

Review of Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia: Culture and Tradition. Originally published at the Anthropology Review Database: <http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD/cgi/showme.cgi?keycode=3236>

Sillitoe, Paul

1998 An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia: Culture and Tradition.
Cambridge; New York: **Cambridge University Press.**

Notes: xxiii, 254 p.: ill., maps; 23 cm. ISBN: 0521581869

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Troy Belford <troy.belford@gmail.com>

Anthropology, Wichita State University, Wichita Kansas, USA



Medium: *Written Literature*

Subject: *Melanesians - Social life and customs*

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ABSTRACT: This is a well-written general text about the varied customs, practices, and features of Melanesian cultures.

A general text about the varied customs, practices and features of Melanesian cultures is a simple proposal and a difficult task to perform. To this end Paul Sillitoe has written one of the more readable books dealing with the general study of Melanesia.

This book will be known territory to specialists of the area. The main audiences for this book, and the group who will profit from it the most, are students and the general public. The prose is well written without too much recourse to academic overstatement, though Sillitoe does refer to penis gourds as *phallocrypts* at times. With the necessary technical language Sillitoe manages to bridge intelligent discussion of ethnographic subjects and acceptable prose.

The introduction is followed by fourteen chapters that deal with classic ethnographic subjects. Each chapter uses a particular group as the model for an aspect of anthropological inquiry: Swidden cultivation in the Bismarck Range (pp. 35-52), Exchange cycles in the Massim Archipelago (pp. 69-83), Big men on Bougainville Island (pp. 99-111), Dispute settlement around the Paniai Lakes (pp. 148-164), etc. What makes these sections of value to the introductory student and general audience is that each chapter utilizes singular references instead of an overwhelming number of ethnographic sources.

This arrangement allows a reader with an interest in a particular chapter to go more into depth about the topic and the culture being discussed by looking to the primary source. While some might label this reductionism, it must be noted that this approach provides an entry point for new students and non-anthropologists and can spare the reader some of the controversies and debates about theoretical issues and academic perspectives. For example, the chapter on witchcraft features R. F. Fortune's *Sorcerers of Dobu* (1932) and the chapter on exchange uses Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) to illustrate the differences between economics in the Western conception and the exchange that the Trobriand Island people practice.

Sillitoe uses multiple theoretical positions in his discussions of individual areas of inquiry. Though he does not overtly agree or disagree with the issues of post-modern theory, he does fleetingly make reference to those critics and the issues they put forth: "Each will witness initiation sequences like the Baktaman ritual a little differently" and "will likely entertain somewhat different views about the significance of what they have seen and taken part in - and the cult leader is no final arbiter, only another view. These post-modernist inspired criticisms apply not only to the interpretive approach but also to every other approach to the study of myth. Indeed, they apply in some degree to all anthropology, although they take on added piquancy in the study of ritual belief, where the rationale for action exists entirely inside others' heads and experiences" (p. 246). Though not necessarily a matter of central discussion throughout the book, this announcement on the next to last page does call into question the rest of the book, namely that the ethnographic data may not be as representative of what people think as what they do.

This book was pleasurable reading that reminded me that a text book does not have to be a boring and shallow experience. An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia would be of great value to an introductory class, a general course on the area for non-specialists, and general reading for the interested layperson.

References Cited:

Fortune, R. F. 1932 *Sorcerers of Dobu*. London: Routledge.

Malinowski, Bronislaw 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc.