporary forces of economic globalization that connect those communities with wider and wider horizons of influence. The editor and contributors have done a remarkable job of capturing much of this complexity while presenting a set of carefully analyzed case studies of national identity formation.

Of course, any volume attempting to deal with a geopolitical area as complex as Melanesia must make choices, and the choice here was to deal only with the independent states of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. New Caledonia and Irian Jaya are absent, thus omitting two cases of nationalist struggle in the context of ongoing colonization by non-Melanesian powers (France and Indonesia, respectively). Even brief treatment of these cases would have added useful comparison points for the volume’s interest in tensions between nation making and state building.

The book’s narrower scope, however, makes for a level of integration not often found in edited collections. These qualities reflect the origins of the volume in a 1991 symposium of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania—a context well suited to developing case studies with a comparative agenda. Excellent introductory and concluding essays by Robert Foster, John Kelly, and Edward LiPuma give this work relevance for readers whose interests lie outside Melanesia. As Kelly observes, in most instances ethnography is the "graveyard for theory." Here, happily, this proves not to be the case.

Work in Oceania highlights the methodological problems confronting anthropological studies of national identities. How can methods derived from community-based ethnography be adapted to the study of national cultures? On the one hand, conventional ethnographic approaches are attuned to the constructed nature of collective identities and the significance of communicative practices in creating them. On the other hand, the research style of village studies is not easily adapted to working on the
national and transnational flows of culture and capital that are the context for much of today’s identity making. Pacific anthropologists accustomed to working in highly territorialized domains of interest have only slowly, and with difficulty, turned their sights to the broader arenas of national identity making that now crosscut those domains. LiPuma and others in this volume reflect on ways that concepts of public sphere and civil society might be incorporated into the vocabulary of ethnography to address some of these problems.

The contributors to this volume consider national identities at several levels of abstraction. The grouping of chapters in the table of contents differentiates those that take a wide-angle approach to national media, policies, and institutions from those that are more concerned with local “appropriations,” mostly seen in terms of the experience of specific linguistic or cultural groups. In the first set, Henry Rutz and Martha Kaplan analyze the production of national narratives in postcoup Fiji; Christine Jourdan discusses the primary institutions of school and media fostering national consciousness in Solomon Islands; and Robert Foster looks at print advertisements in Papua New Guinea’s urban media. In the second set, Eric Hirsch and Ellen Facey examine transformations of “the nation” within the localized communities of the Fuyuge of Papua New Guinea and Nguna, Vanuatu, respectively, while Michael Jacobsen discusses the general predicament of Papua New Guinea nationalism in light of its fissiparous diversity. Writing from the vantage point of Copenhagen, Jacobsen compares the fitful moves toward regional European identity with the possibilities for postnational identity in Papua New Guinea, even speculating about the emergence of a Melanesian “confederacy” (246).

LiPuma notes that the “Melanesian Way” is often invoked in projects concerned to imagine or invent an indigenous nationalism, even one that might presage supranational formations. But neither he nor others in the volume pay much attention to regional discourses of Melanesian identity, or to the impact that such intellectualized constructions as the “Melanesian Way” have in actual contexts of national identity making. With a few exceptions, such as Foster’s analysis of urban advertisements, there is a gap between programmatic statements about the need to attend to narrative constructions that circulate in national media, regional institutions, and so forth, and the kind of detailed, empirical work that has been characteristic of community-based ethnography in the Pacific.

At the same time, the volume’s eclecticism can also be an asset. The contributors offer a number of answers to the question, What might an anthropological (cultural) study of national identity making look like? There is general agreement that nation making entails constructions of collective “peoplehood,” along with associated forms of individual identity (2). And there is some agreement about what it takes to produce such constructions. Kelly answers the question most succinctly when he says, simply: “a narrative” (257). Beyond these points, however, each chapter offers...
different strategies for pursuing
nation-making discourse. Kaplan, for
example, argues persuasively for the
role of rituals “that enshrine particular
narratives as the real or true ones” (116).
She then explores for Fiji the
manner in which particular narratives
become routinized or institutional-
ized, thus obtaining legitimacy and
authority. Foster finds narrative coher-
ence in print-mediated advertising,
pursuing tropes of commodification
and consumption through the land-
scape of popular media. His interest in
the role of advertising as a site of
national identity formation is reflected
in the concerns of several contributors
who attempt to trace connections
between state institutions, exchange
practices, and conceptions of the
person.

The substantial literature on the
invention of tradition in the Pacific has
noted repeatedly the relevance of
national economic policies for local,
cultural identities. Insofar as states reg-
ulate the flow of people and goods
across regional and national bound-
daries, they exert significant influences
over the contexts and purposes of
identity formation. Several authors
note that concepts of modern individu-
alism are tied up with the establish-
ment of market economies that give
new meanings to objects and land and
to the social relations they define.
Citing Hirsch’s chapter on the Fuyuge,
LiPuma characterizes the penetration
of global capital into local exchange
economies as a kind of war: “Should
local cultures surrender to the forces of
capitalism and take advantage of state-
fostered opportunities for economic
advancement, then they also must sur-
render their cultural image of what it is
to be a person” (59).

There is much in this volume for a
range of interests. It is destined to be a
standard reading in the literature on
Melanesia as a cultural and political
region. But it also merits a wider read-
ing among audiences concerned with
productions of national identities gen-
erally, particularly in small nonwestern
communities enmeshed in larger
nation-making projects. Michigan
Press would do well to make the vol-
ume available in paperback so that it
can reach the wide readership it
deserves.

GEORGE M. WHITE
East-West Center

Tradition versus Democracy in the
South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western
Samoa, by Stephanie Lawson. Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press,
1996. ISBN 0-521-49638-1, xii + 228
pages, tables, maps, notes, bibliogra-
phy, index. US$59.95, A$75.00.

This review is written at the end of
1996, a year in which democratic
assumptions and values came under
further scrutiny in the Pacific: there
were pressures on the press (and some
parliamentarians) in Tonga; the com-
mittee reviewing Fiji’s postcoup consti-
tution presented its findings; and, as is
now customary, Western Samoa’s par-
liamentary elections suggested differ-
ences between Samoan traditions and
western views about appropriate cam-
paign practices. At a time when island
leaders and peoples are reasserting the
vitality and relevance of their own cus-