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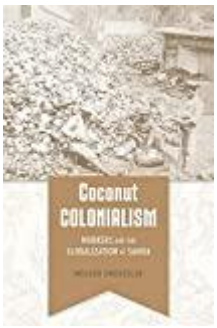
**Holger Droessler.** *Coconut Colonialism: Workers and the Globalization of Samoa.* Harvard Historical Studies Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022. Illustrations, maps. 304 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-26333-8.

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The newest wave of commodity histories inspired by the work of Sven Beckert are fairly unified in making novel sets of contributions to our understanding of empire. Authors in this newer vein often analyze global systems of exchange, labor practices and experiences of colonized and subaltern workers, and the worldwide economic significance of specific colonial commodity markets in the financial ecosystem beyond the particular imperial power extracting those resources. In doing so, the latest works have enhanced the literature on the history of empire and globalization and the relationship of these processes to such wares as tea, diamonds, coconuts, palm oil, and rubber.[1] Holger Droessler's book, *Coconut Colonialism: Workers and the Globalization of Samoa*, is one of the most recent additions to this trend. Droessler emphasizes labor and identity matrices inherent to globalization as the central foci of a collective history of the Samoan Islands and its inhabitants under tripartite and subsequent American, German, and New Zealand mandatory governance.

Despite the title of the monograph, coconut production and the labor to bring this exotic ware to market in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are not the exclusive foci of the volume. Droessler is more centrally focused on the concepts of labor, resistance, cooperation, and *malaga.* The author defines *malaga* as the Samoan custom of demonstrating "kinship by traveling to see relatives for important life events and conduct diplomacy by consulting with allies in times of crisis,... movement, and mobility more generally" (p. 4). Droessler calls this a unique Samoan identity within globalization under various empires, an "Oceanian globality." Nor is the focus solely on ethnic Samoan workers but also a broad kaleidoscope of laborers, including Chinese migrant workers and various Polynesian and Melanesian groups from other Pacific Islands outside of Samoa. Droessler's ambitious and commendable goal is to craft a history that looks at the archipelago and its denizens' experiences with globalization in its entirety. Rather than zeroing in on just American- or German-controlled portions of the island,

he is looking at the interactions and the new connections forged by Samoans and other inhabitants of the region that stretched across different colonial regimes in the same era. The success of this approach is that Droessler does begin a much-needed discussion on viewing globalization as not a triumphalist, homogenizing process—as it is often described—but rather a "decidedly local and remarkably intimate affair" that pitted competing definitions of globality against one another as each set of views shaped and molded the other in the encounter (p. 202).

Droessler has drawn on an impressive array of archives and museums to conduct his research across eighteen institutions in four countries: Germany, New Zealand, Samoa, and the United States. Somewhat understandably, given that Droessler's graduate work was in American cultural history and the history of American civilization, there is a heavier focus on American collections, which account for eight of the eighteen institutions visited for primary source research. German archives, totaling six, account for the second largest archival pool, and therefore the American and German imperial ventures in Samoa are the most carefully analyzed. The secondary literature on American imperialism on the islands as well as Samoa itself and its indigenous history is reviewed fairly in depth and incorporated quite effectively.

There are, however, some strange omissions in the review of literature on the history of German imperialism on the islands. Specifically the absence of direct discussion with research by Matthew P. Fitzpatrick and Christine Winter, who have both written on women, citizenship, identity, and mixed-race mediators and descendants of colonial officials in German colonies, such as Samoa and New Guinea, seems odd given how well suited these works would be for dialogue with this one. [2] For the German imperial historiography, the author relies more heavily on literature that also looks at southwest Africa and Qingdao, like that of George Steinmetz, who includes a large section on Samoa in his *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa and Southwest Africa* (2007), and an array of experts on German imperialism in Africa. While these works provide solid theoretical underpinnings and are pillars in the literature on German imperialism, it is curious that other researchers who have dealt more directly with similar historical issues as Droessler in the German Pacific are not part of the discussion. The approaches of these more subject-specific authors might have been useful for Droessler in crafting his own methodology for tackling the complex web of interactions between race, gender, and labor in the larger context of Germany's Pacific colonies. Furthermore, they could have situated his work within the wider literature. Readers should certainly view ***Coconut Colonialism*** and these works as in conversation with each other, even if that is not readily apparent in the volume under review.

The initial chapter of the book is very rich and looks at the history of the coconut itself as well as the ways Samoans successfully resisted Euro-American commodification of the crop. Samoan resistance allowed them to retain a fair amount of their own indigenous farming practices and labor norms while still integrating aspects of plantation-based wage labor. The result, according to Droessler, was a form of mutualism regarding land partitioning and labor practices that afforded Samoans a degree of self-determination in coconut production. This chapter in particular is a must-read and a strong start for the volume.

Droessler divides the remainder of the book into several sections addressing different categories of labor on the Samoan Islands and showing how resistance and cooperation fostered ***malaga***, "Oceanian globality," and agency for workers in American-, German-, and later New Zealand-controlled portions of the archipelago. Each category gets its own chapter: planters, performers, builders, and mediators. This last category is broadly

defined as indigenous intermediaries between colonial states and the colonized subjects, such as police, translators, nurses, and government functionaries.

The strongest of these "labor category" chapters are those on planters (chapter 2) and builders (chapter 4). Both deal heavily with the multiracial, multiethnic dynamics of labor on the Samoan Islands, addressing the difficulties in forming labor solidarity across groups of thousands of migrant Chinese and Melanesian workers alongside independent and conscripted Samoan laborers. Chapter 2 looks at these dynamics in the copra industry. Copra—the dried meat of the coconut—became a chief cash crop for coconut plantations. Despite difficulties in doing so, these workers managed to craft their own strategies in separate groups to resist exploitation to a degree and/or mold conditions to their suiting in a set of complex nonverbal negotiations with colonizers. By moving across spatial and racial boundaries, Melanesian migrant workers in particular were able to benefit from previous efforts by indigenous Samoans to maintain agency, chiefly through intermarriage and fostering kinship networks that enabled them to tap into the concept of *malaga.* Chinese migrants, on the other hand, appealed to their home government for intervention and were more likely to resort to physical violence as a form of revolt.

Chapter 4 looks at the same groups again but, instead of copra plantation work, focuses on construction. The infrastructure needed for imperialism, capitalism, and globalization in the era—telegraph lines, harbors, docks, roads, naval stations, coal depots—was largely constructed on the islands by Samoans and migrant workers from Melanesia and China. These workers, unlike the copra plantation workers who had used methods internal to their ethnic group, formed much more traditional labor resistance structures, establishing labor solidarity across the various racial and ethnic divides based on the type of work and similar demands for better conditions and pay. The analysis of the two different kinds of labor movements and resistance makes for an interesting contrast in the volume. The only thing that may have improved chapter 4 would have been spinning the information on coerced labor—in the form of conscripted prisoners—into its own chapter to go into more depth on how this system was also distinct and had its own dynamics, but on the whole, these two chapters are quite strong.

Droessler's weakest moments are in chapter 3. In this chapter, he inadequately conceptualizes gender, race, and labor among Samoans who participated in ethnographic shows and human zoos across Europe and North America. The chapter effectively demonstrates how the cross-cultural interactions with other Polynesian and Melanesian groups in these racial displays helped foster connections and expanded *malaga* and "Oceanian globality." The weakest parts, however, are on gender and the issues of agency in this unequal relationship. There is little agency or resistance to be found in the harsh conditions and brutal experiences these individuals were subjected to, and at times it feels as if the author is grasping a bit to find them. Furthermore, there are moments where the author and copyeditor mishandle the complex web of encounters related to gender, race, and labor. The chief example is a jarring, poorly explained, and unfortunate juxtaposition on page 107 after the author describes sexual harassment Samoan women experienced during and immediately following shows: "As in the allegations concerning mistreatment, lack of food, and withheld wages, the Samoan women did not figure in these debates among white men. Yet the female troupe members were by no means helpless victims. For example, they used their European travels to spend part of their wages on fashionable hats, red scarves, and fur coats." What the author likely means here is that Samoan women upset the racialized norms established in these ethnographic displays by purchasing and wearing European garments with their earnings, but that

could and should have been handled a little more deftly here with more explanation and foregrounding, as could other matters of women's work and gender dynamics, which in the book frequently boil down to "finding love" in trysts and marriages between individuals from different island backgrounds. The inclusion of performers as a category of labor is novel, and worth pursuit, but this chapter feels disjointed and out of step with the rest of a well-developed monograph and probably needed a bit more incubation.

Droessler's chapter on mediators (chapter 5) remediates some of the weaknesses in chapter 3 by integrating women and their labor within a larger picture of collaboration and resistance by discussing the various roles Samoans performed in the colonial state. Samoans chiefly served colonial governments as police, translators, secretaries, and nurses. This chapter looks at how primarily mixed-race intermediaries functioned within the colony and became powerbrokers between colonizers and the colonized. This dynamic is all the more starkly outlined against the backdrop of the "bell jar colonialism" of German governors like Wilhelm Solf, which ostensibly sought to keep the races on the island separate to supposedly preserve the purity of both Samoans and Europeans by attempting to hold Samoan culture in a sort of museum display for European viewing and prevent cross-pollination—and therefore limit Europeanization—as much as possible. Figures like Charles T. Taylor, interpreter for Governor Solf, take center stage in the in-depth case studies of this chapter, demonstrating how these intermediaries attempted to, and were occasionally successful at, parlaying their unique access to colonizers into travel for the pursuit of education and *malaga.* Also making an appearance in this chapter is the 1918 flu pandemic, handled effectively by the American administration on its portion of the island but botched terribly by the New Zealand mandatory authority that took over the German portions of the archipelago following World War I. This becomes a lens through which to discuss Grace Pepe, a Samoan nurse who received training from the US Navy in Tutuila and in California and managed to use her position in the medical profession to blend Euro-American medical techniques with local medical practices and knowledge.

Droessler's *Coconut Colonialism* makes interesting contributions to the literature on labor and globalization history. Its strengths lie in describing how resistance, collaboration, and cooperation each played roles in terms of agency and unique constructions of identity in a commodity market that led to the interaction of two different forms of globalization, one as understood by Europeans and the other as constructed by the *malaga* and "Oceanian globality" of Samoans and other Pacific Islander groups. By looking at a century of interactions across different empires within a single archipelago, Droessler also encourages a more inter-imperial approach to our analysis of labor and commodities in the age of empire. Instead of the narrow single empire or national approach taken by older works, his work pushes against the standard narrative of globalization as a simple homogenizing force. For these reasons, ***Coconut Colonialism*** is a nascent continuation of what will hopefully be fruitful and ongoing adaptations of the literature on imperialism, commodities, labor, and globalization in the future.

Notes

[1]. Sven Beckert, ***Empire of Cotton: A Global History*** (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2014); Stephen L. Harp, ***A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday*** (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Erika Rappaport, ***A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Benjamin Breen, ***The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade*** (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Jonathan E. Robins, ***Oil Palm: A Global History*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); and Steven Press, ***Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambi-***

*tions in Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

[2]. Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, "The Samoan Women's Revolt: Race, Intermarriage and Imperial Hierarchy in German Samoa," *German History* 35, no. 2 (June 2017): 206–28; Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, "Embodying Empire: European Tattooing and German Colonial Power," *Past and Present* 234, no. 1 (February 2017): 101–35; Christine Winter, "Changing Frames Identity and Citizenship of New Guineans of German Heritage during the Interwar Years," *Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 3 (2012): 347–67; Christine Winter, *Looking after One's Own: The Rise of Nationalism and the Politics of the Neuendettelsauer Mission in Australia, New Guinea and Germany (1921-1933)* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012); and Christine Winter, "National Socialism and the German (Mixed-Race) Diasporas in Oceania," in *Europe Jenseits Der Grenzen*, ed. Michael Mann and Jürgen G. Nagel (Heidelberg: Draupadi Verlag, 2015), 227-47.

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