

Developments in Polynesian Ethnology

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Introduction

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THIS book represents an attempt by a number of experienced researchers to assess the state of Polynesian ethnology today. It has been less than twenty years since the senior editor assembled the first set of collected papers on Polynesia (Howard 1971). At the time there was a dearth of suitable literature, in either article or book form, that was theoretically suggestive and relevant for contemporary perspectives. Trying to balance geographical coverage against thematic considerations was made difficult because so little work had been done in some of the archipelagoes. Today the problems of putting together such an anthology would be the reverse. In both quantity and quality the work done in Polynesia over the past twenty years has been impressive, and it would be difficult to pare down this wealth of materials to a few representative articles. The path we have taken, consequently, has been to commission the articles contained in this volume.

As each of us began the task of reviewing the recent literature, we were struck by how much had accumulated in our respective areas, and how extensive a task we had undertaken. As is perhaps usual under such circumstances, deadlines were repeatedly extended and what was to have been a two-year project has taken six years to complete. As editors, we have avoided imposing a rigid format on the authors, each of whom has contributed to the theoretical development in his or her area of specialization. Each chapter presents a review of recent materials, although some authors found it expedient to make their points by selecting a few representative cases and amplifying them, while others chose to cast a broader net. Certain key issues, such as gender, are of widespread significance and could not readily be confined to one chapter. They are therefore discussed in several, with each analysis showing the issue in a different light, illuminating a different set of theoretical connections. In our opinion this provides a better picture of the true complexity of these issues.

There are important continuities and trends that have become apparent to us as we worked on the volume. Throughout much of its history, Polynesian ethnology has been marked by two distinct but complementary projects. One aims at reconstructing the nature of Polynesian societies prior to European intrusion, the other at understanding ongoing societies as observed by ethnographers. These projects have taken different shapes during different historical periods, but each has built upon the insights of its predecessors, and each project has informed the other. Understandings gained through intensive fieldwork have helped to recast the problems of prehistoric reconstruction, while attempts to bring order to what is known of precontact Polynesian societies have raised new questions for contemporary ethnographic investigation. The history of Polynesian ethnology therefore appears to be less a series of dramatic paradigm shifts, in Thomas Kuhn's sense, than an accrual of increasingly sophisticated analyses within a broadening, and increasingly complex, framework.

The first issue that fired the imaginations of Western scholars was where the Polynesians originated, and how they got to such remote islands. Speculation began with the explorers and has continued ever since. Implicitly this endeavor required reconstructing precontact Polynesian societies so that comparisons, and inferences about historical connections, could be made. The evidence for these speculations included language, artifacts, myths, beliefs, customary practices, and features of social and political organization. The nature of the task, however, did not require integrated visions of how Polynesian social systems worked. Comparisons were based on traits, considered more as independent entities than as cohering parts of social systems. Reconstructions were thus piecemeal, and on the whole, unrevealing of societal character.

The Bishop Museum studies of the 1920s and 1930s approached the problem with a more sophisticated research agenda. Ethnographers, each armed with a well-defined format for collecting and organizing data, were sent to a variety of Polynesian islands. Their materials were published in a set of standardized ethnographies that were used in comparative studies aimed at unravelling migration routes and historical connections between Polynesian societies. Although a continuation of earlier diffusionist projects, the studies were enriched by materials from ongoing societies, and consequently were more attuned to the subtleties of social context. By contemporary standards fieldwork sessions were relatively short, at times lasting only a number of weeks. Still, the publications of such anthropologists as the Beagleholes, Buck, Burrows, Gifford, Handy, Linton, MacGregor, and Métraux have proven valuable to modern scholars studying continuity and change in the region. The work of these ethnographers was supplemented by archaeological investigations confined largely to surveys of surface remains and compari-

sons of artifacts, primarily adzes. As Patrick Kirch notes (chapter 2), it was generally believed that excavations would have little to add to the ethnological record because settlement periods were presumed to be quite short.

Toward the end of the 1920s, serious ethnography of extant societies came into its own in Polynesian studies. Initially the focus was on the less acculturated societies. Raymond Firth selected the isolated outlier of Tikopia and Margaret Mead the relatively undisturbed island of Manu'a in Samoa. It would be difficult to overestimate the magnitude of Firth's achievements, or his impact on defining the nature of Polynesian ethnology. He gave us the first real glimpse of what a functioning Polynesian society was like, in sufficient detail so that alternative interpretations could be formulated, and in many instances, tested against his data. His voluminous writings, on Tikopia and the New Zealand Maori, have provided us with insights into cultural processes as well as an understanding of form and structure. Firth's later work, following his return visit to Tikopia after World War II, is remarkable for its insights into cultural process. For example, *Rank and Religion* (1970b) illuminates not only the nature of Tikopian religion, but the subtle dynamic factors involved in conversion to Christianity.

Margaret Mead's contributions have stood the test of time less well. There is no doubt that she posed important questions concerning socialization and character development. She can also be credited with initiating the rich tradition in psychological ethnography that is well documented by Jane and James Ritchie in chapter 4. But Mead's work has also been a source of controversy, and questions have been raised about the quality of her fieldwork (Freeman 1983; Holmes 1987).

The connection between ongoing systems and reconstructed Polynesian societies was presumed in Firth's and Mead's studies. Both chose "traditional" settings precisely because they were perceived as more representative of precontact conditions. In seemingly more acculturated settings, anthropologists like Felix Keesing and Ernest Beaglehole initiated studies of culture change during the 1930s and 1940s. These involved attempts to reconstruct pre-European baselines and to assess the impact of missionaries, traders, beachcombers, colonists, and other intrusive agents of Western culture. In their work, too, the reconstructionist and presentist projects merged.

The Presentist Project: Ethnographic Research into Ongoing Societies

World War II interrupted ethnological work in the Pacific, and research was particularly slow to resume in Polynesia following the war's end. Anthropology students from the United States with an interest in the

Pacific were steered toward Micronesia, where the U.S. government had new administrative responsibilities. It was not until the late 1950s and early 1960s that a new group of ethnographers moved into the region. Marshall Sahlins went to Moala, in Fiji, Alan Howard to Rotuma, Allan Hanson to Rapa; and Paul Ottino to Ragihoa, in the Tuamotus. Vern Carroll and Michael Lieber conducted research on Nukuoro and Kapingamarangi respectively, two Polynesian outliers in Micronesia, while Torben Monberg studied Rennell and Bellona, adjacent outliers in Melanesia. Douglas Oliver directed a group in Tahiti that included Ben Finney, Antony Hooper, Paul Kay, and Robert Levy. In New Zealand, Jane and James Ritchie began a long-term project in psychological anthropology among the Maori, and Bruce Biggs initiated his studies of Maori language and culture.

This group of field workers brought with them fresh perspectives and a new sense of purpose. It was a time when the assumptions of functionalist anthropology were being questioned, when cognitive, structuralist, and symbolic perspectives were being explored. But regardless of theoretical orientation or topical focus, the goals of these ethnographers were similar—to detail the ways in which contemporary Polynesian societies were integrated into coherent, functioning systems. They opted for extensive periods of fieldwork, at times ranging over several years, and much of their research was conducted in the vernacular language. In this sense they were guided by the standards for ethnographic research set by Raymond Firth.

From their research a composite picture of ongoing Polynesian societies emerged. Cognatic descent groups, which did not fit the African model worked out by British functionalists, were found to be prevalent; adoption rates were high throughout the region, land tenure patterns revealed a built-in flexibility that afforded everyone at least usufruct rights. The overarching importance of community was also noted. Whether they focused on kinship, political structures, or child-rearing practices, ethnographers remarked upon the degree to which the social commitments of individuals were channeled toward the broader community.

These ethnographers were followed by a continuous flow of students who have helped flesh out the details of social life and personal experience within Polynesian communities. Whereas previously a particular society had been studied by only one or two ethnographers, now some, like Samoa, have hosted innumerable projects. Research topics have correspondingly shifted away from broad scale efforts at portraying societies as cultural wholes toward more focused projects. Students have gone into the field specifically to study medical beliefs, the impact of tourism, the patterning of emotions, or the role of women in the domestic economy. The result has been a set of finer-grained analyses, and a

movement beyond general frameworks to an appreciation for the complexities of form and process.

Contemporary ethnographers have thus shifted away from the overarching concern for describing intracultural regularities, which dominated earlier work, toward a concern for the patterning of intracultural variability. No longer do we accept an account from one village as representative of a whole archipelago, for the diversity within each Polynesian society has become increasingly evident. Diversity has no doubt increased as a result of differential acculturation and unique historical conditions, but it is also apparent that Polynesian societies were never as uniform as earlier conceptions implied. As we have moved away from a preoccupation with general forms, we have become increasingly aware of the flexibility of Polynesian social systems, of the degree to which they are able to accommodate variability.

Modern ethnographic efforts in Polynesia are marked by an emphasis on dynamics and the contingencies that shape them. Descriptions of specific events, daily encounters, negotiations, and recorded conversations are afforded a prominent place in recent accounts. The object is not to dwell on the particular or the unique for its own sake, but to use these particularities to comprehend the conditions that shape social life and personal experience. For some the search is for presuppositions and the intricacies of meaning that make life orderly and understandable to the people who live it; for others it is to discover the specific circumstances that initiate and shape observed events.

The Reconstructionist Project: Understanding Societies of the Past

Efforts at historical reconstruction have also changed considerably during the past thirty years, again in the direction of more sophisticated, more finely textured analyses. As Oliver (1974:xi) has noted, "many of the generalizations [previously] current [regarding pre-European Tahiti] were in reality scholars' inventions that had come to acquire 'authenticity' more through reassertion than through retesting with primary sources." Contemporary scholars are more conscientious about consulting early documents, and many have attained a level of linguistic competence that allows them to scrutinize materials written in Polynesian languages. Furthermore, archaeologists have contributed a wealth of entirely new data for consideration.

Cultural anthropologists have come at the task of reconstruction from two directions, one emphasizing change, the other a reinterpretation of existing models. In their concern for understanding change, several anthropologists working in Polynesia have engaged in reconstructionist

projects. As part of his project in Tahiti, which focused on sociocultural change, Oliver compiled available materials on the early postcontact period and published *Ancient Tahitian Society* (1974) in three volumes. Greg Denning, a student of Oliver's at Harvard with previous training as a Pacific historian, approached the early Marquesan material more boldly and produced his landmark *Islands and Beaches* (1980). Marshall Sahlins' recent essays, which bring together strands from French structuralist and post-structuralist writings, symbolic anthropology, and praxis theory, have also generated a great deal of interest in the reconstructionist project. In his provocative analysis of Captain Cook's death in Hawai'i (1981a),¹ and his collection of essays published in *Islands of History* (1985), Sahlins demonstrates the power of a theoretically informed interpretive approach to historical encounters.

Interpretive models of precontact Polynesian societies are not, in themselves, a recent phenomenon. Many early ethnologists offered bold interpretations of Polynesian beliefs, rituals, and customs. Nor did Elsdon Best (1924a, 1924b), in his reflections about the ancient Maori, A. M. Hocart (1929, 1952) in his writings about Fiji, and E. S. C. Handy (1927) in his analysis of Polynesian religion, shy away from taking interpretive plunges. But these works, and others like them, were given less recognition than they deserved by ethnologists, who preferred to stay closer to "hard facts." More recently Prytz Johansen suffered a similar fate. His daring interpretation of traditional Maori religious beliefs (1954) was all but ignored until the recent revival of interpretive reconstructionist projects. His writings, along with those of Hocart, Best, and other early interpreters of Polynesian culture, are cited with increasing frequency by modern commentators.

Prominent in the recent interpretive literature has been a reliance on myths as a source of insight into precontact Polynesian thinking. Whereas previously myths held an interest among Polynesianists primarily for their clues to migrational histories, current interest focuses more on what they reveal as symbolic structures about religious concepts and notions of political order. Thus Hanson and Hanson (1983) rely to a great extent on mythical materials to construct an interpretive model of precontact Maori institutions, Howard (1985b, 1986b) interprets Rotuman myths as a vehicle for illuminating traditional political concepts, and Valeri (1985b) interprets the legend of 'Umi in Hawai'i for a similar purpose.

The hazards of taking a bold interpretive approach are well-illustrated by the response to Valeri's (1985a) reconstruction of sacrificial rituals and kingship in ancient Hawaii. Valeri brings a strong interpretive program, grounded in the theoretical writings of Durkheim and his followers, to the Hawaiian material. The work has both been hailed as a brilliant tour-de-force and criticized severely for its alleged misuse of

data (see, for example, Charlot 1987 and Valeri's lengthy reply in the same issue of *Pacific Studies*, Howard 1986a, Linnekin 1986). Whatever the hazards, however, many among the current generation of ethnologists are prepared to proceed apace, spurred on rather than deterred by the heated debates.

Out of this revitalized concern for interpretation has emerged a renewed interest in the nature of Polynesian chieftainship. The explorers, traders, missionaries, and colonists were concerned with chieftainship as a practical matter. For them it was of instrumental importance that political stability be maintained so they could get on with their work (see Borofsky and Howard, chapter 8). Hocart (1922) was fascinated by the issue of paramount chieftainship, and used Fijian materials, along with data from elsewhere in the world, to develop a comparative model of kingship. In the 1950s debates were generated by Sahlins' comparative study of *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (1958) and Goldman's (1955) analysis of chiefly status rivalry as the mechanism driving social evolution in the culture area (see Howard and Kirkpatrick, chapter 3). The subsequent publication of Goldman's landmark volume, *Ancient Polynesian Society*, (1970) and Sahlins' recent writings (especially 1981a, 1981b, 1983b, 1985), in which he has shifted from his earlier materialist perspective to one that is cultural and symbolic, have given added impetus to interest in the topic.

The Chapters

The essays in this volume reflect the trends discussed above. Writing about changes in archaeological perspectives, Patrick Kirch (chapter 2) notes that contrary to earlier opinions, stratigraphic excavations in the islands have yielded rich results. In addition to providing a much firmer foundation for inferences about migrations, archaeological materials now provide a solid basis for examining developmental changes within precontact Polynesian societies. Along with changes in archaeological methods have come changes in theoretical views. Kirch describes how Polynesian archaeology has moved from typological through developmental models to an increasing appreciation for the processes of change within such models. "It is now clear," Kirch notes (p. 17), "that the development and transformation of Polynesian societies must be comprehended not against the backdrop of static environments, but rather in the context of dynamic ecosystems that are very much the product of human actions." Human adaptation is depicted as an active process within negotiable environmental constraints. As Kirch emphasizes, the holistic approach is essential here; the study of prehistory flourishes in the interchange between presentist and reconstructionist perspectives.

Alan Howard and John Kirkpatrick (chapter 3), tracing the history of issues in social organization, describe a shift in research interests from a preoccupation with the broad principles of group formation (e.g., kinship versus territoriality, patrilineality versus a cognatic emphasis), to an examination of more focused topics such as adoption, incest avoidance, gender relations, and exchange. As a consequence, a much more dynamic, conceptually sophisticated view of Polynesian social organization has been generated. They argue that specific events and social contexts need to be studied closely if we are to fully comprehend the ways in which Polynesian social life is ordered, and point to a number of shifts in this direction, singling out Shore's work in Samoa as exemplary. His account illuminates the characteristic ways in which social forms help to shape events, constrain relationships, and pattern tensions. Howard and Kirkpatrick (p. 92) conclude that, "although no single vision unites the field [of social organization], there is broad agreement among analysts of Polynesian societies on the importance of studying social dynamics; on the need to integrate accounts of structures and events; on exchange as constitutive of, not just reflecting or linking social groupings; and on the need to map Polynesians' definitions of situations and the ways they negotiate meanings."

Jane and James Ritchie (chapter 4) describe the history of enculturation research in Polynesia and reach similar conclusions. Tracing theoretical shifts through several modalities—from the naturalistic approach of Margaret Mead, through psychoanalytical, cognitive and learning theories to ethnopsychology—they arrive at a view that gives context center stage. Fundamental to Polynesian social metaphysics, they assert, "is the ease with which social worlds are subject to redefinition, depending on circumstances" (p. 103). Polynesian cultures represent adaptations to conflicting interests, overlapping allegiances and multiple solutions to problems, the Ritchies point out (p. 103), and "for Polynesians any and all solutions are tentative, subject to reformulation as conditions change." Learning about contexts, how to recognize as well as to redefine them, is therefore among the most important lessons a Polynesian child must master. Recent research in the area is notable for the close attention paid to the details of interactions between parents and children, and between children and their peers. As a result, we are gaining fresh insights into the nature of cooperation and competition in Polynesian communities, the patterning of emotions, reactions to school environments, and other aspects of thought, feeling, and action. In the Ritchies' opinion, we are now at a point where these insights must be applied in the interest of helping Polynesians to cope with the problems experienced as they adapt to new and rapidly changing environments.

Underlying the problem of interpreting the nature of Polynesian

chieftainship is the rather thorny matter of making cultural sense of the concepts of *mana* and *tapu*. Bradd Shore (chapter 5) reviews the usage of these and related terms in the writings of Polynesianists, and goes on to develop his own interpretation, relating them to key values in the Polynesian worldview. He helps to clarify the cultural logic behind these concepts, and along with it the meaning of rituals that implicate *mana* and *tapu*, the significance of prohibitions placed on women, and the relevance of these notions for chiefly status and performance. "Genuine ethnological insights," Shore (p. 166) notes, "have a way of transforming bits of ethnographic data into significant patterns." His thoughtful analysis is an important theoretical contribution in its own right. The clarification of such central indigenous terms provides us with one of our main avenues for advancing the reconstructionist program, since they reveal the presuppositions that underlie the Polynesian worldview.

George Marcus (chapter 6) points to another research trend, the focus on personhood as a centerpiece for cultural analysis. He describes two recurring chiefly images in Polynesia, one of the chief as a mystified, sacred being, the other of the chief as a respected and admired person. These relate to two aspects of chieftainship, labeled by Marcus as kingly and populist. By framing their studies in terms of personhood, modern ethnographers have emphasized the populist side of chiefs, an understandable trend since the sacred side of chieftainship has been considerably demystified during the twentieth century. With their sacred status diminished, contemporary chiefs are in an ambiguous position. They must situationally negotiate their status, sometimes emphasizing their chiefly prerogatives, sometimes their responsibilities to their constituents. The kinds of issues Marcus sees as important for micro-focused ethnographic research on contemporary chiefs include "How persons acquire chiefly status or office; what strategies of self-presentation they use, given the predicament of their simultaneously alienated and domesticated selves; and how possessing chiefly status maps onto the culturally constructed phases of life of any person" (p. 193). Marcus also directly addresses the reconstructionist project as it relates to chieftainship. He sees in recent research a movement away from stereotypic, and largely static, portrayals of traditional chiefs, to one that aims at uncovering the fundamental dynamics of precontact political systems. The key, in Marcus' view, lies in the dual conception of chiefs, as socially distant, mystified beings whose status was divinely sanctioned on the one hand, and as heroic but approachable persons on the other. The former image is one of chiefs as passive conduits of godly power, the latter image portrays chiefs as active politicians. Although all Polynesian societies shared these cultural notions, the ways in which they were worked out sociologically differed from island to island. As does Shore in his analysis of *mana* and *tapu*, Marcus goes beyond the

published material and offers a new synthesis. In tandem, the chapters by Shore and Marcus underscore the excitement generated by interpretive anthropology as its notions and methods are applied to a revitalized reconstructionist project.

Adrienne Kaeppler (chapter 7) contrasts approaches of the past, which took definitions of art for granted and focused on artifacts and performances apart from their societal contexts, with modern approaches. The anthropological study of art and aesthetics cannot be limited to an examination of objects or artistic products, Kaeppler maintains, nor can they be confined to visual forms. Rather, in her opinion, "studies must try to show how visual and verbal modes of expression are embedded in social structure and cultural philosophy, as well as how ritual and belief systems are integrally related to artistic and aesthetic systems" (p. 220). By relating Tongan aesthetic notions to such aspects of social patterning as spatial arrangements, Kaeppler demonstrates the integral nature of underlying principles. She shows how, for example, the structuring of space in Tongan houses and villages and in kava ceremonies parallels bark cloth designs. She discusses a range of recent studies in the performing and visual arts, in which considerable attention is being paid to indigenous conceptions (ethnoaesthetics). In Kaeppler's view (p. 234), "such studies are important to the future of Polynesian studies, not just because of what we have to learn about art and aesthetics, but for what they can teach us about the nature of Polynesian societies and the ways they have changed and are changing."

In our essay on the early contact period (chapter 8), we also stress the progressive refinement of issues over the past few decades. Within the earlier Eurocentric framework of Pacific history, formally appointed agents of Western cultures were seen as the initiators of change. In comparison, the island-centered framework now in favor among Pacific historians stresses the impact of a broader range of participants, including indigenous actors, beachcombers, and traders. This has had the effect of shifting attention away from formal, often ceremonial engagements, to the processes out of which daily life was constructed. In our attempt to construct a comparative framework for understanding the nature of Polynesian-Western interactions during the early contact period, we emphasize the negotiable character of these early encounters. Clarifying the culturally patterned framework within which the various actors—Polynesians and Europeans alike—operated is the key to building an understanding of the processes at work. What was theft to European ship captains, we suggest, might well have been a matter of status rivalry to Polynesian chiefs. From this standpoint Captain Cook's death in Hawai'i was a product of conflicting agendas based on Hawaiian concerns with power and potency and Western concerns with trade and "civilized" behavior. What has been learned from studies of ongoing

Polynesian cultures during the past thirty years puts us in a much better position to interpret such events.

The State of the Art

The current mood among researchers into Polynesian ethnology is one of excitement and intellectual ferment. Virtually every issue posed in the past has been reopened recently and examined afresh, often with startling results. This appears to be one of those periods in intellectual history when previously exclusive viewpoints and approaches are finding sufficient common ground to provide a productive basis for cross-fertilization. Thus archaeology is no longer committed exclusively to unraveling migration paths and points of cultural origin, but has contributed markedly to our understanding of how Polynesian societies developed and changed over time; studies of contemporary, ongoing societies provide vital clues for reconstructionist efforts and vice versa, history vitalizes anthropology and anthropology vitalizes history.

Perhaps the place where this revitalization and cross-fertilization is most evident is in attempts to interpret the history of early contact between Europeans and Polynesians. Doing a proper job demands a thorough knowledge of what Polynesian societies were like at the time, a task that calls for the use of archaeological, linguistic, historical, and ethnographic materials. It requires a sense of the effects of culture on events and of events on culture. It necessitates attention to details and process as well as to form and structure. By closely examining the actions of Polynesians in their encounters with Europeans, and the actions of Europeans when confronting Polynesians, we are given an opportunity to explore the ways in which people from both worlds negotiated out of the fabric of their respective cultures a meaningful accommodation to ambiguous circumstances. Ethnological understanding, it must be emphasized, is by nature a comparative project.

As editors, we feel privileged to be part of this project to explore recent developments in Polynesian ethnology. As scholars, we feel even more privileged for the opportunity to pursue answers to the fascinating puzzles Polynesia presents.

NOTE

1 We use the spelling Hawai'i to refer to the "Big Island" or southeasternmost island in the archipelago and Hawaii to refer to the archipelago as a whole.