

Book Review

John O'Connor

Culbertson, Philip, Nelson Agee, Margaret, & Makasiale, Cabrini 'Ofa (Eds.). (2007). *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary challenges in mental health for Pacific peoples*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Uliuli is a book that powerfully invites us to engage with the Pasifika nature of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural landscape, and the implications of this for mental health work. It asks students and mental health practitioners of all persuasions to engage with the many voices of Pasifika practitioners. The contributors to this book identify primarily as Samoan, Tongan, Niuean and Hawaiian (and have identifications with a range of additional backgrounds). Their voices and the variety of perspectives they offer provide a rich opportunity for Palagi mental health professionals to enter the many worlds of the Pacific, to hear these voices and the potent lessons they offer. For Pasifika practitioners the book brings together voices that have struggled in the past to be heard, much less read, particularly in the tertiary training centres where many psychotherapists and mental health practitioners initially learn their craft.

The title of this book refers to the Pacific black pearl or penina uliuli. The opening page explains how over the course of years, layer by layer the pearl is formed within the protective barrier of the oyster. Similarly each chapter in this book builds on the one before. Multiple authors contribute to its many textures and contributions complement those that precede them. The result is a multi-layered work which leaves the reader informed, moved and assisted to engage across the many cultural divides which often inhibit cross cultural work with Pasifika communities.

As a Palagi therapist I approached this work with some apprehension, as I anticipated encountering my own ignorance. This was to prove the case, but my apprehension soon became appreciation. In the first section various authors explore their relationship to conceptualisations of Pasifika identities. Siautu Alefaio writes movingly of the challenges for contemporary Pasifika youth in New Zealand, whilst Emeline Afeaki-Mafile'o presents an overview of a mentoring model from a collective perspective for Pasifika youth. Subsequent authors deconstruct notions of the Samoan and Tongan male body, and explore the multiple challenges of "Being 'Afakasi". In each chapter, the reader is invited into the world of Pasifika from a particular standpoint. A theme throughout is the way in which the Pasifika sense of

self is embedded in the collective, an understanding very different from the individualised emphasis of the dominant western perspective.

In the second section, issues of spirituality are considered. David Lui emphasises the importance of spirituality to Samoan views of health and wellbeing and To'oa Jemaima Tiatia writes of the importance of considering spirituality when engaging in suicide prevention. One of the book's strengths is the opportunity it provides to represent both conventional and less conventional perspectives. Cabrini Makasiale critiques the tendency to deify culture, powerfully challenging from within the tendency to make culture "God" and the risks for Pasifika people of doing so. She comments, "Because we believe that God is an absolute, we have deified culture as an absolute. Rot! Culture is organic: it constantly grows and changes, responsive to the environment around it" (p. 83). In the next chapter a survivor of trauma writes of the pain experienced as a result of abuse which occurred within a church context. The moving power of these contributions is in allowing me as a Palagi reader and therapist a glimpse into worlds alongside which I have lived for many years. The authors evocatively describe the comfort and pain, joy and distress of their experience.

The section on the Pacific unconscious explores the ways in which the unconscious provides a resource for Pasifika people. Makasiale writes informatively of her use of metaphor and story telling to invite her clients' exploration of their unconscious. Other authors write of the indigenous Pasifika wisdom that underpins their work with the unconscious. They present many relevant challenges to those of us engaged in the training of mental health professionals if we are to assist our Pasifika students to embrace this wisdom rather than to leave it at the door when they enter our classrooms. Peta Pila Palalagi's poetry beautifully underlines earlier contributions.

The final section explores trauma and healing within Pasifika communities. Joseph Keawe'aimoku Kaholokula's contribution is particularly relevant. He outlines the process and impact colonisation has had on the indigenous people of Hawai'i, the Kanaka Maoli. The unspoken parallels to the experience of Māori are striking and undeniable. The book ends with a comprehensive bibliography of Pasifika mental health, a resource which provides a wealth of material for readers to continue their exploration.

This multi-layered publication is indeed a "pearl of a book" (p. xiv) gifted to our therapeutic community from Pasifika peoples. Philip Culbertson, Margaret Nelson Agee and Cabrini 'Ofa Makasiale have done a skilful and meticulous job of bringing together a wide range of Pasifika authors to contribute diverse, richly informative and extremely moving contributions

from the multiple perspectives of Pasifika peoples, about themselves and the world around them, and the implications this has for mental health work. I highly recommend this book for those of us who wish to embrace the opportunities of therapeutic work within Pasifika communities.