



***Mary, the Devil, and Taro:  
Catholicism and Women's Work  
in a Micronesian Society***

Review by ANGELINE AMES

*Mary, the Devil, and Taro: Catholicism and Women's Work in a Micronesian Society* by Julianna Flinn. (2010). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 200 pp, \$47.00.

This timely and descriptive book on Pollap, an atoll in the Caroline Islands, Micronesia (1), has it all when it comes to women's work and religion in Micronesia. The book combines the obvious: changes in women's roles, hybrid religious structures, and women's contemporary work, with the not so obvious: Traditional roles for women being replaced by even stronger contemporary roles and the argument that women's work is infused with motherhood and women's productive roles. It is a descriptive analysis with excellent use of the local language, a good amount of detail on pre-Catholic relations, and substantiated insights into Pollapese social structures. This book delivers much more than promised. By the end of the read, the author, Julianna Flinn, offers us a solution in terms of women's value in society. For researchers who have been looking for a true and existing matriarchal society, in essence perhaps Pollapese women have just shown us one.

I am not saying Julianna Flinn is arguing that the women in her study have constructed a matriarchal society. She really does everything but just that. Flinn's final conclusions are based more along the lines of what the West can learn from this Micronesian society. As I was reading this very intriguing argument, I kept thinking of Rachel Romero's (2008) thesis "The Role of Matriarchies and Patriarchies in Social Evolution" in relation to the idea of the "mother right" and women taking the lead and ruling the collective in matrilineal societies. The differentiation between the two authors is while Romero's thesis looks at patriarchies replacing matriarchies and generating obvious forms of hierarchy, Flinn's work demonstrates how the women of Pollap lead and rule the collective by honoring Mary, motherhood, and productive roles. Patriarchy, in the form of Catholicism, changed Pollap social structure but one vital characteristic believed to be part of a matriarchal society - the mother archetype - is still very evident in Pollap society, today.

First, I want to address Dr. Flinn's analysis of Catholicism as evident through church activities, most notable in the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Flinn does not present Catholicism as an overbearing form of patriarchal control in Pollap society. Much to her credit, Flinn focuses on Pollapese women's relations to Catholicism by rightfully placing women in a social actor paradigm, an approach that focuses on action, adaptation, meaning of action, and interpretation of action. Action is evident in the ways in which Pollapese women interact with

Catholicism by honoring Mary the Mother of God as “Mother, Protector, Provider, and Devil Stomper” (33). Adaptation for Pollapese women appears not to be a problem, in fact, as the social actor adapts, she reconstructs a patriarchal religion in a way which strengthens her roles in the community and places a collective value on her role as a mother, nurturer, breadwinner, and a producer of goods (34). In Pollapese society, meaning of action is evident in the meaning of motherhood - “an active, strong, and productive role” (169). Pollapese women maintain this construct of a strong, active, and productive mother through Catholicism and the imagery of Mary as a woman who has power over evil – the interpretation of action.

Yet, it is really the imagery of motherhood and the social meaning and interpretation behind this imagery which is the true theme running throughout Flinn’s work. The social meaning behind the imagery is one of value; value of women, of women’s work, and of women’s roles as key players in the production of island resources. Evidence of Pollapese imagery of women as mothers, as powerful women who have power over evil, as the providers of life, and as nurturers are outcomes of Flinn’s discussion on women’s work. Imagery of the Catholic Church, imagery of traditional Pollapese culture, imagery of women’s relations with land and sea, and the imagery associated with women’s subsistence activities and the production and distribution of taro – true taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) – also known as *woot* in the Pollapese language (6) - constructs women’s lives on the Atoll.

Flinn’s work should be of great interest to those who research women’s work in Micronesia. Research findings on women’s work documents the importance of a taro garden, the symbolic relationship taro has as an offering, and the importance of taro to identity. Women’s self-identities and community identities are constructed around their work in the taro gardens. Within this context, taro goes far beyond being just a staple of the Micronesian diet. The social construction of womanhood from the standpoint of women (37), reveals a highly reflective, collective, and participatory mode of research. Notable is that the women of Pollap do not identify their work as separate from men’s work or that women are confined to the reproductive sphere to perform their roles. Instead, participants feel that women’s work on the Atoll is “... essential to the work of men and to the economy of the community” (65). Women’s roles as evident in their own views of work is what makes this such a unique read.

There is a good deal of history in this work, plus substantiated evidence linking Flinn’s thesis to kin relations, women’s roles in mythologies, and stories of origin and survival. There is also a good amount of research that focuses on Pollapese women’s relations to the land and women’s place within the government. Within this context, discussions are centered on women’s contemporary roles and the ways in which contemporary roles are linked to traditional gendered ideologies. Flinn’s analysis demonstrates a genuine understanding of gender values found in Pollap traditional gendered ideologies. The traditional gendered dichotomy is most evident in Chapter Five, which focuses on religion, tradition, and the government. Cultural beliefs about tradition and the need to maintain tradition in leadership roles give Pollapese women a large amount of informal power as seen through chiefly women, the distribution of chiefly power, and senior women who “serve to maintain harmony and protect the reputation of the community” (111). Pollapese defer to those in leadership roles, regardless of their gender, a traditional gendered ideology very different from traditional gendered ideologies embedded in a patriarchal society.

The book as a whole is laid out quite nicely, totaling eight inter-woven chapters that place women in various sectors of the Pollapse Atoll society. Chapter Three is the only chapter that deviates, to some extent, from the qualitative format, primarily with regards to a somewhat detailed quantitative section. The section explains structured interviews and quantitative analysis of the ways in which respondents viewed women's work on the Atoll. Flinn asked respondents to free list what they saw as women's work, resulting in an informative chapter in that societies vary in terms of the construction of women's work and Pollapese society is no different. Again, Flinn is very much aware that the social construction of womanhood is embedded in the ways in which her respondents view women's work.

There are some very interesting and more recent contributions to the literature on women and taro cultivation which would add a great deal to the discussion at hand. Most recent would be *Specialty Crops for Pacific Islands* (2011), in which two chapters; "Giant Swamp Taro (*Cyrtosperma chamissonis*)" and "Taro (*Colocasia esculenta*)" discuss women's contemporary economic relations with taro in terms of migration and the market. The author, Harley I. Manner, like Flinn, places women into a social actors paradigm by looking at ways in which Palauan and Ulithian women have adapted to change brought about by migration and cash-crop production of *Colocasia*, *Cyrtosperma*, and *Xanthosoma* taro.

Another valuable source by Manner would be "The Taro Islets (*maa*) of Puluwat Atoll" (1994). *Maa* is a cultivation technique evidenced best on Puluwat Atoll, which is adjacent to Pollap. *Maa* and the corresponding cultivation of *Colocasia esculenta* fall within the Puluwatese women's domain and are off limits to men (Manner 1994:82). Although the taro swamp is located inland on Pollap, there is no discussion in Flinn's work that mirrors the idea of the *maa*, "...islets constructed in the interior swampy depression of Puluwat Islet" (Manner 1994:80). The social construction of women's work in Puluwat includes the construction of the *maa* islets, giving further evidence that Atoll societies vary in terms of the construction of women's work and that social construction is imbedded in social norms along with the geographical needs.

Flinn does utilize other well-known authors of the field, citing work, for example, from Lessa 1950, Alkire 1965, and Burrows and Spiro 1970. Contemporary and comparative works would only add to the field, firstly, by giving readers an opportunity to understand contemporary shifts taking place in Micronesia in terms of subsistence and ritual processes' socio-economic links to monetary needs. Secondly, readers would understand, in more detail, the adaption patterns that have taken place, and the Micronesian reality that Atolls adjacent to one another construct social realities that may not mirror one another.

I feel that Flinn's work makes a significant contribution to the fields of Sociology, Geography, Anthropology, and Women's Studies, to name only a few. Having said this, I cannot help but feel that her work contributes most to the field of Micronesian Studies. Flinn's work provides the background and foundation for people who are doing original, first-hand studies in the Micronesian region. It would be useful in comparative studies both within Micronesian societies, as well as other societies outside the region. Finally, it is useful in its own right as a way to inform and educate students, scholars, and researchers on a wide range of topics, issues, and themes that are currently debated in the field of women's work in Micronesia.

### References

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