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THE METHOD OF HOPE: Anthropology, Philosophy and Fijian Knowledge

By Hirozaku Miyazaki

Stanford (California): Stanford University Press. 2004. x. 199pp. (Maps, B&W photos.) US$39.95. cloth. ISBN 0-8047-4886-1.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast," goes the aphorism, and, in this interesting slim but densely-argued volume, Miyazaki suggests that this is nowhere more true than for the people of Suvavou, the original owners displaced in 1882 from the whole area on which the capital, Suva, was established. Their persistence, in the face of continual rebuffs and failure, in seeking government compensation for this alienation can only, he suggests, be explained by understanding that hope for them is rehearsed in many cultural practices through which they constitute self-knowledge. Thus, he suggests, hope is not a forlorn wishfulness or Polyanna-ish optimism, but a deeply-grounded method of knowledge that demands of us a 'radical temporal reorientation of knowledge' (p.5). He embarks upon this in "an effort to *inherit* and *replicate* that impulse as a spark of hope on another terrain" – that of anthropology (p.30). His theoretical stance about "hope" is built on that of philosophers from quite disparate schools of thought, especially the Americans Dewey and Rorty, and the Germans Bloch and Benjamin..

Miyazaki demonstrates a keen intellect and an appetite for the eclectic juxtaposition of ideas. He writes clearly enough to avoid the "verbal molasses" through which too many social science writers expect readers to wade. I often had to re-read things, but that was because the ideas were demanding, not the writing.

While his self-avowed aim is to use the case-study to advance hope as a viable strategy applicable to anthropology, I was at least equally engaged by some fresh ways he advanced for looking at Fijian ways of knowing. For example, the neatly-argued point that the Suvavou people's search for documentary evidence hidden (either by accident or malign intent) in the archives is more than a search for empirical evidence to "clinch" their case. For them effectiveness (*mana*) = truth (*dina*), and their hope is to find the *effective* way to urge their claim, since that *must* establish the truth.

Again, extrapolating from Hocart's insights into Fijians' repetitive subdivision of everything into dualities, Miyazaki proposes that in Fijian thought "wholes" are seen not as the sum of their parts, but as infinitely-divisible entities. He suggests that conflict between these two ways of seeing contributes greatly to the internal wrangles over rent-income that Suvavou shares with so many other Fijian communities.

Of particular anthropological interest is his contention that the forms and processes observed by Fijians in both Christian church and traditional gift rituals are also manifestations of the method of hope. Each presents a sequence of problems and solutions. The “problem-giver” relinquishes agency but hopes that the “correct” response will ensure the desired completion and ratify self-knowledge. This is an ingenious re-framing of van Gennep’s famous three phases of Separation, Liminality and Reaffirmation in all ritual, and of Durkheim’s association of acts of ritual with identity processes. He suggests that this process is open-ended toward the future not only because of hope for later reciprocal rituals, but the deeply Christian Fijians once again defer the ritually-fulfilled hope by dedicating the goods to God, seeking future blessing.

The method of hope, Miyazaki concludes, “is a performative inheritance of hope … in the past”, and in the structure of the book “every chapter …[seeks to] replicate hope on a new terrain” (p.129). That new terrain is, in short, the anthropology of the present — always, as he recognizes, a difficult domain, but one in which anthropologists, informed but not bound by history, must inevitably function in light of the flux of today’s social world. He feels that it is a hopeful project, and I hope he’s right.

University of Tasmania RODERICK EWINS

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