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# *Cultural Paradigms, History, and the Search for Identity in Oceania*

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The chapters in this volume attempt to come to grips with a phenomenon that would probably be unremarkable in most other regions of the world. The idea that the social world is composed of distinctive groups, each differing from one another in significant ways, is something most Americans take for granted, as it is taken for granted in much of Europe, Asia, and Africa. To be sure, there is not always agreement about the specific character of the groups involved, nor about the part they play in ordering social life, but that there are ethnic groups—peoples who recognize a common heritage and have special bonds with one another as a consequence of that common heritage—is part and parcel of societal perspectives in much of the world. Oceania is of special interest because the phenomenon of ethnicity is relatively new there; in many parts of the region it is still in the process of becoming. This provides us an opportunity to examine aspects of ethnicity we have been unable to study elsewhere, except in a few isolated instances. We have in Oceania the possibility of seeing people struggle for the first time with who they are—their cultural identity—in an increasingly complex social world. Change and transition are also taking place within developed ethnic traditions, such as in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii, that parallel changes occurring in other regions of the world. So we have a continuum to explore in Oceania, from indigenous notions of group differences and similarities (which generally emphasize open boundaries and flexibility) to institutionalized systems of ethnic discrimination.

One striking aspect of this comparative exercise is the wide range of features used to distinguish groups. Reviewing available materials made me realize, more clearly than ever before, that ethnicity ought not be looked at as a distinctive phenomenon, but rather as an instance of the human propensity to categorize experience according to sameness and difference. From this point of view notions of ethnicity belong to that broader class of phenomena concerned with individuals' identification with, or distancing from, others. It has much in common, in other

words, with conceptualizations of kinship, community, friendship, and other types of social relatedness.

### Ethnotheories and Historical Events

To appreciate fully the developments reported in this volume it is necessary to take a dual view. On the one hand we must consider the ways in which various cultural groups conceptualize their social worlds and organize their experience. We must, in other words, examine their ethnotheories of similarities and differences. On the other hand are the historical contexts in which social action takes place. On a macro level these include such large-scale events as commercialization of economies, colonization, urbanization, mass migration, the emergence of national polities, and similar events. On a micro level are those events that mobilize groups along one set of lines or another, or that crystallize attitudes and emotions around collective symbols.

Before considering the interplay between cultural paradigms and historical events, I shall describe some features that distinguish Oceania as a culture area from the continents. Many of the inhabited islands are small, their populations limited to a few hundred or few thousand. Many are also rather isolated from their neighbors and interacted with them infrequently in the past. In Polynesia, for example, before Western contact the known social world consisted largely of people who were alike physically, linguistically, and culturally. In other areas, including large segments of Melanesia, terrain served to separate populations into small pockets, with intermittent warfare punctuating their isolation from one another. These ecological conditions had some important consequences for ethnicity, or rather for its de-emphasis. Perhaps most important, there were few instances in which people who were clearly distinguishable on the basis of physical appearance, language, or culture dominated another people for a protracted period. Thus one of the main conditions leading to ethnic consciousness on the continental land masses of Europe, Asia, and Africa was absent in Oceania. In addition, until missionization by Europeans, there were no universalistic religions serving to dramatize competing identities. Indigenous religions were localized, associated with particular places and kinship groups. It was in this context—one relatively uncongenial to a highly developed sense of ethnicity—that cultural theories of social groupings developed.

Ethnotheories may be thought of as consisting of three types of propositions (Howard 1985). First are those propositions that underlie conceptual distinctions (i.e., those that group phenomena as the same or

distinguish them as different). Many, if not most, propositions of this type are encoded within the lexical and semantic structures of language and can be analyzed accordingly. Second are those propositions that relate concepts to other concepts, or to actions, events, thoughts, feelings, or other identifiable phenomena. Such propositions are often explicit and appear in statements of association, correlation, and causation, but they are just as likely to be implicit and unarticulated, requiring exposition by analysis. Propositions about types of people—what they are like, how they can be expected to behave, and why—are of this kind. A third type of proposition can be termed *metatheory*, which refers to propositions about the formation of propositions and about their acceptability, truthfulness, and the like. Considering metatheories is important because cultural paradigms are never static. They invariably have a generative aspect to them, as the ranges of possibility are explored and applied to new circumstances. As the chapters in this volume make abundantly clear, cultural templates for ethnicity in Oceania are far from static. Rather they are in a highly dynamic mode, as each of the peoples described strives to make sense of an increasingly complex world. The changes taking place are resulting in greater differentiation of social forms and functions, often leading to the dissolution of preexisting epistemological frameworks. Since uniformity is not expected under such conditions, it is as important to consider how people go about organizing and testing knowledge as it is to grasp the repertoire of principles they invoke to comprehend their experience. It may well be, in fact, that “culture” under conditions of rapid change is better conceived as an assemblage of propositions, many of which may be contradictory to one another, than as a neatly packaged coherent system.

For many of the same reasons issues of identity must be analyzed contextually—examining the ways in which individual actors label themselves and others within particular situations, and how this affects their thinking, feeling, and behavior. Although it would be impossible to exhaust the range of situations in which identity is at issue—new ones are continually arising—a judicious selection of certain types can be very revealing.

### *Personhood and Identity*

It is apparent that we cannot make much sense of “ethno-ethnicity” in Oceania unless we examine notions of personhood. As Michael Lieber explicitly points out, and several other contributors acknowledge, the ways in which people generate ethnic descriptions are logically related to their views about “persons.” What emerges from discussions of the topic (see, for example, White and Kirkpatrick 1985) is that notions of

personhood in Oceanic cultures are very much at variance with the Western concept of the sovereign individual. Enough has been written about Western individualism so that we need not belabor the point here, but for contrastive purposes it may be useful to draw attention to the underlying premise upon which the Western notion of personhood rests. I am referring to the corpuscular theory of reality that formed the foundations of Newtonian physics as well as other sciences, including psychology. The central idea is that the world can best be understood by looking at the qualities of individual entities, with only secondary attention to relationships between entities. This world view also came to pervade Western folk psychology and underlies our commonsense notion of personhood—that persons can be thought of as discrete beings, bounded by their skins, and *possessing* attributes. As the authors in this volume make clear, personhood in Oceanic cultures is based upon a quite different, indeed a contradictory, premise. As Lieber puts it in chapter 4, “The person is a locus of shared *biographies*: personal histories of people’s relationships with other people and with things. The relationship defines the person, not vice versa” (p. 72).

Instead of being thought of as “individuals,” persons are better considered to be *consociates* (Geertz 1973, 364–367). The social implications of this perspective vary from culture to culture, but Joan Larcom’s analysis of court cases among the Mewun in Vanuatu provides a nice example (chapter 8). There, emotional outbreaks are regarded as the product of social relations rather than a result of inner feelings, so a man on a rampage is likely to be seen as less culpable than consociates who angered him, regardless of their intent (indeed, since intentionality is an aspect of the “inner psyche” it tends to be downplayed in cultures emphasizing relational frameworks).

One suspects that this view of personhood emerged in Oceanic societies as a result of people living in relatively small communities based upon kinship, intensive face-to-face relationships, and a strong attachment to locality. Correspondingly, it may have been the high degrees of geographical and social mobility that accompanied industrialization and urbanization that led to the Western emphasis on individualism. Regardless, it appears that the processes leading to the objectification of individuals (*qua* individuals), and those leading to the objectification of cultural groups (*qua* ethnic units), are similar if not identical. In both instances boundaries come to be emphasized over interpenetrating networks of relations. This concern for, or perhaps more accurately, obsession with boundaries in Western thought is a topic I will take up shortly.

Of the groups described in this volume, those least prone to objectification of cultural identities seem to be the Kainantu people in the High-



lands of Papua New Guinea. The Kainantu, as described by Watson, employ a cultural paradigm that presumes differences between individuals and groups of individuals, but accepts them in a rather unreflective way. Underlying their notion of difference is a view that the way people are is primarily a product of environment and place. Individuals are alike if they share a common history, if they are "people who have the same story." But the important point is that there is little concern for classification, and even less for explaining the behavior of others. Furthermore, the distinctions they do make are transient; as Watson puts it, it is "the process of differentiation, not the catalog of diacritics used locally as cultural markers" that is significant (p. 26).

Watson introduces a distinction between Lamarckian and Mendelian views of human nature, a contrast amplified by other contributors to the volume (especially Lieber). The Lamarckian view, which seems to be held in one form or another by most Oceanic peoples, emphasizes the importance of environmental contributions to group character, which is transmitted as legacy to subsequent generations until new environmental conditions prevail. This contrasts with the Mendelian model of inheritance, "whereby somatically fixed traits are transmitted in genetic succession from past to present generations and are impervious to the short-term change of surroundings" (Watson, pp. 36-37). While this distinction seems to elucidate a basic difference in worldview concerning the manner in which group character is formed, it leaves some important assumptions implicit. I will therefore summarize what I see as the main assumptions of each perspective and try to relate them to the case studies reported in this volume.

#### THE EUROPEAN (COLONIAL) PERSPECTIVE

Before contrasting the colonial and Oceanic perspectives in such summary fashion, a caveat is in order. There is obviously much diversity of opinion within European countries and the United States concerning ethnicity, so any depiction at this level must necessarily be overly simplified. It is problematic whether most contemporary Europeans and Americans still think of ethnicity in strictly Mendelian terms.<sup>1</sup> Still, I believe it is historically correct to say that the nineteenth-century colonial framework that structured interaction with Oceanic peoples was largely informed by a common perspective. Only recently has the framework been fundamentally modified to incorporate dissenting views.

*Assumption 1: Genetic inheritance is the main transmitter of a person's vital substance.* Given this assumption, a person's main attributes derive primarily from a condition, internal to the person, that is immu-

table. Experience can only superficially alter one's fundamental character. One can learn to behave in a way that deviates from inborn character and thus mask it temporarily, but in the long run, and through generations, genetically transmitted character prevails. This logic was applied at a group level insofar as it was presumed that people of the same ethnic stock (i.e., "race") shared the same pool of inherited genetic material.

Historically, this assumption was promoted in Europe by political aristocracies, who, in the process of institutionalizing their privilege, placed increasing emphasis on breeding, or bloodline, as the critical determinant of family differences, and by extension, of class differences. The logic, of course, was calculated to undermine attempts to overturn the order, for people could not alter their genetic makeup.<sup>2</sup> This same logic, along with its corresponding implications of moral right and political hierarchy, was extended to incorporate the whole known world during, and immediately following, the age of discovery. One result was the evolutionary perspective, formalized by anthropologists, which ranked peoples along a linear sequence from savagery to civilization.<sup>3</sup> Given the second assumption, discussed below, race thus became indexical of group character, including moral character; by logical deduction, social worth could be determined by race alone.

*Assumption 2: Race, culture, and language strongly cohere with one another.* This assumption, formed on the basis of relatively sharp boundaries between ethnic groups in Europe and the known world, was dramatically reinforced during the age of discovery. The scale of difference was such that it was convenient to employ ethnic labels to summarize the full array of distinctive features. Thus "Arab" came to summarize a set of features composed of a distinctive racial type, Arabic language, and a particular (and from a European point of view, peculiar) set of customs. Of importance for the contrast with Oceania, *place* was considered essentially independent of these three ethnic markers. That is, Arabs would always be Arabs, Jews would be Jews, Gypsies would be Gypsies wherever they might relocate. Increases in geographical mobility among Europeans accentuated this dissociation of place and ethnicity.

*Assumption 3: Where race, language, and culture do not cohere, the character of individuals is determined primarily by genetic inheritance.* The inevitable disentanglement of race from culture and language, theoretically heralded in anthropology by Franz Boas, created a major dilemma for Europeans. From the beginning of contact, Australian Aborigines, Hawaiians, and Maori interbred with Europeans, generating a group of individuals with "mixed blood." These people differentially learned European languages and customs, leading to a variety of

combinations (e.g., light-skinned individuals who spoke only the indigenous language and lived in a "native" fashion, dark-skinned individuals who spoke only English or French and emulated European lifestyles, and everything in between). The net result was that, for an increasing proportion of the population, identity became a matter of degree. As categorical distinctions became more and more problematic, analogic language was introduced (individuals being described as more or less Aborigine, Maori, or Hawaiian) to talk about variability.

For a time, Europeans attempted to impose subcategories to keep boundaries clear and coined such categorical designations as "half-caste" and "Demi." But with time and further intermixtures, such stopgap measures failed to suffice, as did further elaborations like "quadroon" and "octaroon" (Tonkinson, chapter 9). In the face of such confusion, Europeans generally resorted to a fourth assumption, aimed at retaining the hierarchical presuppositions associated with racial distinctions.

*Assumption 4: When mixing of races occurs, the character of individuals is most strongly affected by the "lowest" racial type in their genetic makeup.* Inferior racial stock, to any degree, was therefore perceived as a "contaminant" that could not fully be overcome. It followed that an individual's fitness for participating in civilized (i.e., European) society was problematic if a racial taint was present. While mastery of language and custom might superficially prepare a person for participation, the possibility of atavism, if not the probability, was seen as ever present.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE OCEANIC PERSPECTIVE

Diverse viewpoints certainly existed among Pacific peoples in precontact times. Anthropologists have amply documented the rich variability of Oceanic cultural schemes. But by relative contrast with the Western colonial perspective, the underlying similarities in identity concepts strike our attention.<sup>5</sup>

*Assumption 1: A person's vital substance is transmitted genealogically, but it is supplemented by the food from which one gains sustenance.* Oceanic terms for kinship imply, in one way or another, notions of common substance, or derivation from the same roots. The fundamental conception is that kinsmen share substance through common ancestry, but substance can also be shared by virtue of individuals being fed or nurtured from the same source. If the people who feed a child are his or her genitors, and if they feed the child from ancestral lands, continuity of substance (and hence of character) is assured. If, however, the child is adopted by others, is fed from the land of other families, or

moves to new locations, his or her substance is modified accordingly. Under these latter conditions children have different substance from their genitors. It follows from this assumption that physical appearance (or race) is not a particularly reliable indicator of character.

A corollary of this assumption is that kinship within Oceania is generally considered to be contingent, rather than absolute, as illustrated by studies of adoption and group formation (Brady 1976; Carroll 1970b; Feinberg 1981). Thus, on the one hand, kinship has to be validated by social action to be recognized; on the other, kinship status can be achieved through social action (i.e., by consistently acting as kinsmen even though genealogical linkages may be questionable or unknown). This means that although "we-ness" is commonly expressed in the idiom of kinship, its social reality is dependent upon acts of solidarity and reciprocal exchange. And so it is with ethnicity. The recognition of an us-them dichotomy is everywhere contingent to some degree, but in Oceanic societies it appears to be much more so than in Western cultures.

*Assumption 2: A person's character, and by extension a group's character, is a product of one's specific relational history.* Rather than being internally located, one's character is dependent upon an ongoing set of relationships that contribute to its formation (and continual reformation). Furthermore, it is one's *current* set of committed relationships that is primary for assessing character, not the set of relationships into which one was born. This means that a person's fundamental character can be modified by significantly altering his or her network of committed relationships. The salient attributes upon which identity is based in any given instance are thus a function of commitments between interacting parties instead of observable characteristics of the individual.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast with the European viewpoint, which subordinates social factors to genetics and generalizes from physical type, is stark. Since coherence is not assumed between physical type, language, and culture, differences and similarities between groups are open to interpretation, depending on context. In one instance linguistic variations may be important, in another not; on one occasion a minor difference in custom may promote differentiation, on another a major difference may be ignored. The result is that group boundaries are flexible and often indistinct.

*Assumption 3: Places have character by virtue of their histories, and people who are raised in a place, or assimilate to a group occupying it, acquire its character.* The prevailing notion is that places have spirits, ghosts, or magical powers that incorporate past history and infuse inhabitants with it. Thus, for Oceanic peoples the crucial question is



not so much where one is "from" as where one is "of" (Poyer, p. 129). The logic is that successful adaptation to a place requires coming to terms with (being in the good graces of) the spirits, which requires acceptance of their character. In effect, this is the equivalent of being their genealogical descendants and acquiring their substance. In this sense, as the people of Kainantu put it, people from the same place "have the same story" (Watson, p. 39).

One's cultural identity is therefore often tied to a specific locality, to the place where one's ancestors' spirits dwell, but it may also be based on more generalized distinctions between forest and grassland (Watson, chapter 2), or bush and sea (Pomponio, chapter 3). The power that places have in relation to identity is well illustrated by Flinn's account of Pulapese attitudes toward the people from Ulul. Pulap was raided by men from Ulul in the 1800s, and the Pulapese maintain an animosity toward the Ulul islanders to this day. Yet all the original inhabitants of Ulul emigrated, with the except of one woman who was from Pulap, and the island is today inhabited by descendants of the Tamatam islanders who resettled it (Flinn, chapter 5). The intense emotions generated over land rights, and their symbolic centrality in the political struggles of the Aborigines, Hawaiians, and Maori, also reflect this close association of place with identity in Oceanic societies.

Given these assumptions, the emphasis on situationally variable identity documented in the preceding chapters is not surprising. Group distinctions, whether ethnic or otherwise, are indeed cultural constructions, as Linnekin (chapter 7) and Dominy (chapter 11) point out, but in some cultures they are more subject to reconstruction than in others. In Oceania, continual reconstruction—process rather than structure—appears to be the norm.<sup>7</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Kainantu, who are described by Watson as unreflective about cultural identity, are contemporary Australian Aborigines, Hawaiians, and New Zealand Maori. As a result of European colonization they have been relegated to minority group status in their own homelands, where they are in the position of political and economic underclasses. Concerted, self-conscious efforts are being made in these part-societies to reformulate traditional identities. In the face of political fragmentation, activists in each instance are seeking to redefine their heritage in a manner that will allow them to be more effective participants in the larger political arena. To quote Tonkinson, they "seek to wrest from whites the prerogative of defining Aboriginal people" (p. 192). But these people are in a bind. The most obvious way to achieve unity is to adopt European notions of ethnicity, to accept biological assignment in principle, but to invert the value loadings (which leads to such slogans as "Black is Beautiful"). Thus any-

one with indigenous ancestors would qualify for membership in the ethnic community. Membership would be relatively unequivocal. Unfortunately this does not work in practice, in part because the people who are most indigenous culturally are least likely to accept group assignment in racist (or biological) terms. If, however, a leader adopts traditional assumptions about identity, he or she is likely to receive support from only one faction—those who identify with the specific history (and current political interests) that the leader represents.

### Events and Ethnicity

Of all the events that have implications for cultural identity in Oceania, none has been more important than the establishment of colonial regimes. Colonial administrations institutionalized ethnic categories as formal social entities, and generally prescribed rights and privileges accordingly. They brought to Pacific Islanders an awareness of social ethnicity as a phenomenon—one that was relevant to obtaining political power and economic well-being. It is therefore convenient to distinguish precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods to come to grips with issues of cultural identity.

During the early period of contact with Europeans many, if not most, Oceanic peoples responded to them less as a new category of people than as a special case of known types. This response was facilitated by a notion that chieftainship mediated between gods and humans, so that a continuum existed ranging from slaves, or individuals who were otherwise without social worth, to the creators—the highest of gods. The concept of *mana*, or its equivalent, provided a means of linking notions of personal worth based on genealogies to economic and political efficacy, so that exalted status could be achieved despite constraints of birth (see Goldman 1970, chapter 1, for a discussion of the principles of status in Polynesia). To further set the stage for Europeans, light skin was associated with godlike status in many parts of the region. The explorers were thus often greeted as chiefs or demigods, given their obvious wealth and power (especially the power to kill). However, they were not always treated with reverence, for the logic of such systems made gods, as well as powerful men, fair game for the intrepid. Sahlins' account (1981) of Captain Cook's fateful encounter with Hawaiians is a case in point. Further experiences with traders, missionaries, and beachcombers quickly altered any initial impressions the Islanders may have had of European godliness, but the evidence suggests that most were prepared to accept these peculiar outsiders fully into their social fabric provided they behaved appropriately. There is little evidence that

the Islanders were preoccupied with matters of ethnic identity, despite confrontations with people so dramatically different in language, appearance, and custom.

Where colonial regimes were established, or where Europeans carved out territories over which they exercised economic control, issues of identity increasingly came into focus. In addition to the institutionalization of ethnic categories (including such classifications as "half-caste" or "Demi"), a we-they distinction was underscored by major discrepancies in economic and political prerogatives. Histories of the colonial period suggest an ambivalence on the part of indigenous peoples toward white domination. Despite occasional expressions of resistance (often in symbolic form) and attempts by Islanders to regain control of their own destiny, there was widespread submission to European hegemony. For the most part, social separation enforced by European colonists came to be taken for granted.

Historical trends in the postcolonial period (which I consider to have begun with initial steps to dismantle colonies following World War II) have created new conditions, with profound implications for the processes that concern us. Some of these conditions have nothing to do with decolonization per se, but are the consequence of better transportation, population growth, and a dramatic increase in commercial activity. Isolation has broken down almost everywhere, so that people are continually coming into contact with others who are culturally distinctive. Many have left their homelands and settled elsewhere, either in discrete enclaves (e.g., Kapingamarangi on Pohnpei) or dispersed throughout urban areas (e.g., Nukuoro, also on Pohnpei). Others have emigrated to multiethnic nations—especially to New Zealand and the United States—where they are lumped with other minority groups. The proportion of Islanders receiving advanced education has also dramatically increased, with many receiving graduate degrees at major universities. Such education almost invariably leads toward the objectification of culture, and in many instances to a conservative view of tradition. I first pointed this out over twenty years ago when writing about leadership in Rotuma (Howard 1963) and later indicated its significance for the genesis of Rotuman ethnicity in Fiji:

Western-educated Rotuman leaders are likely to be more conservative than chiefs without Western education precisely because they have learned to make abstract contrastive judgments about social systems and cultural styles. Western education has helped to provide clear criteria for inclusion in a social unit of higher order despite the fact that the traditional system was characterized by groupings with highly permeable social boundaries. [T]he emergence of an ethnic group is facilitated by the

presence of individuals for whom ethnic identity not only becomes problematic but is of ideological import. . . [I]t is . . . often the case that they are the products of isolation from their native cultural systems, with the very isolation heightening their ethnic awareness. (Howard and Howard 1977)

In the 1960s and 1970s ethnicity became a focal issue in Western universities, so that what might have been learned implicitly by previous generations of Oceanic students has been explicitly encountered by students during the past twenty years. Part and parcel of the turn toward ethnic consciousness in Western universities was a serious questioning of the value basis for modern industrial society and a romanticization of earlier, simpler social forms. The Vietnam War impelled violent criticism of power abuse by Western nations and thus provided a framework for colonized, or previously colonized, peoples to reassess their own values and bases for judging social worth. The radicalism of the 1970s also raised ethnic consciousness among Hawaiian-Americans (Linnekin 1983), Australian Aborigines (Tonkinson, chapter 9) and New Zealand Maori (Dominy, chapter 11; Sinclair, chapter 10).

The crux of the matter came to be defined as a question of alternative values (or life-styles) on the one hand, and of political and economic power on the other. The value issue led to discussions about "traditional" social forms and frequently opposed individualistic Western capitalism, based upon egoistic greed, and "native" cultures based on communalism of one form or another. Marxist writings provided a sophisticated rationale for this opposition, as well as a powerful critique of capitalism, but they seem to have had less effect in Oceania than in other regions of the world. Perhaps one reason is that, although Oceanic societies are poor by world standards, economically based class differences have not been great. Even wealthy colonial Europeans rarely lived in the lavish manner that characterizes elites in South American, Asian, and some African nations.

However, Oceanic peoples have always struggled, in one way or another, for greater control of their economic and political destinies, and the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s revitalized their quest. An important part of such endeavors has been the need to define groups, to distinguish "us" for political and economic purposes from "them." As the chapters in this volume make clear, this is a tricky business. As once-distinct peoples increasingly come into contact with one another, as their lots are cast together within (culturally) arbitrary political units, the possibilities for alliance and disengagement are multiple and shifting. Potential identities multiply and become "nested" (Cohen 1978; Linnekin, chapter 7) in complex ways. Ethnic awareness—indeed,



what may be considered a preoccupation with matters of identity—has thus been given dramatic impetus by the processes of decolonization and nation building.

With this general framework of cultural paradigm and historical context in mind, let us move on to a consideration of some issues raised by the contributors to this volume.

### Issues of Cultural Identity and Ethnicity

I begin this section by discussing general issues associated with constructions of identity and ethnicity, that is, problems related to the structure and content of categories. I then go on to consider issues that derive from macrostructural changes in Oceania, particularly in the economic and political domains. Finally, the way events relate to structures, and individual behavior to macrostructures, will be considered.

#### *Ethnic Boundaries and Cultural Constructions of Identity*

When ethnicity is talked or written about in the abstract it often seems to assume a kind of permanence and lack of ambiguity that is belied by the facts, especially in areas like Oceania. The archetype of ethnic distinctiveness involves at least two contrasting categories, the members of which can be clearly distinguished along several dimensions—prototypically physical appearance (or “race”), language, and custom. But even though colonial regimes attempted to introduce such a model, it simply did not take hold in Oceania, as the chapters in this volume make clear. In part this is the result of historical factors that have differentially affected the components of ethnicity, but it is also a consequence of alternative cultural ways of characterizing similarities and differences.

The issue is essentially one of boundaries, of how rigid or permeable they are. In a provocative article some years ago, Hallowell (1963) contrasted the exclusiveness of Western societies with the easy way in which American Indians absorbed foreigners into their communities and kin groups. The contrast could just as easily be made between Oceanic and Western societies, although boundary exclusiveness is not confined to the West (indeed, Japanese society is even more extreme in this regard). Precisely what conditions produce rigid or permeable boundaries remains to be determined, but it seems to involve propositions of all three types (categorical, theoretical, and metatheoretical). Thus rigidity appears to entail categories based on immutable characteristics, theories of differential worth that place relatively little emphasis on social

action, and metatheories that minimize the importance of personal experience in relation to received information (i.e., that are based on acceptance of prevailing stereotypes). In contrast, permeable boundaries are associated with categories formed of mutable characteristics, theories of personal worth that emphasize social action, and metatheories that emphasize personal experience over learned stereotypes. That there are historical (particularly economic and political) circumstances that favor exclusiveness or inclusiveness is indisputable, but the translation of historical conditions into cultural paradigms remains a subject of debate (see, e.g., Sahlins 1981, 1985).

Where, as in Oceania, the diacritics of identity can be modified by social action, a prototypical *them* is likely to be defined in opposition to valued actions.<sup>8</sup> A nice example is provided by the Pulapese, for whom Trukese have become the prototypical other. The emphasis on action is striking: "When making invidious distinctions between 'us' and 'them', Pulapese tend to describe 'them' as being 'just like Truk'. Truk in essence becomes the opposite of 'us' 'We' still follow traditional customs and retain navigational skills. 'We' take care of visitors and share our food; Trukese care only about themselves. 'We' work hard, grow good taro, and have little need for money" (Flinn, p. 123).

There are several revealing aspects to this commentary in addition to the obvious emphasis on behavioral indicators. The notion, for example, that "they" (the Trukese) have abandoned traditional customs (which implicitly were similar to "ours") while "we" (Pulapese) have not is clearly a way of distancing; it is a way of saying that "they" have moved away from "us." Associated with this is a process of mystification, which expresses itself in views of the other as supernaturally potent, a theme that is expressed in several of the chapters. What seems to be involved here is a cultural sense of order that, when violated or transcended with impunity, generates anxiety and a sense of awe. Thus people who are perceived as consistently behaving in a contrary manner are likely to be characterized as dangerous, evil, or otherwise threatening, but also as extremely potent. This is often expressed in the benign form of seeking out healers from opposing groups in times of illness (see Golomb 1978, 1985). The emphasis on sharing food, which is so central to the Pulapese, is an interesting application of Oceanic principles of kinship, mentioned earlier, to attributions of cultural character.

All of this raises questions about the degree to which ethnic considerations order social and psychological experience in contemporary Oceania. After all, identity involves much more than simple assignment to a category. It involves emotional as well as cognitive components and may be superficial or profound in its consequences. Certain identities may come to the fore only in rare contexts, while others may have a con-

tinual social and/or psychological presence. Attachments may be single stranded, based on only one commonality, or multistranded, based on a number of likenesses. Commitments to solidarity may be ephemeral or long lasting. In other words, we simply do not know enough about what it means to belong to a social category unless we know a good deal about both its cognitive and affective parameters.

Dominy's discussion in chapter 11 is especially pertinent to this point. By placing the struggles of Maori women within the context of the women's movement in New Zealand, she has highlighted the crosscutting implications of two potentially powerful identities, that of women (in opposition to men) and that of Maori (in opposition to Pakeha). Both identities are joined, for some individuals, in opposition to an abstracted white, male-dominated culture. For others, a powerful tension exists as a result of dual commitments, while for still others there is no particular problem in reconciling these two affiliations. The strong rhetoric documented by Dominy is instructive with regard to the depth of feelings involved. Her analysis vividly illustrates the fact that ethnic, or cultural, identities are part of a larger set of social categories, and that the potentials for alliance and disengagement are considerable.

It is important to remember that all of these issues of categorization are being raised within a broader context of macrostructural constraints and increasing sociocultural complexity. It is to these issues that we now turn.

### *Macrostructural Aspects of Identity*

To summarize my discussion to this point, it appears that before European intrusion, Oceanic identities were rooted in relational networks based on genealogical ties and locality. In time, Pacific peoples were incorporated, to a greater or lesser degree, into an economic and political macrosystem dominated by an alien (Western) culture. The critical comparative question, then, is what this conjunction of cultures (Oceanic with West, Oceanic with Oceanic) has to tell us about the dynamics of identity—how it shapes, and is shaped by, the social order.

Western administrators imposed ethnic categories as they organized their colonial worlds. They used ethnicity as a means of political subjugation and promulgated the notion that personal worth depends on the ethnic group to which one is assigned. Decolonialization left a substantial residue of these conceptions in emergent political formations,<sup>9</sup> and the Western cultural paradigm still dictates the nature of the political game in Oceania. To a considerable extent, but in new and rather interesting ways, ethnic consciousness remains part of the conceptual and attitudinal equipment used to play it.

As identity issues are drawn into political arenas by indigenous leaders they become subject to all the forms of dialogue and action that constitute political gamesmanship. Campaigning with an eye toward ethnic categories, for example, has become a way to generate political constituencies, and local politicians often assume the prerogative not only to redefine groups for political purposes, but to provide alternative bases for assessing the social value of membership in them. An important consequence is that a handful of leaders—a small elite—has come to have an inordinate amount of influence over how ethnicity is defined in public arenas.

The politicization of cultural identity raises some important questions about social constructions of personal worth. Many precontact Oceanic societies were egalitarian in structure,<sup>10</sup> with prestige based upon fulfilling obligations within networks of kinsmen and community mates. When drawn into more complex, hierarchical sociopolitical systems, people from such societies confront new criteria for evaluating an individual's social standing. An example is provided by the Micronesians from Sapwuahfik Atoll, who distinguish themselves on behavioral grounds from Pohnpeians, whom they describe on occasion as self-enhancing political entrepreneurs. Sapwuahfik people on Pohnpei have the option of playing the Pohnpei game and gaining status in the broader community, or remaining committed to the central bases of Sapwuahfik identity, which is rooted in an egalitarian ethic (Poyer, chapter 6). What this signifies, on a more general plane, is a shift in the bases for determining prestige. Social worth in the political world of contemporary Oceania is embedded in a context of competing populations. To be successful in this larger arena, Sapwuahfik people are required to act in ways contrary to the very way they define their identity. Currently their sense of self-worth is sufficiently strongly rooted in traditional values to sustain them, but one wonders what the consequences of long-term socioeconomic competition will be.

At the heart of the issue is how the bases for cultural identity relate to peoples' attempts to control their own destinies. Indigenous social movements, such as Marching Rule and other millenarian sects, must be seen against this backdrop. They represent, as Linnekin (chapter 7) points out, attempts by colonially subjugated peoples to regain some measure of control over their lives. Colonial history is rife with less dramatic instances, including a wide variety of economic ventures and the dogged maintenance of indigenous medical practices (Howard 1979). The thrust toward self-determination remains strong in the postcolonial Pacific, as the essays in this volume attest (see, for example, Pomponio's analysis of Mandok attempts to defend their way of life by buying a trading vessel and by resisting relocation of a school, chapter 3). Cul-



tural identity is an important part of this thrust, as Pacific peoples explore the most effective ways of balancing political potency in larger arenas against greater control of home communities. By affiliating with other groups, small, potentially distinctive communities are able to enhance their political clout, but they correspondingly must give up a measure of control over their own sovereignty. It is this dilemma that, at least in part, provides a framework for expression of "nested" identities. Cultural identity in Oceania thus has a generative quality, as people search for appropriate alliances and tolerable levels of inclusion.

The fact that much of the discourse concerning cultural identity takes place within political arenas raises questions about its relevance for social reconstruction and social transformation. Can political discourse and action effectively generate commitment to cultural identities, particularly newly formed ones? To what extent do political definitions of cultural identity carry over into other areas of social life? What are the organizational effects of redefining "tradition" for political purposes? Obviously Oceanic societies are not the first to face these dilemmas. They are part and parcel of nation building everywhere, especially where indigenous social, linguistic, religious, and cultural divisions are pronounced.

One of the central issues confronting leaders of emergent nations is how to symbolize unity within contexts of increasing complexity. In contemporary Oceania sociocultural differentiation is taking place along a number of dimensions at once, as individuals move into new occupational roles, receive differential education, spend time abroad, obtain wealth in varying degrees, and so on. Once-isolated Pacific Islanders are being exposed to a multiplicity of world views, ranging from the highly particularistic and provincial to cosmopolitan universalism. As the parameters of cultural experience are altered from relatively closed, redundant modes to a relatively open, diversified mode, the symbolization of identity has become increasingly problematic. A plentitude of possible identities is matched by a multiplicity of ways for symbolizing each particular identity, with the choice of symbols having profound consequences for breadth of inclusion and degree of commitment. Some symbols—particularly those closely associated with a particular person or place—can be divisive, while others are unifying. The case of Maori *tangihanga* 'mourning ceremonies' described by Sinclair (chapter 10) is an excellent example of the latter. It is a powerful symbol for a variety of reasons, including its association with the ancestors and its strong emotional loading. Because they are situationally confined, tangi provide a focused context for affirming Maoriness in which participants do not have to deal with the wider array of potentially divisive symbols.

While the concept of "tradition" is a rallying cry for contemporary leaders, there also seems to be a move toward contemporaneous, social symbolizations of identity. An instance is the case of the Mewun of Vanuatu. In her analysis Larcom makes the important point that for the Mewun "authenticity" (of identity) was previously entwined with the land on which they lived—their sociomythic place—but that this is changing as a result of the establishment of village courts and a preoccupation with *kastom*, "which is rapidly being redefined by the national government as a concept that explains essential differences between Vanuatu and the West, or between indigenous linguistic groups" (Larcom, p. 175).

Another major trend involves trimming the range of salient diacritics by emphasizing a limited number of key symbols to which large segments of a population can relate. The selection of slit-gongs, pigs' teeth, and decorative leaves in Vanuatu is an example, but much of the talk about *kastom* in Melanesia can also be seen as a pruning process. In various Melanesian societies specific "traditional" customs and practices, some of which were previously confined to domestic spheres, are being selected and given salience in the public arena (Larcom, chapter 8; Linnekin, chapter 7).

Perhaps the most pervasive symbolism employed throughout Oceania, as in most of the rest of the postcolonial Third World—the symbolism by which indigenous peoples are able both to define themselves and to forge links with each other—is white colonial society itself. For many Oceanic intellectuals, white society, with its emphases on individualism, material consumerism, and racialism, provides an oppositional category that allows clearest self-definition (see Dominy, chapter 11, for a detailed example). By contrasting Oceanic values of relatedness to Western (white) individualism and racialism these observers have anticipated (and informed) the major thesis of this volume.

## Conclusion

The chapters presented in this book encourage us to take a fresh view of ethnicity and the role that cultural identity plays in social life. While group categorization is probably everywhere more flexible than has been portrayed in the scholarly literature, in Oceania it is process rather than structure that commands our attention. There we have an opportunity to examine ethnicity in the making. Events implicating issues of ethnicity and cultural identity are occurring with increasing regularity, and we are challenged to explore the interplay between cultural paradigms and historical events, to examine how cultural propositions con-

cerning sameness and difference affect events and are modified by them. Much work remains to be done. To set the stage for meaningful comparisons, we will need a much more extensive array of richly textured descriptions than is now available. But ultimately it is through comparisons—with cultures outside as well as within the region—that our deepest insights are likely to emerge.

The prospects for comparison raise some interesting questions regarding meaningful boundaries at various levels. In addition to imposing ethnic categories on Pacific Islanders, Europeans imposed the categories of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia on the region. The rationales of race, language, and custom were used, along with geography, to distinguish these "culture" areas. Until recently anthropologists accepted this division, and indeed may have further entrenched it. Thus the terms *Micronesian*, *Melanesian*, and *Polynesian* have considerable potential for being converted into significant ethnic designations (Linnekin, p. 167), although as yet, it seems, they are only occasionally used that way. One wonders, as alliances are forged between the newly formed nations within Oceania, whether this level of contrast will become institutionalized, or whether new, crosscutting, distinctions will emerge. It would be ironic if the indigenous peoples of Oceania were to adopt these classic divisions as ethnic categories just as anthropologists have come to question their validity.

I would like to conclude by pointing out some profound value issues embedded in questions of ethnicity and cultural identity that must be faced both by the people of Oceania and by anthropologists. The boundaries and borders that distinguish populations one from another are indeed, as Linnekin (chapter 7) persuasively argues, cultural constructions, but they also hold the potential for channeling very powerful emotions. That group identities are subject to hate-filled manipulation has been made all too clear in places like Northern Ireland and the Middle East. When people come to hate one another on the basis of ethnic categories, when they punctuate their interactions with frequent violence, they institutionalize social schisms that are demeaning and maladaptive for everyone involved.

Although much of Oceania has mercifully been spared the more destructive aspects of institutionalized ethnic antagonisms, residues of colonial structuring are clearly evident and portend difficult times ahead. In Australia, Hawaii, and New Zealand, descendants of the original inhabitants have clearly become an underclass, with all of the economic, social, and health disadvantages thereby entailed. One can well understand the bitterness, the anger experienced by these people. One can empathize with their attempts to redefine cultural identities in the interest of political efficacy. The extent to which class antagonisms

will develop along ethnic lines in newly emergent Pacific nations remains to be seen, but the potential is definitely present, as recent events in Fiji and Vanuatu clearly demonstrate.

But we should not forget that cultural differences provide a source of diversity that humankind can ill afford to abandon. With the pressures that exist toward homogenizing the world into one version or another of Western society, we are in danger of losing cultures that contain critical elements needed for adaptations to change we do not yet anticipate (Yinger 1985, 173). Oceania, by providing models of cultural diversity based on flexible group formations with porous boundaries, on mutable criteria for inclusion, presents us with a vision of what a pluralistic world might look like, free from the institutionalized schisms that have structured so much of European history. Whether that vision will be realized, even in Oceania, ought to concern us all.

## NOTES

1. In a recent review of ethnicity, Yinger (1985, 159) reports that "there is now widespread if not universal agreement among scholars that 'racial differences derive social significance from cultural diversity' " (citing Kuper in Kuper and Smith 1971, 13). That such a statement is necessary in a contemporary review is itself remarkable, and an indicator of the persistence of racialism in Western thought, even among scholars.

2. That sociopolitical considerations are fundamental, and underlie conceptual distinctions based on race, is suggested by the fact that Europeans have often conferred "honorary white status" on selected groups or individuals where it has been expedient to do so (as in South Africa where Japanese have been designated as honorary whites; see also Tonkinson, chapter 9).

3. It is interesting to note that the evolutionists did not rank *cultures* as we now understand the term, but rather populations among whom race, language, and culture were assumed to cohere. Despite their essentially liberal perspective, they were, on the whole, unable to disentangle one from the other (Harris 1968, 137-141).

4. This is an extension of what Pettigrew (1979) calls "the ultimate attribution error," by which negatively valued acts of outgroups are seen as caused by their immutable characteristics, while their positively valued acts are explained by transitory, situational forces (cited in Yinger 1985, 164).

5. Since I am more familiar with the Polynesian materials I may have skewed things somewhat in their direction, although the inspiration for my analysis has come from all the chapters in this book.

6. This assumption poses a serious problem for indigenous leaders who are attempting to use a common notion of tradition to define pan-community identity in modern political settings. As Tonkinson points out (chapter 9), they tend not to define the terms of identity and avoid specifying its components. One



tack is to focus on shared experiences since European contact, but that, too, has its problems since different groups have been differently affected.

7. These conditions are not exclusive to Oceania, of course (see Yancey, Eriksen, and Juliani 1979 for a more general assessment of emergent ethnicity), but they are especially salient there.

8. A "prototypical them" can be thought of as a categorical opposite that is least subject to contextual variation within a broad cultural frame (e.g., as black Africans are for white South Africans).

9. Fiji, where political parties are institutionalized along ethnic lines, provides an outstanding example.

10. I do not mean to imply that they adhered to an egalitarian ideology in the modern sense. In fact, many Oceanic societies were hierarchical in orientation but remained egalitarian in practice because of practical constraints, such as a small population.