Comparisons and the Construction of Anthropological Knowledge:
Bridewealth Exchange Rituals among
the Langalanga, Solomon Islands

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“Comparison” has been at the core of anthropological epistemology, methodology, and even ontology for the past century, though various theoretical approaches have diversified perspectives on its place in anthropology. Worldwide cross-cultural comparison has been marginalized since the interpretive turn and the semi-death of grand theory in anthropology. However, comparison has not disappeared from anthropological research. Some scholars propose regional and contextualized comparison in place of “comparison for generalization.” Many acknowledge that comparison is inevitable and inherent in anthropological fieldwork. Such “implicit comparison,” though widely recognized among anthropologists, is little examined, and how its practice and process impact on the construction of anthropological knowledge is understudied. Based on my fieldwork experiences in studying bridewealth exchange rituals among the Langalanga, Solomon Islands, this paper examines the dynamic relationships between anthropological “comparisons” (especially implicit comparison) and fieldwork, ethnographic data gathering and interpretation in anthropological knowledge construction. I argue that the process can be characterized as “interwoven comparison.” Moreover, this paper argues that in spite of the universality of comparison in human beings, comparison varies in different socio-cultural as well as historical and political contexts. In-depth study of local concepts of comparison—what, how and why people compare, and the role comparison plays in local epistemology—can contribute to our understanding of local society and culture.

Keywords: comparison, anthropological knowledge, fieldwork, bridewealth exchange, Melanesia