



Review of Philip Culbertson, Margaret Agee & Cabrini 'Ofa Makasiale (Eds.), *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), xv + 328 pp.

Robert J. Myles

*Penina Uliuli* is a rare and precious black pearl of the Pacific. This book uses its title as metaphor; its aim is to be a “precious, rare, and colorful resource” for the current issues in mental health of Pacific peoples. It is, of course, refreshing to encounter studies of Pacific people written by Pacific people themselves. It is also rare, precious, and colorful to find so many voices unified by their Pacific distinctiveness, yet reflective of their own unique cultures and experiences.

This edited volume contains nineteen contributions, consisting of mainly essays, but also interviews and poetry. The end of the book includes a substantial categorized bibliography pointing to further resource material in Pasifika mental health. Divided into four sections, the book covers the broad topics of Pacific identities, spirituality, the Pacific unconscious, and trauma and healing.

The first section, Pacific identities, contains five essays on how some Pacific identities are construed and their associated challenges. The beginning two chapters discuss the issues of Pacific youth identity, such as growing up within an urban environment in New Zealand. Identity is formed and can be nourished within a collective context including family and church. An approach to community-grounded mentoring programs aimed at Pacific youth is also discussed.

Chapters three and four deal with constructions of the Pacific male body, firstly from a Samoan perspective, and then a Tongan one. Because the topic of masculinity is of special interest to the readers of this journal I will outline these two essays in more detail.

Tavita Maliko explains how the idealized Samoan male body was altered from its traditional understanding when Victorian missionaries arrived and were horrified by the immodest clothing they found on Samoan bodies. Samoans now consider it culturally appropriate to cover much more of their skin, and even more so for special occasions. A full suit, for example, is considered the only suitable dress in church services, despite the tropical climate. Maliko reflects, “the implied message is that God does not want to see the human body, though it was created ‘in His image’”. Another myth inherited from the missionaries remains strong in Samoan culture: to be acceptable before God a man must cover his black skin with white clothing. Maliko, however, argues that the tattoo can be seen as resistance to colonization. Although the missionaries tried, they were unable to cease the traditional Samoan practice. Because of its extreme pain, tattooing is often linked with manliness. A man’s tattoos are thus exhibited as an outward sign of his masculinity.

Maika Lutui admits that Tongan culture has little understanding of reading physical bodies. What usually matters is the mind and soul; Tongans believe they

have a body but are not their body. Lutui brings himself into the essay. He remembers as a child being naked at home, until his sisters were born that is, for it was then shameful to be naked around his family. "Is the Tongan body sinful?" he asks "or is it holy because it is a gift from a Holy God?" Lutui then examines the Tongan male body in more depth. A haircut can display class and ranking, and bodily actions, like posture or the way one walks, is always interpreted through a lens of respect or contempt. In Tongan culture it is important for males to be "strong." What makes a man strong, however, is not a "six-pack" or physical mass, but his ability to successfully carry out the manly tasks designated to him. For Tongans, Luiti concludes, a man's body is valued primarily for what it can do.

The first section ends with a conversation between four women who share in an 'afakasi (half-caste) identity. They describe their self-perceptions influenced by how others see them, and how this can lead to a sense of isolation.

The next section covers issues in Pacific spirituality. Pacific people tend to be very spiritual, an aspect often overlooked when working from Western models of mental health. These chapters approach the topic from different angles, from identifying spirituality as having integral importance to the mental health of Pacific people, to the problems of deifying culture, such as when cultural practices suited to island life impede on the wellbeing of Pacific people living in an urban environment. Chapter eight is a raw and hard-hitting testimony from an anonymous "survivor" of sexual abuse within a Samoan church. The author illustrates through her story that Pacific women must find their voices to speak out against injustices suffered within their communities. This section concludes with an essay reverberating some of the same themes, but with regards to youth suicide prevention.

The third section looks at the Pacific unconscious. What are some of the distinctive elements of a Pacific mindset and worldview? The essayists illustrate how the use of symbol, metaphor and mythology in therapy can help to connect with Pacific Island clients. If the sacred space between two persons, known as the *vā*, is receptive and creative then genuine therapeutic progress can be made. Furthermore, whereas Westerners tend to conceive of themselves individually, Pacific people have a collective interdependent construction of the self, which means that clients are likely, in a non-literal way, to bring more than just themselves into the room. The last contribution is a sequence of poems that illustrate one woman's path of recovery as a victim of domestic violence. These chapters show how incorporating certain practices, and being perceptive to the worldview of Pacific people, can form bridges when working cross-culturally.

The final section, before the bibliography, consists of essays addressing specific mental health issues. The topics covered include domestic violence, problem gambling, and the relationship between colonization and depression and alcohol abuse. Many themes of previous chapters come out in a more specialized configuration. The essays also give some practical solutions for healing these potentially tragic aspects of Pacific communities.

The subjectivity and attached perspective of the essayists is definitely a major strength of this book. Each essay begins with an autobiographical paragraph in which the authors introduce their various Pacific identities. And while the contributors are readily equipped to avoid the pitfalls of assumed Western objectivity, their first hand experiences are written down carefully and critically, unafraid to analyze and critique

the sometimes negative aspects of their own cultures. This leads to an insightful read not only for Pacific people, but also those interested in learning how Pacific people see themselves.

Robert J. Myles  
University of Auckland/New Zealand  
e: robertjmyles@gmail.com