

Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives, edited by Pamela J Stewart and Andrew Strathern. ASAO Monograph Series. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. ISBN cloth, 0-8229-4115-5; paper, 0-8229-5716-7; x + 217 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$45.00; paper, US\$19.95.

The articles published in this book are the result of several sessions of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) entitled "History, Biography, and Person" which came to an end with a symposium in Florida in 1998. Regarding subject matter, the eight ethnographic chapters cover a large number of topics and issues; regarding geography, a broad spectrum of contemporary Pacific entities and societies: Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Tonga, New Zealand, and the Northern Marianas (Saipan). This rather wide approach may at first strike the reader as a somewhat arbitrary, unrelated compilation of various papers; however, it was chosen on purpose by the editors, and on closer inspection the merit of the multiple approach to the subject of life history narratives becomes manifest. The reader cannot but agree with Geoffrey White, "it is just the diversity that is of value" (173).

In their lengthy and comprehensive introduction, Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern first very clearly list the most important studies on the concepts of self, individual, and person, and discuss their applicability to Melanesia. The eight subsequent ethnographic contributions are placed under three headings (with short introductory notes): Self Changes, Male Lead-

ers, and Agencies. The first three narratives, by women, concern self changes.

Barbara Burns McGrath's contribution centers on Alisi, a Tongan woman; Alisi tries to escape the constraints of Tongan marriage and kinship obligations, starting with her wish to become a nun, moving to her love affairs, and finally to her marriage in the United States. In addition to the more casual conversation where she tells the anthropologist aspects of her life in a coffee shop in Seattle, two further versions of her life history are given: a recorded interview intended for Alisi's daughter and Alisi's private diary, which she does not share with anyone. McGrath subtly interprets the fragmented life history and the different versions of Alisi's account of herself. Stewart and Strathern analyze life history material from two women from Hagen, Papua New Guinea, who attempt to escape their situation or at least to improve it by turning to Christian sects. Basing her paper on the life history of Maria Baru, a healer from Irian Jaya, her traditional ritual initiation, and her training at a Catholic mission school, Louise Thoonen convincingly demonstrates how the biographical method may serve as a perfect means to gain an improved understanding of initiation—seen not as an isolated ritual but as part of a life experience.

The next two chapters are dedicated to male leaders. Stewart and Strathern compare the narratives of the well-known Hagen big men Ongka and Ru by relating local ideas about personhood and individuality to different life experiences and differing intentions in their self-represen-

tations. By following their histories and the transformations of their lives through religious changes and imported knowledge in Kawelka society, as well as their personal decision making, the authors demonstrate the “conjunction of history, biography, and personhood” (98).

Karen Sinclair’s biographical essay traces the life of the late Matiu Mareikura—a Māori with whom she has had a close relationship for more than twenty years and a “maker of history” (118)—and his transformation from a young, rugby-loving man to a highly respected Māori ritual leader. His development can only be understood against the background of renewed interest by numerous Māori in their language and their traditional knowledge. It becomes obvious from his life story how “history is . . . encapsulated in biography” (117).

Agencies are the subject of the last three contributions. The focus of the chapter by Richard Scaglione and Marie Norman is the narrative of an Abelam big man, Moll, and his colonial experience. As the authors explain, instead of using that agency of marginalized people frequently called resistance, the Abelam used different responses to colonial power: avoidance of conflicts, evasion, deception, persuasion, co-option. Such varied tactics clearly show that the objectives and agendas of the “subaltern people” are in no way dictated by the colonizers, but that “Pacific Islanders create their own lives and identities and actively participate in processes of historical change” (137).

In his article, William Rodman discusses the new role of the anthropologist as a witness by using as an exam-

ple the biography of Nicodemus Wai from Ambae, Vanuatu, who participated in the Santo rebellion and told the anthropologist his memories of these events—an alternative version of history.

The politicization of biography is the subject of Julianna Flinn. On the island of Saipan, a building that was associated with a respected historic Carolinian chief has been destroyed by a Japanese tourist company. The chief is believed to have brought the Carolinians to Saipan when it had no other (Chamorro) inhabitants and therefore to be the founder of its Carolinian community, a first settler being of higher rank than later settlers. Today’s Carolinians, a definite minority in Saipan, reacted to the building’s demolition by using the chief’s constructed life history and the Carolinian values and traditions he embodied as a way to create identity for themselves and as a tool to gain a better political, social, and economic position in relation to the numerically and economically superior Chamorros.

These three contributions are summarized and discussed in the excellent afterword by White in light of questions such as “Why do life histories?” “What is Pacific about Pacific life histories?” He follows up with comments on such topics as routes of travel, the politics of modernity, gender, power, and violence, which figure prominently in most of the contributions; in conclusion, he considers the constructed nature of life stories.

The book is thought-provoking precisely because of its diverse approaches and questions, the different ways of representing life histories, and the intentions of the narrators.

In my opinion, the only misleading aspect of this book is the cover photo, which could easily be interpreted in the wrong way: researcher Pamela Stewart is sitting on a chair and looking down on two men on an aluminum box, where one of the men is watching the other writing a text. Readers are informed that the photo, suggested by the editorial director of the University of Pittsburgh Press, is intended to show a form of collaborative relationship in the field and is to be understood “in counterpoint to the cover of *Writing Culture*” (edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, 1986), which shows Stephen Tyler writing in the field. Yet without venturing into a comprehensive photo analysis here, to me the picture appears inappropriate as an illustration of equal cooperation—which, after all, is one of the book’s chief intentions and strengths.

The volume shows the great potential that life-story narratives in anthropology still have for understanding life experiences of actual persons. Particularly fascinating and successful is the interaction of concepts of personhood, history, and biography. The book serves and deserves a wide audience, scholars with an interest in psychological anthropology as well as in the many facets of the life history method, and people wanting to know more about individual Pacific lives and their representation.

VERENA KECK
University of Basel

* * *

Topics in Polynesian Language and Culture History, by Jeff Marck. Pacific Linguistics 504. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 2000. ISBN 0-85883-468-5, xviii + 281 pages, maps, tables, figures, appendixes, notes, references. A\$59.95.

Topics in Polynesian Language and Culture History is the result of an extended investigation of the relation between languages and the human communities from which words draw their vitality. At its heart is the search for an even better understanding of processes of language change and their implications for the study of culture history. Specifically, *Topics* applies the comparative method of linguistics to explore the dynamics of questions of kinship and cosmology. To this end, Marck marshals data impressively, and if few of his strictly linguistic conclusions startle the nonspecialist—the substantial shared cosmogonic tradition across the linguistic descendants of Proto-Polynesian, the similarity of the ancestral system of Proto-Polynesian to modern East Polynesian and Tongan characterized by a greater degree of lexical specificity of kinship relations—the general approach is extremely suggestive. Indeed, Marck reminds the reader of the centrality of investigations of Pacific languages in form and substance to broader ethnological goals in historical and contemporary modalities. Comparative investigations of language, notably in the form of lexically specified kinship relations, with an eye toward questions of Islander identity and regional social institutions is, Marck argues, not a matter of some hoary collection of dated monographs but a vibrant and viable source of twenty-first-century scholarship. *Topics* thus evinces a