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TONGAN WOMEN AND MIGRATORY CIRCUITS OF WEALTH AND VALUE(S)¹

PING-ANN ADDO

Abstract. Wealth transfers are key to the “how” and “why” of contemporary global population migration. For example, remittances are much-analyzed and fiercely-debated transfers of wealth from migrant populations to their home countries. Yet wealth can be transferred in the opposite direction – from homeland to hostland – and in various different forms. Using an ethnographic approach to understanding the impact of migrant’s (micro) decisions on wider (macro) global practices, this paper records, compares and contextualizes the global movement of things carried, left behind, pined for, and (re-)created by transmigrants. It seeks to nuance our understandings of the “who” of contemporary migration by tracing the role and cross-cutting paths of traditional wealth from the Kingdom of Tonga between groups of Tongan migrants who live in, and move between New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Hawai‘i. The case study illuminates Tongan women’s choices about carrying and creating objects of value that reify homeland gender and labor practices, while also affording them a role in impacting global wealth transfers that both entwine and eschew cash remittances.

Now more than ever before in human history, globalization a set of intertwined processes of movement, exchange, trade, communication, and expanding consciousness is highly influential in the choices people make in constructing their identities, ethnicities, loyalties, and values. One of the most striking choices is to emigrate from one’s homeland, seemingly leaving behind familiar places and people. Migration figures grow each year, as do the figures for remittances sent back by emigrants to homeland communities. Yet, what people take with them is also telling about their notions of value. They remind us that not all global wealth transfers entail state currencies crossing national boundaries through capitalist exchange circuits. Here I apply ethnographic analysis to illuminate how processes of globalization come about when people “do culture” by transporting material wealth as they engage in global migration. I complicate the notion of remittance as a one-way flow of wealth from diaspora to homeland, offering an anthropological analysis of migration that attends to the paths mapped and meanings made by forms of currency circulating globally as gifts.

This analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted on Tongan transnationalism and exchange between 2000 and 2002 with return visits during 2007, 2011, and 2013. The processes analyzed are still on-going in the Kingdom of Tonga and among Tongans in diaspora in New Zealand. I trace the role and globally cross-cutting paths of traditional wealth between the Kingdom and its diasporic

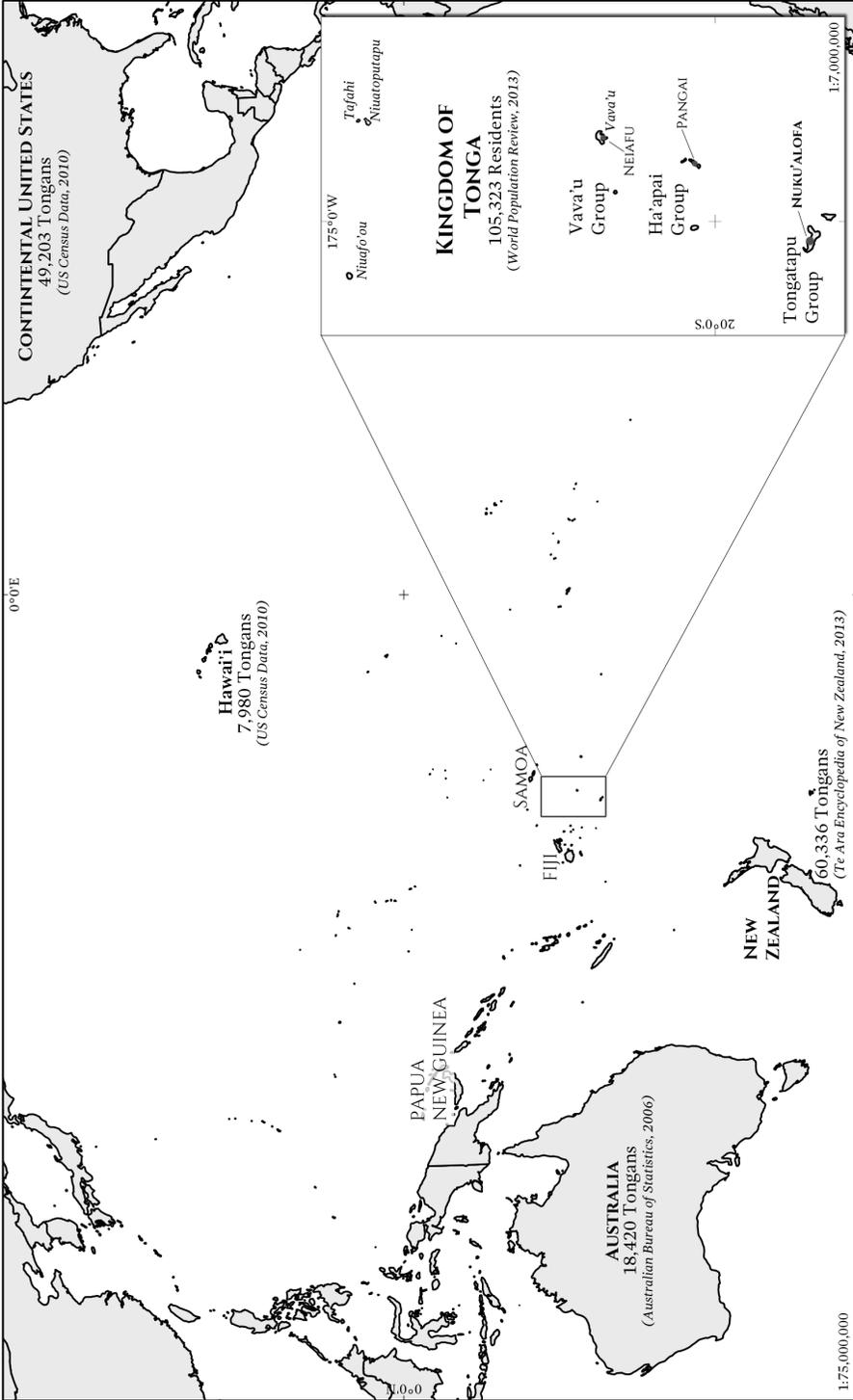
¹ I acknowledge the two anonymous reviewers whose comments were immensely helpful with revising this article.

communities, noting that such exchanges happen between diasporic nodes as well (see Addo 2013; Cave and Koloto 2015). The number of ethnic Tongans in diaspora out-numbers the homeland population by at least five percent and is rising, based in large part on frequent arrivals of new migrants from the homeland. In addition, after Tajikistan, Tonga (closely followed by Fiji) is the nation whose Gross Domestic Product relies most heavily on remittance payments (Brown et al. 2014, 237). Thus, Tongan culture today embeds migration as a prime process for cultural reproduction and economic sustenance. Tongan traditional wealth, such as women's textile wealth called *koloa*, constitutes a major category of globally-transferred wealth that might be missed if we attend only to the movement of cash and consumer goods. The textiles usually flow from homeland to diaspora, as they are needed for ritual exchange, and the people directing these objects are women, who participate in these global flows on behalf of their families.

Ethnography provides details on what valuables circulate, why these things are valued, and whose identities are implicated not just in the things, but in the cross-cutting paths they map across the globe. I employ a case study approach to illuminate Tongan women's motivations for carrying and creating objects of value that reify homeland gender and labour practices, while also affording them a role in impacting global wealth transfers. As in other Pacific communities, it is to the ritual economy (Horan 2013), and not the cash economy, that identity and self-worth are strongly anchored. Globalized (gift) exchange and transnationalism are gendered processes experienced, not in the "stratosphere of disembodiment and disengagement" (Appadurai 2000), but in kin-based allegiances and ritual processes. I focus my analysis on women and put human faces on key material exchange, thus providing a nuanced approach to the person-related process of migration, globalization and transnationalism.

CULTURE, MIGRATION, AND GLOBAL WEALTH FLOWS

The Kingdom of Tonga comprises a Polynesian archipelago of 172 islands, of which 36 are inhabited. It is a small, constitutional monarchy with an agrarian economic base and a population of just over 110,000 inhabitants. Diasporic populations total slightly more, such that about 55 percent of the world's self-avowed Tongans live outside of the Kingdom (Cave and Koloto 2015). Besides some food exports squash, vanilla, and fish which amounted to about 11 percent of GDP in 2009, Tonga relies on remittances for its economic survival. That same year, 39 percent of Tonga's GDP came from remittances, which is the highest of such figures for the entire Pacific (Connell 2015b). Tonga's dependence on cash and in-kind remittances from migrants has led to it being characterized as MIRAB: a migration and remittance aid bureaucracy (Brown et al. 2014, 438), but this has not always been the case. Indeed, until WWII, when consumer goods became more common in the Kingdom, its agrarian economy was almost entirely based on subsistence farming, which buoyed up the ritual economy, and included very little cash. Those with access to economic capital tended to be hereditary elites – nobles and members of the royal family, who could afford to travel or be schooled abroad.



Population of people of self-avowed Tongan Ancestry in Pacific Countries. Inset: The Kingdom of Tonga. Map by Joel Legassie, based on the Natural Earth Dataset, naturalearthdata.com.

Commoners, other than the handful who traveled for education or to advance the missions of various Christian churches that started taking root in the late nineteenth century, did not begin to migrate in large numbers for the purposes of wage earning until the 1960s. Over the past half century, changes in immigration laws in New Zealand, as well as in Australia and the United States, enabled Tongans to apply for work visas. In some cases applicants with a relative already resident in a given destination country could apply for permanent visas. In others, and this remains the case in some destination countries today, only temporary work visas were granted (Connell 2015a and b). Still others migrated, with the help of the Mormon church, to settle in Hawai'i and Salt Lake City, Utah. There are also growing Tongan diasporic communities in Britain, Canada, and Japan ('Esau 2007), as well as in parts of the Middle East (Brown et al. 2014).

When Tongans moved to these places they established village associations, women's craft groups, churches, and other "traditional" institutions. Through these familiar institutions, they recreated homeland practices and maintained links with people in Tonga. Over time, these institutions became sites in which Tongans in diaspora could maintain valuable aspects of their cultural identity and transform these new nations into spaces that they felt comfortable calling "home." Exchange continued to link emigrants, now diasporans, with Tongans in the Kingdom as gifts and reciprocations of *koloa* and other valuables, such as ritual foods necessary to critical life-cycle rituals, flowed from family members in Tonga to those in the diaspora. In addition, as the Tongan population in diaspora increased, more exchanges began to take place in diasporic locations, augmenting remittances (money and valuables sent back to the homeland) as sites in which Tongans could demonstrate their allegiance to kin through gifting. Diasporans continued to remit money back to Tonga through gifts to kin, church and village associations, which at once contributed materially to people and a homeland they loved, but also afforded them recognizable ways to show they still upheld Tongan values. Today, gifting remains both a basic economic practice and a valued cultural trait among Tongans.

From my informants' reports, most Tongan families are transnational (Addo 2013; Small 1997), thus, it might also be argued that Tongan households are not only more widely dispersed because of their current entanglements with globalization, but are actually global(ized) by the transnational nature of their occupants' locations, allegiances, and interactions. Remittances are a useful way to understand this; virtually every Tongan abroad is connected through kinship ties to at least one household in Tonga that requests or desires that money be sent back, and most Tongan households receive some sort of assistance from relatives overseas either directly or indirectly (Lee 2009b). Fund-raisers for churches and high schools in the Kingdom rely on funds remitted from Tongans abroad, as these institutions define important identity sub-categories within Tongan culture. The financing of weddings, funerals, and even christenings and graduation celebrations in Tonga usually has some financial input from relatives living and working overseas.

The effects of gifts in a traditional vein are emotional, material, and symbolic. Even when the objects gifted are not traditional wealth, but modern wealth like state currency, they tend to be gifted as if they were traditional Tongan valuables: in large amounts, accompanied by speeches, prayers, and often a dance performance by a young woman or sometimes children from the giver's kin group. Cited as "the Tongan way," such gifts index respect for tradition, feelings of *'ofa* (love, compassion), and gendered knowledge about how to recognize appropriately the humanity of others. Tongan exchange is idealized as eschewing individual accumulation. Indeed, Tongans I have interviewed often see Westerners as people imprisoned in a life of individualism and non-kin centered work, as well as unduly attached to material wealth for its own sake (Addo 2013). Numerous homeland- and diaspora-based Tongan women are generally unwilling to entirely embrace Western valuables. Their chosen practices must also be seen as a form of resistance to capitalism becoming the primary economic force in their lives, as well as to its encouragement of individual wealth accumulation. Let me further explain by illuminating what *koloa* is and how these textiles are valued.

VALUES AND VALUABLES: OBJECTS AND FLUIDITY

Koloa is a category of textile valuables that is entirely the purview of Tongan women. Traditionally, they have comprised plaited fine mats of various sizes and thicknesses that can be used as floor coverings; very fine (-weft) mats favoured for outer garments worn around the waist; barkcloths made from the beaten, felted, and dyed inner bark of the paper mulberry tree; and decorated baskets filled with bottles of scented coconut oil and/or modern, store-bought toiletries. Women grow and harvest, or otherwise source raw materials for all *koloa*. They treat, make, decorate, care for, and gift *koloa*, and they do so almost entirely by hand and usually in cooperative work groups.

According to Phyllis Herda (1999), who has long researched how Tongan womanhood and identity relate to this category of valuables, the term *koloa* may simply be said to mean "what one values," and the objects are valued because they are the work of women. Women possess undeniable and sacred power in being able to bear children from their bodies. *Koloa* are also assumed to embody women's *mana* (sacred power) and skill, and are associated with basic cultural expressions of love and allegiance to family. When one family gifts *koloa* to another it indexes, honours, and channels women's *mana* as a positive and binding force that produces people and perpetuates culture. While commodifying, selling or pawning, *koloa* affords diasporic women a quick source of cash that they often put toward ceremonial expenses and church donations, *koloa* are identified, first and foremost, as a part of a traditional category of gifts. As anthropologists have long theorized, gifts between groups embody the identity of the giver(s), and in other ways that of the maker(s) (Godelier 1999; Mauss 1925; Weiner 1980). So, as long as women make, care for, even buy and sell, but also continue to gift these things, the objects' currency as *koloa* is maintained.

The specific material forms of *koloa* exhibit an interesting fluidity. Indeed, commoner Tongan women have a history of “indigenizing” (ibid.; Addo 2013; Herda 1999) non-Tongan valuables such as store-bought cloth and bedding, machine-made quilts, knitted blankets, and Western toiletries, using them in lieu of bottles of scented coconut oil that chiefly people tend to include in their ceremonial gifts. Thus, commoner women simultaneously display their pride in being Tongan and their right and capacity to augment the size, value, and aesthetics of this category of objects. They also maintain the authority to alter the form of *koloa* using new materials, colors, and designs. For example, many fine mats include or are entirely plaited from curling ribbon that runs the gamut from shades of the rainbow to those that mimic traditional dye colors of red, brown, black and off-white (Young Leslie and Addo 2007). There is also a new category of “barkcloth” made from synthetic materials that include little or no actual bark. Called *ngatu pepa*, this new barkcloth form continues to incorporate traditional techniques and decorative designs, and is offered as often as paper mulberry barkcloth is now in local Tongan and diasporic ceremonial exchange (Addo 2013).

Ngatu pepa is a diasporic invention. Tongan immigrants I interviewed in New Zealand reported that, in the mid-late 1990s, Tongan women living in diaspora in Salt Lake City invented *ngatu pepa*. As early as the mid-2000s, many Tongans in Tonga had fully absorbed it into their ritual exchanges and, today, *ngatu pepa* is now a category of *koloa* that can be found in all parts of the diaspora. Thus, *ngatu pepa* is part of flows and “contraflows” (James 1997) of Tongan and non-Tongan wealth that interact because of Tongan community and identity, and not simply as part of circuits of wealth between people who neither know nor care about each other. Other innovated textiles include machine-made textiles such as quilts (Herda 1999), which, along with *ngatu pepa*, continue to bolster the textile offerings of kinswomen in their villages of origin in Tonga. There is much to be said about the role of *koloa* flows and exchanges in Tongan ritual processes, which I will discuss next.

RITUALS AND REMITTANCES: GENDERED GLOBAL PROCESSES

One under-researched aspect of migration is the role of ritual as a context and motivation for action among those who migrate. Ritual processes entail the conscious, periodic, and communal interactions whereby particular actors in society transition from one status to another. They do so in contexts designed to differ from their everyday lives, for rituals feature special dresses, foods, discursive interactions, and sometimes altered states of being. After a ritual concludes, it is possible for a community to feel a renewed sense of connection. In Tongan family rituals, a sense of connection is further effected through the exchange of women’s valuables. Gardner and Grillo, in researching “transnational religious practices at the level of households and families” (2002, 180) rightly state that aspects of ritual and how ritual is performed highlight transnationalism’s gendered character. By the same token, Tongan rituals are not only gendered, but are also generational and multiply located. First, older migrants control ritual processes, but often depend

on younger family members to finance ritual costs and lend physical assistance. Second, ritual exchange takes place between families, as families are the unit of identity in Tongan culture, not the individual. Obligations between families do not diminish because their members live far apart, and they often redouble when families are ensconced to whatever degree in advanced capitalist markets.

To understand the value of Tongan objects, we must not only acknowledge that gifts are crucial in Tongan ritual; so too are Tongan notions of rank. Rank is a key Tongan cultural identity marker, but is also one that is rarely considered in analyses of factors affecting economic behaviour on the ground. Contrary to status, which can be challenged and changed, rank structures social hierarchy around assumptions deeply entwined with notions about a person's essence. As a Tongan, one is born into a family that is either of chiefly or commoner rank, and within one's extended family group, one ranks above or below others based on the nature of the relationship, age, birth order, and gender. Families and individuals may be able to affect their status when they offer, accept, and reciprocate material gifts with others. Gifts typically circulate from those of lower rank to those of higher rank. Since the beginning of Tongan history, the land, the gods, chiefly people, and (later) God's blessings had to be recognized by (re-) gifting wealth such as *koloa* (women's wealth) and food (men's wealth) back to the source. Today, commoner Tongans continue to present material gifts to show customary respect to their hereditary chiefs (whose families are today Tongan government leaders and social elites), as well as to church ministers (who are usually commoners, but of relatively higher status, through their close association with God).

The concept of "remittances" also has its attendant assumptions. Remittances are commonly understood to mean "workers remittances" (IMF, 2008, 1): wealth sent back to homelands by migrants and which migrant-sending nations desire to alleviate the "divergences in economic performance between countries and regions" (ibid., 4). In official state and development discourse, remittances are said to take three main forms: "cash, credit transfers and transfers in kind (involving transfers of goods)" (ibid., 6) resulting from labour that migrants perform in host nations. However, ethnographic analyses (e.g., Addo 2013, Levitt 2001, Werbner 1990, Wiltberger 2014) reveal that much of the value "sent back" to migrant-sending nations may have little or nothing to do with labour-related practices. Tongan valuables in global motion also include "reverse remittances"—island foods, *koloa*, and other "handicrafts." Within the last decade, such contraflows have been valued at 43 percent of the value of reported remittances from diasporic locations to Tonga (Gibson and Nero 2008).

It is important to note that Tongan migration has never been gender restricted and that Tongan women have historically remitted more often, and thus larger total sums of money than men (Vete 1995; World Bank 2006, 61). Migration is also rarely an individual decision for Tongans: usually, families decide which members to send abroad and expect emigrants to recognize their obligation towards kin in the homeland, but also to those in diaspora (Connell 2015a). Finally, the notion

of worker remittances flowing back to a homeland primarily for development and capital investment purposes are foreign to many Tongans (Connell 2015b). Externally-sourced funds are often channelled towards supporting traditional wealth creation in Tonga (ibid.; Addo 2013; Cave and Koloto 2015). Case studies will help to illustrate the familial and expansive nature of the migration-remittance-gift confluence of people and valuables in global Tongan relations.

CASE STUDY I: PREPARING FOR A MIGRANT WEDDING

Talanoa, a 65 year-old, Tongan woman who had resided in Auckland New Zealand for almost half her life, was preparing for her daughter's wedding. Talanoa relied on her female kin network, her sisters, cousins, and nieces, to prepare a grand wedding ceremony and reception worthy of Elina's status as the daughter of a pastor (deceased though he was). The year before, Talanoa had traveled to Tonga to obtain *koloa* needed for the event, some of which was *koloa* she had "financed" through remittances to relatives long before this particular trip to Tonga. Relatives from California, Australia, Tonga and other parts of New Zealand were all attending as guests, the most important of whom were the groom's five sisters. Gifts of womanly things, textiles, furniture, and other home furnishings, were among the traditional gifts that would help Talanoa show those five women her respect. It also afforded her a feeling of greater assurance that these women, who would be her future grandchildren's highest-ranking relatives, would care for and protect her daughter and any children she would bear. Talanoa gathered the money she needed to finance these gifts from donations from her kin, as well as money 'Elina, a university-educated woman, had saved up from her job. Talanoa presented furniture suites, *koloa*, and cash gifts (of about NZ\$2,000 each) to three of the groom's sisters who lived in Auckland. The two who lived in the United States received more portable gifts of *koloa* and cash. These gifts were evidence of the material and affective ties Talanoa actively maintained across global and intra-diasporic distances.

As stated earlier, *koloa* encodes the *mana* of women, and their gifting of *koloa* keeps alive gendered knowledge about how to appropriately recognize the humanity of others. As *koloa* is generally imported from Tonga, such a gift in diaspora displays the devotion and sacrifice of a gifting family. Through presenting such gifts to key people in the other family, Talanoa was able to demonstrate her love for her daughter, encourage her new in-laws to cherish the young woman, demonstrate her confidence in Elina's suitability as a bride, and suggest her own kin group's suitability as a marriageable family.

The direction of flows of wealth and people, often together, often in opposite directions, and sometimes in cross-cutting ways, suggests that the unidirectional characterization of remittances (see World Bank citation, for example) must be complicated by a more thorough understanding of what it means to be a sender of wealth in Tongan terms. There are also what I would call "onward flows" of wealth

between people dwelling in different parts of the diaspora. Such flows strengthen links between diasporic nodes, too. Anthropologist Helen Lee (2009a) refers to this as the realm of intra-diasporic transnationalism.

Like many migrants, Tongan migrant families have tended to participate in the global movements of populations, valuables, and information in ways that epitomize “grassroots globalization” (Appadurai 2000, 2). What is key about this sort of ‘globalization from below’ is that, aside from the relatively small number of Tongan nobility whose families have long had the social and economic capital to travel and settle globally, most Tongan commoners who become global migrants are relatively resource-poor. At the same time, however, most of these commoners are literate and adventurous, trust in God, and rely on family and other institutional connections as anchors or pivots for their movements. Indeed they usually move to earn money or to find opportunities for their families, supporting Appadurai’s suggestion that their experiences inform “vernacular discourses about the global ... that are typically concerned with how to plausibly protect cultural autonomy and economic survival in some local, national, or regional sphere in the era of ‘reform’ and ‘openness’” (ibid.). Thus, people routinely express a preference for more traditional or long-standing ways of expressing autonomy and ensuring economic and ritual sustenance. Remittances and reverse remittances support preferred cultural projects on the ground: cash remitted to homeland buttresses homeland institutions, while reverse remittances buoy up the identity projects of communities in diaspora.

Of course gift exchange is not the sum-total of global Tongan economic activity. There are Tongan entrepreneurs in various parts of the world today operating businesses that range from home-based handicraft micro-enterprises to small and large import-export enterprises. I wrote earlier about migrants recreating homeland institutions in diaspora. Another such institution – albeit one that developed with the increasing need for cash, rather than to address kin and village based processes from within – is the Tongan pawn shop. The pawn shop is one form of the institutionalization of *koloa* provision outside the family. Whereas, up until the mid-twentieth century, women grew raw materials for and made the *koloa* they exchanged (Small 1997), today many women buy *koloa* from businesses that commoditize fine mats, barkcloth, and quilts. This is especially the case because women in diaspora cannot easily make *koloa* and may need to acquire it in less time than it would take for a relative to send it from Tonga.

CASE STUDY II: THE RITUAL AND THE COMMERCIAL AS INTERTWINED CONTEXTS FOR ‘VALUE’

Pauline had left the main Tongan Methodist church when she married her Fiji Indian husband a decade before, which was also around the time the couple opened up a small cash loan business in the front of their house. The collateral for loans constituted fine mats, barkcloths, quilts, and even electronics such as TV sets

and CD players in good working order. Loans were short term and high interest, resulting in a lucrative business that numerous Tongans frequented when in need of quick cash to pay bills, church donations, and other expenses. Many Auckland-based Tongan women who pawned their *koloa* at Pauline's shop did so only as a last resort. They often relied on relatives to provide them with cash later, citing a loss of family pride and ability to meet other gifting obligations if the *koloa* were "lost" to the pawn shop (Addo and Besnier 2008). Although she no longer worshipped alongside them, Pauline always kept up ties with her still-Methodist relatives in Auckland and abroad. She attended and contributed money at family weddings and funerals. She also relied on family connections when she did business and regularly enjoyed lodging with kin in cities in Australia and the West Coast of the United States where she periodically visited to sell *koloa* to Tongans in need of various textiles for their cultural obligations.

Pauline's business benefits from a global market for textiles and from her global network of relatives and co-ethnics. It also benefits from value conversions wherein *koloa* is commensurable for cash, cash is suitable for ritual obligations, and globalization becomes a tool for meeting those obligations.

The basis for the flexible valuation of *koloa* and cash is Tongans' own fluid notions of value and home, both concepts that they consider worth striving for. Notions of what constitutes valuables and where home is located can change over time and space without making Tongans feel like they are losing their traditions, as long as they remain connected to other Tongans: both kin and other co-ethnics. Such fluidity is an advantage in global contexts, so it is no wonder that Tongan women take their traditional wealth and ritual practices wherever they migrate. Again, their global identity projects rely on, and perpetuate migratory circuits of people and wealth. We are reminded that cultural practice is dynamic and people-generated, never static or about the practices themselves. Moreover, migration is more than simply a process of movement and resource transfers. It is both a way of shoring up social ties and cultural (as well as economic) value with specific groups of people and a way of accessing that value for one's own sense of security, belonging, and identity.

CONCLUSION: GLOBALIZATION AS PEOPLE-FUELLED AND PEOPLE-FOCUSED

In the Tongan case, traditional wealth is involved in flows that entwine cash and mass-produced commodities but that also eschew Western ways of valuing by frequently pulling these Western forms of wealth into gift exchanges. By guiding individual action, this cultural system subordinates more impersonal wealth exchange to cultural concerns, but also further fuels commodity and cash exchange. When the people concerned are women, we need to acknowledge the constraints and the creative processes whereby they effect a fluid, family-oriented, and place-centred approach to practices embodied at the nexus of the local and

the global. Through globalized gifting, Tongan women are at the forefront of local sustenance, cultural affirmation, and popular resistance. They specifically employ global processes and products themselves as tools to enact such affirmation and resistance.

More generally, I hope to leave readers with a few insights on global migration as it affects and is effected by people who migrate for cultural reasons, and not simply for labour purposes. Objects like *koloa* that have little monetary exchange value outside of very specific cultural contexts can be sources and repositories of value in ritual, but also in business. Also, my analysis suggest that we must broaden our understanding of which places should be seen as central in notions of “globalization.” Sending countries are more than sources for labour, receiving countries are more than locations for global production and consumption, and both are sites of home and identity-making for migrants. Wealth is so often moved locally and globally because people, rather than wealth itself, matters. As people interrelate, economic relations in nations with large proportions of migrants in their population often become reconfigured from below because value moves globally in forms that enfold, rather than eschew, people’s obligations to each other. Expanding these less formal “trade” linkages between these nation states in turn perpetuates the material aspects of grassroots globalization (Appadurai 2000).

Finally, the data on historical and cultural reasons for participating in globalization become more robust when analyses expand beyond a single focus on currency to include the seemingly disparate contexts in which people use things to act in meaningful ways. Analyses that portray migrants as caught in webs of dependency, spending, obligation, and wage-earning flatten both their intentions for and experiences of migration. There may be many economic, social, and political challenges for migrants, but it is worth noting how individuals, families, and entire communities strategize around overcoming these challenges in ways that do not alienate them from their own sense of who they are. This approach keeps analyses people-focused and puts faces on the statistics so often used to understand the inter-twined processes of globalization and migration.

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