

and ceremony and relaxation), though without exploring whether or not these stereotypes exist across populations in the twenty-first century.

Crocombe argues that elite Islanders look to China “not for its communist philosophy but for its success in economic development and maintaining its own ‘traditional’ political system” (46).

This highlights a central weakness of the book: the core question of political economy is largely unexplored. Are some Pacific leaders increasingly attracted by economic models from Asia that involve capital controls, government intervention, and reliance on state-run enterprise, rather than the Washington consensus of trade liberalization and privatization? Will Forum Island countries be able to increase market access in Australia and New Zealand, while at the same time these two largest Forum members negotiate free trade and investment agreements with China?

For a measured analysis of the regional strategic balance, scholars may need to look more at these economic factors, rather than observe the perambulations of the Chinese navy in the Pacific.

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Ña Noniep. Feature film, 108 minutes, DVD, color, 2009. Written, produced, and directed by Jack Niedenthal; distributed by Microwave Films. Marshallese with English subtitles.

Yokwe Bartowe. Feature film, 90 minutes, DVD, color, 2010. Written by Jack Niedenthal; directed and produced by Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaro; distributed by Microwave Films. Marshallese with English subtitles. Both films can be ordered from <https://www.bikiniatoll.com/bikini/cart/RMI%20Movies.html>. US\$7.99 each including shipping within the United States or Canada; US\$15.99 including shipping outside the United States and Canada.

Two recent films offer Marshallese versions of the familiar coming-of-age story. Both films follow the journey of a young male resident of the Marshall Islands as he experiences a crisis that sets him down the wrong path. *Ña Noniep* centers on Liki (Randon Jack), a gifted boy of middle-school age who, because of tragic events involving adults in his family, becomes the target of another family’s thirst for revenge. *Yokwe Bartowe* focuses on Bartowe (Lyel Tarkwon), a college-age man instructed to watch his young sister as she swims in the ocean. Momentarily distracted by the piercing cry of a gull, Bartowe turns his attention back to the water and finds only a rubber ball. Lijiamao (Billma Melson), his beloved sister, has apparently drowned.

Although both narratives focus on the common theme of individuals struggling to find themselves in a confusing world, the films offer a Marshallese flavor. Yes, we see a

world of modern trappings—homes, schools, mobile phones; but we also see the familiar features of island life: palm trees, bright colors, ocean. More memorably, beyond images of a Pacific paradise or the schools designed to develop a modern, educated workforce, we see a society in transition: youth with nothing to do, young men who seek respite from their purposelessness in those potent symbols of aimlessness—alcohol, drugs, and suicide. Most startlingly, we see an ostensibly Christian world in which the spirits of the Marshallese past are alive and active. For viewers seeking insight into Marshallese culture, this last area is the most illuminating and is the most compelling reason to see these films.

Liki, the protagonist of *Ńa Noniep*, is a child prodigy. His parents scold him for spending his waking hours, and what should be his sleeping hours, reading. “You have to sleep too,” his father says. “You want to do well in school.” Yet Liki evidently has no problem with academic achievement. In math class, when no one else can solve the problems displayed on the blackboard, the teacher turns to Liki. Even though it seems he has not been paying attention, he looks up and swiftly, confidently solves the problems, eliciting cheers from the other students. Liki’s best friend at school is Miko (Lulani Ritok), a young girl who resists good-naturedly his efforts to turn her into a fellow prodigy. Miko opts for playing her ukulele over joining Liki in reading. This life comes to a halt when Miko’s parents are involved in a head-on car collision with Liki’s parents. Instead of watching the road, Miko’s father had been

obsessively texting his friends. He, his wife, and Miko’s younger brother all die in the crash.

Beset by grief and an accompanying desire for revenge, Lijimu (Netha Gideon), Miko’s grandmother and now her guardian, targets Liki, the most visible member of the family whom she blames for killing her son, for punishment. Beginning by forbidding interaction between Miko and Liki, Lijimu, known widely for her mischief-making powers, launches a full-blown scheme to destroy the unwitting Liki.

In *Yokwe Bartowe*, Bartowe lives with his parents and his two sisters and attends the local college. He also has a steady girlfriend, Kaila (Martha Horiuchi). At the opening of the film, Lijiamao, the younger of his sisters, swims while Bartowe studies for a test and keeps an eye on her. A momentary distraction—the cry of a gull—leads to tragedy. When Bartowe fixes his eyes again on the water, Lijiamao is gone—drowned. The story continues one year later. Bartowe’s family is suffering. Bartowe’s father says to his wife, “You don’t do any work. Your son’s drunk.” The parents bicker continually, as Bartowe’s father wants his wife to accept the reality of Lijiamao’s death, a reality Bartowe’s mother cannot embrace: “Has anyone seen her body?” Most apparent is the change in Bartowe. The family, and especially his mother, all blame him for Lijiamao’s death, and Bartowe blames himself as well. He spends most of his time drinking or drunk. Not only is he alienated from his family—his mother tells him at one point to leave and never return—but he has also rejected everything else. He has stopped

attending classes and he ignores Kaila, who has just learned she is pregnant.

Lijiamao's absence haunts her family, but she also wields influence elsewhere. One of Lijiamao's friends shows up late to a science class and becomes visibly, then verbally upset that someone else sits in what had been her friend's seat. "That's not her chair," she repeats over the teacher's urgings that she sit down. Later, in the principal's office, the distraught child resists the principal's persuasions that Lijiamao is a "lost hope." "I know she's here," the girl insists. "I could feel her. It's like she's talking to me." Despite the girl's insistence and Lijiamao's mother's doubt, everyone else accepts as fact that Lijiamao has drowned. In this film and in *Ńa Noniep*, a single event sends the protagonists on self-destructive paths.

The spirit world is clearly alive and thriving in the Marshall Islands. *Ńa Noniep* takes its title from the mythical creature that guides others, only to help, never to harm. In *Yokwe Bartowe*, an active spirit world intervenes in the human, first taking the beloved daughter of a happy family, then restoring her after a head-to-head confrontation between Madam Kwolej (Nica Wase), the bird woman who derives pleasure from others' misfortune, and Lijimu, the witch woman whose sorrow at the death of her son and his family sparks the vengeful misery she causes in others.

Lijimu is, in fact, the link between the two films, her scheme for revenge in *Ńa Noniep* informing her widespread reputation for evil in *Yokwe Bartowe*. Was she a force for good before the deaths of her son and his family? That is not clear. Miko, her

surviving granddaughter, comes to live with her, and the two do not appear to have developed a strong relationship. Miko reminds Lijimu of Lijimu's words at the funeral service, that the deceased family members have gone to a happier place. But Lijimu professes anything but Christian forgiveness in her determination to make the offenders pay. Especially infuriating to her is Liki, whose happy nature and intellectual prowess have saved him from following the aimless path taken by so many Marshallese youth.

Both films depict an aimlessness among Marshallese youth, which, fueled by despair, can extend into adulthood. When Liki moves off his established path, thanks to Lijimu's spells, he loafs about, drinks, smokes, sometimes skips school, and is no longer the savior in math class. Bartowe adopts a wayward direction after Lijiamao drowns. Often drunk and frequently discovered passed out, Bartowe occasionally encounters a group of four young men whose sole objective is to find money for beer, vodka, and cigarettes.

Lijimu, certified by rumor as the witch of the neighborhood, is haunted by her deceased family. In *Ńa Noniep* she is determined to destroy the innocent Liki; yet in *Yokwe Bartowe* she ultimately directs her powers—her chants and spells—to aid Bartowe. She asks him why he drinks constantly and why he lives such a miserable life, and then she acknowledges that many Marshallese boys and men, including her late son, are unhappy. The two discuss church. Lijimu attends regularly now, "soothed" by the singing. Bartowe admits that he "was a Christian," but with his current constant

desire for cigarettes and alcohol, he can no longer claim that.

Although Lijimu is a supporting character in both films, it is her quest and the shifting of her powers from evil to good that connect the two films and resolve the key conflicts in *Yokwe Bartowe*. In *Ŋa Noniep* her plan to punish Liki's father falters as she comes up against the Noniep (Kyle Trevor), the young boy-like figure who steps in to help guide Liki back onto the right path. Lijimu and Noniep, in fact, engage in a battle over Liki. Lijimu's powers weaken and fail when confronted with the Noniep.

A similar battle of spirits occurs in *Yokwe Bartowe* between Lijimu and the villainess Madam Kwolej, the woman disguised as a gull who took Lijiamao and destroyed a happy family. Through Bartowe's tale of his sister's drowning, Lijimu recognizes Kwolej's identity and assembles a new potion and a plan to confront her. The battle between the sorceresses leads to Lijimu's triumph, to Lijiamao's restoration to life, and to the magical return of Kaila to the Marshalls from Arkansas, where she has gone to stay with relatives (Lijimu's spell whisks her out of a Wal-Mart aisle). The unhappy family is miraculously restored to happiness, and Bartowe reconnects with his family and his sweetheart.

A major charm of both films is the uncontrived nature of the presentation. The actors look, move, and act like ordinary Marshallese on whom a camera has cast its eye. They inhabit Marshallese houses rather than sets built to resemble Marshallese homes. The exteriors are just that—exterior shots of appropriate sites: homes,

schools, the airport. Residents of the spiritual world—the Noniep, Kwolej, the “drowned” Lijiamao—sport garb befitting Pacific spirits: grass skirts, headdresses adorned with feathers. All of these elements contribute to the natural, unforced feeling of the films. Even though the delivery of lines sometimes sounds like the speech of those who have memorized lines rather than that of ordinary people who interact with one another, the performers speak with necessary conviction and earnestness. They—and the entire filmmaking crew—take their enterprise seriously. And so do we.

While both films connect aimless youth and the struggles of social change, *Yokwe Bartowe* has the stronger social comment. The films suggest that the universe encompasses inherently disruptive forces, as demonstrated by Kwolej and Lijimu in *Ŋa Noniep*. In the Marshalls, these forces can lead their victims into traps of addiction and purposelessness. Because Lijimu alters the direction of her powers in *Yokwe Bartowe* to champion the cause of a struggling young man, she becomes a richer character to the benefit of the film. She admits to having found consolation for her grief in attending church, and she suggests that Bartowe do the same.

The happy endings in both films cannot extend to everything. Thanks to the Noniep, Liki becomes his happy, gifted self again, and he and Miko are once more the best of friends; yet Miko's family is gone, the victim of her father's inattentiveness, not Liki's dad's reckless driving. Similarly, while Bartowe reclaims his position in his family now that his sister has returned home alive, and he no

longer has impulses to drink and wander aimlessly, the drunken, purposeless boys in *Yokwe Bartowe* continue in nearly the same fashion.

Lijimu is defeated at the end of *Ña Noniep*, but she becomes a force for good in *Yokwe Bartowe*. As a condition of her defeat, Kwolej is banished from the islands forever. Does this act suggest that calm and extended happiness will come at last to the Marshall Islands? No! Kaila, in the closing scene, suddenly finds her fingernails growing, and she wonders by what power this transformation has come to her. A look above shows Kwolej leaving the islands but appointing a replacement first. The people of the Marshall Islands will go about their daily lives while other forces—the spiritual, the rarely seen, the never seen—continue their struggle to expand or limit the levels of happiness and misery in the world. In this context, the forces of good—the Noniep and the reformed Lijimu—must stay vigilant in guiding the unwary in their search for a fulfilling life.

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Towards a Theology of the Chamoru: Struggle and Liberation in Oceania, by Jonathan Blas Diaz. Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2010. ISBN 978-9-7105-1162-9; xxiv + 273 pages, maps, illustrations. Paper, US\$25.00. For ordering information, contact the author at jonadiaz@gmail.com

In the introduction to his book, Jonathan Blas Diaz tells us that his primary task, and that of all like-minded

people in Oceania, is “to identify a theology from below” (xv). By this he means a theology that will serve “those who are oppressed and the outcasts of Oceanic society” (xv). From the outset, then, Diaz identifies his dual purpose: to redress the wrongs of the history of his people, the Chamoru people of Guam (and by extension of the Northern Marianas), and to do this within a theological context.

This book is a passionate outcry from a Pacific Islander who is also a Catholic believer, one who has taken his faith seriously enough to earn a graduate degree in theology; this volume is the published thesis that he wrote for this degree. The work is presented not as a history of the Chamoru people or even as a political statement—although it contains elements of both—but rather as a theology that aspires to make sense of a people’s history while serving as a call to arms to challenge whatever might threaten to smother the cultural identity of the people of Guam and the Northern Marianas. There are a good many things that constitute such a threat, according to the author. Two issues, however, surface repeatedly in the book as Diaz seeks to rescue the identity of his people: what he describes as cultural loss and the absence of political self-determination.

On the cultural loss issue, Diaz cavils at the way his fellow Islanders have been presented (or, in many cases, present themselves) as First World people when they are not. Diaz seems to argue that colonization (and not so much missionization) has blinded Island people to their distinctive cultural identity. He attempts to retrieve this cultural identity, in part, through the use of folklore, representing as it