

Washing Away Our Lavalava? Women, Tradition and Power on Lamotrek Atoll

The women on Lamotrek have a special status in the community because the clans administrate and pass on their land and their political influence through the maternal lines. The result used to be a power gradient from women to men, which was balanced by the public freedom of speech and conduct which men held. In a dualistic view of life, the people could always think in terms of relationships: the one cannot manage without the other. Since the colonisation and Christianisation of the Caroline Islands, the gender-balance is in a process of reversal. Through the amalgamation with the western patriarchal social systems, the association of the male gender with public space and the female gender with land, house and family cements the disadvantage felt by women who are dependent on men to make their voices heard. Women of different ages experience this situation of unequal opportunities differently, as I will illustrate using the example of the cultural symbol and most important female article of clothing, the lavalava (see Picture 1.1). The young women feel that it is not fair that they should not be able to conduct themselves as freely as the men. However, this freedom means a certain degree of instability as the more mature women well know. Ultimately, the older women still consider themselves to be the key figures in Lamotreke society whose scope is, at the most, a little more curtailed than it used to be.

Since the sea is traditionally a male domain, with the title of this part I intend to raise the question of whether the influences from the western patriarchal system will eventually drain the women of their power and literally wash away the cultural female force – then not only the lavalava would lose its colours but also the Lamotreke culture in general.



Picture 1.1: Lamotrekesse lavalava (*teor*)

Landscape of Peace

Mechanisms of Social Control on Lamotrek Atoll,
Micronesia

Werle, K.J.S.

2014, XV, 235 p. 43 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-05831-9