

Tivaivai: The Social Fabric of the Cook Islands.* Susanne Küchler and Andrea Eimke. London: The British Museum Press, 2009. 118 pp.

Reviewed by Marsha MacDowell

Over the last fifty years the study of the production and meaning of quilts has been expanding exponentially both in breadth and depth. Studies of quilt-related activity in regions, in cultures, in families, and of individuals heretofore unexplored or under-investigated are contributing to our understanding of those regions, cultures, familial relationships, and individuals in ways previously unimagined or impossible.

This volume builds on and drills deeper into previous studies of the history and culture of the inhabitants of a very small geographic region—the Cook Islands, an archipelago of islands located in the Pacific and with a land mass of only 240 square kilometers—and focuses on how its patchwork and quilting traditions of *tivaivai* represent a social fabric that, in a variety of ways, sustains a sense of community, history, and identity for Cook Islanders no matter where they live in the world.

The volume has two authors who, as described on the back cover, combine “artistic and anthropological perspectives” with Susanne Küchler, a professor of anthropology at University College London, ostensibly contributing the anthropological perspective and Andrea Eimke, identified as an artist and embroiderer having lived in the islands for 25 years, as presumably providing the artistic perspective. Their contributions are not blended into one voice but, rather, Küchler’s writing is presented as a continuous essay while Eimke’s contributions are scattered throughout within framed text boxes or sidebars. This side-by-side presentation of perspectives is almost as interesting as the content itself. Both writers are sharing closely observed descriptions and analyses of the place and meaning of *tivaivai* in the Cook Islands; one from the theoretically informed viewpoint of an academically trained ethnographer, the other from the perspective of a community lay ethnographer, a person who has been a participant-observer deeply enmeshed in the culture and, specifically, the tradition of *tivaivai* over a sustained period. Together their insights and analyses provide the reader with the history and meaning of *tivaivai* that is thorough, scholarly, and accessible.

Cook Islands *tivaivai* looks at once similar yet different from patchwork and appliqué quilt traditions found elsewhere. As within other Pacific Island areas and, indeed, within indigenous communities in North America, the Pacific, South Africa and likely other regions impacted by trade exploration, colonization and the spread of Christianity, quilting was introduced by Western European or Euro-American missionaries and traders. And, as in indigenous groups elsewhere, Cook Islanders adapted the basic construction techniques of quilts but modified both the designs and uses in ways that were unmistakably linked to their culture. Whether made of thousands of colored squares of cloth arranged in fractal patterns or fashioned of cut snowflake-like appliquéd designs heavily edged with embroidered or crocheted thread, *tivaivai* is a visual art distinctive to its locale. For Cook Islanders, *tivaivai* are also inextricably tied to the exchange

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of gifts, the honoring of those who are going through rites of passage, or who hold places of esteem in society. As K uchler astutely states, “The geometrical and mathematical construction of Cook Islands *tivaivai*, so eloquently exhibited in their symmetrical and fractal composition, reflect in large measure the fabric’s indexical and symbolic value as an agent of temporal reckoning. *Tivaivai* patterns enable the recall of certain events associated with key moments in women’s lives and encode ways of categorizing social relations that unfold in the vicinity of the quilts” (p. 15). And, as equally perceptive, Eimke states, in speaking of her own personal awakening of the meaning of *tivaivai* in the Cook Islands, “The appreciation of the work and time involved [in making *tivaivai*] is not the chief concern here. It is the person who receives it that is” (p. 53).

Tivaivai, in both their physicality and in their meaning and use, expose us to ideas and theories that, as K uchler posits, help us understand “how societies in the Pacific have turned themselves into thriving transnational societies” that sustain economic and cultural flows between the island homelands and the many places around the world where diasporic Cook Islanders now live. Much as a Star quilt of mostly Plains Indian origin now serves for Native Americans of many different tribal backgrounds as a symbol of sense of pan-Indian identity and solidarity with an indigenous heritage, to a Cook Islander, *tivaivai* instantly conjures up home, a cultural identity and specific worldviews.

That the volume is written by two women and is about women, is a point that is important to highlight. As K uchler states “Perhaps it is because the European observers and missionaries who populated the Cook Islands between 1850 and the present day are predominantly male that we know so little about the role that women played in shaping and integrating an increasingly diasporic society” (p. 8). K uchler and Eimke have constructed a beautifully rendered study of perhaps one of the most visible and important art forms of the Cook Islands, one that has been shaped by women and which in term has played a significant role in sustaining a culture that might at times feel vulnerable to change or disappearance.

Sidebars and chapters are devoted to *tivaivai* as the fabric of friendship, as a means of mapping time and space, as evidence of acknowledged mastery of skill and creativity, and as reflections of the flora of the islands. Other sections highlight the history and activities of church groups, associations, and the Atiu Fibre Arts Studio that have been devoted to making and exhibiting *tivaivai*, and examine the ways in which *tivaivai* is influencing the work of artists in other media. Maps and photographs of the islands, historical and contemporary photographs of examples of *tivaivai* being made and used, and portraits of the makers help contextualize the work and Eimke’s deeply personal stories humanize the text and reinforce the living nature of the tradition.

The one very disappointing note to this volume is with K uchler’s reference, beginning in the opening paragraphs to her essay, to the widely-distributed myth of the last decade that, as K uchler states, “quilts [were] made by Afro-American slaves to encode, in the stitched patterns, the pathways to freedom known evocatively as the ‘underground railroad’ (p. 1). This notion, based on one woman’s story told in the late 1980s to a writer, has become uncritically accepted and wildly popular nearly throughout the world. Yet it is a story that has been thoroughly disputed by countless scholars specializing in U.S. Civil War history, African American slavery studies, and quilt history. K uchler returns to this idea later in her essay and speaks of it as

accepted fact and thus, sadly, she, along with the British Museum Press, have now become additional voices of authority who unknowingly are complicit in the perpetuation of this falsehood.

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