Introduction

Alan Rumsey

In 1997 the Chevron oil company (through its Papua New Guinea subsidiary Chevron Niugini Limited) engaged in negotiations with the Queensland state government in Australia to construct a pipeline that would bring natural gas from the Kutubu oil fields and other neighboring gas fields to a terminus in Gladstone, Queensland by way of Townsville. In October 1998 an agreement to develop the pipeline was signed by the Australian AGL Gas Company, its partner Petronas of Malaysia, and the PNG Gas Supply Consortium, headed by Chevron Services Australia. What is in progress here is something different from the suboceanic communication cables that have long linked the island of New Guinea to Australia. Here there will be an actual flow of substance. And considering that the Foi people who live in the oil project area in New Guinea see petroleum as originating from women’s menstrual blood (Weiner 1995c), which itself has inscriptive, place-making powers, we are witnessing the Western technological equivalent of one of the epic journeys of mythic inscription that in both New Guinea and Australia play central cosmogonic roles in so many communities. The prospect of the creation of this umbilical cord of connection between two landmasses, which until recently in geological terms were one, serves as a way of introducing a range of problems raised by a comparison between Australian and Papua New Guinea lifeworlds.

Most immediately, there is the likely impact of the pipeline upon indigenous peoples whose lands lie in its course on both sides of the
Torres Strait. Of this we may already have an intimation in the work of such anthropologists as John Burton, Tom Ernst, and Bruce Knauft, who have observed what has happened along the new Kutubu-to-Poroma section of the Highlands Highway that was built by Chevron:

The mountain highway that Chevron constructed in the north [to allow access to the Kutubu oil fields] has become a conduit for New Guinea highlanders wanting to infiltrate the Kutubu area. Liquor, theft, poaching, squatting, and rape have been introduced to thinly populated areas unaccustomed to such problems. (Knauft 1996:98)

Politically, the situation is anything but clear-cut. In the struggle among the Papua New Guinea state, local landowners, and the Kutubu Joint Venture for control of the oil pipeline to the Gulf Coast, the Southern Highlands and Gulf Province landowners sided with Chevron against the Papua New Guinea government, showing that each relationship in these complicated multiparty engagements is contestable.1 On the Australian side, a similar triangular tension is evident in negotiations among Aboriginal land councils and the landowners they represent, the Queensland government, and the Chevron company. Nevertheless, negotiations are all but complete with Aboriginal landowners along the pipeline’s proposed course in northern Queensland, and one cannot help but wonder if their lives will be any less transformed by the outcome. In any case, the example, like other recent developments such as the Bougainville crisis in Papua New Guinea and the recognition of Native Title in Australia, serves to highlight the way in which the landedness of indigenous peoples has become a central issue for the integrity of the state and its relation to international capital on either side of the strait.

This volume arose from a conference at which those issues were a central focus. Titled “From Myth to Minerals: Place, Narrative, Land, and Transformation in Australia and Papua New Guinea,” the conference was held in Canberra at the Australian National University in July 1997.2 It brought together an international group of scholars, including all the contributors to this volume, to discuss indigenous cosmologies of Australia and Papua New Guinea in relation to each other, and the impact of multinational resource extraction on both. The essays concerned most explicitly with the impact of mining are being published in a companion volume to this one, Mining and Indigenous Lifeworlds in Australia and Papua New Guinea (Rumsey and Weiner in press).
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The present volume focuses more generally upon the indigenous lifeworlds that are being affected and upon the ways in which they are grounded in the very earth that is being dug up. Of course, the pipeline is only the latest in a series of events through which those lifeworlds have been brought in conjuncture with the colonizing West, and thereby, at least indirectly, with each other. But even had they not been, we submit that there are good reasons for a conjoint ethnographic focus on Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea to be of interest. How so?

Not very long ago in the history of anthropology, the most likely answer to that question might have been this: for the interesting examples they offer of contrasting types of society or culture—agrarian versus hunter-gatherer, “tribal” versus “band” (Sahlins 1968, Service 1966), “elementary structures” versus “complex structures” (Lévi-Strauss 1969), “prescriptive” versus “performative” structures (Sahlins 1985:x–iv, 26–31), and so on. Each of these sorts of contrasts is grounded in a kind of “whole systems” typology (Schneider 1965) wherein each contrastive case stands for a larger class that includes other, historically unrelated exemplars from elsewhere in the world. So the essential properties that are revealed by an Australia–New Guinea comparison are the same ones that would be revealed by a !Kung-Dinka one, an Australian-Hawaiian one (Sahlins 1985:xii), and so on.

Or, in a closely related rhetoric of reversal, one can argue that (areas of) Australia and New Guinea are really of the same essential type. This argument has been made, for example, by the Dutch comparativist Alex van der Leeden with respect to Lévi-Strauss’ distinction between “elementary” structures of kinship/exchange and “complex” ones. Whereas Lévi-Strauss had seen Australian Aboriginal societies as prime exemplars of the former type and Melanesian ones as transitional between the two, van der Leeden argued instead that “elementary structures are as clearly discernible in Melanesia and New Guinea [sic] as in Australia” (van der Leeden 1970:84 et passim; cf. van der Leeden 1960), in respect of which they belong with the Asian and other examples discussed by Lévi-Strauss (1969).

Our interest here is not in whole-system comparisons of that kind. We do not use Australian or New Guinea examples to stand for any kind of larger class or to try to shed light on some presumably “underlying” panhuman reality such as “elementary structures.” Rather, the
analytical strategy we follow here is more like a certain Melanesian
one from the New Guinea Highlands that Francesca Merlan and I
have studied, namely the Melpa–Ku Waru practice of pairing, or what
the people there call “making twos” (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:113–
116 et passim; Rumsey 1995; cf. Strauss 1962:15–16, Lancy and
Strathern 1981). As opposed to schemata that create a fixed order of
knowledge by taxonomic classification, Ku Waru people use one of
multivalent binary combination as a way of creating alternative per-
spectives on things, by highlighting what is common to pairs of them.
In Ku Waru, kung “pig,” for example, is alternatively paired with
(among other things) owa “dog,” sumuryl “kina shell,” and langi
“vegetable food,” highlighting what it has in common with each of
the other paired terms, namely “domestic animal,” “wealth item,” and
“food.”

Consistent with this schema of pairing, one of the main ways in
which novelty is generated is through what we (Merlan and Rumsey
1991:236–238) have called “contingent juxtaposition,” the bringing
together of previously isolated entities or categories in a way that re-
veals something theretofore concealed or latent in each. A prime
element would be the first arrival of Europeans in the New Guinea
Highlands in the 1930s. This was taken by highlanders not just as a
revelation of an outside world that they had been unaware of but as
something that placed them in a new relationship that revealed things
they had not previously known about themselves (Rumsey 1999a).4
Another example we have studied (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:156–
197, 210–214) was the novel pairing of a women’s cooperative work
group in exchange relationships with both of two sides in a “tribal
fight,” between whom they had intervened on the battlefield to stop
the fight, placing the order of “government law” and “business” in
what was perceived to be a new and mutually illuminating relation-
ship with that of “indigenous” (bo) male-dominated segmentary busi-
ness-as-usual.

It is in this spirit of “making twos” that we juxtapose Australia and
New Guinea in this volume. That is, rather than starting with given
classificatory categories and treating the ethnographic cases as exem-
plary of them, we start with a certain juxtaposition and see how our
understanding of each of the paired terms might be transformed in the
event. We do not treat even the paired terms themselves—“Aboriginal
Australia” and “New Guinea”—as brute facts about the world but as
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historically contingent ways of looking at it (cf. Lederman 1998; Foster 1999, regarding “Melanesia”). For us the most immediately relevant historical fact is the existence of distinct “regional traditions” (Fardon 1990) of ethnography associated with opposite sides of the Torres Strait. On the northern side, the relevant region is of course not limited to New Guinea (here used to mean the entire island and the nearby associated smaller islands) but is variously extended to include more remote “Melanesian” locales such as the Solomons and Vanuatu. It is these *ethnographically* defined regions (however fuzzy around some of the edges) that we take as our objects of juxtaposition.

Even allowing us this strategy, the reader may still ask, Why Australia and New Guinea? Our claim is not that this is a uniquely appropriate or privileged pairing—that these two belong together as coordinate taxa in some fixed order of things—any more than do *kung* “pig” and *owa* “dog” in Ku Waru, or hornbill and cassowary in Foi. Alternative pairings are not only possible but have already been made, with considerable success, by other anthropologists concerned with New Guinea: witness the recent volume of papers edited by Michael Lambek and Andrew Strathern (1998), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia*, and the planned volume by Gregor and Tuzin (in preparation) on gender in Amazonia and Melanesia.

For each of the conferences from which those two volumes arose, there was a previous stipulation and narrowing down of the grounds against which similarity and contrast would be considered. Lambek and Strathern selected the body and personhood as fields or categories within which to limit the proliferation of comparison between Africa and Melanesia. The organizers of the Wenner-Gren Amazonia-Melanesia conference chose the topic of gender in order to effect a similar control on comparison.

By contrast, the conference from which the present volume arose did not focus on a single analytical category such as “gender” or “personhood.” Rather, it proceeded in part from the questions of mining impact that I raised above, and in part also from the intimation that there were certain rather more specific motifs in the ethnography of each region that seemed to resonate with ones from the other, but that had seldom been considered in conjunction with each other. These themes will be identified below. What I want to note here is that, unlike the other two comparative axes mentioned above, the one we have
posited here concerns areas of the world that are immediately adjacent to one another, and part of the interest in comparison lies in questions of historic and possible prehistoric relationships between the two.\textsuperscript{5} That is, the relevant relations of contiguity have been established not just in the imagination of the analysts but also at least in part by actual flows of people, power, objects across the wider region.

The importance of such regional connectedness has already been widely recognized by New Guinea specialists, who in recent years have held several comparative conferences focusing on particular regions within Papua New Guinea.\textsuperscript{6} Speaking of one such region, Marilyn Strathern has said:

\begin{quote}

The societies of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, and elements of their formation, are complex parts and uneven outgrowths of one another. If they are connected, they are only partially so. The continuities I have in mind are less a question of abstract similarities (Parkin 1987) than of proximities in space and time (Fardon 1987). . . . we could envisage Highland peoples in a constant process of self-substitution, eclipsing or turning one kind of world into another, through (a series of) historical events—comparability is lost in the exercise, but a kind of compatibility remains. Analogy remains possible. The turn is, in fact, one that the anthropologist routinely replicates when he or she writes on one society with a further society in mind. (Strathern 1991:54)
\end{quote}

The present volume innovates upon these previous regional exercises by attending to “proximities in time and space” on a much larger scale. I submit that the problems and prospects for comparison at this scale do not differ in kind from the ones that Strathern identifies with respect to the New Guinea Highlands in the quote above. Of course, analogy is always possible, and all such connections are “partial,” but in the case of Australia and New Guinea, just as within the Highlands on a smaller scale, we are dealing with a region in which it is plausible to think of the relevant connections or transformations as linked up in continuous series.

To see why, it is important to bear in mind that what are now Australia and New Guinea have been a single landmass—known to archaeologists as Sahul—for at least three fourths of the period of human habitation (White 1996; O’Connell and Allen 1998) and that even in the postglacial period when the land bridge across the Torres Strait became inundated, the two have never been separated by more than sixty miles of open sea, across which there has probably always
been continuous human traffic. Moreover, the territories that became the independent state of Papua New Guinea in 1975 share important aspects of their colonial history with northern Queensland and Australia’s Northern Territory. Both had, of course, been administered as territories of Australia, and there was regular flow of colonists, missionaries, and capital across the Torres Strait and the Arafura Sea.

One of the main reasons for inattentiveness to more long-standing continuities between the lifeways of Australian Aborigines and New Guineans has been the rigid stereotyping of the former as “hunter-gatherers” and the latter as “horticulturists.” Not only is this dichotomy irrelevant for most of the prehistoric human past of Sahul; even in historic times it is actually a continuum that extends across the Torres Strait rather than a categorical difference between Australia and New Guinea. That is, there was a gradient in the extent to which agriculture was practiced between the islands to the north and east and those to the south, where, on the islands nearest to Cape York, it was only a marginal source of food as opposed to hunting, foraging, and fishing. And if we stop using the “hunter-gatherer”/“horticulturist” rubrics in a “whole-systems” vein and instead compare areas of Aboriginal Australia and New Guinea with respect to the prevalence of meat versus that of vegetable foods in the indigenous people’s diets, it appears that there was a similar continuum extending right across the adjacent landmasses. Jones and Bowler (1980) demonstrated this elegantly, showing that there was more variation both within Australia and within New Guinea in these respects than there was across adjacent regions of northern Australia and southern New Guinea, and that it is more closely correlated with soil types and rainfall than it is with the distribution of horticulture.

Previous Comparative Work on Australian and New Guinea Cosmologies

Though the present volume is the first full-scale comparative work on Australia and New Guinea, we are by no means the first anthropologists to have made comparisons between the two areas. Before elaborating on what we see as the most significant results to emerge from the present project, it will be useful to review some of the work that has been done before.
In general, the part of New Guinea where resemblances to Aboriginal Australia have been most remarked is the south coast, from Elema on the Gulf of Papua to Marind-anim in southwestern Irian Jaya. In 1963 Jan van Baal published a well-known article titled “The Cult of the Bull-Roarer in Australia and Southern New Guinea,” in which he compared its ritual uses and associated myths among four south coast peoples: Kiwai, Trans-Fly, Marind-anim, and Elema and two Australian Aboriginal ones: Yolngu and Aranda. The main point of his article is to establish that “in Australia and in the southern part of New Guinea the bull-roarer has to be interpreted as a phallic symbol and, consequently, its cult as a phallic cult” (van Baal 1963: 201). He shows that in all six ethnographic cases “myths are re-enacted by performers who, in a disguised form, bear a phallic symbol identical with the ancestor who is represented” (208). Van Baal sees in this “the suggestion that there are significant similarities [between southern New Guinean cultures and Australian ones].”

“To them,” he says in a parting remark, “could be added the apparent similarities found between the totemism of the Marind-anim and the Orokolo on the one hand and that of the Australian tribes on the other, as well as the functional similarities between the Australian system of sections and totem-relationships and the organization of over-all-clans in southern New Guinea” (213).

These points were taken up and elaborated upon by A. C. van der Leeden in his contribution to a Festschrift for van Baal, with specific reference to the Nunggubuyu of southeastern Arnhem Land, with whom he had done fieldwork, and Marind-anim (van der Leeden 1975). While conceding that there are considerable ecological differences between the two, he saw these as relevant mainly in accounting for “the contrast between both regions, in the realization of basically identical structural processes of ritual and kinship organization” (151), namely, in each case the “totemic and fourfold division of the society into moieties, sub-moieties . . . , composed of patrilineal clans, sub-clans and lineages” (151). He says that “in both societies, this four-fold division is ideological rather than formal” in that these social categories are “not strictly differentiated and functionally independent corporate groups,” but nonetheless “all categories form a closely integrated whole, and represent different views of a basic set of central ideas underlying the society as a whole” (151). He points out that the
major cults in each society are identified with particular moieties and regions, but there is a tight interdependence among them, valorized in myth by the movements across the landscape of the hero figures who brought the ceremonies.

Van der Leeden argues that cult gatherings effect the “consolidation and intensification of the identity of Nunggubuyu society” (156–157), because “the great moiety rituals should be performed by representatives of clans of at least all four sub-moieties” (157). In this he claims, “the tribe presents itself, albeit in a symbolical fashion, as a local and territorial unit” (157). This seems to me a non sequitur, since the sub-moieties (or “semi-moieties,” as Australianists nowadays generally call them) are by no means limited to Nunggubuyu territory but are of unbounded extent.

Be that as it may, van der Leeden here draws a parallel with the way Marind-anim territorial groups are “composed of local segments which, in each territorial group, reflect the composition of the tribe as a whole, each phratry being represented among the local clans” (ibid.). Those familiar with the work of Marilyn Strathern (1991), Roy Wagner (1991), and Jadran Mimica (1988) will here recognize the kind of “holographic” or “fractal” relationship of whole-to-whole that has been seen to figure so prominently in Melanesian social life.

In his 1993 book *South Coast New Guinea Cultures*, Bruce Knauft also compares Marind-anim with Aboriginal Australia, with particular attention to the role of the *dema* creator beings. Their pervasiveness in Marind social life, he says, “suggests similarities with the dreamtime ancestors of Australian Aboriginal populations southward across the shallow Arafura Sea” (Knauft 1993:137).

Yet, there were important differences. The world of the *dema* was not only primordial, but temporal or “in time.” Correspondingly, the deep-seated transformation of subjects into totemic objects in Australian ritual, as penetrated by Munn . . . comes to a fuller circle among Marind-anim. *Dema* were subjectified as present beings and Marind objectified themselves as creative embodiments who continued the *dema*’s restless wanderings and vital energy. (Knauft 1993:137–138)

Interestingly, though, other and especially more recent Australian ethnography by scholars such as Rose (1992, 1996, chapter 5 below), Povinelli (1993), and Redmond (chapter 6 below), as well as commen-
tary by Aboriginal people, makes much the same point about Aboriginal
dreamings, bringing them much closer to Knauft’s characterization of
Marind-anim dema than he may have supposed.

Knauft also takes up the comparison mentioned above between
Aboriginal Australia and the “Trans-Fly” area, drawing upon the re-
study done there by Mary Ayres in 1979–1981. He says the similarity
in myth and cosmology is strong: “Indeed, links to the Australian
dreamtime are stronger here than among any of the other south coast
language-culture areas”—even more so than to Marind-anim, for

whereas Marind dema embodied a primordial past, their presence
was continuously creative in the present. Marind liked to travel
long distances, wreak the vengeance of the dema on foreign
peoples, proliferate their cults in new incarnations, and transform
the social and cultural landscape as dema had done. Trans-Fly
peoples, in contrast, were conservatively bound to specific ancestral
locations. Lacking specific mythological knowledge of neighboring
clans, local groups feared to travel on others’ land, worried lest
they violate its story-places and court sorcery from its human in-
habitants. Even if a neighboring language dialect was known, it was
inappropriate to speak it, since one lacked ancestral connection
with the knowledge it presumed. In contrast to the Marind’s ubi-
quitous cross-cutting ritual linkages, Morehead peoples emphasized
the “highly autonomous nature of local section groups.” (Knauft
1993:185)

This comparison may not be entirely apposite in what it assumes
about Australian Aborigines, since, as van der Leeden emphasizes, they,
too, have linked the efficacy of their internal religious life to “cross-
cutting ritual linkages.” And Australian Aborigines are, as Don Lay-
cock (1979:82) once put it, “the leading contenders for being the most
multilingual people in the world.” But whatever differences there might
be in the extent of their travels, there is an impressive similarity among
all three of these kinds of creator figures: the Marind-anim dema, the
Morehead “story people” (meintj), and Aboriginal dreamings.

Traveling Myth: The Sido Tales

It is not only the resemblance in the general form of these
cosmologies that has attracted attention from scholars, but also the
details of some of the mythology itself. This is true in particular of the
so-called Papuan hero tales featuring the character Sido, also known as Sida, Said, Soida, Hido, Soido, Sorouw, or Souw. Roy Wagner has pointed out that “in their continuative aspect, these stories form a striking parallel to the series of myths involving a ‘traveling creator’ reported from northern Australia.” There, too, “the activities of the hero are frequently associated with special landmarks, and the hero is often identified or connected with a snake, as is the case in many of the Papuan stories.” Wagner points to some correspondences in the details in the story of Kunukban “Black-Headed Python” from the Victoria River area of the Northern Territory and the Daribi myth of Souw. He concludes that “it is not unlikely that [the Papuan hero tales] draw on a mythic complex of much greater extent that is widely rami-

Of particular interest here are the myths of Aukam and Tiai, told in the western Torres Strait Islands, which Beckett (1975) shows to be related in a continuous series, not only with the Sido tales but also with myths told in the eastern Torres Strait Islands and mainland Australia, as far away as Wik Munkan on western Cape York and Mamu, more than five hundred kilometers down the east coast of Queensland. It is not at all implausible that these myths are all related in a single chain of transmission, since the earliest historical records and oral history attest to regular social contacts among people at every link: mainland and Kiwai Island Pauans with Torres Strait Islanders and western Torres Strait Islanders with Cape York Aborigines. And language relationships in the area show that this must have been the case for a very long time. For the western Torres Strait language shares many elements in common with Australian Aboriginal ones. Indeed, it has generally been taken to be an Australian Aboriginal language. This is now being contested by Robert Dixon (forthcoming), who argues that its Australian-seeming features are the result of extensive borrowing from mainland languages. But in either case, extensive social interaction between islanders and Cape York Aborigines is presupposed.

In other words, even now after seven thousand years of separation between the two landmasses, what we see in the Torres Strait is not a sharp boundary between two categorically distinct culture areas but a continuum of related peoples and sociocultural forms. This is not to say that people who are distant from each other along the continuum
share a common understanding of how they linked. The Berndts and Roy Wagner, from the Australian and New Guinea sides, respectively, both make the important point that the knowledge of transcultural and transregional Creator Beings was always local and partial, and that only in exceptional circumstances did the entire geographic and narrative dimension of any Being’s activities become explicitly apprehended by humans:

As a rule no local descent group, clan, or dialect unit owns a complete myth. Even though at first it may appear to do so, what it has is usually only a section, dealing with some of the actions of a certain being. (Berndt and Berndt 1952:201)

An important feature of these myths is that the hero is generally portrayed as journeying across the known world in some significant way, and that this movement is linked to the major action of the plot. . . . Landmarks and curious features along his route are often linked to his passage, and at Karamui he is said to have created many of the prominent landforms. Frequently the hero is supposed to have originated in the territory of a neighboring people. . . . My Daribi informants told me “we know the story up to the Sazabage [a local ridge], if you want to know what happened afterward, ask the people at Luro.” The total effect is one of a series of linked myths, continued from one society to the next, or, in the native view, the continued adventures of a single wandering hero. (Wagner 1972:19–20)

In short, there is a kind of spatialization of knowledge that goes hand in hand with knowledge of places (cf. chapter 1). James Weiner turns again to this twin theme of emplaced knowledge and knowledge of places in his afterword to this volume, showing it to be a prominent feature of sociality in both New Guinea and Aboriginal Australia and arguing that it lies at the heart of what is distinctive to the two in conjunction with each other. This is not to say that it is unique to the two regions, any more than the Ku Waru class of wealth items is limited to pigs and kina shells. But the two regions are salient exemplars of this relationship, and in true Melpa–Ku Waru fashion, the pairing of the two serves to make visible a feature (in this case itself a two-way relationship, between knowledge of places and emplacement of knowledge) that turns out to be of wider import.
Further Lines of Comparison Developed in the Volume

Above, I have been discussing two different sorts of relationships that have been posited in previous essays toward a comparative anthropology of Australia and New Guinea. In the Sido tales, what is at issue is relationships of direct contiguity within a single sociohistorical field. By contrast, the comparisons made by van Baal, van der Leeden, and Knauft may hint at such a relationship, but they do not presuppose it. All three of those comparisons turn up what are taken to be significant resemblances between particular lifeways in specified regions of Australia and New Guinea, and these are taken as a ground of similarity against which differences can also stand out as significant (cf. Stewart and Strathern, chapter 4 in this volume).

In general, the trans-Arafura comparisons made in this volume are of the latter sort rather than the former. That is, the main point of them is not to establish a historical relationship, for all that they may hint at one. Rather, as already suggested by my invocation of the Melpa–Ku Waru practice of pairing, the point is to see what new light can be shed on each term of the comparison by considering it in relation to the other.

To this end, in chapter 1 I trace the relationships among ancestral tracks, myth, and placedness in Australia and areas of Melanesia, focusing particularly on Aranda and Ngarinyin (Australia), Morehead River and Iatmul (New Guinea), and Tanna (Vanuatu). Taking up Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome as an image of nonhierarchical connectivity, I argue that it is useful for understanding the groundedness of cosmology in landscape that is common to all these cases, but that, in light of them, the opposition that Deleuze and Guattari posit between rhizomatic and supposedly “Western,” “arborescent” models is in need of some refinements. Drawing on these cases, and on my experience in working on Aboriginal land claims, I also offer some general conclusions about the relation between indigenous cosmologies, anthropology, and the politics of landedness in Third and Fourth World settings.

In six of the remaining nine chapters, the authors explicitly develop other comparisons, either involving other areas of Australia and Papua New Guinea, other aspects of the cosmologies, or both. In the re-
mainder of this introduction I will briefly summarize those chapters so as to orient the reader to the rest of the book. In this respect my discussion is complementary to James Weiner’s in the afterword, since his concern there is not to take up points of comparison made by the other authors but to make his own. His discussion does, however, include good summaries of the three noncomparative chapters, by Wagner, Lattas, and Redmond, to which I refer the reader rather than saying anything further about them here.

In chapter 2 Jürg Wassmann provides an account of the Iatmul system of religious secrecy. He focuses on the ritual knotted cord as an iconic representation both of a spatial sequence of place names adumbrated in important creation myths and of a narrative sequence of names, the knowledge of which provides the basis of political power in Iatmul society. He demonstrates how clans in Iatmul society are focused on the necessity to withhold the knowledge of these names from rival clans who seek to divest them of rights to territory. Drawing on Australian ethnography from Arnhem Land and the central desert, Wassmann shows that there are strong similarities with respect to the role of ancestral movements among named places, and of secret knowledge of them, but that there is among the Iatmul a much greater emphasis on knowledge of the names per se, of which there are many for each place and totemic figure. The sets of alternative names serve as masks to provide a large set of alternative identities for a small number of underlying “essences,” and knowledge of these is power.

Wassmann’s perspective on Iatmul cosmology, based on his fieldwork with the Western Iatmul (Nyaura) is complemented in chapter 9 by that of Eric Silverman, who has worked among the Eastern Iatmul. Following up on the extended comparison he has drawn elsewhere between Sepik cosmology and Australian Aboriginal (Silverman 1997), Silverman notes the parallels with regard to onomastic topogenesis, ancestral travel, and the resulting landscape of tracks or “strings,” but he contrasts the two in the degree of fixity they posit: while the Australian dreamtime is often represented as a “single unchanging, timeless source” (Myers 1986:52), by contrast “Eastern Iatmul rarely envision a fixed cosmos” but instead “view their cosmology in terms of pluralism, disjunction and contradiction.” Silverman also provides a wide-ranging view of contemporary dilemmas of cultural property
and the dissemination of formerly secret iconographic designs that are themselves keys to control of knowledge in these societies.

Chapter 4, by Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern, shows that the “ancestral track” motif is by no means a constant across even small areas of Papua New Guinea. Drawing upon their fieldwork among the Duna people of the Southern Highlands, Stewart and Strathern discuss the extensive system of ritual trackways that cross-cut the Huli-Duna-Ipili region (cf. also Biersack 1995:16–19) and note the parallel between these and Australian dreaming tracks. But among the nearby Hageners of the Western Highlands Province, where they have also worked (about a hundred kilometers to the east), no such tracks are evident. The Hageners do have their charter myths, however, and Stewart and Strathern develop a fine-grained comparison between these and those of the Yolngu people of northeastern Arnhem Land. They frame their comparison in terms of a useful ideal-typic distinction between “origin stories,” which tell of events that lay down a permanent state of affairs, and “creation stories,” which stress human agency and tell of “events that initiate a new state of affairs in historical terms.”

In a fitting homage to her teacher Jane Goodale, Deborah Bird Rose, in chapter 5, develops an extended comparison between the cosmology of Aborigines she has worked with in the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory and that of the Kaulong people of West New Britain as described by Goodale (1995). Both posit a realm of “enduring sources,” to which living beings must sustain a relationship through their everyday productive activities. Among the Victoria River people the enduring source is the dreaming. Humans are seen as embedded in the habitats that sustain them, through relations of subject-to-subject reciprocity both among themselves and with the nonhuman world. Among the Kaulong the enduring sources of life are seen to lie in the forest, outside the human realm, which is associated with the clearing. Human life is “brought out of the forest and into the garden and clearing, where it is sustained through human action.” Rose argues that in comparison to the Aboriginal system “the organization of human responsibility toward the world is thus diminished.”

Returning to the theme of secrecy, which is prominent in Wassmann’s chapter, James Weiner in chapter 7 takes up the dramatic and critical case of the Hindmarsh Island Aboriginal sacred site application
in South Australia. Drawing upon the ethnography of the Australian Aboriginal Yulbaridja and Yolngu and the New Guinea Baktaman and Iatmul, he addresses the issue of restricted knowledge. He suggests that the avowal of nescience, or ignorance of important cultural information, is not a mere lack but is itself an important aspect of cultural and personal localization within regimes that are founded on a difference in access to cosmological knowledge. This chapter addresses not just the disjunction between knowledge and landedness but also how this disjunction itself is often put to creative uses in what appear to be wholly indigenous contexts.

The final chapter, by Lissant Bolton, is based on her fieldwork in Vanuatu and her employment both at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre there and at the Australian Museum in Sydney. Bolton shows how the movement of objects, myths, and designs finds its way into the “sacred places” of the Western world, namely the museums that house the material embodiment of these regimes of narrative and restricted knowledge. She draws attention to the problems of incommensurability between these cultures and standard Western notions of objectification, with implications for how legislation designed to protect the cultural property and viability of these traditions may or may not accomplish what it intends to. Both in the Pacific Islands and at Australian museums, where Aboriginal people now take a leading role in shaping the presentation of their culture, in line with these people’s priorities, there has been a lessening of emphasis upon material objects and a correspondingly greater one on the performance of culture and on the protection of the places that are of continuing cultural significance.

In demonstrating as much, Bolton’s chapter brings together two important points that pertain to the volume as a whole. One (elegantly demonstrated by Silverman’s chapter also) is that, whatever else they do, people in all the specific locales and regions under discussion here also participate (however unevenly) in global circuits of power, with respect to which the whole world must be taken as the relevant “ethnographic region.” The other point is that the lifeways that are discussed in this volume are not mere relics of a premodern past, nor do they exist in an empyrean realm of disembodied images. They are grounded in earthly places no less tangible than the substance that is set to flow from Kutubu to Queensland. Through their detailed comparative examination of the modalities of that emplacement, we hope
the essays in this volume will help foster a new appreciation of what is at stake in the ever-intensifying struggles for recognition of the landedness of indigenous peoples in Australia, New Guinea, and beyond.

Notes

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1. See Sagir (in press) for an account of conflict between Foi and Fasu landowners in the Kutubu oil project area over the division of petroleum revenues between them.

2. The conference was funded by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Resource Management in the Pacific project at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. We thank these benefactors for their support.

3. Compare van der Leeden’s concluding proposition that “a comparative study of structural resemblances between Australia and Melanesia can make an important contribution to the knowledge of elementary structures” (van der Leeden 1970:89). From the more nominalist spirit in which analytical frameworks are generally deployed in anthropology nowadays, this way of putting the matter seems otiose. Even Lévi-Strauss, for all his emphasis on universal unconscious mental structures, cautions that “the notions of ‘elementary structures’ and of ‘complex structures’ are purely heuristic—they provide a tool for investigation—and...cannot be used alone to define a system” (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 18). Rather than ask how our knowledge of elementary structures might be increased by studying resemblances between Australia and Melanesia, most of the contributors to this volume would, I think, be more inclined to ask how our understanding of what goes on in Australia and Melanesia might or might not be aided by any such abstract notion: “elementary structure,” “partible person,” or whatever.

4. As in many areas of Melanesia, the Ku Waru people took the Europeans to be their own ancestors or distant collateral relatives, and all their marvelous wealth and miraculous technology to be something that they themselves had once had but lost when their white (or, as they say, “red”) ancestors absconded with them.
5. The same is potentially true of some of the comparisons made in the Africa-Melanesia volume (Lambek and Strathern 1998), notwithstanding the considerable geographic distance between two areas, for two of the four papers in the volume that concern “African” peoples are about peoples of Madagascar, which is anomalous with respect to the Africa-Melanesia axis, as it bears the strong imprint of prehistoric colonization by Austronesian-speaking people, just as do the eastern reaches of “Melanesia.”

6. Within the past two decades there have been conferences focused on the following regions: Mountain Ok (Craig and Hyndman 1990), Sepik (Lutkehaus 1990), southwestern New Guinea Highlands (Biersack 1995; Goldman and Ballard 1998), the Massim area (Leach and Leach 1983; Damon and Wagner 1989), and the Angan region.

7. But see also Mead (1933–1934) and Silverman (1997) for some interesting comparisons involving the Sepik region.

8. See, for example, the remarks by a Western Desert Aboriginal man cited in chapter 1 in this volume, note 4.

9. Aside from the well-established fact of linguistic borrowing across the Torres Strait, one has to ask, given that Australia and New Guinea were one landmass until about ten thousand years ago, whether there are any demonstrable deeper-level genetic relations between presently attested Papuan languages and Australian Aboriginal ones. The answer is, no, not really. An interesting case for such a relationship has been made by a leading Papuanist, Bill Foley (1986), who presented new evidence in support of it at the conference from which this volume arose. But Foley himself still considers his case to be inconclusive. This can, however, by no means be taken as firm evidence that the languages do not derive from a common source, since the comparative method used by historical linguists is generally unreliable for reconstructing relations beyond about ten thousand years before the present.