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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Kinship as Continuity and Transformative Process in Pacific Island Societies**

**Review by Kathleen Barlow**

*Living Kinship in the Pacific*

by Christina Toren & Simonne Pauwels (eds)

Berghahn Books, 2015

Toren and Pauwels frame the essays in *Living Kinship* in the Pacific as demonstrations of how thoroughly kinship continues to produce social relations and community for Pacific Islanders, and does so as an historical process that draws on meanings enacted through daily life and ritual. Drawing on Sahlins (2011) and Kuper (2013), they affirm that each acting subject lives in a culturally constituted reality in which kinship is articulated with and through other domains, including exchange, gender, cosmology, and political economy. For the societies included here emphasis is on political economy as community, leadership, land and place, as mediated through marriage and siblingship. While the authors argue that kinship is historically constituted through biology and culture, the definitions of history, biology (as genetics?) and intersubjectivity that are asserted as the process through which kinship is 'lived,' are not made clear, nor are they articulated comparatively in the essays that follow. Nevertheless, there are excellent accounts of culturally specific renderings of biological relatedness across the cultures described here.

The volume begins with three chapters that provide striking examples of contemporary kinship sustained in and adapted to contexts heavily influenced by nation-state politics and global economy. Nabobo-Baba (Ch. 1) shows how in Fiji kinship is expressed as chiefly compassion through gifts of land (*i solisoli*) and material goods, a practice that runs directly counter to the competitive and accumulative strategies of capitalism. She gives three examples in which land was gifted from one chief to another to provide a social safety net for a community in need or to benefit the larger good. These contemporary examples reveal lines of fracture between contractual relationships modeled on

Western institutions and the spirit of kinship obligation and exchange based on traditional practices. Jara Hulkenberg's essay (Ch. 3) demonstrates the strength of Fijian ideas of community, place and kin ties in contexts of urban-rural migration, inter-island inequalities in access to resources, and out-migration to transnational contexts. Fijians away from home go to great lengths to provide remittances to home villages and to provide barkcloth mats and valuables, and appropriate kin to perform life-cycle rituals for those living in town, city or another country. Identity and membership continue to be based in *vanua*, one's home place (including land, people, ancestors). Ching-Hsiu Lin's essay (Ch. 2) examines the impact of monetized economic relations on exchange practices related to marriage among the Truku of Taiwan. In order to purchase pigs for bridewealth and for sacrifices to redress wrongdoings or alleviate misfortune, families and households enter into debt relationships in contrast to the formerly egalitarian nature of inter-household exchange.

Chapters 4 through 10 concern complementary and hierarchical relationships established through the maternal line and based in cross-sex siblingship. In each society activities and meanings involving gender, procreation, membership, life-cycle transitions and material exchange stem from the crucial brother-sister relationship. The authors highlight the power of maternal relatedness (often the superiority of a man's elder sister), as a complement to formal emphasis on relations through the father in lineage, residence patterns and authority. In Tokelau (Hoëm Ch. 4), ritualized behavior takes two forms—ritual based in kinship emphasizes offspring through brothers and sisters as complementary groups, and festive community rituals that comment on the leadership, legitimacy, moral quality, etc. of cognatic ties organized through cross-sex siblings. Völkel (Ch. 5) analyzes terminology expressing stratification and possession in Tongan. The '*eiki/tu*'a distinction (superior/inferior) maps onto sister/brother, cousin, patrilateral/matrilateral kin terms. Linguistic features discriminate with possessives who controls the relationship and who is subordinate, privileging ties through the eldest sister.

The Ankave-Anga of Papua New Guinea (Bonnemère Ch. 6) emphasize the sister's role in establishing her brother's full adult status as a maternal uncle. Because Ankave-Anga limit blood relatedness to the mother only, a man and his sister share blood, but he does not pass it on to his children. His sister must ritually enable each phase of his life-cycle transitions and his own child's birth. His sister's children are his only "blood relatives" and as a maternal uncle he maintains connection to the next generation.

The importance of cross-sex siblingship informs an extensive set of classificatory relationships in Lau, Fiji (and other Polynesian societies). Pauwels (Ch. 7) describes the *vasu* status or relationship in terms of the superiority of the elder sister to her brother, and hence her children's ability to ask for (or

take) from him and her obligation to care for and protect her brother's children. This prerogative applies to whole kin groups and chiefdoms in relation to the sibling set through which they are linked, and organizes relationships with respect to relative status, respect and avoidance, gifting, land/sea prerogatives, and alliance in case of conflict.

Tcherkézoff (Ch. 8) traces a widespread consensus in Samoan communities that it is unseemly for villagers to marry each other to a conceptual basis in cross-sex siblingship that requires avoidance, especially with respect to sexuality. In terms of the component groups and symbolic construction of the village as a "family," chiefs are fathers, suggesting that all other males and females are brothers and sisters. In practical terms, if one villager marries another, the man retains his status, but the woman becomes an in-marrying wife, thus losing her valuable status as a "daughter" of the village.

Douaire-Marsaudon's essay (Ch. 9) takes up the Tongan parallel to the Fijian *vasu* relationship, showing how the brother-sister pair and their offspring are the crux of intergenerational kinship, mediating between domestic and political spheres. Because of the sister's superiority, being most closely related to their founding ancestor/god, her son is *fahu* to his mother's brother. In this patrilineal society, the father has secular title, land and authority, but the father's sister wields sacred power over the reproductive success of her brother's wife. Extended *fahu* relationships designate hierarchy among groups whose chiefs are related through the maternal line, informing inter-island military and political alliances. (Nabobo-Baba shows how these positions remain functional in contemporary life.)

Cayrol (Ch. 10) analyzes relationships through women in Nasau, Fiji. Whereas men are more rooted in land, locality and house/household, women are mobile. They move at marriage to their husband's house where they must be welcomed by their husband's father's sister or her representative. Paths of exchange among lineages are established by women through marriage. Crucial in these configurations is the paternal grandmother, who is empowered to give names drawn from her own lineage. This naming prerogative is emblematic of women's contributions as they establish paths of wealth and exchange by marrying in.

The volume concludes with an essay by Toren (Ch. 11) inviting us to consider kinship as intersubjectively developed through life experience in culturally constructed contexts. The relationship among ritualized behavior, ritual meaning, developmental trajectories and structural features of kin terms and relations is addressed in a necessarily abbreviated way. That these are dynamic and changing dimensions of cultural life that nevertheless often hew closely to core cultural values over long stretches of time is well-demonstrated in the articles that precede this discussion. Overall, we are offered ethnographically rich insights into contemporary kinship as grounded in longstanding traditions and persisting in the face of tremendous forces of change.

## References Cited

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**Kathleen Barlow** has conducted local village-based and comparative regional research in the Lower Sepik River and North Coastal region of Papua New Guinea beginning in the 1980's. Her main research interests are gender women, cultural learning, material culture and ritual among Murik and their trading partners.



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