Vol. 20, No. 2, July 2010, 176–178

Collective creativity: Art and society in the South Pacific, by Katherine Giuffre. Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific Series, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, 2009, xvi?163pp., figures, tables, appendices, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7664-5 (hardback).

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Though the title gives no hint of it, the focus of this book, which is actually a case study, is Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands. This fact is significant because the work is less a study about creativity and more a fascinating picture of a tiny insular society, historically disrupted, and now left endlessly dividing itself amoeba-like into factions competing about rights and identities. *Struggles in art and society: A story of contemporary Rarotonga* might have been a truer title.

That said, the book's most glaring omission is the lack of any photographs of the art that is central to the discourse, let alone of the players: makers, sellers and users. Surely only academic publishers (and 'arts radio' producers!) could convince themselves that words suffice when dealing with visual art. It was particularly frustrating during the author's otherwise most interesting discussion of the several artist factions, their different approaches, and claims of copyright infringements.

Most readers will be left forever wondering what each of these might look like, where they differ and overlap, and so on.

With those caveats, I should immediately say how interesting I found this book, and acknowledge the quality of the author's research. By the end, I felt I had a genuine sense of this generous, proud, truculent, and thoroughly conflicted little society. Giuffre writes fluently and clearly, does not become bogged down in jargon and appropriately provides many references to relevant literature. This is not to suggest that the book is an easy read, since it is too densely packed with ideas. Its problem is one of digestion, not of style.

The focus is immediately identified: a 'Rarotongan arts explosion' that has occurred over less than two decades. Giuffre asks why, and how, a place becomes a locus of creativity, and what social systems are implicated (p. 3), and foreshadows her conclusions that in Rarotonga, at least, answers lie in the social structures and networks of the 'collective'.

Giuffre first considers theories about the ever-elusive source(s) of creativity, then inevitably moves to the safer ground of conditions that may foster it.

By the end of the book little evidence appears to have been adduced that the

collective can be credited with generating creativity *per se*; that emerges as having been stimulated by particular histories and needs, and limited opportunities to deal with them.

What does become clear, however, is that 'the presence of a collaborative circle surrounding the creators plays a crucial role in supporting the deviant creation' (p. 11), both politically and practically. Those who lack support groups, Giuffre asserts, are significantly disadvantaged.

Given the exceptional levels of inter-group tensions Giuffre documents, I think she passes too quickly over conflict as a stimulus to creativity (p. 9). I have elsewhere (Ewins 1998, 2009) discussed artistic vigour in terms of a bell-curve in which a certain level of stress is optimal for creative enterprise but the extremes of total comfort and total disruption are both destructive of it (Kavolis 1972).

Giuffre tolls off the depressingly familiar list of causes of post-contact change and erosion of tradition and culture (religion, disease, technology, diet, clothing, miscegenation, land ownership, capitalism, education, emigration). In terms of the book's topic, the most problematic of these have been first emigration, from outer islands to Rarotonga and thence to New Zealand, and the countervailing re-entry of members of the diaspora, often a generation or more removed. Emigration began with annexation to NZ in 1900, continued through autonomy in 1965, and was greatly facilitated when the airport was built in 1974. Goods and money flow in while people flow out; over 80% of Cook Islanders now live overseas. As in many post-colonial and diasporic situations, rapid social, political and economic change has provoked a responsive emphasis on indigenousness, and identity markers. In the latter category, art is always to the fore.

Added to the perceptions of threatened identity common to most small societies in the face of globalising forces, the issues of the outward and inward movement of those who claim indigenousness (and therefore under Cook Islands law have a claim on a share of the very limited land on the tiny islands), help set the stage for great competition for identity and entitlements. Many re-entrant Rarotongans have had access to higher levels of education and sophistication that give them some advantages, but they have also generally lost touch with many traditions, including language, and those who have 'stayed on' use this to 'trump' them with claims of more 'authentic' indigenousness.

In addition to its identity role, in a place with limited employment opportunities, the production of art (for tourists in particular) has emerged as a prosperous industry. Here again, Rarotonga fits the pattern of less developed countries (LDCs), and also typically, the reproduction of their traditional arts was begun very shortly after first contact with the outside world, when islanders observed the newcomers' keenness to buy up portable manifestations of their culture. Today, control of cultural production, consumption, and marketing is hotly contested, since many layers of reinforced identity, kudos and reward flow from it (p.41).

Having set this scenario, the author devotes the remainder of the book to a detailed examination of the manner in which the struggle for dominance is played out. Giuffre reveals the interplay of issues such as kinship and other group membership, tension between indigenous and non-indigenous people, the tug-of-war between the tastes and aspirations of artists, galleries, and consumers. In particular, overseas-trained artists, and some gallery owners, have raised issues of the validation that must accompany a transition from producing simulacra of traditional art forms to producing contemporary art that remains distinctive to the Cooks, but meets aesthetic and quality criteria that will stand muster in the outside art world (in the first instance in NZ). This is perhaps the area in which the greatest distance remains to be travelled.

The final chapter of the book is the shortest and, appropriately, the pithiest, drawing together all the strands of empirical data, theory, and analysis. The author reiterates what she sees as the uniqueness of Rarotonga's 'art renaissance', and ties this (correctly, I believe) to the disruption of the social networks with emigration and profound cultural change. Contrary to this disruption is the forging of new networks among the artists, lending much mutual support. Here too, however, she acknowledges the disharmony between artist groups and sees it as 'stimulating creativity and innovation'.

Rarotongans have good reason to be well pleased with Giuffre's respectful and sympathetic portrait of them and their world. If only it had pictures!

References:

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