

Sinclair Dinnen & Allison Ley (eds) (2000), Reflections on Violence in Melanesia, Hawkins Press & Asia Pacific Press, Leichhardt, ISBN 1 876067 13 6

Among Europeans, Melanesia has a centuries-old reputation for violence. Remember the stories of the colonial era trade in humans – blackbirding – and Melanesian peoples’ violent responses to the blackbirders? The stories of European exploration and settlement among the ‘savages’ of the region? And in contemporary times the media routinely present us with images of Melanesian violence: criminal gangs and tribal fighting in PNG; political cum racial violence in Fiji; racist murder of freedom fighters in New Caledonia; civil war over land and power in Solomon Islands.

‘Violence in Melanesia’ was the theme of a Workshop held at the Australian National University, Canberra, in December 1997, and this book has evolved from that event. The Workshop was convened by the ANU’s State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, and was organised by Sinclair Dinnen, one of the co-editors of the book. It attracted participants from all nations of Melanesia (the independent nations PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, the Indonesian province of West Papua and the French overseas territory of New Caledonia). Most of the book’s chapters were Workshop papers, though at least one (on leadership in Bougainville) was written long after the event, as recently as April 1999.

The editors emphasise the diversity of the subject, the Workshop papers and the presenters themselves. They explain that ‘while our inclusive editorial policy chooses to embrace this diversity in focus and theoretic orientation, and, in doing so ensures that all the original workshop voices are heard, it nevertheless complicates the task of ordering the collection’ (p 3). Their solution was to structure the book into five sections: Representations; The Gender of Violence; Non-government Organisations and Domestic Violence; Violence and Identity; and Violence and the State. In all, the book has 22 chapters including an introduction by Sinclair Dinnen and a conclusion by Margaret Jolly, both of which are successful in pulling the issues together.

John Braithwaite provided a Foreword in which he highlights the diversity of the perceptions and experiences of violence in the region. He refers, among other things, to restorative justice, observing that ‘Restorative justice or peacemaking is one kind of response that is attracting enormous international interest in the late 1990s. This volume shows what a tragedy it is that Western scholars of restorative justice are not learning from the Melanesian experience’ (p viii). Rather surprisingly, however, the reader will not find any chapter that systematically discusses the theory and practice of restorative justice as contemporary criminology perceives it. What we have, instead, are a number of case studies (mostly by anthropologists and community service agency personnel) describing and analysing peacemaking. Even here we see the diversity of violence, and responses to violence, in Melanesia, with restorative processes as diverse as mutual exchanges of wealth and the development of new traditionally-based decision-making structures.

The editors made no attempt to attain a geographical balance in the papers selected for publication. Indeed, 11 of the 22 chapters are about PNG with the other nations being addressed by only one or two chapters each. This reflects, presumably, the extent of violence in PNG, the amount of research undertaken there and the areas of expertise of the Workshop participants.

Some people, reading the book cover-to-cover, will be frustrated by the range of presentation styles, while others (myself included) enjoyed this aspect. Some chapters are quite dense and academic, with a heavy anthropological emphasis. Others, including some written by people engaged in dealing in their day-to-day lives with violence (especially sexual violence), focus on the practical realities.

One of the achievements of the book is to give the reader a more realistic understanding of violence in Melanesia. The media images of armed men stalking and attacking each other are balanced by the book's heavy emphasis on violence against women. The media emphasis on 'stranger danger' is balanced by the accounts and analyses of violence within the family. The single chapter on West Papua is about state violence perpetrated by Indonesia against its Indigenous peoples, and one chapter analyses how a transnational mining corporation actually creates conflict and, indeed, inter-personal violence, in the locality it mines. The relevance of violence to governance is an underlying theme, one component of which is the widespread failure of the criminal justice systems of the Melanesian nations and territories to deal with the problems, and the ways in which police and military personnel are so often the perpetrators.

Surprisingly, substance abuse as a risk factor for inter-personal violence is not prominent in any of the 22 chapters. Although alcohol is mentioned a number of times, this occurs only in passing. The complex relationships between cannabis use, cannabis markets, and violence, and the contemporary gross exaggerations (especially in PNG) about the causal nature of the cannabis/violence link – diverting attention from the deeper aetiological factors - are not mentioned at all. Considering the extent of concern in PNG and elsewhere in the region about the links between substance abuse and violence, this is a regrettable omission.

The book is available in paperback for AU\$29.95. It should be of interest to readers concerned about violence generally, not just specialists in Melanesia. Criminologists and criminal justice personnel should find useful the opportunity to see discussions of violence through the eyes of people from other disciplines. They should also find useful the explicit challenges, presented in some of the chapters, to Western criminologists' culture-bound concepts of violence.

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