



Ping-Ann Addo

*Creating a Nation with Cloth:
Women, Wealth, and Tradition in the Tongan
Diaspora*

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reviewed by [Anna-Karina Hermkens](#)

1. This multi-sited ethnographic study provides wonderful insight into how 'people from small states engage in global travel and the circulation of valuables, thereby incorporating more conventional sites of modernity—the cities of industrial capitalist nations—into their local world' (1). In particular, it shows how elderly, first-generation Tongan common women of the diaspora are agents of modernity, building relationships between the Tongan diaspora and the homeland through the movement of valuables (kaloa) they create.
2. Kaloa is a category of valuable objects made and presented ceremonially by women, and it is associated with women's generative powers (2). It includes textiles, such as barkcloths and fine mats, but also coconut oil and decorated baskets. Women in the diaspora make kaloa to distinguish themselves and their ethnic community. Moreover, when sold, kaloa affords them some financial independence in the new country in which they live. Ping-Ann Addo's *Creating a Nation with Cloth* shows how kaloa intertwines tradition and modernity, and kinship and capitalism in processes of global nation building. Importantly, it therefore also highlights the roles of women in nation building. With women often being stereotyped as symbols of nationalism instead of agents of nation building, *Creating a Nation with Cloth* shows the importance and agency of women in such processes. Moreover, with its focus on material culture, *Creating a Nation with Cloth* contributes to discussions about gender in relation to gift and commodity exchange, and the significance of (gendered) material culture in creating forms of being and belonging, referred to in Tongan as *Langa Fonua*.
3. Addo argues that textiles function as texts through which ideas about 'gender, family, competition and solidarity are realized and reworked in ways that incorporate traditional and modern notions of what it means to be part of the Tongan nation in the twenty-first century' (3). Kaloa are valued for their capacity or potential to connect people with each other through gift giving. But not all kaloa are gifted. Throughout the book, we see how these objects gain or are afforded value in and through processes of gift and commodity exchange and the moral norms or cultural values that are navigated in such processes in both the diaspora and the homeland.
4. The first chapter unfolds the history and value of particular varieties of kaloa. Addo argues that the notion of global commodities and valuables should include traditional forms that contribute to kin-based connections as they embody memory, desire and contention over modernity (28). Through the

exchange of objects like *kaloa*, but also modern cash wealth, members of Tongan transnational communities 'forge and maintain the intersecting webs of obligation, desire, and value transfer that connect them to kin and co-ethnics in other homes, villages, and countries' (33). The author analyses Tongan debates around the authenticity of *ngatu pepa*, a type of textile that consists of barkcloth with a vylene base, and which was invented by women in the diaspora. She shows that although collectors of 'primitive art' might not be interested in this 'modern' cloth, *ngatu pepa* has gained significant value as a gift in the Tongan exchange system. Addo refers to Tongans' 'pragmatic creativity' to stress the highly negotiated processes by which Tongans expand their nation and the category of *kaloa* to include and value *ngatu pepa*, maintaining connections with each other through these and other gifts, as they move about the world.

5. The second chapter again highlights the role of women in creative innovative processes by focusing on the role of women's associations and groups in the process of indigenising foreign forms, thereby preserving tradition through innovation. While this chapter shows the agency and empowerment of women through *langa fonua* groups from a more general perspective, the subsequent chapter gives the reader a beautiful close-up by unfolding the life histories of three elderly women. These intimate histories 'capture the tensions between women's traditional roles in kin groups and community and their modern ways of performing *langa fonua*' (28). The beautiful crafted life narratives articulate how women harness help and resources from people in different parts of the multi-territorial Tongan nation in order to fulfil these kin-based duties, and to re-create their society in diaspora.
6. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on life cycle rituals, elucidating relations of debt that are such an integral part of what it means to be a Tongan woman and mother. Through the case-study of a wedding and a first birthday celebration, the entanglements of money and consumer goods with gift giving of *kaloa* are illuminated, while the vignette of a funeral in the diaspora shows the tensions between cash and *kaloa*. Funerals in particular, demand a high respect for tradition from the participants. The case study movingly shows how the grieving family's refusal to accept *kaloa* as gifts is entangled with the family's and other diasporans efforts to perform *langa fonua*.
7. The final chapter, titled 'Church, Cash and Competition', details the significance of cash and its entanglement with sentiments in the context of gift-giving related to the Church and fundraising events. As with the kin-based ritual events described in the previous two chapters, church events involve large amounts of cash, which are gifted in 'highly contingent and culturally-determined ways' (169). Addo shows how these acts of (monetary) giving connect Tongan communities and congregations with each other across nation states, thereby contributing to the diasporans' globalised nation-building projects in material ways.
8. In her conclusion Addo emphasises how movement and dwelling are twin practices in the diasporic construction of place (189). The movement of things like *kaloa*, as both gift and commodity, is, as she coins it, 'a tool for Pacific modernity' (191). Addo eloquently shows the agency of women in creating this modernity as they invest in the creative possibilities in tension between movement and dwelling and through the exchange of *kaloa*. Hence women lead Tongan modernity as a multi-territorial nation. Engaging and well written, *Creating a Nation with Cloth* is of interest to a wide audience, making a valuable contribution to Anthropology, Gender and Pacific Studies and other disciplines that discuss gift and commodity exchange, nation building and the diaspora.

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