

Paths and Places in Melanesian Landscapes

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Melanesian people feel strong attachment to their places and land generally. Due to different cosmologies, however, this attachment is perceived, articulated and institutionalized in different ways among different societies. Many myths of origin of the world, which are simultaneously myths of origin of their customs, tell how earth and landscape were made from the bodies of ancestral beings, with whom the present day people can either identify or claim certain relations. The reproduction of land requires people's ongoing engagement, so that whatever part of their bodies they give to the land it returns to them and their descendants in the form of edible plants and animals. No wonder that many have claimed that eating food from the same land equals eating their own ancestors. The land is therefore a human substance, and by eating the food from their land the people embody and coexist with their kin. Eating from the same land actually makes kin.

In some other Melanesian societies, the life of places in their landscape is secured by different spirit-beings occupying them. People can either identify with these beings (especially in a ritual context), maintain a relationship through different forms of exchange and magic or avoid them altogether (as it is the case with taboo places). Storytelling, singing and dancing re-enact the ancestral link to these places. As different groups can identify with different places, relationships between these groups are also reflected in relationships between places and spirit-beings who live there. These relationships are often expressed through movements (journeys, exchanges, marriages, adoptions etc.) from place to place and paths that are formed by these movements.

As various recent studies have shown, a variety of external influences (Christianity, mining, logging, rubber, cocoa and palm oil cash-cropping, national politics, new technologies etc.) have begun to challenge Melanesian people's customary perception and articulation of place and expanded their landscape. This has led certain societies into rejection of all those practices that enforce customary attachment to place and acceptance of different practices of detachment.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore twofold: first, to compare perception, articulation and institutionalization of placemaking practices among different Melanesian societies; and second, to look how territorial organization and relationship to place have been modified due to internal and external social, political and religious interventions.