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NAVIGATORS FORGING A CULTURE AND FOUNDING A NATION VOLUME 1

Navigators Forging A Matriarchal Culture In Polynesia

Fata Ariu Levi

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Self (381 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A Samoan orator chief examines Polynesian culture in this historical sequel.

Dedicated to Samoan High Chieftess and the independent nation's first female prime minister, Afioga Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, this survey of Polynesian culture pays particular attention to the role of matriarchy in the development of Samoan and Manu'an culture. The first volume of the second installment of a series on Polynesian history, this expertly researched work notes that early Polynesian culture was matriarchal in nature. Women anchored, protected, and ensured the "wellbeing of the family and home front," while men embarked on oceanic expeditions. As explorations gave way to settlements over time and men became "home-bodies," Polynesia saw a "revolutionary" cultural shift that changed the structures of families, leadership, and organizations. Despite the "disruptions" caused by the rise of these male-dominated systems as settlements grew, Levi convincingly points to ways in which Polynesian clans embraced a "combination of matriarchal and patriarchal culture" that remains evident throughout the region today. This is perhaps most striking, according to the author, in the Samoans' and Manu'ans' "greatest asset," a "love for each other" that "gives them the cohesiveness and unity to weather any storms that befall them." Blending the scholarly approach of an anthropologist with the passion of a proud Samoan, Levi's analysis takes aim at worn and racist stereotypes of the "noble savage," providing an effective counternarrative of Polynesian "sage nobility." Above all, the book's guiding principle is that "Samoan and Manu'an history belongs to the people." To this end, the volume pays particular attention to the history of daily life, from titles, salutations, and "Family-Centric chiefdom" to tattoos, weavings, seating arrangements, and house construction. The work's research is especially impressive, demonstrating a firm grasp of thousands of years of oral tradition and local lore in addition to written histories in both English and Samoan. And while the book is occasionally repetitive in a narrative that spans 350 pages, the academic verbosity is offset by a passionate writing style and ample use of engaging maps, photographs, charts, and other visual elements that make the volume accessible to a general audience.

An impressively researched, impassioned history of traditional Polynesian culture.

(epilogue; conclusion)

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