

**Book review for the journal *Ethnos* of Robert J. Foster (2002)
Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption and Media in
Papua New Guinea. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana
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Last summer I was in a British pub with fellow anthropologists. One of them was relating a brush she once had with the Italian bureaucracy. Except for the narrator, who had forgotten to take off her academic cap, we all found the incident 'typically Italian'. In private, social and cultural anthropologists know that there are strong cultural contrasts between any two nations, however ineffable the terms culture and nation may be. This belief arises neither from current anthropological thought nor from folk stereotypes but rather from hard experience. When we live and work in a foreign country we find that the national culture is 'all over the place': in people's quirks and material culture, in their civil service and mass media, in their strange sense of humour. Alas when it comes to theorising the nation we ignore the overwhelming evidence, seeking refuge in 1980s constructivist metaphors of the 'imagined community' and 'invented tradition' kind.

Robert J. Foster's (2002) *Materializing the Nation* strays from the constructivist paradigm. The book is a study of 'nation-making' in an unlikely setting: Papua New Guinea (PNG). Unlike nation-building, the concept of nation-making does not privilege state-led processes, as it also encompasses the private sector and the population at large. PNG may have a weak state, says Foster, but the vastly ramifying process of making this former Australian colony into a nation is well underway. Evidence that PNG is much more than an imagined political community is indeed all over the place. Foster studies law and order campaigns, Coca-Cola ads, letters to newspaper editors, betel nut chewing, millennial cults and a host of other practices. Everywhere he documents the making of a nationwide public culture. Following Billig, he stresses the importance of daily banalities in the life of a nation, e.g. reading the sports news in UK dailies, or viewing street hoardings in PNG's lingua franca, *Tok Pisin*. A second departure from constructivism is Foster's point that not all nations are modern inventions. Where Italy, Indonesia and PNG are examples of nation-states in which the state preceded an 'invented' nation, this is not universally the case. Unfortunately he does not elaborate on this important comparative point, a hard bone of contention in the inter-disciplinary study of nationalism (see A.D. Smith's [2001] *Nationalism*, an excellent overview of the subject).

Against the anthropological grain, Foster does not celebrate the local 'resistance' of marginal peoples faced with globalising forces. Instead he convincingly demonstrates that there is a high psychological price to be paid for a late arrival at the 'international grammar of nationhood' (Löfgren). Finding themselves in the *lasples* (last place) to be 'developed', PNG citizens regard their national selves as something else than what they aspire them to be. Millenarian Christianity is one way out of this predicament (chapter 6). Foster's conclusion is both compelling and in line with A.D. Smith's world historical thesis (which Foster does not refer to), namely that *national states constitute the global, they do not resist it*. In other words, we live in an inter-national

order that reduces the scope for alternative political communities to 'a global structure of common difference' (Wilk).

The book is written with flair and wit. It has much to offer students of ethnicity and nationalism. The Introduction is a particularly well-crafted discussion of key contributions from Anderson, Billig, Kelly, Wilk, Löfgren and others set in a Melanesian context. Readers interested in the anthropology of media will, however, be disappointed to learn that Foster's lengthy analyses of PNG media lack a crucial perspective: that of their users. This is related to the fact that the first and sole reference to the author's own fieldwork appears on page 133. For the remainder of the book Foster carries out armchair analyses of media materials or relies on the secondary ethnographic literature, from which we learn little about media consumption. That said, whatever one's area of specialisation, *Materializing the Nation* is a rare anthropological reminder that we live in a world of national cultures - some ancient, others newly assembled, all of them work in progress.