

# South Pacific Cultures and the Concept and Practice of History

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## INTRODUCTION. HISTORY AND CULTURE:

The practice of history is often assumed to be transparent and universal, but in fact it is a highly specialised phenomenon which exists only in certain societies. This raises problems for those writing about cultures where the practice of history has not traditionally existed, one such region being the South Pacific. A better understanding of the oral nature of Pacific societies and the way in which this affects one's understanding of the past will be helpful to the historian of this region, and others like it.

A number of scholars have made pertinent observations about the essential differences between oral and chirographic, or written, cultures, drawing on studies as varied as ancient Middle Eastern cultures and more recent African ones.<sup>1</sup> What this suggests is that there are generic characteristics of oral cultures across time and place. This paper will apply to the South Pacific the work of Abdul Janmohamed,<sup>2</sup> who has neatly summarised the main findings on oral literature in the introduction to his article on the writings of Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, and the work of Pilch, Malina and Esler on the values of Biblical Israel, an ancient, largely oral culture with strong parallels with Pacific island cultures.<sup>3</sup>

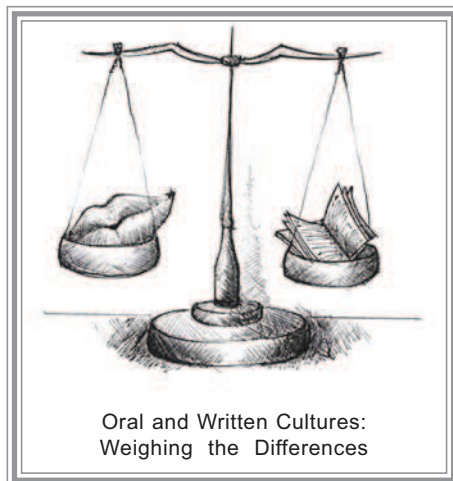
Oral cultures have been the most common in history; prior to the invention of the printing press, written cultures emerged only in pockets of history, where an elite had the leisure and resources to develop chirographic, or written, forms of thinking. These cultures often existed only by exploiting a slave class to

serve the needs of the educated elite. Such pockets of history include the Greeks, who produced philosophers like Plato, who tried to define absolute truth, and Aristotle, who promoted the virtue of reason. The Greeks also produced scientists, such as the mathematician Archimedes and the astronomer Aristarchus. The first recognizable histories were written by Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon.

Up until then, histories were a mix of myth, hagiography and fact. For the Egyptians, 'history and religion was the interplay of the gods', from which 'mankind is absent.' The purpose of history in the Egyptian world was 'to maintain and enhance the established order of the world,'<sup>4</sup> hence actually being mythic rather than historic. It was common, for example, for the Pharaohs to modify accounts of their wars so that they would always appear to be the victors, as failure was not an option for the god-Pharaoh.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish scriptures contain considerable historical material, but are still not strictly history, given the emphasis on a divine perspective on events, and the lack of concern for chronology evident in some of their records. 'We lack the means to test [the Old Testament's] historical statements, and the actual facts and their chronology are a matter of complex controversy.'<sup>6</sup>

The Greeks were the first to follow historical practices which we would accept today, with an 'objective study of history and the need to establish an accurate chronology.'<sup>7</sup> While Herodotus, the first historian, included myth in his work, and used a strongly oral style of narrative, with frequent interruptions of chronology, his work is recognizably history for its emphasis on cause and effect, the researching of sources, and the discounting of myth as an adequate explanation of events.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Roman ruling class was educated and literate, and produced distinguished writers like Cato the Elder, Seneca and Cicero, and historians like Livy and Tacitus. The romanised Jewish historian Josephus also wrote during this period.

In popular usage, the word 'history' is loosely used to indicate everything that has happened in the past. Under that definition, history is universal. However, the discipline of history as carried out by historians is not



Oral and Written Cultures:  
Weighing the Differences

merely what happened in the past, for much of it has never been recorded and therefore cannot be known. Even so-called histories that merely record ‘facts’ are really just almanacs, not true histories at all. The work of the historian goes beyond the gathering of facts and information, to the sorting and ordering of evidence according to a particular purpose, keeping some facts as relevant to the point and discarding many other equally true facts on the grounds that they are irrelevant. The final product is teleological, revealing purpose and design. In other words history is always interpretive. It is the ‘why’, not just the ‘what’ of the past.

History differs from other teleological work, such as theology, literature and myth, however, because of its dependence on external evidence. While theology, literature and myth can convey truth or knowledge, none necessarily depends on producing evidence for its credibility. The theologian can receive divine revelation, the novelist can invent, and myth simply is, without resorting to proof. The great cry in history however, is ‘What are your sources?’ Historians seek out evidence, then weigh it according to accepted methodologies, comparing it with rival evidence, and sifting it for inaccuracy, biases, and other distortions which may hide truth. From the weight of evidence, they are then free to draw conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

When historians work in oral cultures like those of the South Pacific, they need to recognise that these notions of history cannot be taken for granted. Historians must take into account the cultural differences towards the evidence and documents between themselves and the cultures under study. The cultural features of oral societies do not immediately disappear upon the introduction of reading and writing, but remain influential even generations after literacy has been introduced.

Oral cultures, both ancient and modern, are marked by distinctive modes of thinking, products not of a lack of intelligence or deficient genetic make-up, but simply because a lack of writing inhibits certain thought patterns. These distinctive modes of thinking have implications for the historian, which need to be explored.

**Contextual meaning:** Oral cultures tend to define meaning contextually through stories or proverbs, as opposed to the abstract definitions of written cultures. Stories are used to organise a world-view in a way that is memorable.<sup>10</sup> The cultures of the South Pacific traditionally use stories to explain the origins of the world and their place in it. Take for example the man-god Maui in Polynesian legend. In New Zealand, in Maori versions of his legend, Maui tames the sun, draws up the land

Aotearoa from the sea with a fishing line, and steals fire from the underworld for mankind, giving the Maori accounts of the origins of features of their world. From such stories, the culture is able to deduce indirectly the nature of the gods and that of humanity from events, rather than defined in the clinical way common to modern scientific cultures. The stories have the typically oral features of episodic plots, with repetition used to highlight key features, and little concern for chronology. Oral stories usually do not make overt links between units of a story, links being made simply by placing two related events or statements side by side, and inviting the listener to draw a connection. Characterisation also is usually flat, represented almost entirely from external actions and speech, with little examination of the internal psychological state or motivation of people in the stories.<sup>11</sup> The historian needs to note the importance of the stories of oral cultures, and the wealth of information they offer about the core values of the society. An understanding of the formal characteristics of oral narrative will also help the historian recognize the value of oral accounts of events, despite lapses of chronology and of internal motivation.

**Integrated worldview:** Oral cultures also possess an integrated worldview, fusing the spiritual and material worlds, whereas scientific written cultures separate the spheres. Virtually all phenomena, from the weather to tribal warfare to the conception of children, have a connection with the divinity, whereas written cultures separate those with a perceived natural cause, such as drought or infertility, and those with a political-economic cause, such as the rise and fall of empires. There would be very little left under the banner of divine intervention.<sup>12</sup> In Melanesian cultures, for example, the belief that spirits affected daily life was widespread, and spirits were associated with good or bad harvests, success at fishing, cyclones and death. Sorcerers able to influence the spirit world were feared.

Propositional logic is typical of written cultures, where statements A and B can be compared, but this form of logic is rare in oral cultures, because without writing to fix an utterance, it is difficult to reflect on it and draw comparative conclusions. Linear, or syllogistic logic is replaced by general immediate context, and permits mutually exclusive beliefs to exist without causing tension in the believer. Contradictory evidence does not constitute a difficulty in oral cultures.<sup>13</sup> For example, a pastor’s wife in Tahiti refused to live in a house next to the cemetery because she was afraid of the ghosts. She could



The Bible’s story format suits the oral story-telling traditions of the Pacific



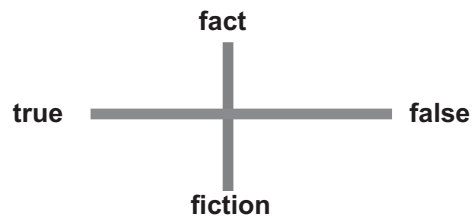
In Pacific oral cultures, dead ancestors live on through the spirit world

believe in both the Adventist doctrine of the state of the dead and the traditional Tahitian ghosts without a sense of their mutual contradiction.<sup>14</sup> These features affect the way historians will perceive motivation and cause, which in oral cultures will often lack the kind of linear logic expected in Western cultures. That does not render oral cultures illogical; it merely means that their logic operates according to different principles. In one incident a Melanesian man lied to police about a robbery his brother had committed. In order to get his brother freed, the man tried to persuade the police that he himself had committed the crime, despite the evidence clearly showing that the brother was responsible. Instead, he was jailed for perjury and the brother for theft. By Western standards, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, the man was foolish and deserved his punishment; by Melanesian standards, he was admirable in wishing to preserve his brother's honour.<sup>15</sup>

**Belief:** Oral cultures differ from written ones in their approach to belief. In a written culture, critical thinking becomes possible, as scholars collect facts, scrutinise documents, question sources, and search for facts and truth. Oral cultures cannot do this. Sources cannot be examined, and knowledge exists only through oral traditions passed down through the generations. There is no way of verifying the factuality of stories, which in turn means that the concept of factuality itself does not exist. In effect, critical thinking as we understand it is possible only in a written culture. Oral cultures are systems of faith, where beliefs are not questioned simply because they cannot be, whereas chirographic cultures are marked by scepticism, requiring things to be proved before they are believed.<sup>16</sup> While historians will be sceptical of oral sources, they will also recognise that the stories represent truth for the teller and the listener within the culture.

**Fact, fiction, truth and falsehood:** Modern culture has a very different understanding of what constitutes facts or realism. Until very recently, the notion of realism was hazy even in the English language, and the distinction between news and fiction is less than 300 years old. The differentiation between the two began in earnest with the development of regular newspapers, themselves made possible by the printing press (and many would cynically note that the press still struggles to differentiate).<sup>17</sup>

A written culture has the potential to categorise information in two ways. On one spectrum we can oppose truth and falsehood, and on another we distinguish between fact and fiction.



In the upper left hand quadrant we can identify things we would label as true facts, for example, the law of gravity. On the other hand, in the lower right hand quadrant we might consider Superman or Mills and Boon novels as fictional and false. Literature provides many examples of fictions that are true (lower left quadrant), stories which have never literally occurred, yet which represent truth. One might point to the psychological insights of the works of Jane Austen or of South Pacific novelists Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau'ofa. Wendt's dark novels and short stories explode the Western myth of the Pacific as paradise, while Hau'ofa's witty satires ruthlessly expose hypocrisy in both Polynesian and Palangi (White) culture. It is also possible to identify facts which are false (upper right quadrant), things whose existence is a fact, but which represents a moral falsehood. The most obvious example is statistics, facts which are used to opposite and self-seeking ends by politicians, among others. While the terms 'fact' and 'truth', and 'fiction' and 'false', are not completely separated in written cultures, we can still make these distinctions, although without pen, paper and diagrams these fine distinctions would probably be lost — which is precisely the point. Such reasoning is possible only in written cultures.

The desire to separate facts from truth is a heritage of the Western development of objectivism, which has claimed that emotional disengagement is essential to fair and balanced scholarship. Until recently, the scientific method insisted on clinical external observation without the participation of the observer. Such thinking is alien to oral cultures. Objectivity is virtually unknown in oral cultures, where everything known is immediate, and intimately connected to everything else.<sup>18</sup>

Oral cultures are not usually interested in facts as externally verifiable, objective data. The notion of factuality as distinct from truth is hazy, and there is a strong tendency to overlook historicity in favour of myth. In effect this thinking is best characterised by only one axis: the true-false axis. Therefore all true fictions are treated in precisely the same manner as true facts — they are usually indistinguishable; similarly, false facts are treated in the same manner as false fictions. Anything that reveals truth is treated as truthful, whether it is historical or not. Many myths and legends, for example, lack historical foundation, yet function as important guides to socially and



Oral cultures explain technology through magical powers; Western cultures explain it through rational science.



Western objectivity is emphasised by the distance of speaker from audience, while in the oral culture, speaker and audience are close.

morally acceptable behaviour, and therefore are regarded in the same light as other truths which have scientific or historical support. To a written culture this presents a potential problem. Oral stories which can be demonstrated to be not factual may be discounted, thus losing the truth which was present to the oral culture that generated them.

A proper understanding of the role of myth can benefit the historian of the South Pacific. Historians working with Aboriginal oral traditions have found that while many myths can be discounted as literal truth (for example, some Northern Territory Aboriginal tribes tell stories of their personal contact with Captain Cook), they are repositories of moral truth that reveal key values of the society that tells the story. Stories with a basis in fact tend to coalesce around single characters, who become the archetypes representing the significance of the past. In the Northern Territory, Captain Cook has become the focal character in stories explaining the origin of the European takeover of Aboriginal land, even for Aboriginal groups which never had contact with Cook. While the literal contact with Cook is not true, the moral meaning is.<sup>19</sup>

The oral societies of the South Pacific tend to share certain cultural values with other oral societies, ancient and modern. These shape their perception of events, and are in many ways different from those common in Western countries.

**Community:** Perhaps the single biggest difference is the collective and communal core values of the Pacific as opposed to the glorification of individualism that marks Western culture. Oral cultures favour collectivity because communication can happen only in face to face situations, reinforcing the perception of the person belonging to a group. This is unlike written cultures, where writing, reading, and electronic media communication often occur individually, and reinforce the sense of the self, apart from others.<sup>20</sup>



In oral cultures, community meals are common; in Western cultures a meal often involves only the immediate family.

The collective or communal nature of the world of the Pacific peoples produces a series of typical values and behaviours, although the specific nature of the community varies considerably between Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian communities, and often within each of these subgroups as well. However, certain generalizations can be made. In these cultures the group is more important than the individual, and individuals work for the realisation of group goals rather than their own. Persons are defined according to set groups to which they belong, rather than according to any distinctive traits that they personally might have displayed. In particular, the family and the clan play a central role in the identity of the individual. Kinship is a vital key to understanding the values and behaviour of oral cultures. Associated core values include mutual obligations of support within the group, obedience to authority, maintenance of tradition, an emphasis on following socially approved forms of behaviour, and unquestioned support for one's own group against any threat from other groups, regardless of the moral issues at stake. Typically, people belong to only a few group categories, to which they were intensely loyal, unlike modern cultures where people typically belong to many groups but have little loyalty to any (work, neighbourhood, church, social clubs, etc, which Western people change frequently). Closely allied with group identity is the concept of honour and shame, which play a huge role in determining behaviour. The reputation of the group is critical to one's sense of dignity, hence group honour is defended as a matter of principle, and the preservation of honour becomes a key motivating force, stronger than whether the group was right or wrong.<sup>21</sup>

However, community has distinct divisions within it. Most oral cultures share the view that the genders inhabit separate, though perhaps overlapping spheres. They tend not to think of 'people' collectively, but of separate categories of 'men' and 'women'. Similarly, they will often distinguish between 'men' and 'boys', 'women' and 'girls', and 'fathers' and mothers', and will probably not even have a collective term such as 'parents' in the language's vocabulary.<sup>22</sup> Some oral cultures have the added feature of a hereditary social hierarchy, common in Polynesian though not in Melanesian society. These differentiated categories are associated with culturally assigned roles. To break those roles is to be guilty of a great sin, for it threatens the entire social fabric. Hence, some resistance to Western ways of behaving can simply be a fear of breaking traditional cultural norms, such as promoting women or commoners to leadership roles, or expecting noble children to do the same dirty domestic tasks as commoners.

Community values means that South Pacific cultures can place an entirely different construct upon events from those of Europeans. To Pacific peoples, Western individualistic pursuits may appear rude and uncultured. In particular, attitudes towards ownership vary, causing Westerners to punish as theft behaviours which may not necessarily be considered so in the original culture. Conversely, Western personal property conventions appear to be the height of selfishness for Pacific cultures. Typically, in Pacific oral societies, the benefits that any individual gains belong by rights to that person's entire community, or to the elders who have nurtured them. A person in power, with rights over church budgets for example, is expected to share these among the extended family, and exclude those who don't belong. Anything less is considered an offence. However, Western people look on this behaviour as nepotism and corruption.



1 Dualism allows a person to conform to expected behaviour without requiring that they personally believe.

2 In a Western Culture, the men looking on would be in 'productive' work, not 'wasting time' watching.



In a case from Papua New Guinea, several church elders rose in a public meeting to avow that they were not responsible for the pregnancy of a betrothed girl, as they had only slept with her on one or two occasions. There was no shame in their denial. What Westerners failed to understand was, firstly, the local belief that pregnancy required at least four or five unions, and secondly, that the elders spoke not of their own behaviour, but of that of young men in their clan grouping who were in fact responsible, and who were universally known to have slept with the girl. As their elders, or fathers, as the local custom held them to be, the senior men could speak of other's behaviour as if it was their own. Indeed, community values and the need to avoid shame demanded that they do so.<sup>23</sup> The treatment of behaviour and the characterisation of ethnic groups in literature can often be shaped by such cultural misunderstandings. The historian needs to be aware of these cultural characteristics in order to understand motive and explain events more completely and fairly.

**Dualism:** Adherence to group norms over individual inclinations promotes a dualistic self, where external behaviours ideally conform to that of the in-group, and personal dissenting feelings or opinions are kept inside. There is little concept of the internal and highly individualistic psychological make-up of each person. People are defined not by idiosyncratic psychological characteristics, but by the stereotyped characteristics of the group to which they belong. Identifying a person's in-group is equivalent to identifying their individual and personal qualities.

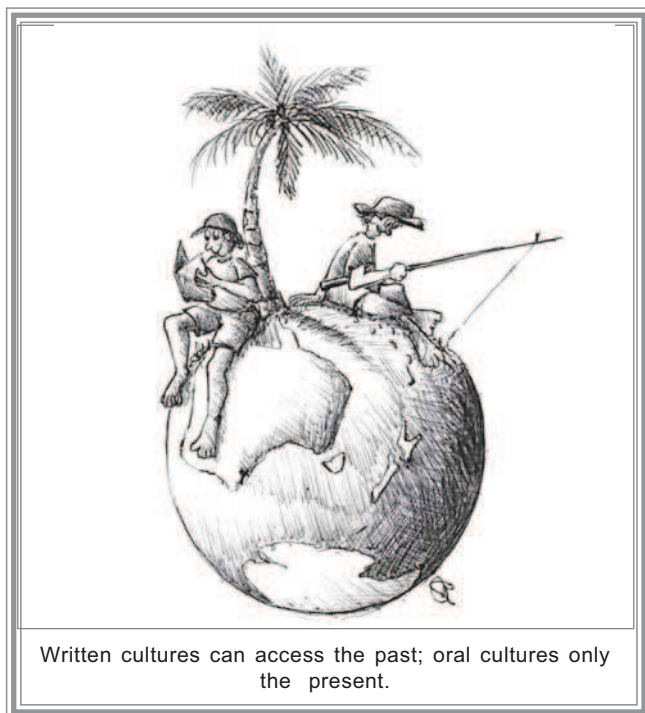
The tendency to externalise all things means that causes of problems are almost always seen as coming from outside the self or even the group. Whenever there is trouble, it is because of the malice of someone outside the group, and rarely because of the consequences of the actions of those in the group. Externalising can lead to what appears to be a lack of responsible behaviour towards the maintenance of machinery or property. Oral cultures are often unable to draw cause-and-effect conclusions from behaviour, rather blaming malicious outside forces for all events.<sup>24</sup>

Dualism, combined with community, leads to external acquiescence without the necessity of personal commitment. Hence a political leader will do whatever pleases the village that he represents, even if he is personally opposed to it. Similarly, children will answer a question from a teacher with whatever they believe will please the questioner, regardless of whether

they consider the answer to be right. Because pleasing the in-group is important, and because the in-group identifies with the powerful new Westernised peoples, individuals will do whatever it takes to satisfy the new power, regardless of their own feelings or understandings. Westerners can often be deceived into thinking that the motivation is internal, and can be offended by the 'hypocrisy' and 'betrayal' when it is uncovered. However, to people within the oral culture, they have fulfilled all their obligations. They have followed the external forms demanded by the in-group, and are puzzled when Westerners consider this not to be enough.

**Time:** Another key feature of oral culture is its perception of time. Many highly Westernised persons who have lived in the Pacific can testify that our Western time-conscious and clock-driven lifestyle is usually not shared by others. Oral cultures tend to see the past and the future as extensions of the present. What is not immediately imaginable, either in history or the future, simply does not exist, for both past and future are difficult to deal with conceptually without written documents. Hence time and chronology are not valued features of oral cultures, and now is all that matters. Yesterday and tomorrow are abstracts, not realities, and promises for tomorrow lack concrete meaning.<sup>25</sup> Thus, one day (month, year) is as good as another. This also affects attitudes to resources such as money and machinery. If the future is conceptually unthinkable, the idea of 'saving' money actually appears like wasting it, when it could be spent right now. Similarly, routine maintenance can appear to be a waste of energy when the machine is working perfectly well right now. Historians should expect that an understanding of chronology may not be shared by the subjects they are researching.

**Limited good:** Oral cultures often believe in the concept of limited good — that there is a fixed amount of good in the world, therefore the prosperity of one group can be had only at the expense of the well-being of others. This leads to intense competition and friction between various in-groups, as each seeks to appropriate to themselves the good that they see others enjoying. Hence, to do evil to others is automatic; it is in fact necessary if one's own group is to prosper.<sup>26</sup> In many Melanesian cultures, for example, a person outside of one's own clan was automatically regarded as evil or threatening. Such a mindset explains much of the apparently senseless violence which appears routine and ingrained, as groups demand that



their rights are respected while aggressively violating the rights of others.

**Language:** Every language has built into it modes of thought, and by implication, excludes alternate modes. Language shapes culture just as much as culture shapes language. It is difficult for a language group to think about things and ideas for which there are no words. Anyone who has tried to translate a text from one language to another has experienced the frustration of trying to fit an idea into another language that lacks the words to express it. A person's language therefore helps to shape the perception of events, and different language groups will create different histories, simply because of the characteristic thought patterns of particular languages. Indeed, research in parts of Papua New Guinea seem to indicate that tribal variations of a particular dialect or language are often cultivated as a valued clue to identity.<sup>27</sup>

Language differences also inhibit the ability of one culture to understand the nuances of what is happening in another culture. While the external behaviour can be seen and recorded, its true or full meaning may elude the observer, who will explain it using words and concepts which exist only in their own language, leading to distortion and misrepresentation. Take for example the word 'mana', which is widespread throughout the Pacific, and which is highly significant for understanding cultural relationships, but for which there is no adequate translation into English.

Oral cultures typically foster the use of proverb and pithy sayings. As the detailed codes of law in chirographic cultures are too involved to work from memory, the legal system of oral cultures is often based around the wisdom tradition, providing a 'grammar of values'.<sup>28</sup> The historian who takes these features into account will be able to make much more sense of the stories told by oral societies, even of the recent past, and will recognise the existence of a form of law, which is often overlooked by Western cultures.

**Conclusion:** It becomes clear then, that culture strongly shapes the very concept and practice of history. The oral societies of the Pacific have preserved stories of their origins and past achievements, mostly in the form of mythic narratives, genealogies and epic tales. Historians who understand the nature

of oral society and the stories that it preserves will recognise the historical value in the narratives, and avoid the twin failures of uncritical acceptance or cynical rejection of the stories. Sensitive historians will understand that their work carries the thumbprints of their own imperfect culture, even as they identify the limitations of other societies.

Ironically the similarities between South Pacific cultures and the cultures of the biblical world mean that Pacific peoples may have a better understanding of the significance of biblical narratives and precepts than Westerners, who too often impose alien Western values on their interpretations of the ancient biblical text. Having brought the Bible to the South Pacific, and having acted as teacher to its cultures, the West may now need to adopt the more humble position of student, and see how South Pacific perspectives can enhance an understanding of the Bible. The Western historian may in fact have more to learn from the Pacific than to teach it.

## References and Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Abdul Janmohammed, 'Sophisticated Primitivism', *Ariel*, 15, No 4, October 1984, 22-27
- <sup>3</sup> John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds, *Biblical Social Values and their Meaning: A Handbook*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1993; Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels*. London: Routledge, 1996; Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- <sup>4</sup> John Baines and Jaromir Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1987, 210
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- <sup>6</sup> Nicholas de Lange, *Atlas of the Jewish World*. Oxford: Equinox, 1988, 14
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> David Sansone, *Ancient Greek Civilization*. Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004, pp 113-118
- <sup>9</sup> For a lively and readable discussion on the nature of history as a discipline, see John Vincent, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History*. London: Duckworth, 1995
- <sup>10</sup> Janmohamed, 25-6
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 27
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 24-5
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Anecdote told to me by returned missionaries.
- <sup>15</sup> Ennio Mantovani, 'Traditional Values and Ethics', in *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures. A Handbook for Church Worker*. Ed. Darrell Whiteman. Goroka: The Melanesian Institute, 1984, 207
- <sup>16</sup> Janmohamed, 23-4
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- <sup>18</sup> Janmohamed, 25
- <sup>19</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, 'Oral histories and knowledge', in *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*. Eds. Bain Attwood & S.G. Foster. Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003, 122-5
- <sup>20</sup> Pilch & Malina, 49-52, 88-91; Janmohamed, 24
- <sup>21</sup> Pilch & Malina, 49-52, 88-91; Esler, 25-29; Malina, 37-40, 79ff
- <sup>22</sup> Malina, 51-59
- <sup>23</sup> Kenneth McElhanon & Darrell Whiteman, 'Kinship: Who is Related to Whom', in *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures*, 105-8
- <sup>24</sup> Esler, 29-30; Malina 63-64
- <sup>25</sup> Pilch & Malina, 166-171
- <sup>26</sup> Pilch & Malina, 55-59; Esler, 34-35
- <sup>27</sup> D.C. Laycock, 'Melanesian Linguistic Diversity: A Melanesian Choice?', in *Melanesia: Beyond Diversity*, Vol 1. Eds. R.J. May & Hank Nelson. Canberra: ANU, 1982, 34-5
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