Engaging with Strangers: Love and Violence in the Rural Solomon Islands by Debra McDougall (review)

Tarcisius Kabutaulaka

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 32, Number 2, 2020, pp. 621-624 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0047

Book and Media Reviews

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 32, Number 2, 621–632

Engaging with Strangers: Love and Violence in the Rural Solomon Islands, by Debra McDougall. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016. ISBN hardback 978-1-78533-020-9; ISBN e-book 978-1-78533-021-6; 287 pages, photographs, notes, glossary, references, index. Cloth, US$135.00; e-book, US$29.95.

Debra McDougall's *Engaging with Strangers: Love and Violence in the Rural Solomon Islands* provides an insightful and in-depth account of how Solomon Islanders in rural areas, far from the centers of state power, regularly encounter and engage with "strangers." It weaves a narrative showing that, rather than being insular, isolated, atomistic, tribal, and inhospitable, rural communities have always been open and willing to engage with the world beyond their shores. As McDougall states, "these social worlds and the people who inhabit them are cosmopolitan" (236). They constantly engage with people from other places, adopt ideas, technologies, and goods, and speak languages other than their own, illustrating that no local worlds are entirely isolated and no cultures are really bounded.

The book focuses on Rannongga, an island in the Western Province of Solomon Islands. In many ways, this island exists at the margins of the influences of the state and other global forces. It is relatively small compared to others in the archipelago, it does not host major government or church headquarters, it is not in one of Solomon Islands' high-traffic seaways, and it does not have an airstrip or a major shipping port. Its contemporary connection to the outside world is largely through Gizo, the small town that serves as the Western Province's capital. However, McDougall shows that despite being on the outer margins of the centers of power, the people of Rannongga are, and have always been, very cosmopolitan—traveling to other places and welcoming, accommodating, and adopting strangers from nearby islands as well as those from afar. She shows that even prior to European contact, the people of Rannongga had built relationships with those from New Georgia, Vella Lavella, Choiseul, and other islands. These were done through wars, the capture and adoption of people from other islands, intermarriages, the giving of land, and other relationships that have created lasting genealogical connections.

McDougall uses ethnographical, archival, and other sources to dispel the idea that islands at the margins of state power are isolated, insular, and powerless. She references distant past and contemporary accounts and experiences to show how these societies have always been cosmopolitan. While the accounts are specific to Rannongga and to Solomon Islands more generally, they are located within broader theoretical frames drawn largely from anthropology and sociology, as well as other academic disciplines. McDougall introduces the book with the stories of her own arrival in Rannongga in October 1998 and how she was welcomed and adopted and forged relationships that continue long after her fieldwork. This provides an interesting and useful insight into ethnography in faraway places, including the role of the stranger-researcher-

guest and that of Rannonggans as both research subjects and hosts for the researcher. They negotiated internally how the researcher fit (or did not fit) into their society, showing how subjects of academic research are often themselves researchers, observing and finding out more about the person they have accepted into their community. The book also provides an interesting insight into how the researcher managed her encounters with peoples at the margins of state influence and with her place not only as a stranger-researcher-guest but also as a young woman from Merika (America) who had landed herself in what might have seemed to be the edge of the earth compared to her US home.

Chapter one discusses the idea of "stranger sociality" and the dominant Western social theories, providing the theoretical and conceptual framework for the book. This leads to chapter two, which tracks the sociospatial and political-economic transformations of the twentieth century, showing how Rannongga, and by extension Solomon Islands, was constantly changing and transformative. However, this does not necessarily mean discontinuity and dislocation. Despite the changes that have occurred as a result of changing settlements, Christianity, state influence, and socioeconomic developments through industries such as logging, the people of Rannongga continue to be rooted in traditions, or kastom. Chapters three and four provide an overview of the deeper histories of Rannongga during the "time before" or "time of darkness"—the period prior to European contact. It also discusses the pacifications that have occurred as a result of the establishment of Christianity and government, two of the most influential institutions that have since been embraced by the people of Rannongga.

Chapter five examines kinship relationships and land tenure. These are especially important in the context of outsider-driven development projects such as large-scale logging by multinational corporations. The chapter underscores how in Rannongga, like elsewhere in Solomon Islands and in other Pacific Islands, kinship and land tenure are intertwined—land tenure is ultimately about how kinship relations and stories are inscribed onto landscapes. These relationships and stories are often disrupted by outsider-driven development projects because of competition for access to land and the resources on it and for control over the benefits from such projects. This is reflective of changes happening elsewhere in Solomon Islands and illustrates how local communities are entangled with the state and multinational corporations as well as with each other. This is further highlighted in chapter six, which juxtaposes two contrasting forms of development: large-scale logging and community-based conservation projects, which are often facilitated by international nongovernmental organizations. While both are outside-driven, they have attracted support from local people creating complex entanglements between the Islanders and outside forces.

The rest of the book (chapters seven and eight) places Rannongga within the context of Solomon Islands, especially in light of the conflict that started on Guadalcanal in late 1998 and resulted in the deployment of the

Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in mid-2003. It challenges the idea that the conflict was primarily a result of tribal and atomistic binaries between Solomon Islanders. Instead, McDougall argues that "the violence had little to do with the failure of local people to transcend local bonds of kith and kin to embrace a more cosmopolitan national identity. Rather, it arose from a broadly shared frustration with a state that consistently failed to serve the common good, and political elites who seem more responsive to the agendas of diverse transnational actors than to the needs of the ordinary citizens they are supposed to serve" (15).

This book provides a valuable insight into how the people of Rannongga, like other Solomon Islanders, engage with strangers. It shows how descriptions of isolation and disconnections experienced by societies at the margins of state power and global forces are often inaccurate. The author utilizes multilayered subjects—Rannongga communities, the Solomon Islands state, international nongovernmental organizations, multinational corporations, the stranger-researcher-guest—to show how people from Rannongga negotiate and weave relationships that thread beyond their island. It also demonstrates the degree and nature of their agency in forging these relationships, while simultaneously acknowledging the economic power of outside forces.

Engaging with Strangers is a valuable contribution to scholarship about Solomon Islands in particular and the Pacific Islands more generally, and it would be a useful resource for students in anthropology, sociology, history and political science, especially those planning to work in Solomon Islands or other Melanesian countries. McDougall does a wonderful job of knitting a narrative that is accessible, engaging, and informative. Her work breathes life into ethnographic research and provides useful reflections on ethnography. As someone who comes from the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, a place often referred to as "isolated," I find that this book validates what I have always known: We were never isolated. We have always been cosmopolitan.

TARCISIUS KABUTAULAKA
University of Hawai'i–Mānoa

* * *

Living Kinship in the Pacific, edited by Christina Toren and Simonne Pauwels. Pacific Perspectives: Studies of the European Society for Oceanists 4. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. ISBN cloth 978-1-78238-577-6; ISBN paper 978-1-78533-520-4; 274 pages, illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, US$135.00; paper, US$29.95.

Edited by Christina Toren and Simonne Pauwels, the collected works that make up *Living Kinship in the Pacific* offer case studies that examine kinship practices throughout the Pacific across both space and time. As Toren and Pauwels explain, "The book's objective is straightforward: to provide case studies of contemporary Pacific kinship, and in so doing arrive at an understanding of what is currently happening to kinship in an area where deep historical links provide for close and useful comparison" (1). More provocatively, the collection