Document généré le 19 avr. 2024 18:17

**Anthropologica**

Anthropologica

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Volume 63, numéro 1, 2021

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078610ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021336

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Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (imprimé)
2292-3586 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Padmanabhan, D. (2021). Compte rendu de [Donaldson, Emily C. *Working with the Ancestors: Mana and Place in the Marquesas Islands.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019, 280 pages]. *Anthropologica*, *63*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021336

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# Book Review

## Donaldson, Emily C. *Working with the Ancestors: Mana and Place in the Marquesas Islands.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019, 280 pages.

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*Working with the Ancestors* explores Marquesan understandings of heritage, sustainability, and development through a Marquesan initiative to join a UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). Davidson's ethnography eloquently argues that while the basis for the incorporation into the WHL is about historicity and preservation, these bases are incongruent with the local community's interpretations of heritage. The inclusion in the WHL precludes understandings of *mana* (spiritual power), *papae* (stone pavements that may have *mana*), and *tapu* (taboo). This preclusion takes place through the creation of expert knowledge through academia and UNESCO working groups, through committees at the regional, state, and international levels, and through visibility brought about by tourism. With these processes, local values and knowledge are replaced by standardized, western notions of heritage and local sites of reverence are turned into sites of universal importance. The book excels in re-conceptualising notions of heritage, living spaces and rituals, pushing further the boundaries of anthropology, heritage studies and history. It is an engaging read with each chapter exploring the contestations and ambivalences that exist amongst Marquesans and between Marquesans and the WHL representatives on a variety of issues. It leaves the reader questioning about struggles such as who has the right to representation of a community, preservation versus livelihood and finally about environment versus humans. The book is understandable to both experts and non-experts. Commendably, the book leaves the reader with many unsettling questions rather than seek to provide tailor-made solutions.

The book has three main arguments. First that a Western distinction between nature and culture does not hold true in the Marquesas because living and nonliving, human and non-human, past and present are blended and understood in a reciprocal relationship. Second, because of a complex history

of colonialism, depopulation, and encounter with Western market-oriented capitalism, Marquesans have resisted and modified some aspects of the market economy, which has resulted in a polyvalent lifestyle. Third, concepts of heritage and sustainability may be known to the islanders largely through UNESCO's work, which, the book argues, suggests a need to engage with the creation and prevalence of these concepts locally. What does heritage means in the Marquesas?

The ways in which perceptions of heritage and the past shape indigenous interactions with and uses of the land is the focus of the Introduction, which considers environment, sustainability, and local interpretations of historic spaces in the context of the Marquesan initiative to join the UNESCO WHL.

The blended relationship between nature and culture, which shows the possibility of a different reconfiguration of landscape, is the subject of Chapter 1. Donaldson advocates an 'in dwelling' perspective where landscape is marked by reciprocity and fluid boundaries between people and their surroundings. This invites an understanding of Marquesan life as an interplay between history, past, present, human and non-human actors.

The dissonance that emerges through interpretations and uses of the land allows Chapter 2 to introduce ideas of customary approaches towards land ownership, the French colonial land tenure system, and the modern Western market-oriented system. Land ownership, meaning, and connectedness to daily life become the context against which later chapters develop the multiple and contested meanings of the land.

The Marquesan understanding of *mana* and *tapu*, influenced by shared knowledge, colonial history, the spread of Christianity, depopulation, and loss, is the centre of Chapter 3. These experiences enable some narratives and disable others. People show fear, yet may not be verbally expressing their belief in what have, through colonial legacy, become pagan beliefs and which lend to traditional spirituality itself becoming *tapu* (62). The chapter engages with various experiences and interpretations of spirits and concludes that these experiences tie the community to each other, if not the land.

The relationship of Marquesans with their land and their response to a monetized market system is the focus of Chapter 4. The chapter examines the tension between a cash crop market-oriented system on the one hand and a conventional kin-based relationship to land on the other. The clash results in a polyvalent lifestyle with many sources of income, which are seen by the government as a threat to development.

The UNESCO World Heritage List conception of the idea of heritage and the relationship to this set of expertise is the centre of Chapter 5. Donaldson writes that "dissonant understandings of 'heritage' in the Marquesas reveal a latent resistance and a fundamental difference between how heritage is defined and operationalized versus how it is experienced or lived" (113). The crucial distinction is between 'respecting' the work of ancestors versus the work of 'protecting' cultural and natural heritage. The chapter discusses the meanings of heritage for people across generations, which shows structures of power and the difficulties in cross-cultural communication. How might ontologically distancing spiritual meanings and values and create an ontological dissonance?

Questions of loss and sustainability are the core of Chapter 6, which shows how the UNESCO project "illustrates how the identification of heritage involves not only understanding but using history for current purposes that often promote particular political, social, or economic goals, exerting a unique form of territorialized power" (146). It focuses on the relationship between heritage and the strategy of local leaders and the role of heritage tourism in the reconstruction of indigenous worlds, and highlights that to indigenize the concepts of sustainability and heritage in the islands might mean an acceptance of intentional loss, as some sites are more precious than others. It concludes by advocating for seeing heritage places as cultural landscapes and unravelling the multiple layers by seeing the past and present as intertwined.

The Conclusion turns to challenges faced by the community and what might lead to a recognition and respect of Marquesan worldview, which would include acknowledging respect for spirits and *mana* of ancestors and seeking to learn existing patterns of local interaction, accepting neglect as a form of heritage preservation, and so forth.

While this book might have special relevance for scholars of environmental anthropology and heritage studies, it will be interesting to scholars of anthropology in general. The book excels in drawing out narratives which are detailed and nuanced. This book is a must read for its attempt to re-define heritage, at the very minimum. The book does justice to the task at hand- i.e. exploring the contested multiple narratives of heritage in the Marquesas. Interconnected are issues of power, ritual, space and a living heritage. While definitely a worthwhile read, the impact of social class, gender and the impact of education amongst the younger generation on understanding the Marqueas cultural landscape could have been further explored.