

Florence Weiss: *Vor dem Vulkanausbruch. Eine ethnologische Erzählung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch 1999. 376 S. (Die Frau in der Gesellschaft)

In her second popular book written in German after „Die dreisten Frauen“ (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch 1996), the Swiss anthropologist and psychoanalyst Florence Weiss describes a research trip to the Papua New Guinea (PNG) town of Rabaul. Having studied the rural culture of the Iatmul people of the Sepik River for fifteen years, Weiss addresses the question of what has happened to the migrant Iatmul (estimated at around half the total 10.000 population) who live in urban areas. Weiss's special interest is in how the transformation from rural to urban has developed among women, and how the strong position of women in the traditional society, based on their role as the main food suppliers, has changed.

To answer these questions, Weiss, together with her partner Milan Stanek, lived for several months in a settlement around Rabaul which is home to 300 Iatmul – currently the largest single migrant group outside the Sepik. Weiss developed a strong personal relationship with three women in particular. In long discussions, the women talk about how they live, their thoughts and their culture. Slowly, Weiss recognizes that the women of the Sepik emerge as capable of resisting, and of asserting their interests. Even though they have now become dependent on their husbands as a result of the changing roles of men and women, these women do not see themselves as inferior to men, but defend their interests and fight as they did in the village. However, they are far less exposed to the process of modernisation than the men, who have to accept modern structures and modern modes of discipline and time. While most of the men work as wage labourers outside their

normal personal or cultural contexts in a structure dominated by foreigners, women reproduce their important cultural group identity by engaging in activities together, such as going to the market, catching fish or playing cards.

Although the adults obtain some work and no one goes hungry, Weiss identifies different levels of poverty. People with difficulties in adapting to the process of modernisation and to modern life belong to the lowest social level. Young employed women in particular have adapted to the modern way of life, while others simply dream about improving their poor living conditions. Those who earn enough to do so leave the settlement and move into the town. Despite all the difficulties, no one wants to return to the village, where arguments, mosquitoes, group pressure to distribute surpluses and a fear of sorcery dominate daily life. It is obvious that a path has been trodden to the modern world. The coming generation will have a different relationship to the traditional Iatmul village and will be influenced by a contrasting set of social values.

What irritates this reviewer and PNG resident is the picture Weiss gives of a past society which does not fit the reality of present-day Papua New Guinea. Where is the PNG in which the European or white population holds all the power and the rest of the population have to follow their orders? Where is the PNG in which people live 'as in New York', the 'exclusive' living areas being for whites, while the urban black population mostly lives in settlements? Reading Weiss's book, I am unable to lose the feeling that I am in the wrong country: in present-day PNG there are only a few whites left, and all jobs, official positions and villas have been 'localised'. Nowhere in the book does Weiss tell us clearly when her anthropological narrative took place. The short epilogue explains that, three years after her fieldwork, the Rabaul volcano erupted, devastating the town

and the settlement. How many German readers know that this tragedy happened in 1994? From this, it has to be realised that Weiss's field trip took place in 1991 – a long time ago in relation to the rapid cultural and socio-economic transformation that Papua New Guinea and its people have experienced since the 1980s. This also explains why there is almost no reference in Weiss' book to unemployment, crime, hunger, and prostitution, or the loss of perspective and hope which at the present time characterises not only urban women but most of the urban population.

One's negative impressions are increased when Weiss gives vent to her anti-colonial and anti-Australian sentiments. She explains behaviour of the fortnightly pay-day as resulting from the (white) employers' opinion that the black population are incapable of working out their income in terms of their household budget. Even though many (male) Melanesians invest their fortnightly income in beer, with the consequence that women and families have insufficient food to eat for the rest of the two-week period, the argument is vitiated by the consideration that this wage system, which was introduced by colonial administration, is still the norm in Australia. Would Weiss argue in this way with respect to Australians? More problematic still is Weiss's interpretation of the readiness of women to use violence as positive resistance against the violence of men. For Weiss, both genders are equal when women are able and willing to fight back, but what about the hundreds of women wounded or killed by women each year? In general, are violent responses and physical aggression positive if they are carried out by women, especially strong Iatmul women, and directed against men? Where is the vote against the escalation of violence at all levels of Papua New Guinea society? Even though this book is a narrative documentation of research experiences and results, one expects deeper reflection about a rapidly

developing society from a well-established anthropologist.

To summarise, Weiss's book offers a readily accessible and interesting introduction to the situation of a group of people who have left their traditional clan-based culture in a remote village to live in an urban context dominated by modern global values. Weiss was able to overcome cultural differences and thus come very close to her partners in conversations – a huge advantage for the reader. However, the book lacks credibility overall, given that the author fails to inform the reader that the narrative is about past events in a society which no longer exists – a point, however, which seems to be of no interest to either the author or the publisher.

Roland Seib

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Michael W. Young: *Malinowski's Kiriwina. Fieldwork Photography 1915–1918*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1999. x, 306 pp., 190 halftones, 4 maps, 1 line drawing

Like Bronislaw Malinowski the British anthropologist Michael Young carried out field research on a Massim society in the south-east of mainland New Guinea. However, unlike his famous predecessor he did not go to the Trobriand Islands to do his fieldwork, but opted instead for Goodenough Island, an island relatively close to the 'holy grounds' of modern ethnography. Young's fieldwork resulted in two excellent monographs (Young 1971, 1983) which both come up to the high standards set by the master of Trobriand ethnography. It is obvious that these fine examples of ethnographic research reveal their author's deep admiration of