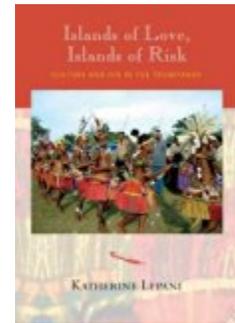


Katherine Lepani. *Islands of Love, Islands of Risk: Culture and HIV in the Trobriands.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 264 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8265-1875-0.

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Love Story without a Happy Ending

In *Islands of Love, Islands of Risk: Culture and HIV in the Trobriands*, Katherine Lepani provides a thoughtful (and loving) observation of community and culture. She also inadvertently demonstrates that, in relation to HIV within the context of the Trobriand Islands (and within the whole of Papua New Guinea [PNG]), the anthropological gaze could perhaps be more usefully turned on the HIV prevention project itself, rather than on the Islanders.

Lepani is married to a Trobriand Islander and coordinated the development of both PNG's first national multi-sectoral strategy for HIV in 1997 and the *National HIV Prevention Strategy 2010-2015*. As such, she is perfectly placed to write about the HIV response and the Trobriand Islands, labeled the "Islands of Love" following Bronislaw Malinowski's 1922 ethnography of Trobriand social and sexual life *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

In many ways, the book is a love story; the love (and respect) that Lepani feels for the Trobriand Islanders and her deep sense of personal connection to the Islands shine through. During fieldwork she lived in her mother-in-law's house and took part in social rituals as a Trobriander, not as an outsider. The book is saturated with a sense of place and of people, and is at its strongest where Lepani describes the many layers of communally connected social life; the "dances" of negotiating sexual partners; the importance of exchange as cultural capital; and the constant interweaving of the "traditional" and the modern, in which each changes the other.

Where she falters, for me, is at the points where her love for the Trobriands appears to serve as a blinker, most strikingly in relation to her analysis of gendered relations. For example in chapter 4, titled "'Because We Can!' Gendered Agency and Social Reproduction," Lepani writes glowingly of the sexual freedom provided to young women (prior to relational commitment) and states that "sexual autonomy is exercised equally, although differentially, by males and females. Young girls express confidence in their sexuality and have the right to reject the advances of suitors they find undesirable" (p. 71). These are unequivocal statements: "equally, although differentially" and "the right to reject." They also obscure the power inequities in relation to male and female sexuality and sexual behavior that Lepani reveals throughout the book. For example, she tells us of boys' "territorial pride" and acknowledges that "in this dimension of regulation the freedom enjoyed by young people takes on sharp gender divisions and a double standard, with boys generally more territorial and possessive about the movement of their female peers than the reverse, and with boys seeking more freedom of movement for themselves" (p. 106).

There is an equivocation here; a playing down about the ownership dimension demonstrated by such curtailment of movement. On the next page, we hear from a young Trobriand woman who states that young men can bring sexual partners from other villages to their home, while young women who go to other villages in search of sexual partners risk violence: "If young men from our

village find out, they will hit us” (p. 107). Further gender-based violence is reported on the same page, where we learn that if a young woman in a steady relationship has “a concurrent partnering,” then “in some instances, a boy might ‘punish’ his steady girlfriend for having a concurrent partner by striking her legs with a stick or metal chain” (p. 107). Again, the equivocation here is clear. “In *some* instances” she writes (emphasis added), while choosing to add quotation marks around the word “punish.” Lepani further diminishes this sexual violence by stating that “such an assault is generally viewed as justifiable in a long-term relationship.” The young woman thus “punished” may, we hear, seek recourse for the assault by asking her kinsmen to retaliate, or she may “choose to assert her autonomy by ending the relationship altogether,” but these seem small recompense in the face of being beaten with a stick or metal chain. Lepani wraps the section up by reasserting that there exists a “protocol of reciprocated desire and consent between partners,” and that this, alongside “the judicious management of sexual networks,” “helps to mitigate the possibility of coercion and conflict” (p. 108). The only sexual networks that were being “managed,” as far as I saw in this book, were those of women. Lepani tells us elsewhere that it is common for married men to take other sexual partners while their wives are pregnant; the women object to this, but it seems their only resort is to employ witchcraft to try and prevent it. Such gendered sexual double standards can be found in other societies across the world; Lepani does the Islanders no favor by seeming to insist on their gender equity.

In *Islands of Love*, Lepani seeks to use the cultural dynamics of the Trobriand Islanders as “a productive site for addressing universal human problems, and for considering how local cultural knowledge might enable effective and positive responses to the global challenges of HIV” (p. 14). Her overriding message is the need for context-

tual, communal (not individual) approaches to HIV prevention. This is nothing new. She even references major works from the late 1980s and 1990s that make the same point: for example, Paula Treichler’s seminal 1999 work *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, and Gilbert Herdt and Shirley Lindenbaum’s edited collection *The Time of AIDS: Social Analysis, Theory and Method* (1992). Lepani also quotes Lindenbaum in direct reference to PNG and the need to understand and incorporate indigenous conceptualizations of illness and health in delivery of health services.

We know that HIV is a sociocultural phenomenon, not just a virus. We know that the biomedical does not provide a useful framework for responding to HIV within communities. We know that condoms are socially and culturally tainted artifacts. The international apparatus of HIV prevention has co-opted the language of cultural appropriateness; as Lepani reports, *The Pacific Regional Strategy on HIV/AIDS* (2005) “acknowledges the challenge to develop a program of response that ‘feels and smells like the Pacific’” (p. 18).

Yet still, in the Trobriands as elsewhere in the world, HIV prevention activities continue to focus on the spreading of “basic facts.” Lepani tells us that village birth attendants in the Trobriands have distributed condoms and provided HIV awareness raising sessions since the early 1990s, and “the islands are saturated with the paraphernalia of the national awareness campaign” (p. 32). HIV training workshops “for health workers, teachers, local government officials, and church and community leaders” have been “organised through the provincial and district governments and the churches” (p. 32); and all the time, the mismatch between these activities and the lived experience of the Trobriand Islanders has remained. If only Lepani had turned her eye for detail and cultural exchange on HIV prevention itself. This is the “culture” in need of the anthropological gaze.

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