

REVIEW ARTICLE

Polynesian Social Stratification Revisited: Reflections on Castles Built of Sand (and a Few Bits of Coral)

Ancient Polynesian Society. IRVING GOLDMAN. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1970. xxviii + 625 pp., illustrations, maps, 10 appendices, bibliography, index. \$17.50 (cloth).

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I

Someday a historian will have to explain the lure of Polynesia for armchair anthropologists. Just what is it that compels scholars, snugly secure by their firesides in London, New York, Helsinki, etc., to ruminate about the origins of the Polynesians, the nature of their societies, and the processes by which their cultures developed? Does Polynesia still represent for Western man a myth of a utopian past, of *l'homme naturel*, and thus appeal to his thwarted desires for a carefree existence? Is it awe at the thought of small groups of people plying their primitive craft across thousands of miles of uncharted ocean at a time when Europeans were loathe to sail out of sight of known shorelines? Is it that the semi-isolation of Polynesian islands makes it into a kind of natural laboratory for social analysis? Or is it simply that the information we have to go on is so sketchy that it permits us to build historical and theoretical castles—marvelous, intricate, even towering castles—out of the sandy fragments?

For most of the first two centuries following discovery by Europeans, speculations focused on origins and migration routes (see Howard 1967). This game is still going on, with renewed vigor in fact, but given the recent surge of archaeological research in the region, competitors now need fieldwork credentials if they are to gain a hearing. Fortunately for armchair anthropology, the

evidence on pre-contact social systems is as poor now as it ever was, allowing for the construction of sand castles of greater proportions than ever. The most recent monument, the one that inspired this review, is Irving Goldman's *Ancient Polynesian Society* (1970). Before commenting on Goldman's volume, however, it may be well to specify the issues at stake and to briefly review the work of some previous architects.

Essentially there have been three related issues involved: (1) What in fact were the socio-political forms in Polynesia at the time of contact? Subsumed under this question are several sub-issues, including the composition of social groupings and the basis of their formation, the principles underlying rank distinctions, the extent of status differentiation in the various societies, and the number of social strata that could be distinguished; (2) How did existent socio-political systems function? Of major significance is the way in which sub-systems (e.g., economic, kinship, religious, and political) articulated with one another, and the roles played by chiefs in fostering stability and change; and (3) What dynamics lie behind the differentiation of social forms and social systems contained within the culture area?

These issues involve an increasing degree of inference and speculation. That is, an analysis of function presumes a competent description of social forms, and a credible theory of social differentiation presumes both a competent description of social forms and a reasonable analysis of social function. For Polynesia, unfortunately, adequate descriptions of traditional social systems are virtually non-existent, being based on fragmentary accounts of explorers, missionaries, renegades and traders, or the memories of a handful of elderly informants.¹ The question we must ask, then, is whether the game is worth the candle. What in fact have been the fruits of the quest?

II

Speculation about Polynesian social systems began with the explorers, but virtually all earlier approaches attempted to tie social forms to migration theories. Only superficial attention was paid to the nature of social groupings and the way they functioned, and variations were accounted for by reference to different mixtures of proto-forms carried by successive waves of migrants. Chiefs were often presumed to represent the descendants of a conquering "tribe," and were seen as separate racial stocks.

It was not until the second decade of the present century that interest shifted to the nature of Polynesian social, political, and religious organization itself. To Robert W. Williamson must go the credit for being the first man to attempt a systematic integration of the fragmentary accounts. Williamson, a solicitor by training, had done fieldwork in New Guinea before turning to the task of organizing the Polynesian materials in 1913. The results of his work appeared in several volumes, commencing with a three-volume set published in 1924 on *The Social and Political Systems of Central Polynesia*.² This was followed by two volumes on *The Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia* in 1933 and two posthumous works, *Religion and Social Organization in Central Polynesia* (1937) and *Essays in Polynesian Ethnology* (1939). Both posthumous volumes were edited by Ralph Piddington, whose interpretive summaries of Williamson's data stand as a major contribution in their own right.

Williamson was well aware of the limitations placed upon him by deficiencies in the data, and it is to his credit that he exercised considerable caution in weighing the evidence. As an act of sheer scholarship (i.e., attention to details), a careful sifting from multiple sources, and critical evaluation of the merit contained in various accounts, Williamson stands as superior to his successors. Partly because of his scholarly caution, however, and partly because of the theoretical temper of the times in which he was working, Williamson's generalizations were rather gross; today they appear obvious, if not trivial. His was a time of incipient functionalism, when grand developmental schemes were deplored as "conjectural history," and customs were to be understood

"in context" within particular societies. Rather than presenting a comprehensive scheme, Williamson offered considered opinions and "tentative hypotheses." Thus he clearly recognized the optative nature of social groups in Polynesia, but admitted to confusion regarding a conceptualization:

The actual investigation of the systems of grouping is rendered difficult by the intermixtures, sometimes extensive, which had taken place between the social groups, both great and small, and which sometimes make it hard to show that the occupants of a given geographical area were, or had been, a social group, although there is reason for believing that this was so. The children and later descendants of a marriage between persons of two different groups might live and become established in the home of either the male or the female ancestor; and, whilst they would, I think, commonly be regarded as belonging to the social group among which they lived, and which would have, as it were, absorbed them—especially so, perhaps, if it was the group of the male ancestor, even though their rank of blood might be regarded as derived from their female ancestor—this was not necessarily so; and it was sometimes a matter of uncertainty and arrangement whether the children of a marriage should be regarded as belonging to the group of their father or that of their mother, and often, I think, they were recognized as belonging to both groups, and this dual connection would, or might be, handed down to their descendants. It follows that a family—a term which might often include a large body of people—might be treated as belonging to a group other than that with whom they were living, and the recognition of this fact might well militate against the recognition of what was fundamentally a social system of grouping. So also in the case of an adopted person, whilst he was a member of the group into which he had been adopted, I do not think that he necessarily lost his right of membership of his group of origin. I draw attention to these sources of confusion—there are, I think, other sources also—to illustrate the difficulty, and perhaps often the impossibility, of demonstrating systems of social grouping in cases where apparently it prevailed substantially [1924, II:2].

By "social" grouping Williamson is referring to groups formed on the basis of kin-

ship criteria. He goes on to evaluate information on various Polynesian societies regarding the relative significance of kinship and locality in the formation of groups. Only for Samoa does he consider the data to approach adequacy, but he concludes nevertheless that throughout Polynesia groupings were primarily based on social (i.e., kinship) considerations. This conclusion constitutes Williamson's central finding regarding Polynesian social organization and colors virtually all his subsequent interpretations. For example, on the question of social classes, he distinguishes four—chiefs, middle and lower classes, and a special category of priests and sorcerers—but concludes that since kinship is the primary organizing principle, boundaries between the classes are necessarily blurred:

I look upon the whole subject in the light of my belief that the grouping of the people was primarily social, the connection between a great chief or king and the chiefs of the several separate districts forming his dominions, and between the latter and the chiefs or other heads of villages in those districts, and between these again and the domestic households within the villages, being primarily and in the main one of social relationship. . . I do not think it is possible to draw any defined line of demarcation between a chief and a member of the middle classes, because I do not believe there was such a line, the middle class people having in fact been, as a rule, related, closely or distantly, to their chiefs [1924, H:356-357].

Williamson offered no systematic theory to account for the development of social stratification or social differentiation in Polynesia. In considering the institution of chieftainship, he concentrates on classifying and describing the features of chiefly power—administrative, religious, parliamentary, consultative, military, diplomatic, judicial, and personal. Ultimately the exercise of chiefly power was perceived by Williamson as an individual phenomenon:

the powers of the chiefs would doubtless vary in different parts of the same island or area, and would differ from time to time in the same area. Much would depend upon the character, ability, personality and conduct (good or bad) of a chief, as displayed both in dealing with his own subjects, in external political

enterprises and intrigues, and in war; and upon the corresponding qualities of those who might oppose him [1924, III:97].

III

It fell to Ralph Piddington to draw theoretical conclusions of substance from Williamson's materials. After editing the final fragments of the latter's ethnographic files, Piddington concludes *Essays in Polynesian Ethnology* with an extensive treatise on Polynesian social history, including in his analysis research of more recent origin than that available to Williamson (including work by Raymond Firth, Te Rangi Hiroa, Earnest Beaglehole, Margaret Mead, and Ian Hogbin). Piddington, a student of Malinowski and an avowed functionalist, is theoretically preoccupied in these essays with debating the diffusionists, and particularly advocates of the two-strata theory of Polynesian society. In order to highlight the difference in approach he offers a suppositional account of emergent political institutions:

It has been suggested on the basis of the "two strata" theory that the original Polynesians were politically not so highly organized as the subsequent immigrants who brought with them the elaborate forms of chieftainship which we find in Polynesia to-day; that their social organization was characterized by "democracy," by clan organization, and by the absence of highly developed political authority. And it has been held that the neo-Polynesians brought with them political institutions, court etiquette, dynastic traditions, social ceremonialism and caste—in fact the most important features which went to make up the highly developed forms of Polynesian chieftainship. As against this, could we show a possible method by which the elaborate forms of political organization might have developed out of the more simple type of social structure?

Let us imagine a band of original navigators or castaways arriving in Polynesia, and let us assume that these people were organized . . . into small extended family groupings. We might then give the following general account of their subsequent history: As the population increased, new joint families were formed by a process of fission which we know took place regularly in the case of expanding family groups. But it seems unlikely that over any large

area such as Hawaii, Samoa or the Society Islands, there ever existed a scattered population of autonomous family groups. Whether through sheer economic need, arising from the pressure of population on food-supply, through a struggle for the best, most fertile and most easily cultivated lands, or through the growth of inter-group rivalry, there was a tendency for some groups to become dominant over others. For this purpose alliances were formed, both for the acquisition of dominion and for the throwing off of authority. Correlated with this, there arose a greater centralization of authority; the headman became first a chief and then a head-chief, sometimes making a bid for dominion over the whole area. In pre-European times such ambitious projects were generally unsuccessful in the large island groups, since the extension of authority and domination brought with it counter-tendencies of rebellion, opposition and rivalry.

Corresponding with the extension of authority, a number of other cultural features arose. The respect regularly paid to the head of the extended family group became developed into elaborate systems of etiquette and taboo surrounding the chiefs; the ordinary recognition of genealogical descent, succession and inheritance, prolonged through the generations, merged the progenitors of the chiefly families with the ancestor-gods themselves, and these two factors led to the beliefs and practices subsumed under the general title of the sanctity of chieftainship [Williamson and Piddington 1939:206-207].

True to his mentor's theoretical predilections, Piddington assumes that these various forms arose to satisfy "social needs," although just what the dynamics involved are is never made clear. In his analysis of political institutions, Piddington concentrates on classifying functions and the factors associated with promoting stability and change. Chiefs are considered to have served three types of function, classified as (1) economic, (2) social, ceremonial, and magico-religious, and (3) political. For each set of functions, advantages and disadvantages are discussed for the people as well as the chiefs in terms of human needs, requirements, and satisfactions. This balance of interests led, according to Piddington, to a system of unstable equilibrium, in which the interests of

the parties sometimes conflicted and sometimes coincided. Another set of factors, labeled "traditional," is seen as contributing to institutional stability. These refer to "all the culturally standardized forces which served to maintain the stability and permanence of chieftainship, the social framework of continuous tradition within which the various human interests found expression" (1939:217). Piddington admits that characterizing chieftainship as merely a balance of interests maintained by powerful traditional factors would not account for either local variation or historical change. To allow for such explanations an additional set of variables is postulated, including geographical and demographic circumstances, individual variations in role performance, institutional efflorescence within particular societies, and diffusion. These same sets of variables are analyzed in relation to Polynesian religion and material culture as well as social organization.

It is important to note that both Williamson and Piddington were primarily concerned with arriving at generalizations about principles underlying the operation and development of Polynesian social systems. They used empirical evidence to identify critical features of institutional arrangement and attempted to define the processes that lay behind socio-cultural developments in the region. Neither attempted to systematically categorize types of social structure or to order the societies involved on a developmental scale.

IV

A limited, but nevertheless notable attempt to classify Polynesian social systems and account for variations was Burrows' paper on "Breed and Border in Polynesia," which was published during the same year as *Essays in Polynesian Ethnology* (1939). Burrows held that alignments of breed (kinship based groupings) and border (territorially based groupings) had fairly regular distributions. Coincidence of breed and border (i.e., territorially contained kinship groupings) was found either in marginal regions or in atolls with a comparatively small population. Intermingling of breed and border (i.e., groupings based partially on kinship, partially on territorial principles) appeared in two

separate areas, one western and the other farther east, between which stretched a continuous line of islands where breed and border either coincided or were aligned in unique intermediate fashions. Two isolated regions also had intermediate alignments peculiar to themselves. This situation suggested to Burrows that coincidence of breed and border was the earlier alignment, and that intermingling developed later. "Similarities within the two areas of intermingled breed and border can be most readily explained by diffusion," he maintained. "Yet the role of purely local dynamic factors is emphasized . . . by the variations in detail that give each region a pattern in some respects unique" (p. 18). Burrows concludes that:

Progressive encroachment of border over breed seems to have been the rule in Polynesia. As territorial units grew larger and stronger, kinship grouping became simpler or vaguer; for in both areas of intermingled breed and border, complex ramified kinship grouping was either absent, or the larger groups were vague in conception and limited in function [pp. 20-21].

He postulates several processes as favoring change in this direction, including intermarriage, adoption, migration, and "perhaps most powerful of all—warfare arising from rivalry over land or ambition for enhanced status" (p. 21).

Incidentally, Burrows is the only scholar discussed in this paper who did primary fieldwork in Polynesia.

V

The issues were essentially left dormant for nearly twenty years, until the late 1950s when Marshall Sahlins and Irving Goldman reopened the controversy. Sahlins' study explicitly aims at explaining social stratification in Polynesia from an evolutionary point of view. In *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (1958), Sahlins reviews and systematizes data on fourteen Polynesian societies with the purpose of establishing a stratification gradient and correlating it to "techno-environmental" differences. In considering traditional social structure, Sahlins focuses upon two features of stratification: degree and form. Degree can be estimated, according to Sahlins, on structural and/or functional

grounds. The major structural criterion is socially recognized categories of rank, while functional criteria include economic, socio-political and ceremonial privilege and power. He admits that "the ethnographic accounts of Polynesian cultures do not treat social ranking according to the criteria we have outlined" (p. 5), and in lieu of the hiatus details the considerations taken into account in making necessary inferences. The result is a four level classification. The form of stratification systems, like degree, is examined by Sahlins from the viewpoint of adaptive variation. He distinguishes three types: the "ramage system," which is based on "internally ranked, segmentary unilineal kin groups acting also as political units" (pp. xi-xii); the "descent-line system," which is characterized by "discrete, localized common descent groups organized into territorial political entities" (p. xii); and atoll social systems characterized by "complex organizations of interlocking social groups different from both ramage and descent-line structure" (p. xii).

Consistent with his emphasis on "techno-environmental" adaptation, Sahlins concentrates his attention on systems of production, circulation, and consumption of goods. Chiefs are seen as pre-eminently directors of production, as central agents in large-scale redistributions of food and other goods, and as privileged consumers. They are also imbued with sacred powers and exercise political prerogatives, but these are clearly derivative, in Sahlins' scheme, from their economic roles. Ultimately, then, stratification is traced to productivity and the size of redistributive networks. Particularistic history is dismissed as an irrelevant variable, or relegated to a determinant of "nonadaptive survivals." Forms of stratification, as well as degree, are accounted for by Sahlins as alternative solutions to the problems of distributing surplus production. Thus ramified systems are postulated to be a response to familial specialization of production of surplus strategic goods, which in turn is a predictable reaction to spatial distributions of rich resource zones too scattered to be exploited by a single household, or where the range of crops is so large as to preclude effective exploitation by a single household. Descent-line systems are presumed to be a response to spatial distributions of rich

resource zones clustered in a small area, or to a small range of crops.

In considering Sahlins' scheme, one is apt to be struck by the scientific elegance of it all. Theoretical premises are neatly spelled out, definitions and conceptual operations are explicit and apparently consistent, and a huge quantity of data is reduced to a well-articulated model. An impressive feat, to be sure, but for persons familiar with the data nagging doubts, and in some instances a sense of scholastic indignation, is apt to be an accompanying response. For just how possible is it to classify ecological zones, particularly on the high islands, into scattered and nucleated; how neatly can "ramage systems" be differentiated from "descent-line systems" in pre-contact societies, and how clearly can the boundaries of redistributive networks be distinguished? Surely the credibility of available sources must be stretched beyond reasonable limits to make such judgments. In many instances it is possible to reverse Sahlins' judgments for given societies on crucial measurements, as Finney (1966), Freeman (1961, 1964), and others have done. In some instances there is good reason to doubt the very existence of the social forms Sahlins' theoretical model purports to explain. But even if he is granted the correctness of his interpretations and inferences concerning aboriginal social forms, there is considerable room for criticism, for when one really comes down to the substantive data as presented by Sahlins, it becomes clear that most of the evidence on stratification can be accounted for by the single factor of population size, without regard to productivity or technoenvironmental adaptation. To the degree that this is in fact the case, his argument is reduced to insignificance.³

VI

While Sahlins' study was awaiting publication, Irving Goldman published an article entitled "Status Rivalry and Cultural Evolution in Polynesia" (1955) in which he proposed an evolutionary scheme that hinged upon the proposition that status rivalry was particularly acute in Polynesian societies. "In one way or another," he maintained, "the history of every Polynesian society has been affected by status rivalry, and under

the proper conditions the effects of this rivalry have been felt in every vital center of the culture" (p. 680). He proposed a sequence of three historical phases labeled "Traditional," "Open," and "Stratified;" the "Traditional" represented early stages of Polynesian cultural development, the "Open" transitional conditions, and the "Stratified" culminating phases. Each phase was identified by characteristic forms of authority, property, kinship, position of women, sexual practices, infanticide, mourning, warfare, priesthood, dieties, afterlife, sorcery, and omens. In several subsequent papers Goldman elaborated his thesis, but for the most part his propositions were not taken very seriously by Polynesian specialists. They were certainly not given the same level of attention paid to Sahlins' thesis. As Hawthorne and Belshaw pointed out in a critical evaluation of Goldman's formulation (1957:18-35), the scheme amounts to a "thinly-veiled monism" in which a cultural constant, status rivalry, is used to account for variability. Other criticisms were that Goldman had been haphazard in his treatment of the ethnographic data—that he had selected material to support his thesis while ignoring contrary evidence—and that his argument was basically circular. Finally, Sahlins, in a footnote included in his monograph, criticized Goldman for his methods, and poses a devastating question:

what is "status rivalry" but the operation of a particular kind of political system, the functioning of a specific structure? Status rivalry is not some disembodied value or an attribute of the Polynesian psyche, it is a social relation characteristic of a given political system. It is the political system that produces rivalry, not vice versa. Goldman is only dealing in tautology [p. 131].

With the publication of *Ancient Polynesian Society* Goldman can no longer be dismissed by specialists in the area. But he will not get his kudos where he seems to want them most, for as an evolutionary theory his scheme remains patchy and unconvincing. Rather, the strength of his book lies in the politically dynamic view he provides of traditional Polynesian societies. Whereas Sahlins presents a picture of societies building from the ground up, Goldman provides a view from the top, of societies

being molded by the political maneuvering of their aristocracies. The views are more complementary than antagonistic.

Goldman identifies his method as a version of Eggan's controlled comparisons, but admits that his approach may prove unsatisfactory to "the truly zealous generalist." His study began, he informs us, as an inquiry into the sociology of elementary aristocracies, and only later turned into an "evolutionary" account. Given the acuity, indeed often the brilliance, of his socio-political analysis, and the unimpressiveness of his evolutionary arguments, this admission is particularly revealing. One gains the impression of sound scholarship needlessly diverted by a pet idea; that by emphasizing the evolutionary significance of his contribution Goldman has been betting on the wrong theoretical horses. From the time he initiates a discussion of "The Elementary Ideas of Aristocracy," the reader becomes aware that there is more here than a simple-minded scheme.

The substantive part of *Ancient Polynesian Society* consists of three segments. First is a chapter on "Principles of Status" in which Goldman discusses the concepts of "status" and "status system" theoretically, and outlines the bases for status in Polynesian societies. This is followed by separate chapters on eighteen Polynesian societies. The final segment includes summary-interpretive chapters on "The Status Lineage," "Principles of Kinship," "The Economics of Status," "The Rituals of Status," and "Status and Evolution." A set of ten appendices present data on "Settlement Dates," "Historical Relationships from Linguistics," "Standard Terms of High Honor," "Standard Terms of Low Honor," "Standard Terms of Consanguinity," "Distributions of Standard Kinship Terms," "The Cross Relationships," "Ecological Character," "Basic Kinship Patterns in Western Polynesia," and "Basic Kinship Patterns in Eastern Polynesia."

In his discussion of status and status systems, Goldman rejects static conceptualizations in favor of dynamic ones. The real question, he tells us, does not focus on status as a source of internal order, but on how different categorizations affect the organization and development of the social order. A distinction between ascribed and

achieved status is too simplistic, he asserts, for even hereditary rank is in practice not a single factor but is linked with and dependent upon a variety of other status conditions which are not necessarily ascribed. His preference is for a definition of status in terms of a scale of worth. This leads to a view of status that is "real" (i.e., "founded in the interests and intentions, whether conscious or unconscious, of people") as opposed to "teleological" (i.e., explanations that seek "to identify the contributions of patterned relationships toward ultimate personal ends"). Among the most characteristic social interests are those of valuing, of defining the self in relation to others, and of reacting to the social valuations of others. Goldman thus sees societies' members as actively shaping social systems and the rules governing behavior, rather than as reactors to circumstances, as he makes explicit in the following paragraph.

The interests in valuing, in formulating hierarchical relations, in defining, asserting, defending, and in improvising upon the themes of personal and group identities are real and substantially explicit. Insofar as anyone can know anything precisely, chiefs, for example, have a precise understanding of their position, of the rules governing their position, of where they stand in the scale of worth, and of how they must behave in that scale. The same can be said, perhaps less precisely, about people in relation to kinsmen and in relation to all others in economy and in ritual [p. 6].

By "status system" Goldman refers to "the principles that define worth and more specifically honor, that establish the scales of personal and group value, that relate position or role to privileges and obligations, that allocate respects, and that codify respect behavior" (p. 7).

He then goes on to explain his particular interest in Polynesian social systems:

In Polynesia, it is the status system—specifically, the principles of aristocracy—that gives direction to the social structure as a whole. Principles of status dominate all other principles of social organization. Here, then, in this part of the world, and in this type of social system, the variety of principles that in sum represent a social structure are seen to greatest ad-

vantage from the perspective of the special principles of social status [p. 7].

There follows a description of the principles upon which status is founded in Polynesian societies: *Mana*, *Tohunga* (expertise), *Toa* (military prowess), Seniority, and Sanctity of the Male Line. Discussions of prerogatives of status, varieties of status systems in Polynesia, and status rivalry conclude the chapter. The image that emerges is of politically vital social systems—of systems manifesting “a dialectical relationship between power as personal and power as social.” Power is the key concept. As Goldman points out, “power over people in Polynesia is . . . both a prerogative of status and its measure” (p. 18). It is the ways in which basic principles and prerogatives of status combine and modify one another that give rise to the evolutionary types of “Traditional,” “Open,” and “Stratified Societies”:

In the first, which I call “Traditional,” seniority is central. As the source of *mana* and sanctity, senior descent establishes rank and allocates authority and power in an orderly manner. The Traditional is essentially a religious system headed by a sacred chief and given stability by a religiously sanctioned gradation of worth. In the second system, which I call “Open,” seniority has been modified to allow military and political effectiveness to govern status and political control. The Open system is more strongly military and political than religious, and stability in it must be maintained more directly by the exercise of secular powers. In the Open, status differences are no longer regularly graded but tend to be sharply defined. Finally, the third system, which I call “Stratified,” is characterized by clearcut breaks in status that are far-reaching in their impact upon everyday life. In the Stratified system, status differences are economic and political. High ranks hold the rule and possess the land titles; the commoners are subjects and are landless. The Stratified represents a synthesis of Traditional and Open, combining respect and reverence for hereditary rank via seniority with necessary concessions to political and economic power. The system seems to have been an outcome of the intense status rivalry so characteristic of the Open societies. In effect, chiefs in the Stratified system had succeeded in consolidating their authority and had emerged therefore far stronger

than chiefs in the Traditional and in the Open systems [pp. 20-21].

To most Polynesian specialists, such a classification of political structuring will make reasonable sense. Most will also be attracted to a view of Polynesian societies that emphasizes political maneuvering and the quest for power and honor, for Polynesian societies are, first and foremost, political societies. Most will probably also accept Goldman's assertion that status rivalry is particularly acute in Polynesian societies. But I think most will feel, as I do, that an evolutionary scheme that places such a considerable emphasis on the motives of an elite is unsatisfying. It is one thing to assert, and even to demonstrate, that social systems are structured in large measure by the principles of status and status rivalry; it is quite another to demonstrate a regular evolutionary sequence. For an evolutionary scheme to be satisfactory, one expects a reasonably clear delineation of the mechanisms by which one type is transformed into another, and Goldman does not really succeed in specifying these. Even though status rivalry may be the dominant motive to change, and this is an acceptable proposition, we would want to know under what conditions it waxes, under what conditions it wanes. Goldman's approach is to take each case separately, to seek out historical episodes, to rely on particularistic explanations. This makes for a good approach to socio-cultural change, but to label it “evolutionary” is to argue a non-issue.

In his discussion of social groupings, Goldman grants the utility of viewing descent groups as derivative from rules of affiliation or rules for subdividing kin groups, and acknowledges the value of examining the way in which these principles functionally allocate rights and responsibilities, but he regards descent in Polynesia as primarily concerned with honor. All other components are subordinate to this focal concept. In Polynesia, Goldman insists, “descent is not really a *means* to status, it is the *heart* of status” (p. 419, author's emphasis). Rather than attempting to classify Polynesian descent groups as “nonunilinear,” “multilinear,” etc., which miss the central point in Goldman's view, a more precise designation would be to consider them as “status lineages.”

The status lineage in Polynesia differs from the broader class of "conventional" lineages in the lack of exogamy and in its lack of full commitment to either male or female descent lines. Or, to state the difference positively, the conventional lineages hold to categorical rules of exclusion and of affiliation; the Polynesian status lineages, to flexible rules. Polynesian flexibility, as we have seen, is primarily political, and it is for political reasons that the status lineage is so highly variable an organization. How vital are exogamy and categorical unilinear descent to the concept of lineage? Are Polynesian descent groups a subclass of lineages despite these deficiencies? The answer to both questions can only be that the decisive trait of a lineage is the concept of a known line of descent from a founding ancestor. Sex-line descent is only one of several linear principles of relationship to a founding ancestor, and exogamy is one of several ways by which one linear group can be set off from another. Seen from the perspective of categorical sex-line descent, the status lineage seems to be somewhere between unilateral and bilateral. To evaluate the proper significance of this intermediate position, we must remind ourselves again that all descent is finally bilateral. All unilateral systems may be readily visualized as modifications of basic and inescapable bilaterality [sic] [pp. 422-423].

A special feature of status lineages is that even within specific societies, criteria of descent differ in accordance with genealogical rank. Among high chiefs, "unilinearity" authenticates rank and authority, whereas among commoners, whose central concerns are utilitarian rather than honorific, bilaterality is the rule. In the Stratified societies, according to Goldman, "only the upper ranks can be said to belong to a lineage organization at all. Commoners are part of both a political organization and part of small kindreds" (p. 424).

Chiefs are concerned with descent in order to establish their own affiliation honorably to an honorable descent line so as to authenticate their *mana* and authority; they are likewise concerned with affiliating to themselves people who will contribute to their power. Commoners' interests, on the other hand, are best served by affiliating politically to rising chiefs and those who offer the best conditions of service. Gold-

man thus sees descent principles as part of a set of options by which individuals can structure their affiliations; the way in which they utilize these options is patterned by their differential political concerns.

Many will no doubt quibble with Goldman's label of "status lineage," but few will be able to deny that he has raised issues that are central to a resolution of the "problem" of descent group structure in Polynesia.

Goldman also approaches principles of kinship from the standpoint of the ways they are structured by the status system, but with much less satisfactory results. Polynesian kinship systems are readily understood, he asserts, as "paired or reciprocal relationships, each of which is defined by some metaphor that conveys ideas of honor and worth" (p. 448). Since Polynesia is spared exogamous groupings and prescriptive marriage, societies within the area enjoy "logistical freedom" to develop categories around their central interest, namely, honor. Thus we find that even in the realm of kinship, Goldman conceives of structure as arising from human motives, or to be more precise, he sees cultural forms in Polynesia as primarily resultant from the cumulative decisions of chiefs engaged strategically and tactically in a continual game of honor and power. Even in the realm of kinship, "the calculus of gains and losses operates relentlessly" (p. 459).

This emphasis on kinship as metaphor is pushed to its limits by Goldman's efforts to interpret kinship terms by breaking them down to their etymological roots and relating the roots to their status implications. For example:

In western Polynesia the contrast between senior and junior evokes a different image [from Eastern Polynesia]. The senior is often *ta'okete*, a term compounded of *ta'o*, meaning "under pressure," "under restraint," "weighing down," "keeping a secret," and of *kete*, or "abdomen." The term suggests the Melanesian idea (cf. Malinowski 1929) of magic stored in the abdomen, referring as it does to a force held weightily in check within the body. The reciprocal term for junior remains the same. The contrast is thus . . . between a strong force and that which is weak [pp. 460-461].

From Goldman's perspective, kinship variability is not to be explained as derivative

from a general model (e.g., Omaha, Crow, Hawaiian, etc.), but historically derived from a particular genetic stock. In Polynesia, the two dominant principles are dualism (particularly sex differentiation) and seniority. These principles are essentially competitive; dualism is qualitative and categorical, while seniority is quantitative and relative. Dualism without seniority relates to narrowly familial or domestic status; seniority without dualism "offers the freest and most expansive statement of kinship statuses," while dualism plus seniority allows for the most formal and rigid organization of kinship statuses. Goldman makes his preference for rational-cognitive explanation explicit when he states, "evidence for high variability of the dualism-seniority pattern, particularly in Western Polynesia, points unmistakably to acts of choice" (p. 468).

On the question of relating kinship terminology to behavior, Goldman takes a rather extreme anti-functional viewpoint. Function does not demand terminology, he asserts; rather, it is terminology that demands a function. Although he acknowledges that a variety of powerful circumstances affect terminology, in the final analysis it is the logic of the classification itself that he sees as the ruling factor. And since the classification is fundamentally a denotation system for honor, respect and worth in Goldman's view, it is primarily sensitive to changes in concepts of status.

The discussion of kinship is less satisfactory than the treatment of other topics because, as the author acknowledges, kinship is less firmly integrated with the public status system (as distinct from the domestic status system) than descent group formation, economic exchange, or ritual. One senses a great deal of strain in Goldman's search for regularities and explanation. His etymological gropings are reminiscent of nineteenth century pseudo-science. But then Goldman's game is not really to account for social and cultural forms by reference to a limited set of interrelated mechanisms (i.e., a consistent, parsimonious, mechanical model); in fact, he explicitly eschews general models. Rather, his *modus operandi* is to interpret variations and consistencies in terms of his assumptions about status. Cases are used to illustrate the centrality of a single mechanism—status rivalry—instead of

mechanisms being used to explain the data. Despite the resultant patchiness of the results, Goldman at least provides a compelling case for not ignoring the influence of status systems on kinship, and this is certainly an offense that many have committed.

One of the more fascinating aspects of Polynesian society is that island clusters like Hawaii, the Societies, and Tonga developed such elaborate political systems on such a rudimentary economic base. This surely must have been one of the attractions of the culture area for an anti-functionalalist like Goldman. "Since Polynesian societies can be similar in basic culture whether they occupy atolls or high islands, relatively rich habitats or barren islands," he maintains, "they cannot be regarded as having been molded by their different material environments" (p. 487). Again, the causal emphasis is upon the play of historical chance and human intentions. From his perspective, then, growth in political centralism does not stem from the organizational imperatives of modes of production, as the cultural materialists would have it, but from the status ambitions of chiefs, and more particularly in Polynesia, from wars of conquest.

The character of Polynesian economies stems, in Goldman's view, from the forms of aristocracy in the area. It is not that commerce, i.e., utilitarian exchange, was ignored, but it was subordinated "to a greater interest in ritual circulation of goods." All Polynesian economies are to be considered, in fact, as aristocratic economies. Production, circulation, and consumption serve to measure, allocate, and validate honor. Thus, in those societies where the status of chiefs was comparatively high, the economy was slanted toward the honorific; where lower ranks dominated, the bias shifted toward the utilitarian. From the standpoint of aristocracy, participation in a cycle of economic exchanges is neither the source of status nor a test of status, but rather the prerogative and documentation of status. In a more general sense, as Goldman succinctly puts it, "Exchanges are the code through which status information is communicated" (p. 496).

An emphasis on cultural forms as communications about status also features prominently in Goldman's analysis of ritual. Predictably he concentrates attention on

rituals of rank, i.e., rituals that authenticate position by defining it as sacred, that transpose it out of the realm of the literal into the metaphoric. Metaphoric dominance has as its counterpart metaphoric deference, and it is the interplay between these polar ritual forms that the author sees as the underlying dynamic. More specifically, he sees rituals of ascendance—deference as “coded communications by which the members of a community test the tonus of the status system. Ascendence ritual asserts the quality of status and deference ritual acknowledges it” (p. 519).

In his concluding chapter on “Status and Evolution,” Goldman attempts to clarify his understanding of evolutionary processes in Polynesia. “The growth of the political community,” he asserts, “represents the fulfillment of chiefly ambitions and of Polynesian status ideals” (p. 542). But while he interprets the evidence as revealing that status systems are constantly involved in change and conservation, he stops short of considering it a “cause.” Instead of offering a model of causation, Goldman describes a general direction and offers a loosely defined set of principles that he sees as involved in social transitions. Some of his propositions are useful and provocative, and worthy of attention, but if this is “evolutionism” it is a particularly weak, indeed trivial, form. Throughout the book Goldman looks for solutions to puzzles in particularistic history. Why he is so intent on passing himself off as an evolutionist is a mystery.

Even for those who are kindly disposed to Goldman's perspective, *Ancient Polynesian Society* can prove to be an irritating and frustrating book, for among some brilliant insights there are incredible lapses in scholarship and perplexing distortions. If Sahlins is guilty of making rash or convenient judgments to fit the data to his model, Goldman's offenses are far more flagrant. He exercises almost none of the caution that was the hallmark of Williamson's work, and frequently accepts at face value data that few Polynesian specialists would take seriously. Furthermore he commits innumerable errors in his citations, misspells names, and generally shows a lack of concern for accuracy. To top it all off, one of his own publications is mis-cited in the bibliography! For a manuscript that was com-

pleted in 1966 and published in 1970, this is inexcusable.

VII

Where then have we come this past half-century? Does the two thousand or so printed pages reviewed here represent any real progress in understanding traditional Polynesian social systems or are we simply building more and more elaborate illusions? To some extent, of course, the answer depends on the amount of faith one has in the sources. I, for one, have little, but I am also somewhat reluctant to totally dismiss the work of my colleagues. Upon serious reflection I have decided that the efforts have in fact been worthwhile. Perhaps this is because I have recently come to question the over-emphasis we sometimes put on arriving at convergent solutions to ethnographic puzzles, in emulation of the physical sciences. I have come to believe that in social anthropology our goal ought not to be one of arriving at ultimate or “true” solutions, but of generating a set of theoretical and methodological lenses through which we can examine socio-cultural materials. Each set would yield its own type of understandings, and would provide focus to certain kinds of relationships while others, equally valid but of less immediate interest, would be allowed to slip from view. Such a vision is based on the premise that we should not merely replace old questions with new ones, but should accumulate a broader repertoire. Diversity in anthropology may turn out to be as enriching to mankind as diversity in the cultures we study.

Given this perspective we have indeed learned much over the past decades from building castles in the sandy soil of Polynesian ethnography. Whereas Williamson provided a careful evaluation of the fragmentary materials, and thereby provided a basis for interpretation, he was reluctant to plunge into the arena of theoretical interpretation. He played an important role, nevertheless, by demonstrating that the materials could be worked with; he also suggested the possibility of functional analysis and showed the limitations of diffusion and migration theories then in vogue as a means of accounting for social stratification in Polynesia. Piddington took Williamson's ma-

terials further, moving to the level of a general functional analysis. From Piddington we get an idea of how various institutions might have worked, how they may have interrelated and what kinds of needs they might have served. He provides us with a repertoire of possibilities, defined at a general level, without providing clear focus to one or the other. If the analysis of Polynesian social systems is traced from the diffusionists through Williamson to Piddington, one cannot help but be struck by a sense of progress. The overall thrust is from explanations based on a few *ad hoc* speculations to an interrelated set of principles that can be used for more consistent explanatory forms. However Piddington did not offer, as such, a systematic theory to account for the diversity of social forms in Polynesia. Sahlins did. He showed how certain social forms could have developed and diversified on the basis of a limited set of propositions. In doing so, he forced us to focus our lenses on the relationship between ecological features, modes of production, distribution and consumption, and social institutions. Even though he is probably wrong about important particulars, and though the theory as it stands is clearly inadequate, Sahlins has provided us with a definite perspective from which to attack issues of central importance to an understanding of Polynesian social institutions. Goldman has now provided an alternative lens, one that focuses upon the role of chiefs in generating institutional arrangements. Although Goldman's approach lacks the theoretical sophistication of Sahlins' multilinear evolution—indeed, it is problematic whether it ought to be called "a theory" at all—he deals with a much wider net of relationships and in the end provides a much richer, more dynamic perspective of how Polynesian societies may have developed, functioned, and changed. The key to Goldman's contribution is the distinction he draws between the cultural concerns of high chiefs and persons of lower rank. He persuasively argues that the former were primarily concerned with matters of honor, power, and prestige, while the latter were preoccupied with the pragmatics of making a living. These differential concerns are presumed to lend different shape to social, economic, and ritual life. We are made aware that in most Polynesian societies there were

at least two games going on simultaneously: one ceremonial and chiefly in which honor and status were the stakes, the other secular and utilitarian. One comes to see the utter inadequacy of discussing the economics, descent group structure, and religion of the Maori, Hawaiians, etc., without clearly differentiating between these two strata. Reciprocity between chiefs is *not* the same as reciprocity between commoners, chiefly descent groups are *not* formed by the same principles as among commoners, and the religion of chiefs has a different cosmology and set of ritual observances. It is amazing how many ethnographic puzzles are simplified by this rather obvious but infrequently made distinction.

Although both Sahlins and Goldman are primarily concerned with accounting for variability within the culture area, an additional gain from their analyses is the potential they provide for interpreting particular societies. Owing to the poverty of information there is much to argue about the facts themselves, let alone to interpret their social significance. Both authors engage in a series of "what if" proposals, but though the results may not be compelling, they are provocative and will surely be a stimulant to further research. If nothing else, archaeologists have now been provided with a richer set of competing possibilities concerning social change around which to orient their efforts, and if they do their job well we may yet accumulate sufficient data to produce compelling reconstructions. Perhaps beneath the sand lie enough ethnographic coral chips for a sound architecture.

NOTES

¹ A notable exception, of course, is Tikopia, which has been so thoroughly described by Raymond Firth.

² As a means of restricting the scope of his efforts within manageable boundaries, Williamson chose to exclude Hawaii and New Zealand, and to focus on islands nearer to the equator; hence the designation of "Central Polynesia."

³ See Orans (1966) on this point.

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