

Culture



Roger M. KEESING, *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 254 pages, U.S. \$49.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper)

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Roger M. KEESING, *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 254 pages, U.S. \$49.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

By David S. Trigger

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Roger Keesing arrived to work among the Kwaio people of the Solomon Islands in 1962. He had no way of knowing then that the coming of an American, whose purpose would be to record local "custom", had been prophesied among senior men as part of an ancestrally authorised plan. Since the presence of American soldiers during World War II, Americans in general had been associated with a rhetoric of challenge to the British colonial administration, and the project of codifying *kastomu* had developed as a strategy to gain legitimacy for Kwaio culture in the face of the imposed law of the colonisers. Thus, the young anthropologist was received with some enthusiasm; people were happy to come and work to build him a house, and, in the words of the local man who became his long-time friend and collaborator in research, Keesing came to be "just like one of us", something that had never happened before with a White person (pp.127-35).

This book is Keesing's portrayal of a "small and remote community of diehard cultural conservatives" living (for a considerable time now) among the Christian Solomon Islands majority. The book is a highly readable characterization of people who have "struggle[d] to preserve their ancestral customs, and to defend their right to follow them on their own lands" (p.vii). The narrative takes the reader through a history of Kwaio relations with government, plantations and missions. However, this is not a superficial casting of the protagonists in colonial conflict; the nature of struggles among Kwaio people themselves, and between them and other Islanders, is addressed as a fundamental dimension of the historical process in this part of Melanesia following European invasion some 120 years ago.

While the historical narrative is presented effectively through many rich quotations from Kwaio accounts — in a fashion that should prove accessible to the general reader — Keesing's anthropological project frames this study in terms of current debates about concepts of "resistance". From the outset, he

is concerned with how notions of resistance might fit with the complexities of motivations among Solomon Islanders, who have been far from united in their responses to colonization.

Thus, we learn of violent attacks on ships along the Kwaio coast in the 1880s, where warriors sought to avenge brutal kidnappings of labourers for the Queensland or Fiji plantations. Yet Keesing cautions that "resistance" against European intrusions was only a subtext, for Kwaio motives in the attacks were mixed. They included the goals of "plunder of the vessels and the power and prestige that would come from being able to redistribute European goods" (p.42); more generally, the sentiment of resistance was "subordinated to traditional cultural goals" that entailed motives "relating to kinship obligation, [and] bravado displayed to rivals or siblings or lovers..." (p. 42-3).

Similarly, when a White administrative officer was assassinated in 1927, along with another White man and thirteen Solomon Islanders assisting him collect a tax that was bitterly resented, Keesing comments that "the concept of 'resistance' is somewhat clumsy in its romanticization of action directed to a collective cause" — for the main Kwaio perpetrators were "bent on self-aggrandizement and personal vengeance as well as liberation" (p. 72). Furthermore, while the subsequent White punitive expedition was ineffective in difficult terrain, it was other Islanders from the north who successfully avenged their fallen comrades who had been working for the administration — they wrought bloody havoc among the Kwaio. Some fifteen years later, it was again from among the loyal police and Headmen to the north that the colonial administration received testimony and assistance in its attempt to destroy the Maasina Rule movement, a strategy among the Kwaio (and some other Islanders) to unite in a "Brotherhood" against colonial rule (p. 108). This theme of Kwaio conflict with other Islanders continues through to Keesing's depiction of the onset of the 1990s, where the encroachment of Christians from the coastal areas is opposed resentfully (pp. 183-90), and young Kwaio men "are coming to constitute an angry, frustrated, and predatory underclass" in the context of a nation state with its own "Westernized Solomons elite" (p. 182).

In the final chapters, Keesing reflects on the extent to which Kwaio discourses and practices indicate resistance and accommodation respectively to the range of colonial and postcolonial forces these

people have endured. His point is that resistance is most clear in the Kwaio tactics and strategies of compartmentalization, rather than in the circumstances of overt confrontations. That is, Kwaio resistance has consisted primarily of a fight to defend an "invisible wall" created around "the ancestral way of life" (p. 205).

Given this analysis, it is somewhat surprising that so much of the narrative throughout the book is in fact concerned with the series of dramatic confrontations articulated purposefully and with such force in the Kwaio discourse — primarily the discourse of men, for the voices of women certainly remain much more muted (p. 19). Nevertheless, Keesing succeeds admirably in what he sets out to do; he has written a sensitive interpretation of the Kwaio struggle for cultural autonomy. In the course of doing so, he has given readers some insight into the kinds of relationships anthropologists can develop with those about whom they write and with whom they carry out research. In this case, the sense of social and personal closeness between researcher and researched is quite compelling. In 1989, Roger Keesing visited the family of his old Kwaio friend and colleague to mourn his death. I have no doubt that his own death in 1993 will have prompted considerable sorrow among the Kwaio, just as it has among those anthropologists who knew him and his work throughout a distinguished career.

William K. CARROLL, Linda CHRISTIANSEN-RUFFMAN, Raymond F. CURRIE, and Deborah HARRISON, (Eds.), *Fragile Truths: 25 Years of Sociology and Anthropology in Canada*, Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992.

By Robert Paine

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In this book of 436 pages, there are, in my estimation, 14 pages of interest to anthropology — certainly, only 14 pages of anthropology. But the balance of 422 pages must be addressed.

One puzzles over the title — why "Fragile Truths"? The truths we'll find here, the editors tell us, are "not fast-frozen and absolute" (p. 1), have "multiple" meanings (p. 7), are "reconstructed" (p. 2): but this is the truth of sociological truth to the

verge of truism. Still, there is a challenging point of view attached: on account of Canada's own "fragile" relationship with the United States, "Canadian social science may be... more able to recognize the fragility of sociological knowledge" (p. 7). However, it is left to a lone contributor (of the 14 pages) to reshape the proposition with sophistication.

As to the sub-title: its claim to be about "25 years of sociology and anthropology in Canada" is more fraudulent than fragile. Of 22 essays, all of 20 are written by sociologists, and all four editors, to boot, are sociologists (whose Introduction totals up the essay total to 23). So much for anthropology's "25 years!" And in 40 pages of References, one has to search hard for the meagre listings from anthropology.

Nor for that matter is the book much of a showing of 25 years of sociology. Its occasion was the 25th anniversary of the CSAA (Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association). So it is a retrospective on the CSAA and, in other sets of essays, on the sociopolitical conditions affecting the *practitioners* of sociology in Canada — as seen by some of them.

The grossly partial view that emerges from these limitations is recognized in all candour:

[The book] has little to offer from anthropologists and French-Canadian sociologists... These silences largely reflect the composition of CSAA meetings, which are dominated by the anglophone Canadian sociologists... (p. 5).

That being the obstinate truth, why didn't they call their book "25 Years of the CSAA"? The 25 years brought, notably, disenchantment among the Francophone membership leading to their own association and a preferential shift by anthropologists from CSAA to the CESCE now CASCA (a "small but loyal" band remain with the CSAA: Gordon Inglis's essay).

Elsewhere, there is an Inglis article entitled: "A Discourse on Married Life with Sociology: Or, Life Among the Savages" (CSAA Bulletin No. 30 April 1972). *Fragile Truths*, then, is a role reversal of sorts. (Perhaps it's all Inglis's fault what with his long tongue-in-cheek talk of savages!) At any event, in the divorce courts, *Fragile Truths* would be evidence enough to deliver to those anthropologists and sociologists who (regrettably) want it, their decree *nisi* from each other.

This reviewer notwithstanding, readers of *Culture* may still wish to dip into *Fragile Truths* for ac-