

Preface

This study is part of a growing number of ethnographies that address the effects of climate change in Oceania. It draws on 13 months of fieldwork, mainly on the west coast of Malekula, in the Dixon Reef area, but also including perspectives of interlocutors of the village of Siviri on the main island of Efate. In contrast to dominant media representations, which more often than not show various scenarios of ‘vulnerability’ of people living on islands, this book examines the ways ni-Vanuatu understand climate change in their own ways. Taking politically-driven climate change projects as a starting point, the focus is on ‘mekem garen’ (‘make the garden’; unless stated otherwise, all translations are from Bislama), and the study argues that gardening is much more than a horticultural practice. Rather, mekem garen refers to an ensemble of practices for making sense of climate change and includes both social and environmental dimensions. Gardens are conceived as places of encounters and intersections, where different knowledges and ontological assumptions meet – such as local gardening knowledge and scientific climate change terminology. This is particularly the case when adaption programmes are conducted in order to foster food security in Vanuatu. In this vein, Desirée Hetzel skilfully analyses how cultivation and climate change come together in multi-layered interactions of people, plants, paths, hills, soil and so on. In this process, mekem garen becomes central to making sense of climate change by creating what Desirée Hetzel calls ‘climate change worlds’. Mekem garen is a constantly evolving practice, taking on new influences and reaching beyond the environmental realm. Indeed, gardening is seen as a way of building relations and fostering community. With these insights, Desirée Hetzel’s work offers a novel approach to gardening in the Anthropocene that results from encounters in climate change projects and provides insights relevant beyond the Pacific Islands.

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