

Oceania: The Native Cultures of Australia and the Pacific Islands by Douglas Oliver. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. ISBN 0-8248-1019-8, 2 volumes, 1275 pp, illustrated. US\$90.

In 1951 Douglas Oliver published *The Pacific Islands*. In its revised edition (1961) this work has been the best-known and most widely read general introduction to Oceania. Now, several decades later, Oliver has given us a second encyclopedic tour of the Pacific Islands in the form of a massive two-volume work that is overwhelming in its scope and erudition. A comparison of the two works reveals some ironies. The earlier work devoted fewer than eighty pages to characterizing the "traditional" cultures of the region, focusing instead on the postcontact history of the Pacific Islands. Now, however, at a time when the notion of "traditional culture" has been repeatedly undercut by a new historical consciousness in anthropology, Oliver has resurrected an antique ethnographic genre. *Oceania* constitutes an inventory of "traditional" Oceanic cultures in the spirit of the old Bishop Museum monographs. Though Oliver's work may seem old-fashioned to more interpretively or theoretically inclined anthropologists, his mastery of this sort of descriptive ethnography is legendary among Oceanists.

Like those classic field reports, *Oceania* carves up this complex and far-flung region into readily digestible portions. Part 1 is called "Background" and outlines Pacific ecology, demographics, physical anthropology, languages, prehistory. Part 2, "Activities,"

is a five-hundred-page reconstruction of "salient and widespread" practices of the inhabitants of Oceania just before contact with the West. While some chapters, like those entitled "Domicile" or "Boats and Ocean Travel," are useful divisions, others, like "Definitions," "Religious Ideas," and "Tools," exemplify the sort of hodgepodge effect that this kind of ethnographic inventory can generate.

The entire second volume is devoted to a synoptic overview of Oceanic social organization in which the traditional culture areas (Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, Australia) provide the organizing framework. Rather than attempting a theoretically motivated regional comparison of social organization, as Goldman has done for Polynesia (*Ancient Polynesian Society* 1970), Oliver opts for a series of detailed ethnographic snapshots from some of the better-studied societies, supplemented by a briefer sampling of the variety of social forms from each culture area. The portrait of Australia in this book is heavily influenced by the Murngin, while the Siuai and Tahiti play similar roles in defining Melanesia and Polynesia respectively. Though the text is peppered with plenty of ethnographic examples from other societies, it seems Oliver decided that the typical-case approach would provide the reader with some refuge from the sheer volume and variety of social forms offered by Oceanic societies.

The impulse behind this work is akin to that which inspired the encyclopedists of eighteenth-century France to attempt to encapsulate all human knowledge in a single collection. One can only admire and defer to the energy

and scholarship that have gone into such a project. Yet the very ambition of Oliver's work raises several crucial problems for the reader.

It is not clear who is the intended audience for this work. It is certainly not a popular work, nor would most undergraduates find its length, scope, and detail appealing. Certainly it will become an invaluable general reference work for scholars, but I doubt that most specialists on Oceania will find it completely satisfying.

Though it bears a 1989 publication date, this book is already quite dated, since most of the scholarship on Oceania in the 1980s is oddly missing. This is lamentable, since Oceania, particularly Melanesia, has produced a rich corpus of ethnographic analysis over the past decade. My guess is that *Oceania* will become an important reference work for scholars, but only on those aspects of the region they are not very familiar with.

One danger of such a formidable and encyclopedic work is that students reading it may conclude that little work remains to be done in the reconstruction of precontact Oceanic culture and society. This, of course, is far from the case, and any novice approaching this work might well be assured just how much analytical work has yet to be done.

Though the Pacific has sometimes been characterized as the best existing natural laboratory for comparative ethnology, Oliver emphasizes the region's diversity, something that *Oceania* offers to an unusual degree. The closest we come to a framework for comparison is descriptive taxonomy. Instead of the classic distinc-

tions among forms of reciprocity, linked to levels of social integration, Oliver prefers the more purely descriptive distinctions among egalitarian, competitive, and coercive exchanges. Though these are useful labels, they do not, by themselves, take us far in understanding the sorts of social, ecological, and historical processes that underlie such distinctions.

Oliver's *Oceania* takes for granted the natural unity of the Western Pacific as an area for anthropological analysis. Yet in his brief conclusion to the work, Oliver defers to the area's great heterogeneity as its most compelling general characteristic. This may lead one to wonder at the utility of treating Australia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia as a single topic. One might as profitably lump together the Polynesians, the Swazi, and the Kwakiutl, or Melanesia and the tribal societies of lowland South America. My own feeling has long been that the tradition of treating Oceania as a single analytical unit has somewhat diverted us from the more interesting connections between Polynesians, Micronesians, and peoples of insular Southeast Asia. Despite my caveats, Oliver's achievement is undeniable. All scholars of Oceania have come to depend on his cautious ethnographic sensibility and his synthetic skill. In its capacity to encompass this vast and complex part of the world in two lucid volumes, *Oceania* is an astounding accomplishment. These two rich volumes are a worthy capstone to a distinguished career.

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