Recent Trends in Polynesian
Social Anthropology

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans les études d'anthropologie sociale de la Polynésie, on voit se dessiner, depuis quelques années, une nouvelle tendance. Alors que l'accent avait toujours été placé sur les interprétations historiques de la culture polynésienne, on s'intéresse maintenant à l'analyse des modèles de comportements, surtout en ce qui a trait aux processus de décision. L'auteur discute ensuite de l'influence de cette tendance sur les études synchroniques et diachroniques.

Ever since the Polynesian islands were discovered by Europeans they have been a source of keen scholarly interest. Until quite recently, however, the focus of concern has been almost entirely the prehistory of the area. The key questions were: "Where did the Polynesians come from?" "How did they get to the islands?" "How long ago?" "By what routes?" Most of the previous generation of anthropologists engaged in the area, like their non-professional predecessors, collected data that would throw light on these questions. The ethnographies, most of which were done in the period between the two world wars, were essentially catalogues of material culture, legends and social customs, all of which were treated as "culture traits". The object was to compare and contrast the culture traits of different islands in order to determine historical relationships. Information was elicited mainly from elderly informants who knew most about original customs, and the influences of Western society were either ignored or passed over lightly. Even after historicalism gave way to functionalism in the profession as a whole, Polynesianists remained historically oriented. For those interested in social anthropology Polynesia appeared to have been too spoiled by agents of Western society to be of much interest. Except for Raymond Firth's monumental study of Tikopia, there was little theoretical

interest shown in the comparative sociology of the region. Since World War II the picture has changed considerably. Interest in historical problems has not flagged (Highland 1967), but a sufficient number of social anthropologists have recently entered the area to lay the foundations for a genuine comparative sociology.

There is no single emphasis underlying recent social anthropological research in Polynesia. Orientations have ranged from a concern for specific problems to broad-scale ethnographic research. Students have likewise brought a diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches into the field. Nevertheless, some definite trends are in evidence. Possibly the most noticeable trend is for recent students to focus upon social dynamics, rather than upon ideology. The latter can be more readily catalogued and hence treated as a culture trait, which is why it had a good deal of appeal to the historicalists. Although it is also possible to abstract general principles from social behavior, and to catalogue the generalizations, modern field workers in Polynesia are becoming increasingly intrigued with the dynamics of what Firth (1951) has termed "social organization" and have become somewhat less concerned with what he called "social structure". This trend is clearly related to the whole problem of descent in Polynesia. Unlike most African societies, Polynesian social systems are characterized by ambiguous descent structures which have been variously conceptualized as "ambilineal," "bilateral", and "non-unilinear." The issue was brought to the forefront of social anthropological theory in papers published in the *American Anthropologist* by Ward Goodenough (1955) and William Davenport (1959). Both of these articles represented attempts to clarify the concept of descent, and to apply it as a principle to the formation of kinship groups in Oceanic societies, among others. They stirred considerable debate, and in some instances the discussion degenerated into a sterile nominalism, but for the field workers who followed in its wake, the problem served to highlight the inadequacy of existing models for characterizing Polynesian societies. The issue reached a head in a sequence of publications by Murdock (1960), Goodenough (1961), Sahlins (1963), and Howard (1963). The critical question is whether social systems of the Polynesian type are best considered as statistical models based upon actual

choices, mechanical models based upon ideology, or some other alternative. Murdock, perhaps the chief proponent of the statistical approach to social structure, asserted (1960:9) that such an approach has "the enormous advantage of making possible the utilization of psychological principles and of scientific knowledge concerning the dynamics of cultural change in the interpretation of social systems". Sahlins accused Murdock of looking at social structure from "the inside out," and asserted that a more fruitful approach would be to examine it from "the outside in" (i.e., the relationship between units in a political system). From this point of view, according to Sahlins (1963:45), "political groupings of descent order seem to form a continuum: dogma ranges between an extreme emphasis upon patriliny to a mere emphasis upon common descent (nonunilinear) groups." It was Goodenough, however, who laid the theoretical foundations for the most recent research. In responding to Murdock's 1960 article he (1961:1343) asserted:

> It is in high time ... that we develop a typology that is completely free of statistical and functional considerations, using only structural and formal ones, based on the criteria and principles by which people make membership decisions (as distinct from the kinds of alignments which tend to result from the making of these decisions under a particular set of stable conditions).

Howard (1963), in analysing land tenure in Rotuma, criticizes the idea that societies can be adequately treated as uni-structural models. Following Goodenough he (1963:409) rejects the question "What are the principles of social structure?" as inappropriate and asks instead "What are the principles that structure behavior under given circumstances?" Howard (1963:410) suggests that:

> Instead of conceiving of a society as having a social structure, ... we conceive of social behavior as being structured by participation in given activities within which behavioral choices ... are regular and predictable. Our "systems" would then best be regarded as *activity systems,* the relevant units being the principles ... that are predicative of choice among behavioral alternatives.

In analyzing Rotuman land tenure in this manner he focuses upon the dynamics of usufruct, succession, transactions, and disputes, and documents the extent to which the principles involved are reflected in the ideological model held by the Rotumans. Other recent work on land tenure in Polynesian societies has followed

similar strategies (Hanson n.d., Ottino n.d.). The general picture
of Polynesian land tenure and social groupings that is emerging
is one in which kinship principles interact with other considerations,
such as the amount of land available, residential and social proxi-
mity, political allegiances, etc., to constitute relatively consistent
decision-making models (Howard 1963). They result in nonunili-
near kinship groupings in the sense that they are generally com-
prised of kinsmen who are not unilineally related, but such a
classification misses the point. Any classification scheme that
resorts only to kinship principles is necessarily distortive in Poly-
nesia for the simple reason that they only reflect a portion of the
regular and consistent decision-making principles that enter into
land transactions and group membership. It might be added that
where land is limited, as it is in most of Polynesia, its allocation on
the basis of a limited set of kinship principles is too likely to result
in grossly inequitable distribution to be feasible.

Interestingly enough, the shift in emphasis from historicalism
has not diminished an interest on the part of social anthropologists
in the character of traditional Polynesian societies. As a matter of
fact they have "discovered" a wide range of neglected primary
sources describing various aspects of historical periods in Polynesia
and are using them to generate fresh descriptions of the early
contact "ethnographic present". Ironically many of these docu-
ments, which include detailed observations by explorers, mission-
aries, traders, beachcombers, etc., were of little interest to the
historicalists, particularly if they concentrated on day-to-day
behavior rather than upon exotic customs or beliefs. However
social anthropologists, especially those with an interest in such
mundane matters as the rules governing interpersonal relations,
land tenure and use, and the nature of social groupings, have
found such records to be an extremely rich source of data. By
comparing several different descriptions, taking into account
known biases, and drawing careful inferences, quite reliable
ethnographies are being written. H.E. Maude's review of the
literature covering beachcombers and castaways (1964) constitutes
an example of the high quality results that can be obtained by
careful archival work. Crocombe's study of land tenure in the
Cook Islands (1964), which depends almost entirely on docu-
mentary sources, is another example. Perhaps the most ambitious

work undertaken along these lines has been by Douglas Oliver, who has analyzed an enormous quantity of historical material on the Society Islands. His book on ancient Tahitian society is eagerly awaited by all Polynesianists.

The study of culture change has also recently gained impetus in Polynesia. The work in this area can be divided into essentially three categories: (1) change from traditional to modern Polynesian cultures; (2) urbanization; and (3) relocated communities.

Unquestionably the most thorough study of change from a traditional baseline is Firth's restudy of Tikopia (1959). Returning to the island after nearly twenty-five years, Firth describes the changes which have taken place in the interim, as well as the impact of a crisis created by a hurricane which struck Tikopia only a few weeks before the field work began. Although the social structure had remained essentially intact, significant changes were noted in the areas of economics and religion. An increase in population had also had a noticeable impact.

Torben Monberg has also provided us with a well-documented account of culture change. The islands on which he did field work, Rennell and Bellona, two Polynesian outliers in the Solomon Islands, were among the last to accept Christianity. The conversion took place in 1938, so it was possible for Monberg and his linguist co-worker, Samuel Elbert, to obtain detailed accounts of the traditional religion and the processes of conversion from a wide range of informants. The results of this research are described in several publications (Monberg 1962, 1966, in press; Elbert and Monberg 1965).

Ernest Beaglehole (1957) relied mainly upon missionary and government records in tracing the processes of social change on Rarotonga and Aitutaki, two islands in the Cook group. He explains what was accepted, modified and rejected from Western culture in terms of reward and punishment on the one hand, and the underlying character structure of the people on the other. He concludes that the changes which took place are changes in content rather than in a cultural framework that is basically Polynesian.

Howard also makes extensive use of documentary sources in tracing the processes of change in land tenure and chieftainship

in Rotuma. He illustrates how the growth of the commercial economy, the initial decline in population following contact and missionization, led to an individualization of land holdings (1964), and traces the process by which Rotuman chiefs have lost de facto authority as a result of British colonial administration (1966).

Several studies have focused upon the changing character of chieftainship in the modern world. Felix and Marie Keesing's study of Elite communication in Samoa (1956) is an outstanding example. Another is provided by a man who is himself caught up in the conflict between traditional and emergent leadership, Dr. Rusiata Nayacakalou, a Fijian. His study of Leadership change in an emergent community (1963) provides an insider's view of political change in Fiji. It seems clear from these and other studies that the emergence of an educated elite in Polynesian societies is creating strains within a system of leadership that traditionally depended upon such factors as genealogical priority and advanced age. The way in which such strains are resolved in different communities will no doubt affect the kind of accomodation they make with the modern world.

The past decade has seen the development of a entirely new approach to culture change in Polynesia — the study of island communities as hinterland regions in relation to port towns. In one of the first papers specifically drawing attention to this area of research, Spoehr (1960) specified three ways in which hinterland islands depend on a connection with port towns. These are economic dependence, in which the port towns distribute manufactured goods in exchange for agricultural products; leadership, in the form of entrepreneurs, school teachers, ministers, medical officers, and administrative officials who are trained in urban areas; and the implementation of lines of transportation and communication by which the islands are linked to the world at large. Howard (1961) describes the relationship between Rotuma and the capital city of Suva in Fiji in terms of the flow of population, the flow of goods, and the flow of information and ideas. He concludes that thus far the flow has been slow enough, and sufficiently limited, to permit the island community to exercise a firm conservatism and thereby maintain a high level of internal cohesion, but raises the question of what is likely to happen when

the flow is intensified, as it is sure to be when faster modes of transportation are made available and more efficient communication is possible.

The processes of urbanization in the Society Islands have been subjected to intense investigation by a team of researchers under the direction of Douglas Oliver. Communities were selected at varying distances from the capital city and port town of Pape'ete, in which research was also done, in order to determine sequences of change that correspond to intensity of contact with an urban area. The assumption is made that the communities most removed from Pape'ete are closer to the traditional Tahitian culture. Working within this framework, Finney (1965) demonstrates that a change from a primarily subsistence economy to one based on cash crops and ultimately to one based on wage labor correlates with the progressive dissolution of extended family ties and the emergance of the independent nuclear family. Kay (1963a, 1963b), one of Finney's co-workers on the project, describes Tahitian households within a Pape'ete neighborhood as "disorganized" and "woman-centered." They tend to be disorganized because of the high mobility rate and the high proportion of households without a complete nuclear family. They are judged woman-centered because: (1) there are significantly more women than men in the neighborhood; (2) in many households the only adults are women; and (3) household histories reveal a greater continuity over time of adult female residence than of adult male residence. It is questionable whether this pattern will be found to hold true for other urbanizing Polynesian peoples. Hooper (1961) did not find disintegration of kinship ties to be characteristic of Cook Islanders living in Auckland. He found that the community preserved many of the features of a "folk society," even though it is located in the heart of a modern city. Likewise, Metge (1964) and Ritchie (1964) did not find social breakdown to be characteristic of New Zealand Maoris who have migrated to urban areas. Metge found that among Maori migrants to Auckland obligations toward kinsmen did not disappear, although they were narrowed in range so that the claims of active rather than nominal kin were recognized. She concludes that one of the explanations for this continuity is the determination of the Maoris to retain their cultural identity. Mrs. Ritchie found a lesser degree of active

kinship among migrants to Wellington, but nevertheless found family structure to remain stable. Working with the aid of psychological tests she suggests that the Wellington families have made a generally satisfactory adjustment to the city, although they showed more signs of psychic stress than a comparable rural sample. She, too, stressed the adaptive function of maintaining Maori identity.

Perhaps being an ethnic enclave in an urban setting has something to do with the preservation of prior socio-cultural patterns, but more research will be necessary before the issue can be resolved. The papers which appear in Spoehr's Pacific Science Congress symposium on *Pacific port towns and cities* (1963) provide a good empirical first step toward a comparative sociology of urbanization in Oceanic societies.

The third approach to culture change, that of relocated communities, has been fostered by Homer Barnett. He has directed the research of a number of students who have studied Oceanic communities which have, for one reason or another, been removed from their traditional ecological niche and relocated. The study has involved two Polynesian cultures; Tongans who have resettled in Fiji, and Kapingamarangi (a Polynesian outlier population) who have settled in Ponape in Micronesia. The results of these studies are not yet available but they should yield some interesting generalizations about the relationship between culture and ecology in the insular Pacific.

Another major development is taking place in the area of psychological anthropology. This is not an entirely new field of research in Polynesia. Even during the heyday of historicalism two of the foremost pioneers in culture and personality studies, Margaret Mead and Ernest Beaglehole, were using Polynesia as a psychological laboratory. The most striking aspect of recent research, however, is the entry of individuals trained in psychology and psychiatry into the field situation. The first fruits of this marriage of anthropology and psychology have been an impressive series of studies by James Ritchie and his associates on the New Zealand Maori (James Ritchie 1956, 1963; Jane Ritchie 1957, 1964; Mulligan 1957; Earle 1958). This group has examined personality development among Maoris in considerable depth.

They have used projective and other psychological measures as a means of testing hypotheses derived from first-hand field information. In Hawaii, Ronald Gallimore is currently engaged in an intensive study of personality development among Hawaiians of Polynesian ancestry. Working in conjunction with A. Howard of the Bishop Museum, Gallimore has made extensive use of psychological tests and standardized interview schedules to test hypotheses derived from ethnographic field work. In addition he has directed a sequence of social psychological experiments which have greatly helped to refine and clarify the relationships between personality variables and observed behavior (Gallimore, Howard and Jordan, in press). A somewhat different approach is provided by Robert Levy (1967, in press), a psychiatrist turned anthropologist, who spent nearly three years doing field work in the Society Islands. Levy did a great deal of intensive interviewing to supplement his observations, and is interested in the way in which individuals organize culturally endowed motives, perceptions and interpersonal strategies. His forthcoming book dealing with the private worlds of Tahitians promises to provide profound insights into Polynesian character. Interestingly enough, despite long exposure to different superordinate Western cultures (New Zealand, American, French), the Maoris, Hawaiians and Tahitians appear to be astonishingly alike in modes of child-rearing and resultant personality structure. The key to the developmental sequence seems to be an early period of indulgence and encouragement of dependency, followed by a period, when the child is two or three years old, of punishment for dependency overtures. Parents do not, on the other hand, reward independence. Their overriding concern is for obedience, a factor which is consistent with the stratified nature of the traditional societies. The chief characteristic of the resultant personality type might be called "involvement anxiety," which is manifest in a strong tendency to avoid the vulnerabilities of emotional commitment to either people or possessions. In this frame of reference, much of the happy-go-lucky aura associated with these Polynesian peoples can be seen as a mechanism for avoiding vulnerability.

Social anthropology in the insular Pacific appears to be on the verge of developing into a genuinely comparative science. The

recent formation of the "Association for Social Anthropology in Eastern Oceania," which brings together a group of young anthropologists who have recently done field work in the region (including Polynesia, Micronesia, and parts of Melanesia), is a significant first step in this direction. The first tangible product of the Association, tentatively scheduled for publication in 1968, is a symposium on adoption being edited by Vern Carroll. It is anticipated that this will be only the first of an extended series of comparative studies.

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