Chapter 7

Concepts of Tradition and Change

Ideas of social evolution from “primitive” to “civilized” stages informed the early beginnings of anthropology in the nineteenth century. When these ideas were abandoned with the advent of synchronic studies of how societies functioned at a given time, a different set of problems was created. If the former theories pressed societies into an evolutionary model of change, synchronic theories offered no model of change at all, concentrating rather on continuity and social reproduction. In turn, synchronic theories and approaches have given way to the realization to which we referred in our Introduction, that the ordinary state of society is one of change and that all societies have their complex histories, encoded in their own narratives and practices and, in principle, being accessible in archaeological records. Along with this realization goes another, that static and mechanical views of what constitutes a people’s “culture” fail to represent this reality of historical change (see Lambek 2003).

At the level of individual actions and interactions between people, the idea that cultural ideas and practices are variable and subject to negotiation brings to the foreground the notions of agency and choice, creativity, strategizing, and manipulation in the pursuit of interest. At the collective level the same idea leads into the study of changing forms of historical consciousness and expressions of identity in political and economic contexts, especially those of colonial and postcolonial experience.

Our Duna case study has been intended to contribute to these trends of analysis and theory. Stressing that ideas are variable and shift over time does not commit us to abandoning entirely the concepts of social structure and customary behavior that informed earlier theoretical orientations in anthropology. It does make it easier to understand how change comes about. The same domain of agency that can
lead to change can also lead to a rejection of, or resistance to, changes that are disadvantageous, unwelcome, externally imposed, or greatly out of accordance with local values. An open-ended approach to culture therefore leaves us in a good position to understand either change or resistance to it. We do not assume, by this approach, that the people are fully cognizant of the ramifying effects of all changes on their lives. We do assume that people are on the whole quite conscious of their overall positions in life and attempt to come to terms with and modify or ameliorate these as best they can.

One of the first collections of studies to bring many of these points to the fore in Pacific anthropology was James Carrier’s edited collection *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology* (1992). As Carrier notes, the points were not in themselves new, and he offered the volume as a “reminder,” but one that was needed at the time (Carrier 1992a: viii). In his Introduction, Carrier first questioned the categorical distinction between Us and Them that tended to underlie earlier representations of people and interpreted their societies “as if they were alien entities that are pure beings isolated from Western influence” (1992b: 3). This criticism clearly harks back to Edward Said’s charge of “orientalism,” based on a putative contrast between the West (Europe) and the Orient (the Middle East), in which the West is seen as dynamic and changing and the Orient as unchanging, bound in tradition (Said 1978). The result is an exotic representation of the Other. Said’s critique was a powerful influence in creating what Marcus and Fischer (1986, second ed. 1999) called the crisis of representation in anthropology, a crisis centering both on problems of change in the societies studied and on the standpoints that anthropologists brought to these questions.

The kind of ethnography that was the focus of critique in Carrier’s volume was characterized, he maintained, by a number of features. These include the following:

1. A search for the “authentic,” i.e., the representation of the “other” outside of or prior to contexts of change (1992b: 12–13).
2. Essentialization, i.e., the tendency to see societies as states of being rather than in processes of change, as a result of which colonization is seen “as a kind of ontic rupture that ends the village’s old, authentic, static state” (p. 14), and custom is seen as a product of a long continuous past rather than recent innovations.
3. Isolationism and passivism, i.e., attempting to clearly mark the village society off from others around it and assuming that when people change they passively accept the ways of Western modernization.