

## Book Reviews

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*Reflections on Violence in Melanesia*, edited by Sinclair Dinnen and Allison Ley. Annandale, NSW, and Canberra: Hawkins Press and Asia Pacific Press, Australian National University, 2000. ISBN 1-876067-13-6, xviii + 332 pages, tables, figures, plates, maps, glossary, abbreviations, notes, references, index. Paper, A\$29.95.

This is a treasure trove of a volume, with current, state-of-the-art papers by anthropologists, historians, psychologists, criminologists, political scientists, lawyers, journalists, and local activists, all writing about their own research, work, and experience. It is organized in five sections (Representations, The Gender of Violence, Non-government Organizations and Domestic Violence, Violence and Identity, Violence and the State), with an introduction by Dinnen and an epilogue by Margaret Jolly. The historical accounts blend colonial and missionary activity, exposing the different representations of violence according to whether it was indigenous, colonial, or missionary. While Reverend Brown's punitive raid was self-avowedly undertaken to teach the Tolai that "roast missionary is an expensive dish," this violence was still seen as preparing the ground for the gospel (Christine Weir). More insidious was a newspaper's anti-independence campaign, conducted through depictions of harmony between people and nature by picturing French settlers in intimate camaraderie with mixed-race friends and relatives in a domesticated New Caledonian countryside (Alaine

Chanter). The shocking truth that this intimate group had just been unjustly acquitted of massacring pro-independence Kanaks exposes the underlying violence of these pictures, seen by Chanter as incitements for the Kanak uprising that followed.

Some of the most disturbing discussion concerns rape and domestic violence. Christina Ramosaea and Maxine Anjiga Makail detail local conditions and support programs in Papua New Guinea and the Solomons, while Afu Billy's impassioned piece, critical of churches and police alike, puts no polite gloss on how Solomons women really feel about the violence in their lives. Cyndi Banks and Anou Borrey argue that investigation of rape in Papua New Guinea should be informed by local customs and practices, which still surface in rapists' motives. The absence of vernacular words for rape and the local emphasis on the correctness of broader social relations lead them to suggest that in some societies sex was traditionally associated with a degree of pain and violence. Borrey rightly discounts the further inference, that women enjoyed "rough sex" which caused them physical injury, when she observes that they refused to tolerate violence when they became aware that intimate relations could be experienced differently. Particularly alarming is Borrey's description of opportunistic rape, enjoyed without moral qualms or remorse by men from diverse backgrounds. She blames this situation on the disjuncture between the traditional culture which informs acts of sexual

violence and local response to them, and western culture on which legislation is based. This point is reinforced in Merrin Mason's chapter on Vanuatu, where, despite the existence in the statute book of restraining orders for abusive husbands, senior magistrates decline to grant them and the police refuse to enforce them, because "a man has the right to contact his wife," whatever her wishes. Sarah Garap tells a similar story for Simbu village courts in Papua New Guinea, where "traditional" judgments breach women's constitutional guarantees of equality at the same time as they weaken their traditional positions as subsistence farmers. Though viewing polygamy as "cannibalism which eats away the heart," women here also accepted the hardships of their daily lives as normal. When fledgling protests were met with a higher incidence of rape, women asked, "How do you get men to change their attitudes?" The response was stalled reforms and attacks on crisis centers. In this bleak landscape Alan Rumsey's uplifting tale of gift-bearing Highlands women successfully ending the fight between two warring groups provides a desperately needed oasis of hope. Alas, the event occurred in 1982, and the cooperatives founded by these women have long since folded.

Most of the papers not specifically concerned with gendered violence concentrate on the activities and affairs of men. They consider important problems attendant on modernization and nation-building, such as violence from the perspective of failed security measures, whether those of a mining company (Glenn Banks) or a state that lacks the "blood-and-iron formula" enjoyed by states formed in different

conditions in earlier centuries (Karl Claxton). The possibility that "bits of incipient nation" could represent a "civil society" able to act as the state's agent in providing security is seen by Claxton as undermined by destabilizing "neo-traditional moral communities." Could this be the neo-traditionalism represented by the councils of chiefs set up to deal with violence in Bougainville following a bloody nine-year conflict, which Anthony Regan suggests tended toward authoritarian forms of social control? Or that exemplified in the commitment to a barely known *ples* (traditional place of origin), expressed in warlike behavior by young city-dwelling Papua New Guinea Highlands men (Michael Ward)? Or could it be those nicely oxymoronic urban village courts, which, while falling short of their promise to become significant sources of knowledge about custom, nevertheless prevent escalation of potentially socially disruptive disputes by occupying a regulatory position between traditional moots and introduced laws (Michael Goddard)? The message from Fiji appears clearer: Michael Monsell-Davis argues that traditional socialization, rigidly hierarchical and accompanied by considerable violence, merely begets more violence in a modern urban environment that can only thrive on independent thought, initiative, and individual responsibility.

Two connected questions shadowed my reading. The first concerned the need to bring domestic and gendered violence under the same analytic framework as violence connected with identity and the state. Failure to do this results in dichotomized debates: on the one side, of women suffering rape and domestic violence; on the

other, of men perpetrating violence because of loss of identity and political power. Yet gender relations themselves present problems for modernization and nation-building, and, as both Dinnen and Jolly remark, it is artificial to draw a division between them and the public sphere. Monsell-Davis is explicit about the connection between youth violence and domestic violence. If the line were undrawn the dangers of an argument such as Ward's, who suggests that what is critical in young men's commitment to *ples* is their need to belong, would become apparent. This sense of belonging is expressed through war-like behavior, which is locally prestigious, so *ples* can as easily be seen to stand for a male prestige system. If what is important for men's identity is a military male prestige system built on violence and the subordination of women, clearly neither peace nor women will benefit by its promotion. That men's identities and self-respect are tied to traditions is an argument often made, by analysts and local men alike, but, as several papers in this collection have shown, it is often this traditionalist hankering that is behind attitudes responsible for violence toward women. Bringing gendered violence into a broader framework would, for instance, force an assessment of the disjunctures between Garap's and Goddard's evaluations of the role of the village court, which is an institution central to gender relations as well as to neo-traditionalism, the burgeoning nation, security, and the state.

My second critical point concerns the envisaged relationship between local cultural practices and modern legislation. As many contributors

point out, Melanesia is an extensive and diverse region. It follows that any understanding of local violence must rest on an understanding of traditional practices. But does it further follow that legislation in respect of that violence must be in line with those cultural practices? Legislation in the west did not develop to reflect already existing local practices (see, for instance, legislation against erstwhile acceptable practices of corporal punishment), but primarily to establish the desired practices of an imagined community. Not one author discusses in concrete terms what should be the effects of taking local customs into account. Customs must be understood, but in the end the question is one of what is needed to achieve the desired society. However sketchy the blueprint for this society, it can never enact culturally sensitive legislation that makes allowances for the rape (in one of Borrey's horror stories) of an eighteen-month-old child. But then nor did Melanesian traditions ever make such allowances.

The last word belongs to Otto Ondawame. His heartfelt account of the political and civil repression of West Papuans within the Indonesian state allows, as he sees it, only one way forward for West Papuans: to call for human rights, embracing their moral imperative as a universal concept. His call implicitly rejects a cultural relativist narrowing of human rights.

In a nutshell, this collection is informative, useful, and thought provoking, and essential reading for anyone interested in Melanesia.

LISETTE JOSEPHIDES  
*Queen's University of Belfast*

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