

ERÄSAARI, MATTI. Comparing the Worth of the While in Fiji and Finland. Oxford University Press. British Academy Monographs. 2023. 142 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-726748-6 (hardback); ISBN: 978-0-19-889001-0 (ebook); ISBN: 978-0-19-199565-1 (online); URI: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/88621>

Matti Eräsaari's monograph is a well-observed account of how people think about time in Fiji and Finland. As he observes in the book's introduction, 'clock time' (in E. P. Thompson's sense) is a highly mobile cultural form. Most societies are familiar with the kind of precise time-reckoning that industrial capitalism both offers and demands, but not all societies evaluate it the same way. Indeed, Eräsaari observes, Fiji and Finland might seem to be polar opposites in this regard, with Fiji the home of stereotypically relaxed islanders and Finland a node in temporally disciplined northern European industry; yet both Fijians and Finns 'conceptualise time as a resource, a thing that exists regardless of our actions, and whose passing is loaded with moral significance' (p. 5). Unpacking these concepts is the purpose of this book.

The first part of the book addresses 'Fiji Time', a phrase with several meanings. As Eräsaari notes, the English-language phrase 'Fiji Time' is heard often in Fijian discourse, inflected both with the tourist industry's insistence on relaxation (toss aside your watch, you're on Fiji time now!) and the deeper colonial and Christian characterisation of indigenous Fiji as a not-yet-modern place. Eräsaari reports that although some indigenous Fijians do see villages as places of time-wasting—sites away from industrial and bureaucratic discipline, full of lengthy ceremonies and kava-drinking

sessions—some insist that the deliberate pace of village life is a virtuous rhythm of tradition and nobility. Eräsaari's fieldwork locus of Naloto village in the chiefdom and province of Verata is an apt site for a study of concepts of time, because Verata is honoured as the oldest paramount chiefly site in Fiji; 'while the Verata paramount is today outranked by numerous other paramount chiefs, Verata's claim to seniority persists' (p. 56). Seniority, dignity, slowness, and quietness go together in the most prominent model of indigenous Fijian authority.

In Verata, there is a specific way to 'waste time'—this term being used earnestly by critics and tongue-in-cheek by others. *Solosolo vakaVerata* connotes moving slowly, fiddling around and doing useless things. But it can also mean taking time to prepare and taking care to act with dignity and respect. Among Eräsaari's examples of competing evaluations of time and morality, kava-drinking sessions deserve special mention. From an arch-traditionalist perspective, drinking kava is legitimate work as it reflects and honours the social order, and adds gravitas to formal occasions. From a critical and self-consciously modern perspective, kava-drinking is the epitome of time-wasting, as hours spent at sessions means hours not spent working in the gardens or lagoon, raising children, or carrying out the mission of the church. The book offers telling examples of how kava sessions pull people in and join them in

a slow rhythm that for some participants is a disturbing example of undiscipline and for others is a reassuring example that ancestral ways are still remembered and respected. In both cases, and in other examples Eräsaari offers, time in Fiji is treated as a resource, underscoring the book's argument that one need not rely on clocks to worry about clock time.

The second half of the book moves readers almost 15 000 kilometres away from Fiji to Finland, Eräsaari's homeland and a place where 'time-thrift, punctuality, discipline, and the well-travelled notion that "time is money" (*aika on rahaa*)' holds sway (p. 75). The first chapter on Finland addresses a topic which will be well known to many readers: universities' curious systems of measuring, tracking, and reporting on workload hours using software programs which, perversely, call attention to the fact that the hours obligated by one's contract do not match the hours one actually works. Software that allocates academic staff members' working hours, Eräsaari observes, primarily serves the needs of administrators who are tasked with converting normative (and not really accurate) units of work into 'a receipt of sorts' for payment (p. 85).

The second chapter on Finland turns to 'timebanking', a system in which people exchange services without money changing hands. Labour is measured in 'whiles' (in Finnish, *toivi*), which, to make equivalence possible, typically count as an hour of work. An hour of dog-walking is equivalent to an hour helping someone update their computer, for example. Eräsaari notes the strong moral feeling that members of the Helsinki Timebank attach to the exchange system: when a newbie tells a

meeting of timebankers that someone has asked for 'several whiles per hour' to clean his 'extra-dirty' kitchen, he is sternly informed that that is not how the system works (p. 97). An explicit moral challenge to Finnish timebanking came in 2013 when the national Tax Administration declared that if people were exchanging professional services—that is, a gardener was not updating your computer, but tidying your garden—this would be taxed, and, like it or not, members would need to acknowledge the amount of Euros equivalent to whiles exchanged. This official declaration ran contrary to the timebank principle of social equality and the goal of using time rather than money to achieve it, thereby slowing timebanking's momentum as a social movement in Finland.

This book will be of interest to many scholars: those studying Fiji and Finland, obviously, but also those grappling with the big questions of how time and morality are articulated and evaluated. 'Time is not a uniquely great bearer of value because it measures everything indiscriminately,' Eräsaari concludes, 'but because it shows how our ideas of the good underlie the act of measuring and comparing' (p. 116). The book's argument is persuasive and well-written, the observations lively, and the implications far-reaching.

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