
Significant and fascinating books have been published from the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture Series, including several that demonstrate how Melanesia has been a driving force for theorization in anthropology. Here is another. The significance of this publication relates to the interlocutors toward whom the authors direct their narrative, and their method of engagement with those interlocutors. Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington frame their exploration of RSL (Ramu Sugar Limited—a large sugar factory development in a rural part of Papua New Guinea) as a response to a popular contribution to the understanding of human history and culture, that is, to Jared Diamond’s Guns, Germs, and Steel (1997). Diamond’s thesis is that groups with geographical advantages developed certain technologies with which they were able to dominate others. Why they chose to do so is taken as self-evident. The lectures from which Yali’s Question is developed bore the subtitle “On Avoiding a History of the Self-Evident and the Self-Interested,” and that moral-sounding enterprise structures the book. Thus Diamond and those who are content with his explanation of the unequal distribution of wealth and power in today’s world are the first of the authors’ interlocutors. The second are Papua New Guineans who, like Yali in the book’s title, also seek an answer to the vexing question of why white people have so many powerful material goods. A third set of readers is clearly envisioned, and those are students of history, anthropology, and politics who are called on in the text to avoid subscribing to a history that is “intellectually and politically flawed” (6) because it ignores “the ways in which various people understand the desirable and the feasible” (7).

Gewertz and Errington go about their task through an engagingly rich and nuanced ethnographic focus on the ways in which the development of RSL in the Upper Ramu Valley has been and continues to be shaped by the expectations and desires of differently situated parties to the enterprise. To capture these different positions they devote verbatim space, and then analytic attention, to narratives told by those involved, which are discernable from archival and documentary material. The narratives of course trace the history of the factory, from the first visions of development under colonial survey and government intervention, through land alienation and factory construction, to contemporary pressures faced by its management, workers, and other dependents, from, among other things, global economic “liberalization.” One of the authors’ many achievements is in writing a history, anthropological in its cast, that shows how events appear and have consequences dependent on how goals are shaped, how mechanisms to achieve them are imagined to operate, and how many different aspirations and values may be present at any one moment of the history of an enterprise as large and complex as RSL. So the
book is not intended to synthesize a single, agreed narrative. The emphasis on narrative is explicitly deployed to show how these have given shape to the social, political, and physical landscape that radiates from RSL.

While problems and contradictions are apparent with many of these actors’ positions, the only characters here who are shown little sympathy are recent overseas consultants, the promoters of neoliberal economic rationalization. These people seemingly personify the “self-interested and self-evident” whom Gewertz and Errington wish not only to provide an alternative to, but also to expose as just that. Ignorant of the successes of RSL, of its history of development as an aspect of national self-reliance, of the dependence of large numbers of rural people on its income stream, of the hard work and good intentions of many involved, these consultants demand that Papua New Guinea should compete (economically) on more stringent and difficult terms than major superpowers—with the consequence that RSL would become economically unsustainable, and most likely would have to close. The recommendation of these consultants is that unemployed workers could migrate to towns, where they would have better opportunities anyway. One can see why Gewertz and Errington object. For them, this is a version of Diamond’s approach made real in practice; here, “economics” comes to structure “the inevitable and the inexorable,” which “are handily synonymous with the interests of the haves over the have-nots” (9).

There are consequences to the choice of explaining the difference between “haves and have-nots” as the framing argument of the book. While specific critique is addressed to Diamond and recent World Trade Organization interventions in Papua New Guinea, a more general theme pervading the text concerns the internally contradictory workings of capitalist and colonial relations of production. All parties are portrayed as caught up in a wider process over which they exercise limited control. Alongside this is a concern for “potential accountability” (14), based on the kind of history that the book represents. In this sense, there is always an overarching actor involved in the processes as described: the system of capitalism and the impetus to develop others in its image. That in turn places a discernable limit on the agency of some narratives of “the desirable and feasible” that the book outlines, such as those of Upper Ramu villagers.

Difficult historical, cultural, and moral issues form a major part of the detailed substance of the book. Gewertz and Errington interpret Yali’s question as being about colonial relationships (25). The logic of RSL management is clearly tied to a wider project of development of the nation in order to reduce this inequality, while the Papua New Guinean side is characterized as demanding a recognition of worth that lies in ties to kin and “ples” [a Melanesian Pidgin term for place that includes kinship elements], and to ancestral continuity, not to their involvement in RSL’s day-to-day functioning or profitability.

The book ends with the statement that its response to Yali’s question is “more proximate, more complex and more messy than Diamond’s” (258). I wonder if what Yali was interested in was not explanation at all, but action.
RSL represents one kind of action, and it is to the authors’ great credit that they present it as just that: action on behalf of (almost) all concerned to achieve the overlapping aim of developing the Upper Ramu. That this aim means so many different things to the actors is beautifully demonstrated. The sense one is left with—of complex contradictions not only between the position of RSL and its workers and dependents, but also within each party—demonstrates the positive complexity and value of the text. This is nowhere more detailed or skillfully presented than in the way the authors chart Papua New Guineans’ career trajectories at RSL. It becomes clear that the opposition between “kinship and ples” and the demands of a rationalized working life are not the only factors. Many others—including desire for distinctiveness, the attractions of power and hierarchy, timeless and essentialized notions of what PNG traditional behavior is, notions of reciprocity—contribute to difficulties workers face in balancing career and identity, and thus falling in fully with the project of RSL. Local landowners, out-growers (semi-independent cane farmers), and expatriate managers face similar contradictory desires and perceptions of the enterprise. The exemplary level of detail, which includes solid survey data and archival research, is vital for those who wish to understand this group of people’s various aims and expectations, and thus their responses, to “development.”

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This volume presents formerly secret and confidential dispatches, reports, and correspondence produced by British colonial officials in London and Suva as they prepared Fiji for its independence. Editor Brij V Lal’s task was to examine a vast range of documents, select a limited number for publication, and write an introductory review. The one hundred eighty-one items included cover the period from 1955 to 1970, when independence was granted. In his introduction, Lal reviews issues, actions, and trends in the period, against the backdrop of Fiji’s development as a colonial society. He describes the process of dialogue and debate between London and Fiji and within the London office itself, the meetings between London officials and the political leaders of Fiji, and the preparations for the two constitutional conferences in London in 1965 and 1970.

The officials faced the daunting challenge of dealing with conflicts and fears in Fiji arising from the profound ethnic divide that their predecessors had created. Lengthy dispatches to London by various governors reported on the political situation, the leading personalities and their aspirations and difficulties, and the contentious issues. The documents produced in London illuminate the political pres-