
On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation takes us to different places and agents of Tongan modernities situated at the con- and disjunctures of the local and the global in the urban capital Nuku’alofa. The book focuses on objects, bodies, consumption and performance as important sites where the local and the global are negotiated and connects them to transformations of gendered selves, social distinction and practice. Exploring sites of daily life such as flea markets, pawn shops, beauty parlours, beauty contests, evangelical church services and the gym, Besnier achieves a fascinating actor-centered ethnography of how urban modernity in Tonga is defined, enacted and performed by people of different segments of society. The book depicts vividly what is at stake for the actors involved and the emotions that surround these processes. Besnier’s work deeply benefits from his more than thirty-year-long engagement with people in Tonga. His book will resonate with questions that have emerged for many who have been working in diasporic societies in the Pacific over the last decades. It is a pleasure to read.

Tonga, like other Pacific Island societies, is located on the margins of the global in economic and geopolitical terms. Yet at the same time, society’s diasporic character keeps the global close to home. Almost every family has relatives who live in the richer states of the Pacific rim (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and migrants and their descendants hold close contact with the homeland. In consequence, being modern in Tonga always engages with two realms which are not always distinct but may blend and overlap: on one hand the “local forces of grounded reality” (12), e.g. Tonga’s hierarchical social stratification, ritual and ceremonial obligations and local notions of gendered selves, persons and beauty; on the other hand, the modern world of the diaspora and the West that is always part of local imaginaries and desires. These processes vary in different sites “with different relationships to a larger global context” (27).

One of the strengths of this book that distinguishes it from other studies of globalization is the exploration of the emotive dimensions that are involved in these engagements with modernity. Like in other Pacific Island nations (e.g. fa’a Samoa in Samoa, vakavanua in Fiji) Tongan discourse ideologically frequently distinguishes between “the Tongan way” (anga faka-Tonga) and outside modernity. However, in practice, people constantly negotiate their selves and worlds between the local and the global. Anga faka-Tonga is a polysemic term that embraces everything that is locally defined as being Tongan. The notion is associated with ofa (empathy, compassion, generosity)
and ‘ulungaanga faka’apa’apa (respect). To not respect and not behave according to tradition on the contrary brings mā (shame, embarrassment, humiliation). Thus modernity raises multifaceted anxieties: how one can participate in modernity first of all; but also how to be modern without being considered disrespectful of tradition and thus to experience humiliation and shame.

This predicament becomes most obvious at sites that are part of Tongan neo-liberal capitalism: flea markets and pawnshops. Both are situated at the margins of Tongan society and highlight the articulation of Tongan capitalism with consumption, dilemmas of entrepreneurialism and multiple meanings of objects as gifts and commodities. Flea market traders and pawnshop owners have to balance the necessities of capitalist enterprise with obligations to family and kinship. Clothing, the main article sold at the markets, embodies transnationalism. Clothes are often obtained from relatives overseas instead of monetary remittances and in exchange for koloa, Tongan highly valued textile valuables (mats and barkcloth) presented in rituals and ceremonies. Koloa thus hold a double meaning as gift and commodity and are part of people’s participation not only in tradition but also in modernity. This is aptly explored at the site of the pawnshop where people pawn koloa for cash loans, but then retrieve these objects again to present them as gifts in ceremonies in order to demonstrate one’s respect for tradition.

It is noteworthy that Besnier never loses sight of the gendered dimensions of modernity and a major part of the book discusses the interconnected themes of gendered selves, beauty ideals, the body and performance. Comparing two types of beauty contests, one for women and one for transgender leiti, the author highlights how the boundaries between locality and cosmopolitanism shift in different contexts. While the national Miss Heilala beauty emphasizes Tongan notions of femininity, the transgender Miss Galaxy contest highlights the articulation of transgender leiti with the modern world. If beauty contests and beauty salons are the sites where femininity and transgender ideals are negotiated, sport is the site where Tongan masculinity is defined. By playing rugby and working out at the gym, men cultivate the modern body and self. The book shows well how the medicalization of the body has brought new ideas of fitness, body shapes and nutrition that entangle with Tongan notions of size as a sign of rank and prestige.

The last ethnographic part of the book turns to evangelical churches as modernizing projects. Evangelicalism openly preaches individuality and upward social mobility through education and enterprise, thereby turning its back on the traditionalism of kinship, ritual and rank. The new churches provide modern opportunities for people from all social backgrounds, and their constant growth over the last decades reveals their importance for the local production of modernity. The exploration of religion will be of special interest to those interested in Pentecostalism in the Pacific and elsewhere.

Throughout his book Besnier thus locates the production of modernity in
“both local-global and local-local engagements” (242). His nuanced analysis of the multifaceted processes at work makes the book valuable not only for scholars of Pacific societies and their diasporas, but for everyone concerned with contemporary dynamics of globalization. His focus on urban sites of daily life renders the book different from other studies of modernity and globalization in the Pacific, and paves the way for hopefully more studies to come.

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SINA EMDE


This volume gathers twenty short essays presented at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in February 2006 in conjunction with an exhibition of the Cook/Forster Collection: artefacts from the second and the third voyage of Captain James Cook at the end of the eighteenth century, and later transferred to the Göttingen Institute. These very early cultural remains were of course an excellent pretext to address and somehow renew the question of recontextualization (see Thomas, Entangled Objects. Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific, Cambridge University Press, 1991). The book broadly deals with cultural change and indigenous agency in the context of a global, post-colonial and Christianized Oceania and the papers not only focus on indigenous artefact and Museum Collections but also consider phenomenon and history involving intercultural and intracultural transaction as well as factors of cultural change at the material, economical, political, juridical and ideological levels.

Apart from the comparative archaeological contribution from Hanlon, the first part is devoted to early encounters between European explorers and Pacific islanders with a focus on the social relationships and material exchanges that are documented through journals, archaeology, local histories or travel logs. As one can expect, here Tahiti is the main island under discussion in most of this section’s papers. In particular Anne Salmond and her work on the very seldom mentioned Spanish expedition of Don Domingo Boenichea in 1772 and 1774, brings unusual and original material to link with the question of shifting meanings during early encounters in Tahiti.

With the second part titled Memories, the reader enters into contemporary issues about cultural transmission and invention of tradition. The naming and renaming practice in Vanuatu stands as an original mnemonic collective tool while the local construction of kastam in Baluan Islands illustrates in a very