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Sinuous Objects: Revaluing Women's Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific

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Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (eds). *Sinuous Objects: Revaluing Women's Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Press, 2017. Pp xxv +292, ISBN 9781760461331 (paperback) 9781760461348 (ebook)

It is now over forty years since Annette Weiner's ethnographies challenged the anthropological orthodoxies about women's wealth in the Pacific. She demonstrated how objects woven by women – such as the banana leaf bundles of the Trobriands and the fine mats of Tonga and Samoa – were not only valuable in themselves as exchange items, but were a source of women's value and status.

In the intervening decades debates about the meanings of exchange items have taken new directions and theoretical debates about gender have profoundly altered anthropological understandings of women's social roles. This collection of essays gathers together new theoretical challenges to prevailing ideas about female creativity, relative power, and conceptions of value transformations that have affected women's wealth since colonisation.

The volume comprises eight chapters with an epilogue and includes three poems that evoke vividly the beauty and power of women's creations. The Introduction by the editors provides an overview of the major theoretical issues that have informed anthropological analyses of exchange, gender, wealth and value. They weave together ideas of value derived from disparate theories, illustrating the ways that material and monetary worth are constantly imbricated with social and moral values. This densely and deftly argued chapter sets out the scope of inquiry and the broader significance of their theoretical synthesis for anthropology.

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The first two chapters deal with Trobriand *doba*, the bundles of banana leaves that are made and distributed by women at mortuary ceremonies. Katherine Lepani concentrates on the 'enduring value' of these bundles and some of the ways that Christian missionaries and monetisation have affected their use and the meanings attached to them. Processes of substitution and commensurability that emphasise women's work have ensured that transacted objects continue to affirm women's role in the social reproduction of a matriline. Michelle McCarthy too describes historical changes that have altered the techniques and volume of *doba* production. She also examines the successes and failures of contemporary opposition to *doba* from evangelical churches. She reveals the ways that ideas about economic development and monetary wealth are working to change the value of women's labour, to the point where whole villages have opted out of these exchanges. Both authors reflect upon the changing forms but continuously gendered nature of gifts and commodities in Trobriand culture.

Anna-Karina Hermkens' chapter on tapa cloth production by Maisin women of Collingwood Bay in Papua New Guinea constitutes a superb ethnographic description and subtle recasting of arguments about alienability, labour and creativity. She documents the historical changes that have rendered tapa the ceremonial clothing for Christian celebrations and the more recent attempts at commercialisation of tapa under the auspices of non-government organisations. As the business of making and selling are compartmentalised, men assuming the middleman status, so the meaning of tapa is transformed. Men gain control over the revenue generated – '...thereby alienating women from the tapa they make' (p117). At the same time, when tapa becomes an 'art form' in international contexts, it attains a symbolic status as an artefact of 'Maisin Culture' and its relationship with its specific creator is compromised.

Fibre skirts, woven mats and baskets that were once ubiquitous items of everyday use across the Pacific receded from view as imported textiles were introduced. In the precolonial past pots made from local clay sources were the main cooking utensils and women were the potters. From the late nineteenth century enamel and metal cookware gradually replaced the more fragile local products. For those communities that had previously produced pots for trade with neighbouring groups this shift had

dramatic and deleterious effects, both economically and culturally. Pots had formerly been traded for valuable ceremonial objects as well as food. Economic changes meant that they no longer played an essential role in trade and exchange. In many places the skills of making, decorating and firing pots declined until only elderly women knew them. Elizabeth Bonshek describes this process for the potters of Wanigela, noting however that pots are still being made and exchanged and that some younger women are learning the art. Bonshek also provides an excellent discussion of the Eurocentric value of 'art' over 'craft' – a theme with which others in the volume also engage. Indeed, the volume includes several detailed accounts of the skilled creative processes involved in the manufacture of women's wealth that stand as superb examples of ethnographic description.

Many of the objects that count as women's wealth function as mundane items of utility as well as exchange items that have extraordinary significance in social relationships. Elisabetta Gneccchi-Ruscone's chapter on the string bags and pandanus mats made by Korafe women demonstrates the complexities in meaning, value and practicality and sociality of these items. Ping-Ann Addo, on the other hand, deals with fine woven items, *koloa*, that are unequivocally 'the most important category of traditional wealth for people from the Kingdom of Tonga' (p.211). She shows how fine mats incorporate knowledge and efficacy, which is then transmitted in the gift relationship. This chapter, and that of Jane Horan on Cook Islands *tivaivai* – applied fabric quilts – traces the ways that gifts and transactions between diasporic communities and their home islands maintain and perpetuate social and intergenerational relations. Tivaivai, made using imported cloth and skills imparted initially by missionaries, have effectively replaced tapa and woven mats, but they carry with them the social significance of their predecessors.

In various ways, all contributors wrestle with the problem that the exchange items they describe now work as both gifts and commodities, sometimes involving cash and a market that erases some of the value that previously obtained in women's products themselves. Hermkens' chapter is the most comprehensive in exploring this issue theoretically, but in each chapter the analysis is grounded in an ethnographic specificity that provides insight into the complexity of categories such as 'value' and 'wealth' and the gender of objects and transactions. Margaret Jolly's Epilogue draws

together the strands of argument and reflects on the directions that anthropological inquiry has taken over the past four decades. Recognition of historical change, migration and engagement with globalising economic forces has profoundly altered the ways that women's wealth can be conceptualised.

This collection advances debates about the gendered meanings of value and commoditisation and the changing nature of gift exchange in the contemporary Pacific. It contests European ideas about the distinctions between art and craft and the 'artist' and the 'maker'. It is also a major contribution to the anthropological literature on the role of objects in social relationships.

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