

Foreword to the original edition

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Mention Oceania, and what springs to mind is hardly a ‘continent’ on the lines of Africa or America, but rather an ocean — more nearly a void — surrounded by continents, among which the subcontinent of Australia. And yet the unity of this space that is home to so many island peoples and cultures no longer needs proving: it is based on a common origin in Asia, and on the large linguistic groups that grew from this single root, of which the Austronesian group populates nearly the whole of the Pacific.

Today, however, the peoples of the Pacific are in search of a unified identity built on cultural and political foundations that reach beyond the borders of the independent nations, of the protectorates or of the French overseas territories. The many aboriginal groups of Australia described by classical Anthropology increasingly recognise themselves in a ‘pan-aboriginal identity’ opposed to white power; likewise, Melanesians are seeking stronger ties among themselves, independently of their cultural diversity and the borders left them by the colonial powers, but they would also like to join the people of Oceania as a whole, whether by the intermediary of pluri-governmental institutions or a common identity — the Pacific Way — which has room for all particularisms.

On the large islands — in particular New Guinea, the Solomon and Vanuatu — a number of human groups are still feeling the aftershocks of their first contact with the colonisers and missionaries: they remain deeply rooted in the old culture, although these roots are already growing weaker, but the members of these groups are also attempting to interpret what history is in the process of offering them or imposing on them; it is a time of doubt, of rejection, of enthusiasms and sometimes of millenarian illusions. A second stage in the transition towards Westernization can be seen in a form of biculturalism: the societies in this situation have assimilated Christianity and Western education, have invested in political life and local development programs and thus feel endowed with a new identity, although they remain relatively isolated. Lastly, in the archipelagos that have been administered and Christianised since the nineteenth century, like Polynesia or New Caledonia, today’s populations are experiencing what could be called a third phase of transition: Christianity has been assimilated and the ancestral culture partially forgotten; the inhabitants have understood the issues of political life and are part of the market economy. If they are an independent State, they have assumed responsibility for their own destiny and are debating the changes to be made in their constitutional system, their relations with the other countries in the South Pacific as well as national development and their membership in the world community. At the same time, however, they are anxious to continue the traditions that make their cultural difference, in the growing globalization, to preserve something of their past.

The present work is divided into three parts corresponding roughly to these three 'phases' of transformation. Needless to say, these stages are connected by a historical continuum and should be seen as merely a reading aid, to help follow this book, but also the never-ending story of change in the cultures of the South Pacific.

This book is the outcome of a collective effort. Since the 1960s a group of French anthropologists has been studying some societies in Oceania. Over the years, the group has changed names, lost members and gained new ones, grown younger and contained in the 1990s some twenty researchers, belonging to diverse laboratories and research groups. A dozen texts are gathered in this volume, each presenting a society, captured in its generality or seen from a specific point of view, but always with reference to the issue of collective identity and its confrontation with history and change. All of the present studies stem from work conducted 'in the field' over many long months and many trips, sometimes extending over a period of twenty years or more. For history happens in the field, and that is where the anthropologist must tirelessly follow these societies into their future.