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## REFLECTIONS ON HISTORY IN POLYNESIA

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I would like, in this paper, to reflect on some key issues of history in Polynesian studies. Historical approaches in anthropology have come into vogue again after a hiatus during which functional, structural and cognitive studies predominated. The new historiographies have brought with them new problems and dilemmas which I will try to identify and comment upon. I would particularly like to draw attention to issues of discourse, that is, the language — including underlying assumptions — in which historical approaches have been embedded.

Anthropological history began in Polynesia with attempts to reconstruct the great migrations that resulted in the settlement of the island archipelagos. Diffusionism focused on the artefacts and customs that were the presumed residues of an inferred history. In this context 'history' was synonymous with sailing from one island base to another. Humans were largely omitted, except as conveyors of material culture, language and customs.

The main competitor to diffusionism was evolutionism. Humans were also generally omitted from evolutionary accounts, which attempted to explain the varying levels of political and economic development evident in Polynesian cultures at the time of European intrusion. For evolutionists, 'history' was equivalent to 'processes of development' that were stimulated or constrained by ecological conditions. The forces that drove development were essentially

impersonal, although human actors were sometimes given a role in promoting movement from stage to stage. For example, in Irving Goldman's account (1970), specific Polynesian chiefs are credited with conquests and political activity that brought about changes of scale. But they are portrayed by Goldman as players in a cultural game motivated by status rivalry rather than as flesh-and-blood human beings absorbed in historical events. To be fair to Goldman — fairer than Nicholas Thomas was in his critical essay *Out of time: history and evolution in anthropological discourse* (1989) — he was not claiming to write history, and contributed much to our current understanding of political development in Polynesian societies. Evolutionism is, of course, alive and well in Polynesia, informing much of the archaeological work currently being done. Kirch summarizes the accomplishments of this approach in his book *The evolution of Polynesian chiefdoms* (1984).

In the 1930s anthropologists such as Felix Keesing and Ernest Beaglehole initiated studies of 'culture change' in Polynesia. These were premised on a reconstructed base-line culture that had been altered by European intrusion. History began with the European explorers who, along with missionaries, traders, beachcombers and colonists, set off a chain of causation that led to the transformation, and sometimes 'breakdown', of so-called 'traditional' cultures. A key concept in culture change accounts was 'acculturation', which originally was defined as a two-way process of exchange between interacting cultures, but in practice almost always referred to ways in which dominant Western cultures changed subordinated non-Western cultures. The documentation that supported such studies was generally compiled from European-centred accounts — from the records of missionaries, colonial administrators and the like.

While culture change studies continued into the post-World War II era, they took a back seat to accounts inspired by functional, cognitive

and symbolic anthropology. Raymond Firth's functional studies of Tikopia were an inspiration to Polynesianists, and set an exceptionally high standard for fieldwork. Kinship, political systems, land tenure and economic organization became focal points for investigation. In these accounts history was sometimes ignored, sometimes included as background to a particular institution. But it was marginalized at best and, when included, played a similar role to the role of history in culture change studies. That is, it performed the task of providing a logical transition from reconstructed 'traditional' forms to the forms being described by contemporary ethnographers.

An implicit goal of many functional-cognitive-symbolic accounts was to dispel some of the stereotypic misconceptions in the earlier literature and in Euro-American public culture. Polynesians had been excessively romanticized on the one hand and disparaged on the other. Images of natural humanity and noble savagery were mixed with notions of irresponsibility and laziness to compose a cartoon of Polynesian personhood. Ethnographic accounts by anthropologists from the 1960s onwards have done much to refute these stereotypes, but I sometimes wonder if we have not generated new stereotypes in place of the ones we have dispelled. I have the feeling that we have created a new standardized image of Polynesian personhood: more sophisticated and superficially more benign, but every bit as stereotyped. These new caricatures will only begin to unravel, I believe, when we approach Polynesian societies as historically-dynamic systems, with real actors doing important things in real time. Only then will appreciation of the complexity of persons-in-situations replace the facile generalizations that embed these new stereotypes.

In 1959 Raymond Firth introduced a new approach to history in Polynesia. Visiting Tikopia after an absence of twenty-three years, he documented the changes that had occurred, interviewed previous informants and reconstructed events that had transformed Tikopia in

the interim (Firth 1959). This was a new kind of history in several respects: it was relatively short term; change was calculated from a well-documented account of the earlier culture; the people who participated in historical events were clearly identifiable and large as life; and, of considerable significance, most of the data were provided by the Tikopia themselves. European accounts were used but were clearly secondary.

At the time, Firth's restudy of Tikopia was seen by anthropologists more as a unique opportunity than as a revival of anthropological interest in history. Not until the early 1980s, when Marshall Sahlins (1981) and Greg Dening (1980) published their studies, on Hawaii and the Marquesas respectively, did history again come into vogue in Polynesian anthropology. Informed by structural and symbolic frameworks, Sahlins and Dening focused on early encounters between Europeans and Polynesians. Unlike most previous accounts — those in the culture change genre, for example — they paid almost as much attention to the culture of the European intruders as to the culture of the Polynesians affected. In this respect Sahlins's and Dening's work marked a major step forward, but their studies were limited in scope. In some ways, by confining themselves to the period of 'conjunction' (in Sahlins's phrasing), their projects had more in common with reconstructions of pre-European Polynesian societies than with post-contact historical accounts familiar to historians.

By drawing attention to the cultural background of European intruders, Sahlins and Dening have raised a number of issues of focal concern for historical scholars in Polynesia. The language used in historical documents, for example, now becomes a matter of problematic concern. As Borofsky and I have noted in our chapter 'The early contact period' in *Developments in Polynesian ethnology* (1989), the characterization as 'theft' by European explorers of attempts by Polynesians to appropriate shipboard goods is heavily

loaded with cultural assumptions. Documents, therefore, need to be read with a wary eye for both European and Polynesian cultural agendas.

Parallel to a growing interest in early contact history has been a revitalization of reconstructionist projects. Douglas Oliver's *Ancient Tahitian society* (1974) and Valerio Valeri's work on Hawaii (1985) are two outstanding, though drastically different, examples. Perhaps even more important is the work being done by a new breed of archaeologists who are integrating historical accounts with studies of environmental transformation, historical legends, and changes in material culture and language. Their work promises to provide a sense of Polynesian real-time history prior to European intrusion, replacing notions of relatively fixed 'traditional' cultures or sequential evolutionary stages. As the collaboration of Kirch and Sahlins (1992) on the Anahulu Valley project in Hawaii clearly demonstrates, the early post-contact period provides some unique opportunities for archaeologists and cultural anthropologists to work together.

The period following early contact, and particularly the colonial era in the Pacific, has also caught the attention of contemporary anthropologists. Many of us are now competing directly with Pacific historians in a quest to understand the political economies that resulted from colonization. Documentation for this period is extremely rich, thanks to the colonial powers' compulsiveness for keeping written records. But the documentation is strongly biased in favour of European administrators' values and concerns. It inevitably reveals far more about the culture of colonialism than it does about subjected peoples. If we are to write credible histories of Polynesian societies during the colonial period, however, we have to do more than take European biases into account. We have to do something to compensate for the silencing of Polynesian voices. In my opinion, one

of the best ways to do this is through biography, and by assisting and encouraging Polynesian elders to record their own autobiographies.

I have recently completed a biography of a remarkable Rotuman man by the name of Wilson Inia. He was trained as a school teacher and became a leader who served as a bridge into the modern era. He started the Rotuma High School and was responsible for training a whole generation of individuals who went on to become teachers, ministers, doctors and government officials. Without compensation, he nurtured the Rotuman Co-operative Association into the most successful co-operative venture in Fiji. In his later years he was elected Rotuma's first senator to the Fiji Legislature and served with distinction from 1970 until his death in 1983.

What I found when researching Inia's biography was that although his record of accomplishments was known to most Rotumans he was not seen by them as a figure of historical significance. Nor was he a historical figure to the British colonialists. He had often proved an irritation to them by defying their authority, and they were content to bury him in their voluminous files.

What I came to realize through this research was that in some very important respects Rotumans, along with many other peoples who were colonial subjects, have been deprived of their history. The colonial powers, Great Britain among them, had little interest in glorifying indigenous individuals, especially any who defied their authority. 'History' in colonial schools was mainly European history, and only a few indigenous individuals — usually rulers or warriors — were ever identified, mostly for the roles they played in abetting or thwarting the dominant society's agenda. Rarely are they represented as flesh-and-blood human beings; their biographies, if known at all, are more often than not superficial and shallow. Virtually without representation are those individuals, like Wilson Inia, who —

unobtrusively from the viewpoint of their colonial masters — led their people into new social, economic and political territory.

It is no wonder, then, that the only histories available to ex-colonial peoples are so often short on biography. But history without biography is cold and impersonal; it fails to provide the substance for empathetic identification. It lacks the immediacy needed to make a people's history their own, to make history personally meaningful. Heroes — historical models who exemplify the virtues of particular cultural traditions — are a vital part of every group's sense of themselves. I have written Wilson Inia's biography in order to identify such a hero for the Rotuman people, in the hope that it will help to awaken their concern for their history.

#### IN SEARCH OF POLYNESIANS' HISTORY

All of the approaches to history I have discussed so far have been from a Western perspective, embedded in forms of discourse that emphasize chronological sequencing, cause and effect, developmental stages, and the like. Events and processes with pronounced political or economic effects are routinely privileged. But what of the ways Polynesians 'do history'? What forms do their discourses take? Were their traditional approaches to the past 'historical' in our sense? Are their current perspectives different from ours?

Some forms of traditional Polynesian knowledge, especially legends, were widely presumed by European scholars to be historical discourse as we know it. Many early commentators treated legends as essentially accurate oral accounts of 'real events', slightly embellished with metaphors and colourful exaggerations. Their assumption was that Polynesian story-tellers were repositories of time-chronicled events that were important to each group — that they were 'doing history' in our sense. Some current scholars take a similar view and attempt to date accurately legendary events. But more recently there

has been a good deal of debate in the anthropological literature about the historical veracity of Polynesian legends. Personally I am somewhat sceptical. As I have stated elsewhere when discussing Rotuman legends (Howard 1985), Polynesian story-telling appears to be couched in strong semiotic codes in which sequencing plays an important part. The structuring of legends thus seems to be less oriented to chronicling history than to documenting recurrent cultural truisms. In other words, Polynesian myths and legends seem to be forms of discourse designed to explicate cultural logic. I have no doubt that real historical events are often incorporated into legendary accounts, but I do not believe the assumptions underlying Polynesian legendary discourse are of the same order as those underlying Western histories, written or oral.

Genealogies probably come closer to historical discourse as we know it. They are ordered chronologically and often significant events are attached to various personages. They may be mythicized to a greater or lesser degree as they recede in time and, to the extent that they provide legitimacy to authority, are politically manipulated; but these are processes familiar to Western historiography as well.

In an effort to learn more about historical discourse in Polynesia I recently embarked on a project to discover how contemporary Rotumans 'did history' I purposely chose a sample of educated individuals initially, thinking they would be sensitive to contrasts between Western and Rotuman approaches. I was shocked to discover that although they were all familiar with history as a subject taught in school (which included British history, the history of Australia and New Zealand and, in some instances, the history of Fiji), none had thought about Rotuma's past within a historical framework. When I asked which events in the past they regarded as especially important, I drew blanks. If I suggested events I knew to be important, they would usually agree, but it was apparent they had not thought about

them in historical terms. When I asked about people whom they admired, or who had done the most for Rotuma, they invariably named a close relative or near ancestor, never an unrelated individual who, from an outsider's point of view, had been a historical figure.

These interviews gave me the clue that I needed. For Rotumans, history is embedded in family lines, not in the polity as a whole. My informants' responses reflected the fact that personal identity is still much more strongly attached to kin groups and locality than it is to Rotuma as a whole, or to the expanded Rotuman community. This helps to explain why genealogies remain the closest approximation to Western historical discourse in many Polynesian communities. Genealogies are, in essence, family histories, which coincidentally at times are also political histories.

Once this realization took hold, it was much easier to identify forms of discourse that encoded information about past events. Most of the forms require some previous knowledge of persons and events; familiarity is assumed and so much of the potential narrative is not made explicit. The cryptic nature of these oral accounts is one reason it is so easy for an outsider to miss their historical essence. Some examples of the tropes that encode history are:

### 1. Family jokes (*te samuga*)

These comprise jokes about families that usually refer to a humorous event involving an ancestor. They are usually condensed to a single word (for example, biscuit, button) or a short phrase, and are known by nearly everyone. For example, the descendants of one man are known as 'shake hands with the mirror', in reference to his reaction when he was first shown a mirror by European visitors.

### 2. Sayings

Some sayings encode prototypical events that serve as commentary on current affairs; for example, *fak se Michael* refers to a story about

a district officer who, in a fit of rage, threw hot water on a man who had been a faithful servant. The saying is used as a commentary on someone who turns on loyal supporters.

### 3. Place names

Place names carry with them stories and associations that are well known to people in a specific locality. Who owns a particular piece of land, who claims rights to it, disputes associated with it, social dramas played out on it are all embedded in the name of the land.

### 4. Chiefly titles

As with place names, titles are cultural shorthand for encoding ancestral persona, wars and conflicts, triumphs and tragedies. Titles are located within particular districts and families and as such are circumscribed rather than general to the Rotuman community at large.

So, in contrast to Western historical formats, which are oriented towards providing readers or listeners with information they are presumed not to know, these Rotuman tropes assume a listener's prior knowledge. They aim at recall — at directing a listener's attention to the relevance of their knowledge to a contemporary context. If a listener is uninformed he must ask knowledgeable kin or a friend in private of the associations involved. Only rarely will the historical knowledge embedded in these codes be made explicit in public arenas.

Still another trope for encoding history is songs which are composed to honour specific events such as weddings, funerals, the Methodist Conference, when important guests visit, and so on. These songs are often sung in conjunction with *tau maka* (group dances), but they are also composed by individual singers in modern formats. They are composed as commentary on current events rather than as records for future reference. Most songs are therefore ephemeral,

relating to the current context and later forgotten, although some survive in people's memories and thus have historical significance.

I am well aware that in other contexts educated Polynesians have joined academic discourse concerning their history. Some have taken radical stands disparaging all Western scholarship. They argue that only persons with 'Polynesian blood' are entitled to produce representations of Polynesian culture or narrate Polynesian history. Usually this is stated in more parochial terms; for example, only people with Hawaiian blood or Maori blood are entitled to write about Hawaiian or Maori culture and history. They argue that we have demeaned them in our characterizations and have undermined their political power in the face of Euro-American domination and oppression.

While such arguments deserve a hearing, and are based on serious grievances, I find them unacceptable. For one thing, I have a strong aversion to the racial premises underlying such pronouncements. Any attempt to legitimize or de-legitimize scholarship on the basis of race or ethnicity should not be tolerated. It is through a multiplicity of views that we are most likely to gain a satisfactory appreciation for the human experience in general. Likewise, it is through a multiplicity of views that we are most likely to do justice to the full richness of any single group's humanity.

What would be a step forward for anthropology, however, would be to broaden the scope of our discourse so that it is more accessible to, and appropriate for, the people we study. I am, therefore, extremely sympathetic to the efforts of Polynesian scholars like Albert Wendt from Samoa, Epeli Hau'ofa from Tonga, and Vilsoni Hereniko from Rotuma. They have incorporated Polynesian tropes into their writings — humour, mythical imagery, redundancy — lending to their work an insider's subjectivity that enriches everyone's understanding of the Polynesian experience. To treat such

writings as somehow less scholarly, because they may not conform to current academic standards of discourse, would be a grave injustice. In other words, I am arguing for inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. For too long academic anthropologists have overvalued esoteric discourse designed to prove their intellectual superiority. We have correspondingly undervalued communication that is clear, straightforward and accessible to a public that includes the subjects we study.

#### HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Finally, I wish to address a form of history that is being thrust upon us by changes in the way we do fieldwork. In the past, anthropologists would usually go into the field, spend a year or so there, then return to their home society, and that was it. Return trips were rare, and 'the ethnographic present' was represented in writing as an experience frozen in time. Today, however, many anthropologists stay on location for much longer periods, or return to their field sites over and over again, year after year. They come to see history in the making and gain a very different perspective from their predecessors, whose ethnographies were based on single visits. The more time we spend in the communities that we study, the more blurred the distinction between 'us' and 'them' becomes. The notion of 'the other' as the subject of anthropological investigation and discourse comes to make less and less sense. Ultimately we come to realize there is no other, only *us*.

I did my first fieldwork with Rotumans from 1959–1961 and did not return for twenty-six years. During the interim my field notes constituted for me an ethnographic present devoid of history. But in the period between 1987 and 1991 I returned every year to Rotuma for field sessions lasting from a few weeks to six months. So I not only have a thirty-year perspective on recent Rotuman history, I have

been seeing history unfold before my eyes. Each time I go back I gain deeper insights into ongoing disputes, shifting alliances, and political and economic manœuvring by individuals I have seen in many guises.

Modern technology also has contributed to a constant flow of news and gossip being accessible to the anthropologist. In addition to letters, I now get periodic faxes from my Rotuman friends in Fiji. I talk regularly, in person and on the telephone, with Rotumans — including some who live in Europe — who relate the latest news from home. Other important sources of ethnographic data are the Fiji newspapers. One can find articles about Rotuma ranging from results of cricket matches to political upheavals. So there is no ethnographic present any more, only perpetual change and ongoing process; only history in the making. And the anthropologist often becomes an integral part of that history.

Being witness to, and a participant in, history creates new ethical problems for anthropologists. When analysing the colonial period, or earlier forms of European intrusion such as missionization, we have felt perfectly justified in mercilessly criticizing Europeans who had abused power in pursuit of their own self-interests. In the struggles between Europeans and Pacific Islanders our sympathies have been unabashedly with the latter. Europeans had the power; Pacific Islanders were powerless. We were the oppressors; they were the victims.

I believe we have pushed that particular imagery too far, sometimes portraying Polynesians as though they had no agendas of their own, as if they were only passive reactors to European initiators. But the point I want to make here is that in the post-colonial period power abuses continue. We are now confronted with instances in which Pacific Islanders in positions of authority abuse power in pursuit of political or economic gain. How do we deal with such

occurrences? Should we report them with the same ruthless candour we have used to expose power abuses by Europeans? Or are we to fall back to a position of moral relativism that justifies tyrannical behaviour on the grounds that it is acceptable within Pacific cultures? Just what kind of 'history' should we be doing?

I wish to stick my neck out here and make my own bias clear. In my opinion we have more to lose, both as anthropologists and human beings, by accepting extreme forms of moral relativism than by adopting a universalistic approach, albeit a culturally sensitive one, to power and its abuse. I think the time has come for anthropologists to muster the courage to confront tyranny in no uncertain terms, at every level, and regardless of the ethnicity of its perpetrators. Such an approach will no doubt involve risks. It may mean being denied access to field sites. It may mean getting politically involved despite attempts to avoid it. But it will result in more credible accounts and, hopefully, more social justice, than ignoring such goings on.

To conclude, I believe that anthropologists can no longer avoid paying attention to historical processes, whether analysing earlier cultures in the Pacific or recent ones. The only question is what kind of history we should be doing. We can be timid, falling back on comfortable stereotypes and glossing over rough edges. Or we can confront the worst as well as the best head on, in the manner of good investigative reporting. I suggest that in the long run we will provide a greater service to anthropology, to the Pacific peoples and to humanity if we have the courage to opt for the latter.

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