



No Family Is an Island: Cultural Expertise among Samoans in Diaspora (Expertise: Cultures and Technologies of Knowledge)

Ilana Gershon

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Government bureaucracies across the globe have become increasingly attuned in recent years to cultural diversity within their populations. Using culture as a category to process people and dispense services, however, can create its own problems and unintended consequences. In *No Family Is an Island*, a comparative ethnography of Samoan migrants living in the United States and New Zealand, Ilana Gershon investigates how and when the categories "cultural" and "acultural" become relevant for Samoans as they encounter cultural differences in churches, ritual exchanges, welfare offices, and community-based organizations.

In both New Zealand and the United States, Samoan migrants are minor minorities in an ethnic constellation dominated by other minority groups. As a result, they often find themselves in contexts where the challenge is not to establish the terms of the debate but to rewrite them. To navigate complicated and often unyielding bureaucracies, they must become skilled in what Gershon calls "reflexive engagement" with the multiple social orders they inhabit. Those who are successful are able to parlay their own cultural expertise (their "Samoanness") into an ability to subtly alter the institutions with which they interact in their everyday lives. Just as the "cultural" is sometimes constrained by the forces exerted by acultural institutions, so too can migrant culture reshape the bureaucracies of their new countries. Theoretically sophisticated yet highly readable, *No Family Is an Island* contributes significantly to our understanding of the modern immigrant experience of making homes abroad.



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