The Quest for Origins: Who First Discovered and Settled New Zealand and the Pacific Islands
by K. R. Howe
Review by: Toon Van Meijl
Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40023587
Accessed: 11/07/2012 03:20

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Book Reviews

Overall, this volume clearly bears signs of its origin in one group’s experience working through Bougainville’s traumas. As such it fills a gap in the literature, but lacks the focus and detail of a scholarly work. Similarly, the book’s insights on the relation between law and custom are worthwhile, but not presented in a framework which allows it to make a contribution to the existing theoretical literature on this subject.

While we academics have been waiting for a proper monograph on the conclusion of the Bougainville crisis, Howley has just been busy concluding it. Howley’s work involves bettering the condition of thousands of Bougainvillean, not producing an erudite account of their suffering suitable for chewing over by scholars—a choice few would take issue with. And glancing over Howley’s shoulder while he works is a rewarding enough thing to do until a proper tome comes along. This book provides exactly that glimpse.

University of Chicago, IL, U.S.A. Alex Golub


This is a very useful book about three questions that have intrigued many people ever since Western explorers and discoverers first encountered the peoples inhabiting the Pacific Islands: Where did they come from? When did they arrive? How did they get there? It provides not only a good synthesis of the main trend in contemporary answers to these questions, but also of the historical evolution of current ideas. Thus, it demonstrates that the study of the origin of Pacific Islanders has long reflected Western concerns with racial superiority, political supremacy or, more recently, with the impact of environmental degradation. The main value of this book, however, is not simply situated in the analysis it offers of the wider context in which the question of origin has been answered over the past two or three centuries, but also in its accessibility. It is highly readable indeed, which is no mean feat for such a complex debate.

Howe makes a distinction between what he labels an ‘orthodox’ interpretation of the whence and whither of the Pacific Islanders, and the contemporary view based on modern archaeological research. The foundations of the first framework were laid during the scientific expeditions led by James Cook, after which it became dominant for almost two hundred years. During this period the quest for origins was largely motivated by an interest in the European past, and the Pacific was studied mainly as an
historical laboratory of Western civilization. Darwin’s theories only reinforced this evolutionary perspective towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The ‘orthodox’ view of the origin of the Pacific Islanders located their homeland outside the Pacific Ocean, somewhere further to the west. Initially, the peoples living in the Pacific area were often assumed to be of Semitic origin, a belief that was first spread by the missionaries representing the Maori as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. During the second half of the nineteenth century the notion of the Semitic Polynesian was gradually replaced by that of the Aryan or Caucasian Polynesian. The diffusionist assumption that both views share was briefly challenged around 1900, when a team of Cambridge anthropologists led by Alfred Cort Haddon suggested that the differences between the savage and the civilized were not the product of evolutionary distance but instead of different social and physical environments. In spite of this unprecedented rejection of diffusionism, however, the assumption was maintained that primitive societies were fundamentally passive and could change only under the impact of outside influences.

Since the late 1950s a shift has taken place in the interpretation of the origin of the Pacific Islanders. Radiocarbon dating and other advances in archaeology, new insights in linguistic and biological anthropology as well as in ethnobotany, the gradual acceptance of an adaptive framework arguing that peoples change in interaction with new environments, and a much better understanding of how they travelled over the oceans have all contributed to the current understanding that the Pacific Islanders are of Austronesian origin. A generalized Austronesian culture was present in the Southeast Asian region approximately 5000-6000 years ago, which subsequently experienced a wide range of adaptations and cultural innovations when a variety of communities moved westwards to Madagascar and others eastwards across Oceania. Howe provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of the archaeological, biological and linguistic evidence that has been accumulated over the years to support this view. In addition, he elaborates on the complicated controversy about the question whether Austronesian migration was deliberate or accidental, and particularly the role of navigation techniques and maritime technology therein. Thus, he illustrates the point that the settlement of the Pacific Islands was not a result of drift voyages, but instead of a deliberate strategy of exploration. By doing so, he also refutes in some detail the hypothesis of the popular Thor Heyerdahl, who attempted to demonstrate that the Polynesians originated from South America. Furthermore, he pays attention to a wide range of other, alternative interpretations of the origin of the Pacific Islanders, including the suggestion that Spanish and Portuguese influences in the Pacific should not be underestimated, and the speculation that the Pacific is a sunken continent accommodating ancient civilizations. Finally, Howe shows how some of these ideas periodically recur in popular media, most recently in so-called ‘new’
modes of learning, such as 'new' diffusionism, 'New Age' and 'new' geology, all trying to perpetuate some of the old myths about the origin of Pacific Islanders.

The last chapter offers a rich case study of the making of New Zealand prehistory and the historical development of the explanation of the origin of the Maori population, which illustrates the general issues and findings regarding the prehistoric settlement of the Pacific at large. It makes this book complete and interesting for a wide audience, including specialists looking for a good synthesis and interested outsiders in search of a good introduction.

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TOON VAN MEIJL


Thirty years after Albert Wendt published Sons for the Return Home (Auckland: Longman Paul) in 1973, Apelu Tielu has written a counternarrative Forever in Paradise. The comparison is irresistible. Both are first novels by Samoan authors, about the return to Samoa of New Zealand-educated Samoan men who have fallen in love with young Euro-New Zealand women. But there the resemblance ends. Wendt's novel is a dark but beautifully written account of racism, cross-cultural conflict, the early New Zealand migrant experience, star-crossed lovers, and a Samoa that is no paradise. His anti-hero is painfully perceptive.

In contrast, Tielu's novel is a ponderously written fantasy with Victorian resonances. The author uses humour and romance to sugar-coat his morally instructive sub-text. His hero is a high-born Renaissance man with perfect genes, who has diligently steeped himself in science, philosophy, music, art and literature, as well as fundamentalist Christian doctrines on subjects ranging from abortion to evolution.

Solomona Tuisamoa is a hero of astounding righteousness— in the first chapter he refuses to be a passenger, let alone drive the heroine's new Volkswagen, lecturing her on the manufacturer's historical connections to the Third Reich. The heroine is beautiful and submissive, but despite her presence in an adjoining college room for three years, the hero, ever self-disciplined, maintains his commitment to premarital chastity. Tielu's noble Samoan not only counters stereotypes of victimized working-class immigrants or simple Third World villagers, but also of those free-loving Polynesian Romeos.

Tielu's Samoa is paradise manqué. All obstacles and adversity could be overcome if only there were inspired leaders with divine guidance to shrewdly