

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346013181>

Book Review of Connell and Lee (eds) Change and Continuity in the Pacific: Revisiting the Region

Research · November 2020

CITATIONS

0

READS

19

1 author:



John Cox

University of Melbourne

60 PUBLICATIONS 463 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The Social and Religious Dimensions of Disasters in the Pacific [View project](#)



Bingo! Social experiences, harms and responses to bingo playing in disadvantaged Victorian populations [View project](#)

John Connell and Helen Lee (Eds.) (2018). *Change and continuity in the Pacific: Revisiting the region*. Routledge Pacific Rim Geographies, Vol. 10. London and New York: Routledge. 216pp. ISBN: 978-0-3675-9240-0 (pbk) US\$55.

Change and continuity in the Pacific is a collection of essays by thirteen anthropologists and geographers with decades of field experience in the Pacific Islands. Many undertook fieldwork in very isolated locations in the 1970s and 1980s. All have maintained relationships and research interests with people from those original communities over periods of 30 or 40 years. The chapters offer broad coverage of communities across the region, including Cook Islands, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. As individual chapters and as a collection, the papers in this volume offer a remarkable set of perspectives on social change in Oceania.

As disciplinary methods and interests, research funding, and other institutional incentives veer away from long-term fieldwork in remote places, one reads the book with the sense that it is partly a threnody for an invaluable way of doing research that is increasingly difficult to sustain. As the authors retell old stories, the volume has enough nostalgia to charm the reader. However, more importantly, it also tells stories of change and adaptation with an analytical edge that is informed by deep knowledge and long experience – and moral concern for the future of their old friends – that allows cultural continuities to emerge as contemporary responses to new conditions.

The movement of people from home islands to urban centres, or into diasporic life in the cities of former colonisers, is a major theme of the book. New forms of transnational communities have emerged and are reshaping diasporas and homelands alike. Where cultural loss and the dilution of distinctive collective island identities might be expected (by academics or by islanders themselves), here are narratives of social connection taking new forms, often utilising global tools such as social media to rearticulate modes of being, being together and belonging (as Chambers and Chambers note in their chapter on Tuvalu). In other cases, as Flinn argues for the Pollapese (Chuuk State, Micronesia), the revival of old traditions in navigation and dance has happened as a result of islanders realising that their local customs are highly valued by others in Micronesia and beyond. These adaptations all happen in different ways, depending on the community studied; but there are broader continuities, not only culturally within groups of people but - as the collection makes its comparative contribution - across the region, as Pacific Islanders face similar conditions in different locations and adapt in similar ways. There are also similar troubles: health problems that result from the embrace of imported cheap foods and changes in lifestyle; or the declining quality of basic services and the emergence of poverty as some places are left on the periphery of their nations or the global economy (Allen; Connell; Sofer).

One of the continuities across the region is the ongoing contestation of the meaning of development. Connell's chapter refers to the lament that all the old men of Siwai (in Bougainville) have died, a reference to both the fate of his cohort of initial informants and the passing of old ways of maintaining the good life, and the ongoing disappointment with (and experimentation in new approaches to) development. Lee documents the tensions between developmentalist ideas of youth empowerment that are supported by donor agencies, local NGOs and the Tongan government as against the resilience of Tongan norms of deference and subordination, based on seniority in age and rank. Shankman observes new forms of financialised dependency in Samoa. Carucci's chapter chronicles the disappointment of

Enewetak people with the broken promises of the United States to compensate them for the damage caused by its nuclear program in the Marshall Islands.

The book documents a diversity of experiences of fieldwork. Feinberg's chapter on the adaptations of Anutan chiefly traditions (Solomon Islands) – including the somewhat uneasy incorporation of his adult son into this system – provides an example of how long-term fieldwork relations can erode the distinction between insider and outsider. Lindstrom notes how the Tannese (Vanuatu) comment on his returns to the island as an honorary “grandpa” whose reappearance comes as no surprise. Yet, this embrace cannot always be assumed: Lewis, having grown up in the Cook Islands, now remarks on the unease of becoming an outsider after a 30-year research gap.

Change and continuity in the Pacific provides an overview of processes of social change and mobility from across the region that is grounded in remarkably long-term histories of engagement with local communities, even as those communities now expand beyond their geographic homelands. The volume explores contemporary negotiations and rearticulations of tradition and modernity; movements and returns; expansion of horizons and stasis; innovation, aspiration and disillusionment. And it records the authors' own hopes, fears and continuing connection and fascination with the Pacific communities that many of them have studied for most of their own life journeys. The collection's longitudinal perspective is refreshing as an antidote for much of the persistently short-term thinking that underpins development programs in the Pacific; and, on the academic side, the book attests to the value of scholarship that maintains relationships of integrity with people in the field of study.

John Cox
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
La Trobe University
Australia
J.Cox2@latrobe.edu.au
