

## Book and Media Reviews

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mayhem in the Pacific demands investigation into the media-politics-conflict nexus in the Pacific context. *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face* seeks to fill this gap.

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*Idyllic No More: Pacific Island Climate, Corruption and Development Dilemmas*, by Giff Johnson. Create-space Independent Publishing Platform, 2015. ISBN 978-1-5122-3558-6; 154 pages, photographs, suggestions for further reading. Paper, US\$7.50.

Ieremia Tabai, the first president of Kiribati, once quipped, “The Pacific is paradise for those who don’t have to live here.” In his book *Idyllic No More: Pacific Island Climate, Corruption and Development Dilemmas*, Giff Johnson seems intent on proving Tabai right. For those who are familiar with Johnson, who has served as the editor of the *Marshall Islands Journal* for more than thirty years and has lived in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) even longer, his approach to the issues of development and corruption should come as no surprise; many of the arguments he makes here have been fine-tuned from his numerous signed and unsigned editorials in the *Journal*. Most of Johnson’s examples also come from his direct experience in the Marshalls; other regions of Oceania are perhaps implied, but with the exception of a brief mention of the Fiji government’s crackdown on free speech and a few references to the politico-economic similarities between the Republic of the Marshall Islands,

the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau, one should come into this book understanding the Marshallese context from which Johnson is writing.

The book is roughly divided into two sections: the first half is a critique of development, donors, and corruption, while the second half is a more in-depth exploration of specific dilemmas and possibilities. Johnson certainly has plenty of examples of governmental malfeasance to choose from. A favorite example, which he repeats numerous times, is that of travel by national leaders and other, lower-level bureaucrats, necessitated by big-donor meetings in such metropolises as Sydney, Suva, Washington DC, and, with the push for global climate initiatives, various cities in the European Union. And there is enough blame to go around, from the administrative functionary who takes full advantage of donor-sponsored travel and therefore has little time to actually perform her job duties to the Western donor states or to the agencies themselves, some of whom Johnson calls out for meeting so frequently that achieving any actual benchmark of progress during the shorter and shorter periods in which there are no meetings scheduled borders on Kafkaesque absurdity.

A glaring issue with Johnson’s book, however, is that it is, arguably, not a book. Rather, as Johnson explains, he has collected a series of blog postings that he originally wrote for the Pacific Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit think tank based in Port Vila, Vanuatu, between 2013 and 2015. While the blogs have been edited and grouped according to

theme (corresponding more or less to each “chapter”), there is little notion of chronology—that is, whether they are presented in the order they were originally written—and as a result there is quite a bit of repetition of ideas, themes, and passages, notably in the first half of the book. Additionally, Johnson refers to events that happened “this year.” However, without any temporal context (or date of publication of the original blog posting), we can only guess as to when he is referring. Moreover, the first three chapters are rather jumbled and at times often rehash the same arguments. Johnson makes no effort to draw distinctions between the concepts of corruption, development, and good governance, and it is left to the reader to discern those differences for herself. To be sure, what is missing here, and for the book as a whole, is a workable summary analysis of what the main issues and topics in relation to Pacific Island corruption and development are and how they can most usefully be accessed by the nonspecialist reader.

The second half of the book, made up of five shorter chapters, is much better organized and clearer in scope, covering issues (in order) of Pacific fisheries; climate change; noncommunicable diseases; nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands; and out-migration to the United States. I would especially recommend those interested in the sustainability of the Pacific Islands in terms of food security and economic opportunity to read the fourth chapter, on Pacific fisheries, as it serves as the best primer on the subject for a popular readership that is currently available. Again, however, it would have been helpful to the reader if

Johnson had also provided a concluding chapter to tie up these various threads facing contemporary Pacific Island states, and what their prospects are, especially in light of the ending of the economic assistance sections of the Compact of Free Association between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia in 2023. The reader would also have benefited from some basic structural pieces that are missing, including references and an index. There is a list of well-known essays, books, and blogs by a handful of authors on similar issues, almost all set in Micronesia, but these are helpful only to those least familiar with any literature on the region.

One could also take issue with the book’s title, implying as it does that Pacific Island societies were once somehow idyllic. But the question then becomes a matter of when that might have been the case, and what has happened since then. There are, in fact, a number of uncomfortable implications embedded in the title, but since Johnson does not explore these assumptions, the reader is left to ponder whether he means that entities like the Marshalls were idyllic, or at least better governed, under pre-independence administrations (such as the Americans, Japanese, or Germans)—or, perhaps more problematically, that the Pacific Islands are no longer idyllic because they are now governed by Islanders themselves, albeit (at least in the case of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau) in a neocolonial relationship with the United States.

That being said, individual blogs/

essays work on their own merits, and it is refreshing to see someone exercise the freedom of the press in Oceania in a way that serves to hold public officials and elected leaders accountable. Johnson's editorials are consistently even tempered, and at the same time he is unafraid of violating the unwritten rule in close-knit Island societies that one should not criticize those in positions of power. Some of the more perilous ground that Johnson admirably covers includes the hypocrisy of RMI government leaders criticizing the opening of the first mosque in the country in light of the nation's explicit religious freedom laws; the building tension between political leaders' discourse on climate change as imminent and immediately observable and the most recent science that has concluded that many Pacific Island atolls, notably those in the Marshalls, have actually *increased* in size over the past half-century; and the political maneuverings of Kwajalein Senator Tony de Brum, who, as an international representative for both climate change and the RMI lawsuit filed against the nine nuclear powers in recent years, Johnson suggests has been emblematic of the current RMI administration's use of international grandstanding to excuse a lack of action on domestic issues. In this way, the book makes for some refreshing reading.

And while this will not be confused with an academic book, it makes for a worthwhile companion to more theoretical and analytical works on these same issues, of which Peter Larmour's *Interpreting Corruption: Culture and Politics in the Pacific Islands* (2012) comes to mind. Johnson's book pro-

vides a set of grounded examples of what appears to be a well-established dysfunction in Pacific Island governments writ large. Perhaps in future editions he might consider connecting his opinions and observations to larger conversations about corruption and governance in Oceania that are already ongoing and very necessary.

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*The Polynesian Iconoclasm: Religious Revolution and the Seasonality of Power*, by Jeffrey Sissons. ASAO Studies in Pacific Anthropology 5. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. ISBN 978-1-78238-413-7, viii + 160 pages, map, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$85.00.

New accounts of Polynesian relations with colonizers in the early contact period seem theoretically indebted to Marshall Sahlins's elegant reconstruction of the 1779 murder of Captain Cook in Hawai'i, *Islands of History* (1985). Sahlins interpreted Hawaiian views of Cook's arrival in Kealakekua Bay as in conjuncture with how the British saw their hosts in order to illustrate a broader theoretical argument against Whig history, that is, history as a narrative of progress and from the viewpoint of the victors (see *The Whig Interpretation of History*, by Herbert Butterfield [1965]). In Sahlins's well-known argument, Cook came ashore during Makahiki, the local new year's celebration of the rise of the Pleiades that heralds the annual return of Lono, the ancestor-spirit who