

– BOOK REVIEW –

Jardins, cyclones et catastrophes. Ethnographier le désastre au Vanuatu. By Maëlle Calandra Paris

Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle; Vandœuvres-les-Nancy, Inist-CNRS (Natures en sociétés, 11). 2025. Pp. 359. Price: 37€ (printed book), 18.50€ (ebook). ISBN 978-2-38327-037-9. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5852/nes11>

Noémie Séverin^{1*}

¹ University of Groningen (Netherlands), University of New England (Australia);  ORCID [0009-0004-1986-7437](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1986-7437)

*Corresponding author: noemie.severin@proton.me

In the South Pacific region, Vanuatu stands as the country most at risk of disasters from natural hazards, generating growing interest and making it a compelling case for study across various disciplines. In this book written in French, Maëlle Calandra offers an original examination of disasters through the dual frameworks of disaster anthropology and environmental anthropology. Focusing on Tongoa, an island in central Vanuatu, she explores the relationships between inhabitants and their environment - particularly their gardens - as well as the impact of disasters, and the ways in which people perceive, define, explain, experience, and live with these events. This book is building on her doctoral thesis (Calandra 2017) which examined the connections between Tongoa's inhabitants, their gardens, the sea, and local perceptions of disasters. Maëlle Calandra is a brilliant anthropologist who has received several awards (2018 Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Dissertation Prize, 2018 1st ThesePac Prize, 'South Pacific Grand Jury' category, 2025 Red Cross Foundation Research Award) and is deeply appreciated by the communities she worked with on Tongoa.

In a well-written introduction, Calandra presents her framework and a highly relevant, comprehensive methodology. The book is based on an ethnographic fieldwork, complemented by qualitative and interdisciplinary approaches, conducted between 2011 and 2018, primarily in Kurumambe village, with additional data collected from a few nearby villages. While the findings are

To cite this article:

Séverin, N. 2026. Jardins, cyclones et catastrophes. Ethnographier le désastre au Vanuatu. By Maëlle Calandra Paris Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle; Vandœuvres-les-Nancy, Inist-CNRS (Natures en sociétés, 11). 2025. Pp. 359. Price: 37€ (printed book), 18.50€ (ebook). ISBN 978-2-38327-037-9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5852/nes11>. Journal of Pacific Archaeology, 16(1): Book Review 1:1-3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70460/jpa.v16i1.422>

Submitted: 12/08/2026, Accepted 26/08/2026, First online 02/09/2026



Copyright

©2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

valuable and offer important perspectives into the impact and perception of disasters on Tongoa, readers should bear in mind that they are largely drawn from a single village. Given Vanuatu's significant cultural and geographical diversity - even within a single island - as well as the strong desire among villages to maintain their distinctness, not all observations may be universally applicable across Tongoa.

A strength of Calandra's methodology is its use of diverse methods and data types, including an innovative and contextually relevant approach: having participants of all ages and genders create drawings. This method, also explored in Calandra (2013) and similarly applied in Fache *et al.* (2022) for participatory research in the Pacific, is engaging, comprehensive, and particularly well-suited to the South Pacific context. The drawings serve as beautiful and informative visual representations, enriching the book alongside its stunning photographs. Calandra's methodology, as presented in this book, is a must-read for researchers in anthropology and related disciplines working in the South Pacific.

Calandra also contextualizes her research against the limited ethnographic data on Tongoa, providing precious information - not only in the introduction but throughout the book - for scholars from all disciplines studying Vanuatu, and particularly Shefa Province. With prior contributions primarily from Espirat *et al.* (1973) and Kelly (1999), her work makes an important contribution toward addressing a gap in the literature by offering updated and detailed perspectives and findings on the island's socio-cultural and environmental context. However, the rapid socio-economic changes in Tongoa call for more recent data to fully capture the current situation.

The book is divided into two parts, each comprising multiple chapters.

Chapter 1 immerses the reader in the daily life of Tongoa villagers, particularly their deep connection to their gardens. This chapter engages effectively the senses of the reader - a characteristic of Calandra's writing throughout the whole book - while also offering a sociopolitical and governance background that highlights the complexity and importance of land. Chapter 2 provides a meticulous analysis of the various garden spaces and their socio-economic-agricultural interplay, while Chapter 3 explores the history, diversity and uses of farmed plants. Chapter 4, grounded in the anthropology of technology, digs into the technical, technological and social dimensions of maintaining a prosperous garden in Tongoa, emphasizing the learning process based on observation, imitation, and shaping the body in harmony with the garden. Together, these chapters offer a comprehensive glimpse into the centrality of gardens in the lives of Tongoa's inhabitants, shaped by a long history of skill, knowledge, hard work, ingenuity, and attachment. This underscores the inseparability of environmental anthropology and disaster anthropology.

The final two chapters of Part 1 shift focus to the ocean and shore, through a detailed analysis revealing the continuity between land and sea and nuancing Bonnemaïson's (1996) work. Chapter 6 also offers a fascinating analysis of the interaction with the non-human world and a thorough discussion around the local criteria for aesthetic and beauty.

In this first part, Calandra masterfully combines rigorous academic writing with literary storytelling, with great care for the local perspective, demonstrating the best of anthropological scholarship. Her work is structured, analytical, and deeply contextualized, making it accessible and engaging for a wide audience.

Part 2 examines the disruption by disaster of the relationship between villagers and their environment, dissecting the concept of disaster itself. Chapter 7 presents a powerful ethnography of

Tropical Cyclone Pam, adopting a holistic approach and a realistic narrative that engages and moves the reader. The strength of this section lies in its foundation on fieldwork conducted immediately before and after the disaster, underlining the importance of long fieldwork in anthropology. Chapter 8 offers an impressive analysis of the various discourses surrounding the disaster, particularly its origins, while the final chapter provides an in-depth exploration through various factors of the relationship between disasters, Tongoa inhabitants and their gardens. Although this analysis could be enriched by incorporating psychological and demographic parameters, it is highly beneficial for governments, policymakers, NGOs and communities.

The book includes a comprehensive list of references, bridging francophone and anglophone literatures - a contribution to encouraging greater interaction between these literatures in Pacific studies, further enabled by the tools available in our era.

Part 2, along with the emphasis on integrating environmental anthropology into disaster studies in Part 1, is particularly timely. Since Tropical Cyclone Pam, Tongoa and the broader archipelago have faced numerous disasters, including another Category 5 cyclone, twin cyclones, severe earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and ecological threats from invasive species. For the communities involved and future generations, general audience, and research in various contexts and disciplines, this book serves as a holistic and invaluable testimony and snapshot of a turning moment in history.

References

- Bonnemaison, J. 1996. Gens de pirogue et gens de terre. Les fondements géographiques d'une identité. L'archipel du Vanuatu. Essai de géographie culturelle. (Livre 1). Paris: ORSTOM.
- Calandra, M. 2013. Faire dessiner le terrain. La nature à "risques" et les jardins de subsistance de Tanna et Tongoa (Vanuatu). In *Le Cadavre en procès*, special issue of *Techniques 1 Culture*, 60, pp. 182–201. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/tc.6822>
- Calandra, M. 2017. Jardins de terre, jardin de mer à Tongoa (Vanuatu). Une anthropologie de la nature domestique dans un milieu affecté par la catastrophe. Doctoral dissertation. Paris, École des hautes études en sciences sociales.
- Espirat, J-J., Guiart, J., Lagrange, M-S. and Renaud, M. 1973. Système des titres électifs ou héréditaires, dans les Nouvelles-Hébrides Centrales d'Efate aux îles Shepherd. Paris : Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle.
- Fache, É., Piovano, S., Soderberg, A., Malakai, T., Riera L., David, G., Kowash, M., Pauwels, S., Breckwoldt, A., Carrière, S. and Sabinot S. 2022. "Draw the sea" ...: Children's representations of ocean connectivity in Fiji and New Caledonia. *Ambio*, 51:1, pp. 2445–2458. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-022-01777-1>
- Kelly, S. 1999. Unwrapping Mats: people, land and material culture in Tongoa, Central Vanuatu. Doctoral dissertation. London: University College London.