

ing to balance a critical individualism with commitment to their national and academic communities.

Genealogies for the Present in Cultural Anthropology. By Bruce M. Knaft. New York: Routledge, 1996. Pp. viii+384. \$59.95 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

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The MacGuffin (a shaggy dog story Alfred Hitchcock used to illustrate that the real story might be elsewhere than the ostensible focus of attention) in this book is, as the author suggests in the preface, reading for the ethnography of Melanesia, particularly that of the south coast of New Guinea. By playing off Melanesia against fashionable "theory" writers, Knaft hopes to enrich both.

In the chapter on Foucault, for instance, Knaft writes, "Since sex and violence are prominent in significant portions of Foucault's historical work and in the ethnography of south coast New Guinea, they provide a substantive as well as an analytic point of linkage" (p. 144). This is a region rich in the diversity of ritualized sexuality (homosexual as well as heterosexual), the use of bodily inscriptions to institutionalize social divisions and relations of domination (nose-, penis-, tongue-bleeding; burning; rubbing with nettles; etc.), head-hunting raids, and "radical and prolonged initiation rites" for children of decapitated adults. Such practices and their cosmological armatures, when read against several generations of ethnographic description and analysis, provide a way to explore the shifting conceptual categories, anxieties, and ideologies of anthropological, missionary, governmental, and political-economic frameworks from 1900 to the present. This list should include most recently the invention of *private* homosexual relations (*mbai*) where missionaries and governments have eradicated *public* ritualized homo- and heterosexual (*pap-isyj*) exchange partners. *Mbai*, says Knaft, is "radical resistance to and infringement upon the sexual taboos of the Catholic priests" and illustrates "a subtler change in what Foucault identifies as the way in which the individual *as ethical subject* establishes his or her relation to the rule" (p. 169).

The chapter on postmodernity and Melanesia picks up the ethical in terms of political economy. The ecological and social devastations caused by oil companies and mining and logging operations by big corporations have generated local resistances in many forms, which detailed ethnography can foreground. It might have helped Knaft's case if instead of joining those who choose to read "postmodern-ism" as merely engaging in pastiche, irony, and other aesthetic tactics, he had acknowledged, for instance, Derrida's defense of Marx as prophetic of an intensifying spectralization of commodity fetishism (*Specters of Marx*, Routledge [1994]),

which continues to produce the “ten plagues” of unemployment, economic warfare, and so forth, or had acknowledged the generational experiences out of which French postmodern theory arises—decolonization (Algeria), technological modernization (computers), (re)pluralization of French culture (*Le Pen*), and so on. Still, the important point, which Knauft gets right, is to insist that theorists be read against the context of the political, economic, and ethical issues on the ground. Heidegger, thus, fares badly in Knauft’s reading, quite apart from his Nazism, for his fundamental asociality and ahistoricity in contrast to Bakhtin.

The chapter on Bakhtin and Gramsci uses the ethnographic examples of changes in the form of sorcery accusations and spirit mediumship among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea. Comparing these to Michael Taussig’s descriptions from South America, Knauft suggests how these accusations and new songs of a particular spirit medium expose and negotiate the social encroachments of capitalist economic relations. This is a rich vein of thought that Knauft uses to foreground the ways in which local agency is developed and contestations of hegemony are pursued. Other ethnographic comparative examples he might have drawn upon include Richard Werbner’s account of changing uses of witchcraft in Zimbabwe after the civil war or Anna Tsing’s account of sorcery and possession in Malaysian factories.

The chapter on Bourdieu invokes the many ways warfare in Melanesia has been analyzed over the decades: precolonial indigenous collective violence seen as savagery, later as ecologically adaptive or as evidence about the nature of human aggression or warfare in abstract comparative perspective; World War II in Melanesia as generative of cargo cults; postcolonial conflicts as producing coups and gangs. These can be used reflexively to expose the shifting frames of “objective” analysis, Melanesian authors themselves adding their own diverse perspectives. Knauft uses this to criticize what he sees as the weaknesses of Bourdieu and practice theorists: abstraction, failure to deal with agency, or to think through the ways postcolonial constructions of identity “do not boil down to a shared location” (pp. 131–32). Again, a more charitable reading of Bourdieu might be to reinsert his writing into his struggles to come to terms with his historical context—“Algeria 1960” for the essay on the Kabyle house, for instance.

To read Knauft’s book for the ethnography can be rewarding, as is the effort to read theory into its historical contexts of production. It seems to me that, were Knauft to invest the same generosity of contextual reading of ethnographic and theoretical work elsewhere as he gives his colleagues in Melanesia, we would have a far more powerful contribution to the ethnographically informed critical humanism he and many of the rest of us have long been calling for. Anthropologists continue to produce a quite rich corpus of ethnography, including regional sensitivity to the changing political economy of late modernity or global capitalism and a sensitivity to contestatory social forces and varieties of mobilizing the diverse threads of culture and power.