

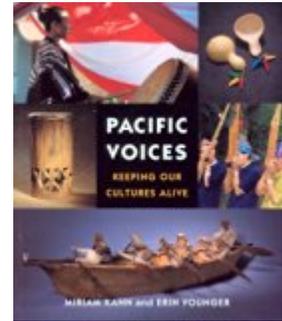
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Miriam Kahn, Erin Younger. *Pacific Voices: Keeping Our Cultures Alive*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. xiv + 176 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98550-3.

Reviewed by Ping-Ann Addo (Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts)

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Pacific Voices Seen and Heard

Pacific Voices is a beautifully illustrated book containing the personal reflections of individuals who were among the one hundred “community advisors” to the Burke Museum’s exhibit of the same name. This exhibit at the University of Washington, Seattle employed objects to chronicle the history of peoples from the Pacific area who live in and around Seattle, each object evoking its own response. The exhibit, which opened in 1997, and the book, published in 2005, both constitute projects concerned with the consolidation and integration of interviews in ways sensitive to cultural ideas about epistemology, knowledge-sharing, and knowledge protection.

The book opens with a heartfelt essay by cultural anthropologist and *Pacific Voices*’ curator-in-charge Miriam Kahn, who also contributed several photographs to the text. The following seventeen chapters take us on a journey from selected island cultures of the Pacific basin (Hawai’i, Samoa, Aotearoa New Zealand, and unnamed islands of Micronesia) to the western Pacific Rim (China, Japan, Korea, Laos), ending in the Pacific Northwest (visiting Nu-chah-nulth and Coast Salish cultures among others). These chapters are authored by individuals of different ages and ranks in their respective cultures. Over 200 photographs and drawings provide context for the objects and create a pictorial history of the people, places, and things found in the stories inspired by these pieces. The book closes with a short conclusion by Erin Younger, the Burke Museum’s director of public programs, a list of suggested readings for each chapter, notes on contributors, and a short index primarily of non-English words.

The first two chapters, Iwalani Christian’s “Voice of the Gods” and Moodette Ka’apana’s “Foundation of the Hula” discuss the Hawaiian *pahu* drum, providing not-quite-contrasting reflections on the experience of making this instrument, playing it for the first time, passing into *kumu hula* status, and traveling with the sacred instrument. Having two Hawaiian *pahu* grace the pages is a wonderful and rich way to show that no two objects are alike and no single individual’s account can substitute for another’s. However, it raises the question: What are we missing with those objects that have the immediate benefit of only one entry?

In the succeeding chapters, objects are introduced by name, culture group, and a short quote from the chapter’s author indicating the piece’s personal and cultural significance. Thus, the Micronesian Canoe constitutes a “Reminder of a Way of Life”; the Coast Salish River Canoe becomes “A Way to Learn Patience”; the Vietnamese Incense Burner embodies a “Vehicle for Carrying Prayers”; and the Coast Salish Hook is a “Reminder of the Importance of Salmon.” Whether by design or contributor choice, all the chapters stress the gender and age roles of individuals in their respective cultures. One entry entitled “Chinese New Year Foods: Meals that Bring Families Together,” authored by five Chinese-American men and women, presents a particularly interesting picture of the diversity of food, modes of preparation and consumption, as well as the symbolism of those combinations in which the foods are eaten. As in all the chapters, the five contributors’ ideas about the roles played by the objects

are integrated generally by a sequence of quotations that both support and sometimes conflict with one another as the chapter moves on.

All the objects make obvious the abiding threads of cultural knowledge that connect people, places, time periods and, given the book's context, western-styled museums. The objects featured, save for the two *pahu*, are owned by, or are on long-term loan to, the Burke Museum. The book presents them as reminders to cultural institutions that institutional responsibilities to people are abiding, even though responsibility for objects often dominates their mission, or the way that mission is carried out. There is no indication, however, whether these objects represent most, or only a handful, of Seattle's Pacific communities.

Each chapter's structure is exemplary of how museum object labels can create more engaged learning experiences in a gallery, with each successive section providing more in-depth information. For example, chapter 10 is titled "Japanese *Obutsudan*," subtitled "Altar to Remember Loved Ones," and then presents the name of, and a short *obutsudan*-related reflection by, the author, Reverend Dean Koyama. The prose of the chapter provides substantive cultural details about the object in contextualized doses headed "Taking refuge in Amida Buddha" (p. 98); "Sizes and styles may vary, but the meaning remains" (p. 100); and "Obon [the most important summer festival in Japan] combines the religious and the festive" (p. 100-101). The combination of such words and the many images afford readers-cum -museum visitors the agency to deepen their experience with the object while confronting it. To this end, the book's final section, a list of suggested readings on each object, is a welcome aspect of the publication.

Ardent museum-goers and researchers might find the list of further readings even more helpful, however, if the authors and editors had added some more ethnographically in-depth references about both the objects and local lifeways. For example, sections like that on the *whare nui* Maori meeting house in the Maori *korowai* chapter, could benefit from additional references that provide more native exegesis on the parallels between meeting house parts and the bodies of the ancestors these houses represent. For the native Northwest objects, references to anthropologists' long-standing fight against racism, the devotion of Franz Boas and others to recording local languages, and the continued, collaborative championing of native lifeways, would also be useful. Such additional ref-

erences would clarify, for conscientious readers, details about the relationships between various local cultures and acknowledge the politics inherent in these groups' ongoing relationships and struggles with the West.

Despite *Pacific Voices*' obvious local engagement and self-reflexivity, I am also left wondering about possible compromises and discussions that affected the book's final form. I would have liked to know more about the process that resulted in these seventeen chapters. Was there any contention over the choice of contributing cultures or how they would be presented? Were all community advisors invited to contribute or did they self-select? What of the politics and polemics of the peoples connected to these objects which are, according to Younger's conclusion, like "hope chests" (p.161) carried into the future? Kahn's introduction speaks of Seattle's "communities" and Younger's conclusion, of the Seattle "community" as the people for whom these objects have significance. However, the future for most of these objects would seem to be in a museum collection, rather than in the hands of a particular community. How should we then be thinking about forms of community that are not only tied to native lands and places, but to spaces mediated by cultural institutions? What do the voices in Seattle's ethnic communities have to say about such re-configurations of relationships between people, objects, and places?

I must end by saying that I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of reading *Pacific Voices* because it gives different versions of Seattle's ethnic transformation, through local histories and the memories of individuals. The book celebrates and affirms the sixteen cultures represented in the diverse population of Seattle today and it will be beneficial to professionals and students in ethnic and material culture studies, to members of ethnic groups, and to art enthusiasts. The clear, narrative structure of the chapters, along with the large and vivid images that open each one, make it suitable for introducing the cultures it showcases to audiences as young as elementary school children. Like a walk through the Burke's exhibit, or a visit to its virtual exhibit,[1] *Pacific Voices* affords us the sights that accompany the sounds, smells, and experiences of growing up, and growing old, among the people and things that matter to cultural identity.

Note

[1]. Visit online at <http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/exhibits/pv.html>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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