



Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani  
(editors)

*Sinuous Objects*

Revaluing Women's Wealth in the  
Contemporary Pacific

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reviewed by [Nancy J. Pollock](#)

1. The place of fibrous creations by Pacific women for their communities is analysed by eight contributors to this volume. Each author considers the place of her particular communities' transformation of natural fibres from their environment into 'objects of value' whether in exchange, as gifts, or as decorative additions to community events. Trobrianders' banana skirts (3 papers), tapa cloth in Papua New Guinea (1) and as *ngatu* in Tonga (2), string bags, pots and Cook Islands *tivaevae* (1 each) provide examples of 'gendered' social contributions; three poems add an alternative dimension to these considerations. Coloured photographs enhance the volume's complex concern about 'Ways of Seeing' (Berger 1973).
2. The emphasis on 'value' stressed by the editors is addressed in various ways by the other authors. As a complex concept that many anthropologists have grappled with from many perspectives, this volume provides a welcome addition. Each paper opens with an anthropologist's personal experience that led her to consider 'materialisation of value' as a process (Hermkens and Lepani: 17). The social contributions of creations themselves, as appraised in local terms, is well illustrated in Ping-Ann Addo's paper, in which she follows Kalo's biography in terms of her guardianship of barkcloth as *Koloa*, 'Tongan women's textile wealth' (Addo: 224). Other creations, such as banana leaf skirts (MacCarthy, Lepani), or string bags (Gnecchi-Ruscone) or tapa (Hermkens, Wonu Veys, Addo), or *tivaevae* (Horan) are assessed in terms of how local values may be 'seen' as wealth beyond its economic dimension by anthropologists, in various Pacific communities.
3. While these various fibre transformations are included as 'objects', I would prefer a more social term, creations. Each author addresses her particular example, whether banana leaf skirts, string bags, or pieces of bark-cloth as women's contributions to both material culture, and aesthetics, and other western dimensions of value. Pacific contributors to the wider world of design stems from such creative origins, now recognised by the dress designer industry. Such creative use of fibres is establishing a place on the wider catwalk world in Europe, America and beyond. As the creators vie with one another in the commercials as well as for the world of aesthetics for awards, including the World of Wearable Art in New Zealand, they are extending our perceptions of creations that translate values of new aesthetics into cash values, and other spheres.

4. These examples of women's creative productivity become somewhat lost in the mysteries of the volume's title: 'Sinuous Objects'. While the editors refer to 'the sensuous nature of these objects—often intimately intertwined with the body, reproduction, motherhood and social identity—with which they are ascribed',<sup>(3)</sup> I do not find these associations and values to be stressed in authors' papers. The suggestion that many of these women's creations are worn, in some sense or other, as part of their value is not necessarily the main contribution stressed as value, i.e. as wealth. Kalo's collection of pieces of Tongan tapa/ngatu as koloa for future presentations, as Addo documents, is a more familiar value to me. The large *ngatu* (3 metres x 2 metres) that covers one wall of my bedroom, was a gift from a Tongan family, while another large piece that had covered the roadway outside the airport in Tonga as the Queen arrived for her Tongan visit in 1963 was replicated in 2018 when Prince Harry and his new wife Meghan were similarly honoured on their arrival at that airport in October 2018. Covering a significant length of the highway out of the airport with Tongan tapa is a Tongan way of expressing the value of koloa (Wonu Veys: Ch. 6) through many social dimensions beyond bodily coverings. The value of creations made from local fibres must be seen in the contexts of the local communities to which many women contribute.
5. How readers of this volume interpret the 'value' of these creative pieces as representations of 'wealth', or as gendered objects is an open question. The decorated pieces with elaborate designs, as shared in the accompanying photos illustrated in Anna-Karina Hermkens' photo of Mildred painting a piece of tapa (Fig. 15, 104), and other photos, appeal to my personal appreciation of these creations. Importantly, several photos show women in their associations with other members of their community, creating or displaying their creations. Readers' appreciations of these selected 'displays' is dependent on individual interpretations of ethnographic contexts. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1973) offers us directions as to how we perceive 'the other'.
6. The volume of 292 pages provides contemporary comments in very readable form enhanced by photographs; inclusion of three poems adds a welcome alternative textual form. The lack of an Index detracts from the volume's usefulness, particularly for researchers seeking particular themes that link the papers. The placement of Abbreviations and Glossary in the front of the volume (xv–xxiv) is less useful than when local terms are placed in notes following each Chapter. The sources of Glossary references are then associated with the author of the paper. Abbreviations too needed to be placed in Notes available at the end of each paper. These compositors' features notwithstanding, overall this volume adds to our considerations of women's transformations of local fibres to illustrate social dimensions of contemporary Pacific culture.
7. This volume adds thought-provoking dimensions to anthropological representations of other ways of living, through emphasis on women's creativities. The coloured photos assist the reader to focus on less familiar cultural activities, whereby fibres, as elements from their natural environment, are transformed into cultural creations. While the editors raise questions of value addressed in the anthropological literature, Margaret Jolly's 'Epilogue' directs us towards rethinking whether women's wealth, however identified, is predominantly economic or social. Alternatively we may consider wealth as a social entity that incorporates both (Western concepts).

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