

**Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (Eds.) (2017). *Sinuous objects: Revaluing women's wealth in the contemporary Pacific*. Canberra, Australia: ANU Press. ISSN: 978-1-7604-6133-1 (pbk Aus\$58.00). ESSN: 978-1-7604-6134-8 (e-book)**

A collection of chapters sharing ethnographic research of women's wealth-building activities in the Pacific islands, *Sinuous objects* measures up to its title. Its editors, Hermkens and Lepani, have woven together a volume of fresh approaches to theorising social value attachment to material objects. The objects considered include those of adornment, art, everyday use items such as bowls, ritual objects and traded goods. An intriguing contribution of the volume is how each of the authors engages a historical approach towards the transformation of the social value of objects produced in the Pacific.

In particular, the colonial legacy on Pacific indigenous culture, the alteration of the region's economies, and the current reckoning with indigenous and Pacific societies are tied to shifting perceptions of an object's value. As the authors also identify, the value associated with such objects is informed by global consumerism and global North perceptions of Oceanian women. At the same time, in the Pacific islands considered – Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Cook Islands – women's productive activities build community cohesion, sustain cultural practices and assert individual identities. In sum, the volume examines, through a gendered lens, how global social and economic forces interact with community and cultural forms to create a platform for debating past and present perceptions of what is “women's wealth.”

The introduction to the volume begins with the catwalk of RUNWAY2015, a fashion show that highlights Papua New Guinea's clothing designers. From the runway, the book continues with eight ethnographic chapters, each dedicated to objects crafted by Pacific island women. These chapters firmly set this book into the larger discussion of gender and women's value in the Pacific. Peppering the chapters are three beautiful and insightful poems, an epilogue, and many excellent illustrations. This compilation offers a balanced and delightful read brimming with heart and history. The introduction unpacks a meaning of ‘value’ that reaches beyond a capitalist framework into a “culturally mediated category” that includes informal and gift economies prevalent in the Pacific Islands that reinforce social ties and cultural identities. Because women's art and/or craft-making often run counter to capitalism as the objective of the women producers goes beyond economic gain, their work and the substance of women's artistic productions is often neglected or minimised, because their art had not been monetized. The volume shows that production and consumption are often gendered; as such, gender must be a focus when development agencies or governments address Pacific Islanders with development plans and woman empowerment initiatives. The editors analyse how gender bias dictates what objects are classified as art, artifact and craft. These distinctions influence how artists see themselves, their skills and the value they place on what they produce.

The first chapter is “Doba and ephemeral durability: The enduring material value of women's work in the Trobriand regenerative economy” by Katherine Lepani. This introduces doba; skirts made from banana leaves and fibres. Doba are integral to Trobrianders' gifting practices as well as ceremonies of Sagali, a festive or ceremonial distribution of food. Yet, from Christian and capitalist perspectives, the tradition of doba or skirt making is scrutinised and diminished as an expensive waste of women's time. Doba defies capitalist ideals because, according to tradition, the more a woman makes and gives away, the more ‘social capital’ she creates for herself and her community. As an object of cultural and communal currency, doba illustrates how women's wealth differs from the capitalist definition of wealth accumulation. Lepani explains, “What many women seek is not economic independence per se but economic opportunities to fulfil social obligations and make stronger contributions to collective wellbeing and social cohesion” (p. 54).

Chapter two is “Doing away with doba?” by Michelle MacCarthy. It also examines the relationship of doba and Sagali, and missionaries’ influence on Trobriand Islander debates regarding doba production. Since it is time-consuming and resource-depleting, some communities have stopped making doba and have reduced the gifting of doba in Sagali. Yet, islanders argue that doba and Sagali are indispensable because they are culturally significant and assist in the redistribution of wealth in a context where limited formal jobs exist. Significantly, doba and Sagali are also examples of women’s wealth because they demonstrate and affirm matrilineality. “Doba-Trobriand skirts,” a poem by Katherine Lepani, is deftly inserted after the first two chapters. It is a testament to the beauty of doba skirts and the serenity and solidarity achieved in the labour of making them.

Chapter three is “Women’s wealth and moral economies among the Maisin in Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea” by Anna-Karina Hermkens. It describes the fluidity and significance of tapa: the traditional material of the Pacific produced from pound bark, to create string bags, mats and art. The creation of these items play a large role in the Maisin concept of vina which translates to a social orientation of giving. This plays a key organisational role in the social relations of the Maisin community (p. 105). Apart from maintaining relationships and social cohesion, Hermkens explains that the objects produced by women impact the entire Maisin community because identity in this society is diffuse and not singly attributed to individuals. Yet, through shifts in economic structure such as result from globalisation and networks of distribution, these objects are now successful global commodities. Maisin women’s skill sets are thus commodified via linkage to global consumers by means of their artwork. Rather than their artistic projects serving Maisin’s underlying cultural orientation of giving or vina objects, woman now labour to satisfy global market demands and earn cash for their families. Hermkens takes a wide-angle view of whether women currently earn or gain much of anything from their labour when measured by community defined values rather than capitalist ones.

Relatedly, Chapter four deals with “Revaluing pots: Wanigela women and regional exchange” by Elizabeth Bonshek, also centered on Papua New Guinea. It chronicles the trade and barter expeditions of the women from the Wanigela tribe who exchange the pots they produce with those produced by Maisin women. This traditional barter system is dwindling as the influence of transnational purchases shape the value of objects in the Pacific. The Wanigela’s neighbouring community, the Maisins, have experienced financial success because of the global markets for women’s art, but this is not the case for the Wanigela. The Wanigela struggle to trade or sell their pots, creating a wealth gap and creating resentment between the two communities. While the author does a wonderful job articulating the shifts in valuing these “sinuous objects,” she offers no resolution for reducing the communal tension. The next chapter, also based in Papua New Guinea but focused on the Korafe, considers the production of pandanus mats by women of this indigenous community. It suggests that, though they affirm clan identity or express kindness, these mats do not amount to wealth.

By offering several ethnographic accounts in a region rich in small island states, the volume is able to highlight that women’s experiences are not monolithic, especially in their creative productions, and may differ, depending on the indigenous communities in which they are situated, as well as on global consumer interests. The following two chapters address women’s productions in Tonga, offering yet another set of distinct examples of how the global context – in this case, women’s involvement with formal employment – interferes with their production of ceremoniously given objects, or koloa. In Chapter Six, Wonu Veys addresses the dilemma of women needing to purchase items such as coconut oil and baskets, rather than making them, because of limited time due to formal work. Yet, the fundamental social value

of the object was that it carried a women's energy, or mana. Chapter Seven also focuses on Tonga, this time on its diaspora. It counters the argument of the previous chapter by suggesting that koloa objects do produce wealth when one focuses on the generative qualities of identity and small island culture since they allow women to carry items with them so that they "never felt poor" when living abroad (p. 225).

The final chapter addresses the influence of cash gifts in the 'rite of passage' rituals in the Cook Islands. The volume concludes by recognising that determining the meaning women's wealth remains complicated in the Pacific. Small island states have traditions of economy that differ from capitalist logics and have remained resistant to it. How definitions of women's wealth unfold across these islands will inform the larger social economy in the region, and not just the position of women in it.

*Sinuou* *Objects* showcases the tensions between traditional and ceremonial objects that women produce and the contemporary concerns with earning cash, with the final chapter addressing the influence of cash gifts in the rite of passage rituals in the Cook Islands. The volume concludes by recognizing that determining meanings of women's wealth remains complicated in the Pacific. By addressing various influences on the traditional economies in the Pacific and the gendered nature of production, the volume does an excellent job in drawing readers' attention to local points of contention in Oceania as the region engages with the impact of globalisation. It seems that the influence of Christian missionaries and contemporary forms of capitalism are palpable as Pacific island women seek to maintain island cultures and identities but also operate as agents within the broadening global economy in the Pacific

*Sierra Schuetz and Marina Karides*

*University of Hawai'i at Hilo*

*USA*

[sierras6@hawaii.edu](mailto:sierras6@hawaii.edu) and [mkarides@hawaii.edu](mailto:mkarides@hawaii.edu)

---