Tevolo and the Politics of Interpretation in Tonga

This paper examines the phenomenon of tevolo and sickness in Vava’u, Tonga. The word tevolo has been translated loosely as ghost, spirit or devil. Tevolo are agents of sickness but they are also an allegorical way of talking about agency. Tevolo is a term uniquely appropriated from its intended missionary meaning to demonise various pre-Christian practices that has come to mean much of what is ambiguous, hybrid, both satisfying and detrimental in Tonga. It forms a unique locus for an examination of the production of knowledge in Tonga. I examine how writing about tevolo allows the anthropologist to negotiate multiple affiliations, and collaboration with people in the field site and reconcile the need to produce anthropological knowledge that implicitly denies the reality of local epistemologies.