

**Women's Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific:  
Gender, value and moral economies**  
Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (editors)

**Outline**

1. Introduction

Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani

**Women's Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific**

Some thirty years ago, Pacific anthropology was dominated by debates about “women's wealth”. These were triggered by Annette's Weiner's (1976) critical reappraisal of Bronislaw Malinowski's classic work on the Trobriand Islands, and her observations that women's production of “wealth” (banana leaf bundles and skirts) and exchange in *sagali* (mortuary) rituals occupied a central role in Trobriand matrilineal cosmology and social organization. Weiner's work has been criticized for making ahistorical and universalistic claims about the inherent value of women's regenerative power and for perpetuating western gender dichotomies (see Strathern 1981 and Jolly 1992). At the same time, she is credited for having brought women's work to scholarly attention.

Surprisingly, the role of objects made by Pacific women and their significance in exchange, gender relations and the constitution, or contestation, of sociality has received relatively little scholarly attention. Maureen MacKenzie's analysis of Telefol string bags (1991); Annie Walter's (1996) and Lissant Bolton's studies of plaited mats made by Vanuatu women (1993, 2003); John Barker's (2008) and Anna-Karina Hermkens' (2013) analyses of barkcloth made by Maisin women in Papua New Guinea; and Ping-Ann Addo's (2013) study of women, wealth, and tradition in the Tongan diaspora, represent the major ethnographic contributions thus far. Inspired by Weiner's urge to study ‘female’ artefacts, MacKenzie, for example, shows how string bags are complex social products that provide a model for both men and women to explore and comprehend their existence. Bolton's studies show how women, mats, and landscape are interconnected, elucidating the central position of both mats and women on Ambea Island. She adequately demonstrates how the production of plaited mats is intertwined with women's knowledge and agency and notions about *kastom*. These analyses have contributed significantly to our understanding of how women's objects are important elements in Pacific societies and the diaspora.

The anthropological approach to dealing with things has to a large extent been informed by the Western division between art and artefacts (for example: Boas 1927; Fraser 1962: 13; Layton 1991), a classification that has brought about distinctive theoretical perspectives and methodological analyses. The first category of objects (i.e. art) has been approached from an aesthetic and/or a communicative viewpoint in which semiotics and structuralism are used to explain these objects of art as cultural phenomenon (for example: Boas 1927; Forge 1979; Price 1989; Layton 1991, 2003; Morphy 1994). In contrast, studies of artefacts have mainly focused on technology, form, style, and/or function.

Anthropologists interested in the study of things realize that this division between art and artefacts is limited, as are the various approaches to it. They offer plural and holistic ways of analysing the relationships between people and the objects they produce (for example: Kopytoff 1986: 66; Locher 1990: 34; MacKenzie 1991; Bolton 1993; Miller 1994: 129-30; Hoskins 1998; Gell 1998). According to Marilyn Strathern (1990: 221), for example, objects circulate within relationships in order to make relations in which objects can circulate. This implies that both people and things simultaneously create and are created through the relationships within which they are situated. This view of Melanesian relations and identity is often associated with gift exchange, whereas commodity exchange is identified with Western forms of exchange and sociability (Strathern 1990; Mosko 1992, 2002). However, it seems that this theoretical division is frequently used to essentialise forms of exchange that occur simultaneously in one ethnographic setting. People often have multiple understandings of exchange, using objects, including objects made by women, both as a gift and as a commodity in various types of exchanges and transactions (Hermkens 2013).

In this volume, we bring the debate about women's wealth back to the fore again by engaging critically with debates about gender and materiality, relationality, and the social life and agency of things (Kopytoff 1986; Gell 1998). Through a comparative perspective and situating women's work and their lives in the *longue durée* of Christian conversion, colonialism, commoditization and globalization in the Pacific, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, the papers in this volume question, explore and engage in debate with each other about how women's wealth is defined, valued, and contested in current exchanges, bride-price debates, programs for sustainable development, efforts of nation-building, and the challenges of living in diaspora. The papers draw on ethnographic material from the Trobriand Islands and Oro Province in Papua New Guinea, and from Vanuatu, Cook Islands, and New Zealand. Unique to this volume is the

linking of case studies from each area, with the authors directly commenting upon each others' perspectives and interpretation of women's wealth in these ethnographic contexts.

2.Katherine Lepani, Australian National University.

**Doba and ephemeral durability: the enduring material value of women's work in the Trobriand regenerative economy**

Doba, the bundles of dried banana leaves that comprise the central transactions in Trobriand mortuary feasts called sagali, signify the regeneration of matrilineal identity through the production and exchange of material goods. This paper considers the durability of doba as both the subject and object of women's work which activates relationality between persons and things and heralds the enduring value of gendered agency in the collective project of social reproduction and cohesion. I situate doba in relation to the deep sedimentation of Christianity in Trobriand cultural forms by tracing recollections from the early years of the 20th century when Trobriand women first introduced pieces of cotton fabric, and garments made on Singer hand sewing machines, into sagali distributions on the Methodist mission station under the watchful eyes of expatriate missionaries. Called karekwa after the English 'calico,' fabric has been fully integrated into sagali over several generations and is now regarded as an essential exchange item. Purchased from shops or acquired through elaborate networks of obligation, karekwa augments doba transactions in a number of forms, whether by the bolt, cut into two-metre lengths, or sewn into skirts, blouses, shirts, and pillow slips. The commensurability of pieces of cloth with banana leaf bundles raises the question of the inevitable replacement of one form for the other through the increasing commoditization of sagali and what this signals about the role of women in the Trobriand regenerative economy. Yet the changing materiality of sagali distributions, where manufactured goods and cash have produced an efflorescence of new forms of exchange, has not supplanted the ephemeral bundles of dried banana leaves. Women utilise the organizational framework of the church to acquire banana leaf bundles for their sagali projects by making cash donations to the Women's Fellowship. Doba retains centre stage in signifying the material value of women's agency and matrilineal identity in articulation with Christian models of domestic productivity and individual and collective patterns of modern consumption.

3.Michelle MacCarthy, University of Bergen, Norway.

**Doing Away with Doba? Women's wealth and shifting values in Trobriand mortuary distributions**

The importance of banana leaf bundles (doba) in the Trobriand mortuary distributions called sagali are well documented, and have been the subject of considerable anthropological discussion. In this paper, I return to the role of doba and its production as a defining aspect of proper Trobriand womanhood, as well as being essential to maintaining social relationships through its distribution at sagali. Today, however, amidst pressure from the leaders of several newly established evangelical churches in the Trobriands, some villages are choosing to abandon the production and exchange of doba in mortuary distributions (and, indeed, to curb or cease the practice of sagali) in favour of smaller exchanges, using cash and store goods instead of the locally produced doba. Disparate discourses are employed to justify on the one hand, a “waste not, want not” attitude as espoused by the church which characterizes doba production as a waste of time better spent in more “productive” activity; and a competing argument based on both the unique identity of Trobriand Island women who manufacture their own wealth, and on the democratizing effects of such production as outside the cash economy (to which most people have limited access). I argue that at the base of these discourses is a fundamental tension between competing regimes of value. On the one hand is a reflexive and determined effort to maintain “culture” and the social obligations entailed therein, as part and parcel of an essentialized Trobriand identity looking to the past; and an equally reflexive but forward-looking, “from darkness to light” discourse that emphasizes modernity and a conscious move away from what both church officials and some Trobrianders characterize as their “primitive” past. I explore here how these alternate discourses reflect competing obligations to Christianity and the ancestors; individual priorities as against inter- and intra-clan obligations; endogenous and exogenous forms of wealth; and globalization/modernity vis à vis regional specificity and a unique anthropological/economic heritage.

### **Poem by Katherine Lepani**

4. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Australian National University.

#### **Values of cloth: Women’s wealth and moral economies among the Maisin in Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea.**

Among the Maisin people living in Collingwood Bay (Oro province, Papua New Guinea), substances of cloth and women merge in the process of making and painting barkcloth. What happens when these cloths are given away during life-cycle rituals, exchanged as barter for canoes, string-bags and

sorcery, or sold as commodities? In this article it is argued that dominant approaches of social exchange have not taken fully into account the sensibilities of women's wealth and the role of women in both the production and exchanging of goods. The imported distinctions between objects and subjects, and gifts and commodities have often prevented a more sentient approach of things, their materiality, their affect and their correspondence (Ingold 2013) with humans. Likewise, women are often placed in the periphery of social life wherein objects are produced and given in exchange, or they are regarded as passive subjects who are exchanged between men. Thereby, the entanglement between women and the things they make, as well as their agency in social and cultural reproduction has been understated. Here, I will focus on the correspondence between cloth and women and on its predicament in the context of domestic moral economies and processes of commoditization.

5. Elizabeth Bonshek, University of Canberra.

**Revaluing pots: Wanigela women and regional exchange.**

Wanigela women exchange *baitab nokwat* (cooking pots) for barkcloth, string bags, mats, dogs and canoes in an extensive regional network within Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea. Their exchange pots are also sold for cash when access to markets arises. However, the future of pot making and the reproduction of cultural knowledge now emblematic of the women of Wanigela is not certain: fewer women continue to make pots, and of these only a small number are young women. For the latter, the sale of pots as commodities, rather than participation in a regional exchange network of some antiquity, provides the impetus to commence learning the skills of their mothers and grandmothers. Furthermore, long standing social and cultural values governing the exchangeability of pots are poised for transformation as Wanigela women watch the barkcloth production of their neighbours shift to a commoditized art form. This paper follows a group of senior potters as they undertake a pot exchange expedition for barkcloth. I examine the contemporary contexts of *baitab nokwat* exchanges and explore how women's wealth in Wanigela is made, valued but also contested through the flow-on effects of a project which focused on the economic development of the women's neighbours. Questions concerning the value of pots to Wanigela women today emerge as the social relations that have supported pottery production and exchange in the past are challenged.

6. Elisabetta Gnechi Ruscone, Università di Milano-Bicocca

**The extraordinary values of ordinary objects:**

## **Stringbags and pandanus mats as Korafe women's wealth?**

This paper takes its lead from Mackenzie's (1991) and Hermkens' (2013) insights into the roles that women's valuables play as expression and constitution of relations and of persons (Strathern 1988). Artefacts express different values in the different performative contexts they enter into in the course of their life histories (Appadurai 1986). While tapa cloths, like facial tattoos, have assumed a great importance in identifying women from the Tufi - Collingwood bay area with regards to outsiders (Barker 2008; Hermkens 2013), these garments today are only worn in ceremonial demonstrative contexts. String bags and pandanus mats made by Korafe women in the same area, on the other hand, are not associated to tribal identity. They are mundane objects made and primarily used by women on a daily basis. They express different values in everyday life, in ritual contexts when their significance assumes further dimensions, and in exchange, both informal and ceremonial, showing their entanglements with diverse fields of action. The value attributed these objects by Korafe women and men in different social contexts does not mean that they are perceived as women's wealth. Mats and stringbags enter into ceremonial exchanges as part of patrilineal clans' social and material assets, and yet women express a great deal of autonomy in deciding if, when, how many they make, and for whom. Women thus enact their pivotal social role in conjugal and brother-sister relations (Weiner 1992, Godelier 1999).

### **Poem by Tessa Miller (Fijian Tapa artist)**

7. Wonu Veys, Curator Oceania, Leiden Netherlands

#### **Capturing the 'female essence'? Textile wealth in Tonga**

The presentation of large amounts of goods and food during ceremonial occasions in Tonga has been discussed extensively in anthropological literature. Based on nineteenth-century observations and twentieth-century scholarship a broad distinction is generally asserted between objects made by men and those made by women. The latter, comprising a variety of textile valuables but also baskets and coconut oil, are termed *koloa* and are said to capture the 'female essence' (Kaeppler 1999). In this chapter I intend to first examine the numerous definitions of *koloa*, for some a concept inalienably linked to femininity. Focusing on textile wealth at historical and contemporary chiefly rituals, I will then explore Tongan women's present and past strategies in deploying these objects as ways of expressing modernity, while staying rooted in the past and protecting and

nurturing relatives during life-changing events. In so doing, I will question the notion of ‘gendered objects’ as expressed by Weiner (1992) and perpetuated in a Tongan context by other scholars.

8. Ping-Ann Ado, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

### **Passing on, and Passing on Wealth: Compelling Values in Tongan Exchange**

Women from the Kingdom of Tonga have proudly maintained a practice of gifting *koloa* -- fine mats and barkcloth, decorated baskets, quilts, and bottles of oil – as their families have moved “up in the world” monetarily and away from their homeland geographically. In other work on Tongan women and their textile wealth in New Zealand, I have considered the implications of women’s widening their cultural territory through movement of themselves and wealth objects, arguing that the globalized nation such women build through exchanging barkcloth and fine mats as gifts challenges the normative idea that nations are always geographically bounded or spatially contiguous. Here I echo two central ideas of that work: contrary to prevalent understandings of globalization, global resource flows do not always primarily involve commodities and, even in the cash economies of diasporic locations, notions of wealth do not always index cash or the ability to command money such that one can buy and display commodities and riches. Indeed, wealth goes beyond things to the ability to reify connections to others through things. Moreover, where women are located and for whose benefit they engage in exchange influences which objects they choose to deploy as wealth. I employ Tongan women’s own critical reflections on what they gain by living in diaspora, what they have lost by moving away from their home islands, and how they inspire a sense of *koloa* as wealth in members of younger generations in their families to address questions such as: How are notions of wealth tied to ideas about home and place? Why does it matter that particular forms of wealth are valued differently as they change hands, contexts, generations, and locations?

9. Jane Horan, University of Auckland

### **Cook Islands *Tivaivai* and the Haircutting Ceremony in Auckland: Ritual action, money, and the parameters of value**

*Tivaivai* are ‘unquilted quilts’ made by women in the Cook Islands and in the various nexus of Cook Islands populations around the Pacific basin, including Auckland. They are the paramount form of valuable which are gifted and used as decoration at public events in the Cook Islands ceremonial economy. One such category of event is the haircutting, the male rite of passage ceremony. New Zealand Cook Islanders live in the wider New Zealand political economy, so while *tivaivai* as the paramount

valuable, ‘front’ a ritual complex that transforms people at events like haircuttings, that same ritual complex dignifies the gifting of other lesser valuables that materialise kin relationships – including money. I argue that this is an explicit response to the contemporary realities that New Zealand Cook Islanders live in. In this article I analysis the role tivaivai plays in helping Cook Islanders in New Zealand manage the dialectic between what Gudeman (2008) calls the realm of mutuality and the realm of market.

10. Margaret Jolly, Australian National University.

## **Epilogue**