

---

## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

---

Stephanie Lawson, *Tradition versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa*. Cambridge Asia-Pacific Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. x, 228, maps, tables, notes, bib., index. US\$64.95 cloth.

**Editors' Note:** Because of the fluidity of the situation in Fiji, it is important for readers to note that the various reviews and the author's response were written in late 1999 and early 2000, before the events of May 2000. —LL & DBR

*Review:* HENRY J. RUTZ  
HAMILTON COLLEGE  
CLINTON, NEW YORK

### Evaluating the Discourse of Tradition

ARGUABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS of many Pacific Islands countries today concern political legitimation. The postcolonial history of Pacific Islanders is devoid of the wars and genocidal confrontations of Africa, the death-squad democracies of Latin America, and the authoritarian oppression of some Asian countries. The word "crisis" would be inappropriate for this region's colonial and postcolonial political rhetoric and constitutional development. To date, the only events worthy of the term were those of the bloodless Fiji coups of 1987, the first ever in the region.

Nevertheless, if "crisis" refers to the ontology of legitimation, by which I mean serious disagreements about what constitutes legitimacy, that is, what

legitimacy “is,” then a number of Pacific Islands countries can be said to be in a state of perpetual legitimation contests that consist of discourse about their constitutional development. The single exception is the bloodless Fiji coups of 1987, the first ever in the region. These did produce a constitutional crisis that brought the country back to “normalcy,” to use a term of international diplomacy, in 1990. In the Pacific Islands, the postcolonial process of constituting the nation-state and constructing national cultures continues to be a project in the uses of the past. Indigenous peoples lay claim to “tradition” as the source of political legitimacy.

This thoughtful and provocative book explores in depth the dialogic “tradition versus democracy” discussion that has come to frame particular discourses of legitimation in many Pacific Islands countries, with special reference to Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. On the one hand, there is the recent world-historical triumph of democracy, reinforced by American hegemony, which more than ever coerces all countries, including those in the Pacific Islands, to frame certain ideas about political legitimacy as “democracy.” In other words, from a global perspective, “democracy” is the hegemonic term in discourses about legitimation, and people in Pacific Islands countries are aware that they are not beyond the reach of global hegemony. On the other hand, there are, from an insular perspective, discourses of legitimation in which ideas about “tradition” are hegemonic. As the ironic title of Lawson’s book suggests, she views all these discourses as being framed by a dialogism in which ideas about democracy are opposed to ideas about tradition, either as complementary or contradictory ciphers in the power struggles of political elites.

In the past several decades Pacific historians, anthropologists, and political scientists have produced a large and rich literature on tradition as a form of history and culture. Less often have they linked their cultural studies to questions of elitism and political ideology, or both questions to problems of legitimation, which always brings into view a particular formation of the state as an instrument of elite power.

Lawson’s book makes four important contributions to a subject that will continue to preoccupy scholars of the Pacific Islands. First, she brings together in her text the voices of Pacific Islands politicians, journalists, activists, academicians, and intellectuals. Readers will find a treasure trove of sources in the detailed chapter notes and her bibliography. Second, in her first and last chapters, she addresses many epistemological issues that plague the literature on tradition and adopts an epistemological posture, bringing into her discussion the reflections of many authors whose geographical interests lie in other parts of the world. Third, she synthesizes the particularities of our knowledge about legitimation contests for three countries, pro-

viding a comparative perspective that has been lacking in the literature. Fourth, and most courageously, she takes a stand against the discourse of "tradition" by evaluating it negatively from the viewpoint of a discourse of "democracy."

My brief comments are directed at Lawson's evaluation of the dialogism of "tradition" versus "democracy." Her conclusions raise questions about evaluative criteria and the place of interpretation and relativism in comparative studies. It will be useful at the outset to have a précis of Lawson's conclusions about the dialogics of tradition versus democracy. For Lawson, tradition is not just another cultural system, a particular form of history that views the past as present. Whatever its cultural logic, tradition is an ideology that legitimates the social hierarchy, especially for chiefs whose discourse of "tradition" is a cipher for codifying privilege and prerogative in the name of preservation and protection of culture from alien elements that are perceived as destructive of a way of life. Furthermore, the discourse of "tradition," which is inherently conservative, has become more rigid as it has been codified in the constitution of the nation-state. Thereafter, the legitimacy of the state resides in the constitution, framed by a discourse of "tradition" and valorizing the social hierarchy as a natural civic order.

In the Pacific Islands, the discourse of "tradition" also is shaped by a dialectical relationship to the discourse of "democracy." The latter is portrayed as alien to "the Pacific Way." This dialectic becomes hypocritical and oppressive when discourses of tradition take on the characteristics of island xenophobia. Chiefs encourage commoners to think that by accepting the authority of tradition, they must reject "the Alien Way" (the "money way"). It is a frequent observation that those elites who most strongly defend tradition in the interest of commoners also share unequally in the benefits of education, employment, consumption of imports, and travel to foreign lands. Seeing tradition as ideology removes the apparent paradox of chiefs as the keepers of authentic culture who consume other cultures, specifically those whose discourses of legitimation are democratic.

Lawson has gone farther than most in taking a position against the politics of tradition in Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. In between the lines there is more than a little frustration with relativistic analyses of history, culture, and symbolism. Political scientists seem less prone to relativism than anthropologists. Political theory is, by and large, democratic theory, and political scientists haven't had much use for the old science of culture. Some anthropologists, steeped in the relativism of cultural systems and still not wholly comfortable with the ideological dimension of culture or the necessity of thinking about culture in terms of nation-states, are reluctant to insinuate themselves in the evaluation of systems of legitimation that govern

the lives of others. But on these points Lawson is most convincing. She argues, correctly in my opinion, that cultural relativism can't be defended. It rests on a false dichotomy between outside-inside, as if there is intellectual sovereignty over particular forms of culture or ideas. Following Nathan, she rejects the claim that evaluation of "otherness" is a form of cultural imperialism, on grounds that value judgments underwrite all forms of communication. To give over the power of evaluation to cultural relativism would be to admit all forms of political legitimacy as equivalent without any basis for judgment.

In Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa, the main defenders of tradition as the basis of legitimacy are political elites, primarily chiefs or nobles, whose privileges and prerogatives depend upon maintaining their positions in a social hierarchy. The three countries (which have a shared history in the precontact period) have slightly different kinds and degrees of social hierarchy, which themselves have implications for differences in their rhetoric and politics of tradition. But they all have an entrenched stratum of chiefs whose legitimacy rests on perceptions of their power to protect people from harm and promote the welfare of all. This original power derives from divinity, *mana*, or some other supernatural source—most definitely not from the people. From the viewpoint of practically any rhetoric of "democracy," these discourses of "tradition" look more similar than different. Each country has an equivalent phrase for "tradition" that encompasses an ontology of things believed to be "good" or "true": *vakavanua* in Fiji, *anga faka Tonga* in Tonga, and *fa'a Samoa* in Western Samoa. In each case, tradition is conflated within chieftainship: *vakaturaga* in Fiji, *anga faka Tonga* in Tonga, and *fa'amatai* in Western Samoa. The ontological framework that conflates tradition with social hierarchy is captured by Lawson when she quotes the words of Queen Salote on the founding of the Tongan Traditions Committee in 1952(!) to the effect that "the customs of the people are its heritage" (p. 97). Lawson goes on to say: "But the kind of heritage recalled through genealogical knowledge is one which can only be expressed in the idiom of chiefliness."

The identity of the individual, the group, and the nation are one in tradition. When Indira Gandhi came to Fiji in 1982, a year of national elections fraught with Fijians' fears of losing control of the government to Indians, commoner Fijian friends took the occasion of her visit to instruct me: "You see now that Indians cannot win. How could an Indian be prime minister or governor-general? How could he greet a foreign visitor in the correct manner?" The Fijian rituals of *vakavanua* (tradition), which include greetings to high chiefs that incorporate formal speech codes in Fijian language and ceremonies, had become official government protocol. My Fijian friends found the protocol for ceremonies of state and "the Fijian way of life" to be indistinguishable. The idea of an Indian head of state in charge of the former

was incomprehensible to them because of the impossibility of an Indian in charge of the latter, whereas my own confusion arose from the incomprehensibility to me of an Indian governor-general of Fiji who could fail to give a proper welcome to a prime minister of India.

Five years later, in 1987, the first Fiji coup laid bare two incompatible ontologies and their relation to two different forms of political legitimation. The 1987 coups are significant because crisis brought into the open just how little most Fijians—at all levels of the social hierarchy—had made democracy a part of their lives. Lawson points out that it is Christianity, not democracy, that Pacific Islanders brought into their lives. Democracy, to use her words, is a “regime legitimator,” there for the eyes of other nation-states (p. 160). As her case studies show, democratic practices are not a burning issue. In each case, the voice of democracy comes from a small number of educated individuals whose biographical profiles often stand apart from the vast majority of their fellow men and women. Colonial legacy and national status have, in all cases, effected real change in peoples’ lives, necessitating a shift in rhetorical strategies. But there has been no transformation of the dialogic form of “tradition versus democracy.” Instead, the form gradually (traditionalists, after all, are in no hurry) encompasses more and more foreign content, a kind of legitimation involution.

Lawson is on the mark when she concludes that, overall, in Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa the colonial legacy and nationhood have resulted in the intensification of elitism through a process of the codification of chieftainship as the linchpin of legitimation by virtue of tradition. Their constitutions provide for the retention of their highest chiefs as heads of state and recognition of aristocracy in places of power and wealth (p. 161).

What, then, are we to make of the global hegemony of “democratic” discourse? Pacific Islands countries, like so many others in the world today, “talk the talk but don’t walk the walk.” Lawson shows in her case studies that reforms in all three countries were responses to local contests within the discourse of “tradition,” not embraces of democratic virtue. For example, the adoption of universal suffrage in Western Samoa was a response to the Samoan problem of inflated *matai* titles. And when it was adopted, the Village Fono Act of 1990 was an agreement to embrace universal suffrage at the cost of a reform that would actually increase local powers of the *matai* system.

The relativization of democracy, Lawson argues, poses further problems of interpretation and evaluation. The rhetorical strategy of inscribing “tradition” as “democracy” is one more way for conservative political elites to close the door to outside criticism, “accusing their critics not only of errors in cross-cultural understanding, but of ethnocentrism, epistemological imperialism,

cultural chauvinism, and so forth" (p. 35). In other words, conservative political elites could use their own brand of political cultural relativism, strengthening the hand of reactionary and xenophobic nationalists. The purpose is not to open debate about political legitimation but to stifle it.

Lawson discusses how Western Samoan political elites adopt the rhetorical strategy of claiming that the chiefly system (*vakamatai*) is a pure form of democracy, providing for all men the opportunity of becoming chiefs through a process of consensus rather than secret ballot. The invocation of consensus as a superior substitute for open debate and secret ballot is common in the discourse of "tradition." In Pacific Islands chiefly systems, consensus means going along with chiefly authority. Commoners neither dissent nor vote; they grumble. Their only hope is for chiefs to delay action, sometimes for generations. The doctrine of cultural relativism without evaluation would be helpless in the face of these and many other rhetorical strategies of "tradition."

Few countries remain that do not purport to be "democracies" or at least to give the appearance of being sympathetic to a discourse of "democracy." In the Pacific Islands cases, the global hegemonic discourse of "democracy" is being brought inside other, counterhegemonic political discourses, that is, those of "tradition," resulting in ambiguities, incongruities, and paradoxes reflected in the "tradition versus democracy" debate.

Lawson is acutely aware of the ideological pitfalls of relativizing a discourse of "democracy." Both as a matter of personal commitment and as a mundane problem of comparative method, she is forced by the position she has taken vis-à-vis "tradition" to say more about "democracy" by way of criteria for evaluation. In her three chapters on country case studies, Lawson honors the relativist position of interpreting each country's political discourse in the context of its own culture and history. Here Lawson gives the reader a sense of ambiguity and paradox in the constitutions of each state. A discourse of "tradition" underscores reforms and strengthens its own legitimacy by codifying it. Even radical action seems to result in a further reinforcement of tradition. An example is the first Fiji coup in May of 1987, which surprised practically everybody close to the events of the election, and it surely surprised more distant observers. When prime minister and paramount chief Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was defeated in the April election, and the chiefs had lost control of the reins of power for the first time, he included in his concession speech a statement that the winner in the election was democracy. And a few months later, when it looked like a coalition government would resolve a constitutional crisis, restoring to power those who had won a valid democratic election, an unexpected second coup happened in September, restoring Fijians to power. By October, Fiji had gone from being a dominion in the Commonwealth to becoming an independent republic. The winner

was the discourse of “tradition,” which became more elaborated and codified in a new constitution in 1990 (Rutz 1995).

Lawson describes these and many other less-dramatic constitutional reforms that continue to be shaped by political discourse in Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. She includes the voices of “democracy,” found in such documents as the Declaration of Rights in the Tongan constitution or Western Samoan elite ideas about the chiefly system (*fa'amatai*), as the purest form of “democracy.” In her case studies, she moves easily from exposition to evaluation to express her approval or disapproval of efforts by Pacific Islanders to shape their own discourse of “democracy.” For example, she expresses her approval of those parts of Tonga’s Declaration of Rights that “suggest some desire to give effect to certain principles associated with more modern liberal values” (p. 94) while withholding her assent to an expression of equality in the same constitution because it is compromised by the Tongan discourse of “tradition.” To take a more extreme example, she characterizes the Fijian version of “democracy” reflected in the 1990 constitution as “a form of political apartheid on the one hand, and the attempted institutionalization of a one-party state on the other” (p. 66). This is in spite of her claim that “there is no one institutional form that can be claimed to give ideal or exclusive expression to the practice of democratic politics” (*ibid.*). How do we reconcile these apparent discrepancies?

Clearly, the problem lies not with her evaluation *per se* (with which I am mostly in agreement), but with the methodological requirement to establish explicit criteria of “democracy” that limit its elasticity and thereby reduce its co-optation by nondemocratic discourses. To Lawson’s credit, she struggles mightily to provide the reader with standards of evaluation that underscore her belief in the virtues of democracy but which expose her to relativistic critique. Sometimes these appear in a case study side by side with its exposition, such as in the example above when she invokes “liberal values” as a criterion. Another example is when she rejects Fijian claims that the 1990 constitution is democratic on the grounds that denying political rights to one part of a citizenry that are constitutionally granted to another “is contrary to the character of democratic rule” (p. 67). A third example is when she invokes the constitutional guarantee of the right of a political opposition to come to power as “one of the most basic features of modern democracy” by way of dismissing the Fijian constitution as nondemocratic (*ibid.*).

Lawson first addresses the problem of criteria in chapter 1, where she defines democracy minimally as a system “in which no person can arrogate to him or herself unconditional or unlimited power” (p. 35). But she recognizes that this negative criterion is too weak to withstand a relativist critique. This brings us back to her own rhetorical strategy. Lawson believes that dis-

courses of “tradition” are less desirable forms of political legitimation than those of “democracy.” But why? The reason is that the former are dogmatic while the latter are open to change through debate. Democracy has its dogmatic truths, but it also has a built-in means to overcome them. She is not unmindful of similar criteria championed by Karl Popper earlier in the century, when the evaluation of both science and politics seemed less ambiguous and paradoxical. Popper made strong claims for the demarcation of science from myth and for the clear distinction between an open society and its enemies. Elsewhere in her discussion of the importance of traditions in every society, Lawson cites Popper on the distinction between uncritical acceptance of traditions and traditions that are subject to change by means of critical awareness (p. 16). However hard we try, it seems that we are forced back on outmoded and rejected dichotomies not unlike tradition-modernity, however suspect that may be. If we add to this protection of open debate a criterion of a constitutional guarantee that a political opposition has a peaceful means to come to power, we are probably as close as we can get to evaluative criteria for comparing “democratic” discourses and their relation to discourses of “tradition.” Both, as Lawson recognizes, can be instituted in diverse ways.

#### REFERENCE CITED

Rutz, Henry J.

- 1995 Occupying the Headwaters of Tradition: Rhetorical Strategies of Nation Making in Fiji. In *Nation Making: Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia*, edited by Robert J. Foster, 71–93. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.