

Bambridge, T. (Ed.). (2016). *The Rahui: Legal pluralism in Polynesian traditional management of resources and territories*. Canberra, Australia: ANU Press. 269pp. ISBN: 978-1-9250-2279-7 (pbk); 978-1-9250-2291-9 (e-book). Available for free download.

The debated concepts of *tapu/kapu/tabu* (spiritual restriction or sacred prohibition) and *mana* (Austronesian concept of power, effectiveness and prestige) have been something of a crucial obsession within anthropological literature, both in attempts to understand Oceanic underpinnings of power and religion and, in recent decades, in their application towards fulfilling western and global desires for biodiversity conservation. In this edited volume, readers are offered the first work devoted to discussing the related, but understudied, concept of *rahui/kahui/ra'ui* (resource or territory restriction) in multiple Polynesian small states and across deep time. The book is first and foremost a valuable and ethnographically rich resource for anyone studying taboo institutions or contemporary Pacific governance broadly. It also details the unique ways that small jurisdictions assert cultural as well as legal identity while contending with foreign governing powers and large-scale international forces. Finally, the work provides invaluable English language access to French scholarship in Oceania previously underutilised by large swathes of academia.

The concept of *rahui* is practically non-existent in secondary literature compared to its often misrepresented relative *tapu* with which it is often conflated. One feat of this work, although not always effectively overt, is to clarify the nature of *rahui*, not as a form of *tapu*, but as one of two types of prohibition: *tapu* is a prohibition governed by the sacred nature of objects, while *rahui* is a prohibition controlled by strategies linked to political and sacred power. Moreover, argues editor Bambridge, “the political implication of the *rahui* remain relevant today as modern states and indigenous communities in Eastern Polynesia conceptualise *rahui* from a political perspective rather than from an environmental one” (pp. 3-4).

This political and pluralistic dynamism of *rahui* detailed in this book is a compelling contribution that frees its analysis from narrow historical romanticisms, abstract sacred descriptions and contemporary ecological relegations. Bambridge employs the notion of legal pluralism and recent paradigms from legal anthropology, where law is a process instead of a static system of rules, to frame the volume’s collective contributions across Polynesia. Within this perspective, the various chapters outline *rahui* across eleven societies, demonstrating a continuity between traditional and contemporary pluralism where aspects of customary *rahui* have adapted to changing contexts.

The book is laid out in two parts. Part I – *Tapu and rahui: traditions and pluralistic organisation of society* – grounds the work and establishes the underlying central argument: contemporary observations of political ambiguity and pluralism mirror those of the past, and non-centralised networked leadership existed in many Polynesian societies. The chapters here consider various practices of *rahui* from a historical pre-European perspective, reconstructing the institution exclusively on primary sources. The first three deal with the early sacred and religious modality of *rahui* where conductivity and circulation of power, strategically conveyed, came from and enforced genealogical hierarchies and ancestral networks. Chapters 4 and 5 consider *rahui* more directly within the context of resource use and management.

The concluding chapter of Part I by Bambridge returns us to the analytical lens of legal pluralism to establish that (in the Society Islands) authority over *rahui* can be deployed by different individuals and groups in varied contexts. He brings a welcome (but brief) placement of *rahui* in a context of existing Polynesian *tapu* and *mana* literature, establishing

the most significant and anthropologically-challenging conclusion of the volume: “comparatively limited attention in secondary modern sources has resulted in the misrepresentation of *rahui* and related concepts such as *mana* and *tapu*, which, in turn, has resulted in an overly structural understanding of Polynesian sociopolitical chieftainship” (p. 120). His analysis of a diversified *rahui* which “represents a major departure from the standard interpretations popularised by Firth, Sahlins, Keesing and Shore in Oceanian anthropology” (p. 134) calls for exciting and careful re-examinations of foundational works.

Part II – *Rahui* today as state-custom pluralism – transitions to address *rahui* in a contemporary setting, particularly in relation to, and dialogue with, ideological and environmental changes. Each chapter highlights the dialogical processes through which *rahui* as a cultural institution has relevance today amidst French Polynesia’s “presence and potency of the state” (p. 212). The authors demonstrate that, across several small societies, innovative compliance with *rahui* can pragmatically work towards collective local cohesion and make visible contemporary contestations of regional and national legislation. In places where *rahui* or *rahui*-like practices have been encoded into legal frameworks, Part II authors describe their inconsistent interpretations and implementations, and the varying responses to them by local communities. In some instances, the insertion and vague reappropriation of *rahui* has been met with resistance where access bans by the government are felt as impinging upon freedom and making little sense without its historically sacred significance. Alternatively, in locations such as Tongareva, where the use of *rahui* (or *ra’ui*) was prohibited by law, its continued (but structurally different) use by local communities today suggests a pragmatic flexibility of cultural practices and “the ability of the islanders to make the most out of the cracks of recognition that continued to exist in the superimposed colonial systems” (p. 169).

In this book, readers are offered a beautiful spectacle of widespread custom diversely manifesting over time and place, and a “restitution of a rich and nuanced account of *rahui*” (p. 134). The scholarly value of the work is essentially threefold: rich ethnographic evidence of *rahui* across diverse societies; the nature of *rahui* as unremitting and overtly political; and the theoretical inferences of a continuously negotiated plural governance in Polynesia. Some chapters are better than others in hitting these areas; the tone, style, extent of anthropological or legal jargon, and the level of work varies greatly across the book. Only a handful of chapters interact with secondary treatments of *tapu/kapu/tabu* and *mana* in anthropological scholarship; many ignore them entirely. This may leave some readers wanting further exegesis that directly and critically engages with those foundational works. The edited volume must, however, be understood within the progressive work by Pacific scholars concerning decolonisation, indigeneity, emerging epistemologies and the invention of tradition. To this end, the work succeeds in a kind of celebratory exclusion of secondary anthropological literature, perhaps thus eliminating or reducing the scholarly force of previous interpretations within Oceanic anthropology. This must-read collection represents a firmly-planted seedling that will grow to inspire further exciting research on the complex realities of Pacific island customs and their pluralistic reassertions.

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