

Appendix E

Obituary: Marie Olive Reay, Born Maitland, NSW, Died Booragul, NSW, 16 September 2004, Aged 82¹

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It is a painful task to record the death of Marie Reay, who for almost thirty years was a member of the Department of Anthropology, in what was at the time of her appointment the Research School of Pacific Studies (now Pacific and Asian Studies) at The Australian National University. While perhaps best known for her research in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, most notably among the Kuma, Marie will be remembered as a pioneering ethnographer whose work was at the forefront of expanding fields in twentieth-century Australian anthropology, including the anthropology of women and the study of race relations in the small towns of western NSW. She was a significant figure in the founding and growth of the Australian Anthropology Society (AAS), a role which was acknowledged by her peers when she was made the first life member of that Association. Marie's career in anthropology began at Sydney University, where she studied for an MA (graduated 1948) under the dictatorial A. P. Elkin who directed her fieldwork among fringedwelling Aborigines in western NSW. This fieldwork initiated an important strand in Marie's career. She became part of a new pioneering wave of fieldworkers in Indigenous communities, comprising Bill Stanner, Nancy Munn, Mervyn Meggitt, Les Hiatt, Jeremy Beckett and Diane Barwick (all of whom, at one time or another, held positions in the Anthropology Department in RSPacS at ANU). Marie also conducted fieldwork among Aborigines of Borroloola in the Northern Territory, and from the time of its founding in the mid-1960s she was closely associated with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra.

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In 1951 Marie took up what would become the second prominent strand in her career. She travelled to Papua to study social change among the Orokaiva of Northern Province, intending to follow up F. E. Williams's research in the 1920s. She was there when the catastrophic eruption of Mt Lamington occurred, killing over 3000 people. Evacuated along with other survivors, Marie subsequently wrote a report on the social consequences of the disaster. During 1950–1, Marie also lectured at the Australian School of Pacific Administration in Sydney, where she was a junior colleague of notable ethnographers of Papua New Guinea including Mick Read, Ian Hogbin and Camilla Wedgwood.

Having won a scholarship to the newly established The Australian National University in 1953, Marie was one of the first research scholars in what was then the Department of Anthropology and Sociology in the Research School of Pacific Studies. Directed by S. F. Nadel and supervised by W. E. Stanner, in 1953 Marie was sent to the Wahgi Valley in the central highlands of New Guinea where she did pioneering fieldwork among the Kuma. She belonged to that heroic first wave of anthropologists to work intensively in the vast, relatively

unknown Highlands, along with Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Mick Read, Richard Salisbury, Ralph Bulmer, Mervyn Meggitt, Robert Glasse and D'Arcy Ryan. Marie was again ahead of her times, as she was the first ethnographer to investigate in depth the position of women in a Highlands society, a topic that became fashionable as anthropology responded to the critiques of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. She keenly followed political developments in Papua New Guinea as the country moved to independence and parliamentary elections.

The travel writer Colin Simpson met Marie in Minj as she was about to begin her fieldwork and he wondered about her survival prospects among the misogynous warriors of the Wahgi. 'She appeared diffident and "soft"' to Simpson (1954, p. 232). Few who knew Marie in later life would call her diffident: she held some radical opinions and was never afraid to express them forcefully. As for being 'soft', the Kuma would have been the first to disagree. Her students and junior colleagues, too, learned that Marie could be intimidating and abrasive, though she tempered her sharpness with sly, dry humour.

Embarking on the writing of her thesis, she became even more scornful of the 'God-Professor' Nadel and her authoritarian supervisor Stanner. To both of them 'PhD students were a lesser species'. She had to 'tone down' her field reports on the Kuma because her findings concerning family life and the position of women did not conform to her advisers' preconceptions. When she planned to take a short holiday from her thesis, Nadel had sneered: 'Anthropologists don't need holidays.' She took one anyway, and noted with a twinkle that Nadel died while she was away (Reay 1992, p. 158).

In the Wahgi she also defied the god-administrator who disapproved of female anthropologists, especially ones who broke the White Women's Protection law by wearing shorts. 'Modified Bombay bloomers', Marie called them, 'equipped with five generous pockets' for her custom-made notebooks. These capacious khaki shorts, she wrote dryly, 'looked terrible and would be certain to discourage any sexual passion that happened to be present'. Kuma, in any case, treated her as an honorary male and even allowed her to witness boys' initiation rites (Reay 1992, p. 166).

'Shorn of verbiage', Marie's PhD thesis was published as *The Kuma: Freedom and Conformity in the New Guinea Highlands* in 1959, the same year that she was appointed to a research fellowship in the Anthropology Department. During the next thirty years, Marie observed a succession of male chairs and different styles of academic leadership: namely, those of John Barnes, Bill Epstein, Derek Freeman and Roger Keesing. She did not much care for any of them, and took delight in privately puncturing their pretensions. As a graduate student she had been exploited by Elkin, bullied by Nadel, and patronized by Stanner, so she took a dim view of god-professors in general, and tended to remain aloof

from departmental politics. But Marie was politically and administratively active elsewhere; she served as a Justice of the Peace in Canberra for many years and was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 1977. She had been the secretary of the Australian branch of the Association of Social Anthropologists in 1963 and served on the executive of its successor organization, the Australian Anthropological Society. Marie viewed with alarm the push within the AAS to establish it as a professional organization, to provide accreditation, especially for anthropologists working outside the university. Her strongly held view was that the AAS was established as a 'learned society' to promote anthropological knowledge and understanding. In 1995, although in poor health, she determined to attend the annual conference in Adelaide to do some 'quiet lobbying' for her point of view.

From the early 1960s until after her retirement in 1988 Marie revisited the Kuma regularly, and for this purpose she maintained a house at Minj. Her long-term association with the district allowed her to pursue an abiding interest in political and social change, about which she wrote innumerable articles. A graceful writer (of poetry and short stories as well as anthropological essays), Marie succeeded in making her academic writings accessible to a non-specialist readership. While she read carefully and engaged critically with theoretical developments in anthropology, she was no lover of grand theory and her essays invariably had a sharp ethnographic focus. She wrote on every conceivable aspect of Kuma life. Books that she edited or co-edited include: *Aborigines Now: New Perspectives on the Study of Aboriginal Communities* (1964), *The Politics of Dependence* (1971) and *Metaphors of Interpretation* (1985).

In an autobiographical essay entitled 'An innocent in the Garden of Eden', Marie concluded an engaging account of her life among the Kuma:

I associate my early fieldwork in the Highlands with three basic experiences: the place, incredibly beautiful and as yet unsullied by tin roofs, steel pylons, and the dust of vehicular traffic; the people, colorful and friendly and eager to share with me their joys and sorrows; and discovery, the recognition of a set or sequence of events clicking shut in my understanding like a poem satisfactorily resolved. (Reay 1992, p. 164)

Marie was a notable if somewhat eccentric fixture of the ANU anthropology department and many generations of students will remember her with respect and affection. Her academic standards were of the highest order, and, although she encouraged independence of mind in her students, she was alert to any suspicion of fudged data and was particularly harsh on sloppy writing.

Marie Reay was a consummate ethnographer of great sensitivity, imagination and—given the obstacles and hazards of her time— extraordinary persistence and courage. Her classic book on the Kuma, her path-breaking research on race and gender and her commitment to the development of the discipline have secured her a place in the posterity of Australian anthropology.

References

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