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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MELANESIA PAUL SILLITOE, 1998

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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 he 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 14 chapters which deal with classic aspects of anthropological study and ethnographic subjects. Each chapter uses a particular group as the model for an aspect of anthropological inquiry: "Swidden cultivation in the Bismarck Range" (p. 35-52), "Exchange cycles in the Massim Archipelago" (p. 69-83), "Big men on Bougainville Island" (p. 99-111) "Dispute settlement around the Paniai Lakes" (p. 148-164), etc. What makes these individual sections of value to the introductory student and general audience is that each chapter utilizes singular references in place of a large number of ethnographic sources.

This method of arrangement allows a reader with an interest in a particular chapter to go more into depth about the subject and the ethnographic group being discussed by looking to the primary source. There is a possible charge of reductionism that some would apply to this book. It must be noted that this approach allows new students and non-anthropologists the chance to become interested in the subject. This generalization can spare the reader some of the controversies and debates about theoretical issues and academic perspectives. 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 practices of exchange that the Trobriand Island people practice.

Sillitoe does use multiple theoretical positions in his discussions of individual areas of inquiry. Though he does not directly agree or disagree with the issues of post-modern theory within this text, 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 validity of 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 a pleasurable reading experience that reminded me that a text book does not have to be a boring and shallow reading experience. This book would be of great value to an introductory class, a general course on the area for non-specialists and the interested layperson.

REFERENCES

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