

CSSH NOTES

Matt Tomlinson, *In God's Image: The Metaculture of Fijian Christianity*.
Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2009.

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After a long period of reluctance, anthropologists have recently embraced the study of Christianity, and fruitfully so. Matt Tomlinson's ethnography *In God's Image* testifies to the deep insight long-term fieldwork can provide into the complex entanglements of globalized religion, culture, history, and politics. The book offers a sophisticated analysis of the dynamics of Methodist Christianity on the Fijian island of Kadavu.

Analyzing the interactions between the Methodist Church and traditional chiefs in terms of "metaculture," that is, Fijian reflections and commentary on cultural dynamics, the book's main insight is that Christianity is particularly effective in generating metacultural reflections on "culture" and thereby produces irresolvable but creative tensions for local Christians. This insight is extremely fruitful for analyses of Christianity anywhere in the world.

The ethnography presented in this book shows that in Fiji much of this metacultural discourse revolves around the themes of historical decline and loss of power. Tomlinson describes the complicated local dynamic in which the Church (*lotu*) both depends on and opposes the chiefly system (*vanua*). In perpetual entanglement and competition with the *vanua*, Christianity has produced in Fijians a profound sense of decline from a dangerous yet powerful ancestral past to a weak and threatened present. But it also provides people with means of recuperation and sources of hope, ranging from the personal level of ritually dealing with sickness to the political level of religious nationalism.

The book's chapters are based on various forms of speech through which this sense of loss and attempts at recuperation are shaped and expressed: church sermons (chs. 3 and 6), talk at kava drinking sessions (ch. 4), chain prayers (ch. 5), traditional chants (ch. 6), and a life story (ch. 7). Analyzing such speech events as metacultural forms in which culture is reflected upon and dealt with, Tomlinson emphasizes the force of (religious) language in generating and circulating anxieties about social decline and vulnerability. Clearly, such an analysis is not limited to religion per se, but offers valuable insights into political upheavals and processes of social change.

One weakness of the book is that it restricts the power of language to its textual aspects. The role of the body in generating feelings of loss, anxiety, and vulnerability does surface in a chapter about nightly kava-drinking sessions, where the sedating influence of kava (a local brew) on people's bodies makes the lost power that they talk about during drinking literally felt in the body. But the bodily and sensorial aspects of speech itself—as embodied language—are largely neglected. These aspects do feature prominently in the life story of a catechist presented in the last chapter. His remarks about being “pierced,” “touched,” and moved to tears by a sermon, and the turning point this brought about in his religious life, leave the reader wondering about the affective dimensions of the sermons and other speech acts analyzed earlier in the book. What is it about voice, volume, pitch, and performance more generally that makes a sermon touch or a prayer powerful? More broadly, what is the persuasive power and emotional impact of non-linguistic aspects of speech? The book evokes but hardly addresses questions about the limits of language in relation to religion, and hence about the limits of a language- and discourse-centered approach to religion.

These reservations aside, *In God's Image* is a major contribution to the anthropology of religion. It is a highly enjoyable, stimulating, and informative read for scholars and students of global Christianity and anyone interested in the ways in which it takes shape and meaning in local histories and cultural settings.

———Marleen de Witte, VU University Amsterdam

Pier M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

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In this impressive work, Pier Larson sets out to challenge how historians have thought about language and culture change in the southwestern Indian Ocean and, by implication, elsewhere in the European colonial world during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Larson does so by focusing on the largely unknown diaspora of Malagasy-speaking peoples, most of who left the Grande Ile between the 1670s and early 1830s as slaves, in a part of the world ignored by most historians of slavery and colonialism. The significance of this diaspora is suggested by conservative estimates that the 464,000 men, women, and children exported from Madagascar between 1600 and 1900 accounted for 29 percent of all slave exports from sub-Saharan Africa to Arabia, the Persian Gulf, India, South Africa, and the Mascarene Islands of Mauritius and Réunion.

Larson's assessment of the socio-cultural and political consequences of this diaspora rests on a detailed reconstruction of how free and enslaved Malagasy,