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Introduction: Changes and Last Chapters

Sipum

This book is the culmination of research begun in 1991. I was interested in how people in and around Muyuw in the northeast corner of the Kula Ring located themselves in their environment. Returning to Muyuw after research there in the 1970s, I was informed about but not particularly interested in the vast changes—continuous gold exploration and timber and then oil palm plantation plans—that were once again making the island a proletarian speck in a renetworked world. By virtue of an 1895 gold rush, dreams about copra plantations, and the way steamships had apparently opened the Pacific to development, the island had been one such space for several decades at the turn of the twentieth century. But by my first experiences on the island in the 1970s its ties to the West had receded, villages were tentatively reconstituting themselves, and it seemed possible to investigate the culture at a remove from its European context. To this place I desired to return.

Yet from the very beginning, changing circumstances redefined this new study's purpose. One of these came during that initial return in 1991. The first half of this book documents the

consequences of that encounter: I provide an account of the place of flora within the northeast sector of the Kula Ring. This book is an ethnography of flora. It describes how trees and other plants are understood and used to make and comprehend lifeways.

The second and third shifts came during and after my 1996 research. One is realized in the last half of this story. The investigation of flora led to an investigation into the structure and place of outrigger sailing craft in this cultural system. These forms create an argument about how the region relates to a major climate pattern in the southern world—, *El Niño Southern Oscillation*, from here on ENSO or *El Niño*. This phenomenon generates a problem of knowing, of knowledge structures. A general consideration of knowledge forms outlined in the first half of the book builds to their more focused pursuit in the second. Chapter 2, the beginning of Part II's ethnography of trees, begins with a bizarre event from my first research time, 1973-1975. One evening in 1974 one of my age-mate informants underwent a sudden altered state of consciousness reportedly because he saw a tree he was not supposed to see. Eventually we will see how that tree is a signpost for regional relationships, as is the conscience which enables the life I attempt to describe.

Suffusing the whole, the third unfolds around the ravages of time and history.

From 1991 I had planned to convert this research into a two-part comparison. The eastern half of Kula Ring is one part. China is the other: I visited Taiwan and the People's Republic of China for the first time just before returning to Muyuw in 1991. As I made repeated returns to Muyuw, so I continued visiting East Asia. Gradually a historical dimension merged the two. For I became increasingly familiar with the Kula Ring as a transformational moment in the Austronesian pulsation out of East Asia some four to six thousand years ago. Although footnotes

and chapter 6's final synthesis allude to possible morphological conversions across these spaces,ⁱ this study synthesizes what I have learned of the northeastern Kula Ring.

One development from this synthesis became a profound sense of writing a last chapter in a Pacific story, undoubtedly one of many, nevertheless a last chapter. Among the events that heightened this realization was the tragic death in April 2009 of my friend, mentor, and jungle guide from 1995 through 2006–7, Amoen Aisi. Nicknamed “Sipum” because his ruddy face reminded people of a yellowish-orange flower identified with chicken pox, he was the son of Aisi, one my earliest instructors. In his late teens during my 1970s research, Sipum verged on an elder by my return. An ebullient man with aggressive intelligence, I treasured my association with him. But Sipum's death did not stand alone. His two sons predeceased him. Both drowned tragically, one in nearly inexplicable circumstances; some of its grief I shared with him and his wife in 2002.

Sipum became sick during a proverbially successful wild pig hunt he led one Wednesday afternoon in April. That hunt had followed a uniquely stunning fishing trip Tuesday evening; others went fishing too but caught nothing. Retrieved from the hunting grounds and transported immediately to the aid post located by the World War II airstrip at Guasopa, he was returned to his village, Wabunun, Thursday evening where he died in a sister's son's house early Friday morning. He was moved immediately next door to his own house where he was set up for visitors from near and far until mid-day. He was then buried. Following this, his daughter, his last child, came down with the same symptoms. Calling “Father I come to you,” she died and was buried Saturday.

Sipum represented many of the tensions on the island. Many believe his wife killed him, their three children, one of her sisters, and her mother with witchcraft (*bwagau*); as I left in

August 2009, the village was organizing action against to her. A picture my son took of us captures our anguish.

Sipum was a middle brother surrounded of two elder brothers with the extraordinary success in the *kula*, and younger brothers with phenomenal commercial success in the encroaching Western sphere. He became the village's expert on the bush, but not just that—he also made himself a sewing-machine mechanic



and took great pride in fixing Singer machines across the eastern part of the island. He invented a special belt that allowed him to neatly insert elastic bands into the cloth skirts all women now wear. I learned these baffling but not surprising facts on the last day I saw him during 2007's brief return. His death, and his daughter's, however, brought to the fore another facet of his being, one closer to what attracted us to each other. Sipum *studied* traditional magic and the empirical world that gave it content—trees and winds and cloud formations—and was working on new material he had learned from people elsewhere in the region. He wrote magic down in a book. Fearing that unleashed powers from this practice led to Sipum's death as well as his daughter's, to say nothing of his sons, his subclan relatives insisted his books be buried in her grave.

A Last Voyage

I first settled on this project by trying to understand what people meant when, in 1991, they told me they used a tree called *gwed*—*gweda* in the Trobriands—to reproduce soil conditions for their

horticultural fields. To pursue this issue I knew I had to make a general inquiry about the culture's flora. I thought I had finished collecting that data when I left Muyuw in late July 1996, exhausted and unknowingly malarial. I wound my way home, passing through Canberra's Australian National University and then Auckland, New Zealand, to see, respectively, Chris Gregory, an old friend and colleague, and Simon Bickler, a new friend and then a graduate student who had finished archeological research on Muyuw several months earlier. In Canberra I told Gregory that I unexpectedly learned a great deal about outrigger canoes, *anageg*, which Nancy Munn described in her classic account of Gawa (Munn 1986). He told me that I must meet Adrian Horridge, a legendary and founding figure in ANU's Research School of Biological Sciences. Although retired, Horridge maintained an office and kept working in his main field, insect optics, and his intellectual avocation, Indo-Pacific sailing craft. We met for coffee in his building's outer public spaces. He quizzed me to see if I was worth his time, and apparently I was, as he invited me to his office. Among other things, I described springs people built into canoes and the peculiar cross grains of a tree species used to fashion keels. Although then a world expert on Pacific sailing craft, he claimed he had never heard what I told him.ⁱⁱ Then as I talked about what puzzled me most about Muyuw sailing craft—those vibrating parts—he gently introduced me to his writings about Pacific sailing and invoked various physical principles—among others Grey's paradox—that might suggest lines of interpretation for my puzzles.

ⁱ. Alemida 1990, Petitot 2009, and Turner 1990 reorient these speculations.

ⁱⁱ. He mentioned Mekong River boats with sewn hulls, potentially significant given the Austronesian expansion out of the south and southeast China coast.