The Force of Ethnology

Origins and Significance of the Melanesia/Polynesia Division

by Nicholas Thomas

The distinction between Melanesian and Polynesian cultural types has been extensively criticized in recent years, but in a limited empirical way which has concentrated upon the stereotypes of Melanesian egalitarian societies with big men and Polynesian centralized chiefdoms presented in Sahlin's influential 1963 article, "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief." The critique has established that social forms were more diverse than these categories could acknowledge but neglected the ideological character of the distinction and its long history in earlier European representations of social diversity in the Pacific. The perception of regional social variation in evolutionary terms appears to have persisted through various substantial changes in interpretation and intellectual value judgements. Discredited ethnological typifications of peoples and societies seem to live on in the use of the labels "Melanesia" and "Polynesia" in contemporary anthropology and Pacific studies.

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"Ethnology" seems to be dead. Neither professional social scientists nor dedicated amateurs work hard at noting the diagnostic features of "cultures" or clarifying their boundaries. There are no longer articles that map out at once differences in material culture and frizzy hair, that would separate people according to their use of the loom or the bow or mark some off because of what they did not use or possess. Culture is no longer the residue of prior movement.

Once grand "histories" of ancestral migrations have been set aside, ethnography takes place within localities and seasonal cycles and can be made to speak to general anthropological problems. The overt concerns of ethnography are usually confined within sites of fieldwork, and the anthropological project is to bring particular facts into a relationship with a "theoretical" issue, such as the nature of ritual or inequality. However, the languages of analysis and sets of issues are often defined by regional specialists, and this must derive partly from the fact that the societies in whatever area they study have something in common, even if merely an imposed colonial history, that influences the way groups and appropriate questions are recognized. There must thus be some basis, in actuality or perception, for the constitution of what might be called a culture area, but it is notable that there is virtually no discussion now of what regions are, of what status they are supposed to have as entities in anthropological talk. The relationships between proximate societies, the causes of a degree of similarity or dissimilarity, and the distinctiveness of certain regions are discredited ethnological questions. Anthropology thus moves between the local and the theoretical and somehow slips across the problems of definition which derive from the time and space of prehistory. The banishment of conjectural prehistory and ethnology on the part of a systematizing anthropology raises a variety of questions, but my interest here is restricted to the extent to which ethnological concepts actually have been extracted from the repertoire of anthropological ideas.

A critical point which has been insisted upon with peculiar force in Pacific studies in recent years has been the unhelpfulness and even falsity of the distinction between the major ethnic and cultural regions of Melanesia and Polynesia. The opposition, which created separate frames for the discussions of regional specialists and provided a textbook contrast for theories of political evolution, has been attacked not only by anthropologists but also by historians, archaeologists, and linguists [e.g., Hau'ofa 1975; Douglas 1979; Pawley 1981; Friedman 1981, 1985; Guatt 1981; Spriggs 1984:222; Thomas 1986:1–2; Keesing n.d.]. Even the author of a best-selling travel book has noted that the dichotomy was in many ways simplistic and overdrawn [Wright 1986:20–21]. Although the basis of the critique in overlapping social variation and prehistoric unity appears to have been widely accepted, the recognition that these regions ought not to be seen as discrete domains has borne little fruit at the level of integrated analysis. The implication is that old-fashioned ethnological distinctions are more

1 A number of discussions with Margaret Jolly about European representations of the Pacific were very helpful. I would also like to thank the staff of the Cambridge University Library (especially the rare book section) for their assistance.
tenacious than overt contemporary argument would allow: this leads me to explore the earlier history of classifications of Pacific societies and raises the question of the extent to which anthropological paradigms have in fact disposed of the discredited evolutionism which gave rise to ethnological discriminations in the first place.

Sahlins and His Critics

The implicit or explicit reference point for most of the critiques just mentioned is Sahlins’s 1963 paper, “Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia,” which has been extensively reproduced and used in undergraduate teaching. Although now dated in its style of political anthropology, it must remain one of the most widely read essays in that field and in Pacific studies. The central feature of the argument was an opposition between the competitive and egalitarian political systems of Melanesia and the stratified chiefdoms of Polynesia. These social forms were associated with two leadership types, the big-man, who acquired influence through factional politics and the manipulation of reciprocal exchange relations, and the chief, whose position derived from rank at birth. The words which summed up the difference were thus “achievement” and “ascription”: “The political geometry in Polynesia is pyramidal. Local groups of the order of self-governing Melanesian communities appear in Polynesia as subdivisions of a more inclusive political body [p. 287]. . . . the qualities of command that had to reside in men in Melanesia, that had to be personally demonstrated in order to attract loyal followers, were in Polynesia socially assigned to office and rank” [p. 295].

Sahlins was frank about the evolutionary link he envisaged between the two types: there was “an upward west-to-east slope in political development,” and Polynesia represented an evolutionary “advance” [p. 286] over Melanesia. His interest in both forms was partly in the features which created “ceilings” or “shortcomings,” that is, the factors which prevented political transformation from moving beyond a certain stage. The argument recognizably emerged from an interest in “cultural” evolution which perceived development essentially in linear terms.

The intellectual concerns of anthropologists have been transformed since the “Poor Man, Rich Man” article was written, and there has been relatively little interest in refining any integrated view of Pacific evolution [the main exception is Friedman 1981]. The racist implications of the evolutionary separation of Melanesia and Polynesia have been attacked by some writers [Hau’ofa 1975, Guiart 1981], but—precisely because Sahlins so effectively synthesized general theoretical propositions with particular claims about real social variation—most critics have concentrated upon refuting or qualifying the stereotypes.

As Hau’ofa [1981:291] has pointed out, the anthropologists who wrote generally on Melanesian societies, including Sahlins, often acknowledged that the “big-man” leadership type was not found throughout the region but implied that the cases at odds with the model were merely marginal exceptions or “aberrations” [cf. Sahlins 1963:286 n. 2]. Even if discussion is confined to variation on the axis of ascription and hereditary rank versus achievement and big-manship, it is clear that this view is unacceptable because it so radically understates the incidence of chieftainship. Hau’ofa suggested that this derived partly from an overemphasis on the New Guinea highland societies which had been so extensively researched: the generalization of what had been established as the “big-man” stereotype led ethnographers to overlook or distort the evidence for hierarchy and for distinct types of authority [p. 292].

Even if mainland Papua New Guinea is concentrated upon, the evidence for some form of chieftainship is widespread, especially in the Papuan gulf [see Hau’ofa 1981:291 for references]. In the highlands, supposedly a core area for what were seen as “entrepreneurial” and generally egalitarian systems, some societies apparently at one time possessed more rigid hierarchies. In the Hagen area, certain men were apparently prominent because of their control over the exchange of pearl-shell valuables, the more fluid inequality of the post–World War II period deriving from the European importation of shell and the transformation of exchange networks [A. Strathern 1971:108; Feli 1987]. Other writers have pointed out that missionary activity and pacification, among other facets of colonial history, definitely diminished the positions of a variety of indigenous leaders in many parts of the western Pacific [Douglas 1979:5; Hau’ofa 1981:292; Keesing 1985:237].

Hierarchical structures and various forms of “ascribed” leadership are extensively documented for so-called seaboard Melanesia: the Trobriand case is of course renowned from Malinowski’s description and has been the subject of reinterpretation [Brunton 1975]. Chieftainship certainly also existed in several parts of the western and southeastern Solomons [Somerville 1897, Ivens 1927], in various parts of Vanuatu [notably Malakula and Aneityum] [Deacon 1934, Geddie 1852], in most of New Caledonia [Guiart 1963; Douglas 1979:16–19], and throughout Fiji [Thomas 1986], which, however, has been regarded as an extension of Polynesia [e.g., Chowning 1979:67]. The argument for Melanesian diversity had a Polynesian counterpart: although chieftainship did exist in virtually all Polynesian societies, in some areas rank had a fluid character and titles were competed for rather than ascribed [Douglas 1979:19, 25]. Linnekin [1985:209–16] has also argued that the pursuit of status in the “traditionalist” communities on the margins of modern Hawaiian society resembles the entrepreneurial activities of Melanesian big-men, but of course the significance of this point for aboriginal Polynesian politics is indirect.

This attack upon Sahlins’s model thus had a rather limited and empirical character [cf. Jolly 1987:171]. It stressed mainly that the ideal types simply did not capture real variation; more particularly, Douglas [1979] suggested that there was a need to separate rank, power,
and authority and that the dynamic interplay between ascription and achievement needed to be studied more closely in a range of societies. She set out a range of variables (such as the "extent of stratification") but did not attempt to formulate any larger-scale model or theory of Pacific social evolution. From the viewpoint of empirical social analysis, the value of this revision and specification could hardly be questioned, but the confinement of the criticism to the issue of actual social diversity meant that any more fundamental theoretical or ideological implications of the equality-hierarchy and achievement-ascription dichotomies remained implicit and virtually undiscussed. Moreover, the self-contained character of Sahlin's narrative of the first voyages made reference to earlier classifications and descriptions of Pacific societies unnecessary. It was as though the regional distinctions and their social correlates had no particular connotations or prior history but were simply the products of a modern anthropological exposition. This is in fact very far from being true, and the volume of what might be called "proto-anthropological" writing directly or indirectly concerned with contrasts between the western and eastern Pacific and their social meaning is considerable. The question of the influence of this earlier discourse demands scrutiny, especially with regard to the permeation of contemporary anthropological and historical scholarship by implicit metaphors and constructs of social difference.

Encountering Difference: The Cook Voyages and Forster's Observations

A very large number of ethnographic observations and descriptions of indigenous peoples of various parts of the Pacific derive from explorers' and traders' voyages, and systematic ideas about cultural or "racial" differences across Oceania emerged from a few key texts before 1800. The voyages of Captain Cook were of great importance in the formation of representations of Oceanic peoples, for two reasons in particular: first, contact was made with a wide range of native peoples in Polynesia, Melanesia, Australia, and insular Southeast Asia, and second, various scientists and intellectuals participated who were trained and disposed to describe and speculate about the "varieties of the Human Species" among other matters and whose publications became influential. Brief or fleeting encounters with the inhabitants of many islands were complemented by protracted visits to places such as Tahiti, Hawaii, and Tonga, where the visitors became acquainted with chiefs and to some extent with local political intricacies.

Notice was of course made of language, and it was quickly recognized that Easter Islanders, Hawaiians, New Zealand Maori, Tahitians, Marquesans, and Tongans spoke what were evidently dialects or related languages. The similarity of the words for numbers alone made this clear [Joseph Banks in Beaglehole 1962:35–37]. Contact with unrelated groups on the Pacific rim such as the people of the American Northwest Coast and Kamchatka reinforced the sense of the underlying homogeneity of what was later to be called the Polynesian population. The recognition of this grouping and its distinction from the people of the western Pacific emerged especially from the second voyage (1772–75), when Kanaky [New Caledonia] and parts of northern Vanuatu, as well as many Polynesian islands, were visited. Many specific observations and interpretations were offered by men such as Banks (on the first voyage), Cook himself, and various other officers, but rather than pursuing the variations and complexities here I focus upon the view developed in Johann Reinhold Forster's wide-ranging "Remarks on the Human Species in the South-Sea Isles," which occupies almost 400 pages of his Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World (1778). The suggestion had been made earlier that the inhabitants of parts such as New Britain and New Ireland were "Negroes" (e.g., Hawkesworth 1773:599). Since the people of the east were not so considered, a distinction developed (1778:228):

We chiefly observed two great varieties of people in the South Seas; the one more fair, well-limbed, athletic, of a fine size, and a kind benevolent temper; the other blacker, the hair just beginning to become crisp, the body more slender and low, and their temper, if possible more brisk, though somewhat mistrustful. The first race inhabits O-Tahiti, and the Society Isles, the Marquesas, the Friendly Isles [Tonga], Easter Island, and New Zealand. The second race peoples New-Caledonia, Tanna and the New Hebrides, especially Malickalo [Malakula].

The racial distinction was paralleled by a whole series of contrasts: whereas Marquesans among others in the east were "really amiable," the people of Tanna and New Caledonia were hostile and generally mistrustful of strangers, while Polynesian women were beautiful, those of Tanna and Malakula were "ill-favoured" and even said to be "ugly and deformed" partly because they were "obliged to act the part of packhorses, in carrying provisions for their indolent husbands, and to do all the most laborious drudgery in the plantations" [pp. 235–42]. Since the contribution of Polynesian women to work generally, and particularly to garden work, appeared to be lighter, a correlation emerged between physique, social organization, and the status of women, which in the more rudimentary and primitive societies seemed manifestly lower.

One of the most important contrasts was postulated between the civilized and hierarchical character of the Tahitians and their neighbours as opposed to the tribal, localized, and "debased" character of the society of the other race. The picture became complicated because

2. See Beaglehole (1955–57) for Cook's journals, as well as numerous supplementary papers including the journals of other officers. The meticulous editions are complemented by other works such as Hoare's (1982) edition of Forster's journal and Joppien and Smith's (1983–87) superb presentation of the paintings and illustrations, many of substantial ethnographic interest.
Forster attempted to associate diversity with environmental factors (and his book was a significant antecedent of certain geographic theories): "the inhabitants of the islands in the South Seas, though unconnected with highly civilized nations, are more improved in every respect, as they live more and more distant from the poles. . . . their population is greater, their society better regulated . . . their manners more courteous, elegant and even refined. . . . On the contrary, the wretched mortals towards the frozen zone, are the most debased of human beings" [p. 286]. Here the opposition was partly between the people of Tierra del Fuego or Australia and those of the central Pacific, but since such as the Tahitians and Tongans best represented the positive characteristics, Forster's theory animated the difference between the two principal "races" as well as that between the inhabitants of different latitudes. It is ironic that the peoples of this great region should have stimulated an early attempt at a systematic or adaptive explanation of social difference, since the obsession in the 19th century and to a lesser extent since has of course been the migrations and links with higher Asiatic civilizations of the Polynesians and (in some quarters) the imagined African origins of Melanesian people [e.g., Fornander 1878–80, Thomson 1908].

Dumont d'Urville: Defining Oceanic Races

The distinctions between the darker race in the west and the peoples related to the Tahitians and Tongans were sustained and elaborated upon in publications associated with other voyages [e.g., Wilson 1799:1xxx–lxxxv], but the ethnological distinctions as understood in the 20th century were not clearly defined until the 1830s. The general term "the South Seas" was extensively used in the 19th century and even now retains some currency, mainly in travel writing rather than scholarship, and usage has always been erratic—as in the application of the term "Polynesian" to indentured labourers from the Solomons Islands and Vanuatu in the late 19th and early 20th centuries [Spate 1947]. However, the boundaries of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia as they have been understood in modern anthropology, geography, and related disciplines were set out by the navigator Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville in an article in the Bulletin de la Société de Géographie in 1832. A map was published with the essay which represented the divisions very much as they are now perceived—the Polynesian "triangle" included Hawaii, New Zealand, Easter Island, and the islands of the central Pacific, Micronesia included Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands), the Marshalls, the Marianas, and so on, but did not extend as far west as the Philippines, the boundary between Polynesia and Melanesia was drawn between Tonga and Fiji, and the only significant difference from subsequent conceptions was the inclusion in the latter region not only of New Caledonia, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, among others, but also of Australia.

Like the earlier writers, Dumont d'Urville stressed that the Polynesian region was inhabited by a distinct race, "a single great family whose members are spread across tremendous distances" [p. 4, translation mine]. There were not only physical similarities: "the language is everywhere exactly the same" [p. 4]—rather an overstatement. The Polynesians were slaves of the tapu "superstition," kava drinkers, and notable for their developed arts, civilization, regular government, royal dynasties, castes, laws, etiquette, and organized religion [pp. 4–5]. Variation was acknowledged, but within the framework of the underlying family relationships [p. 8].

The political condition of the Samoans, of athletic physique, is virtually unknown, but the account of La Pérouse permits one to suppose that it closely resembles that of Tonga. The Marquesan form of government is closely connected with that of the Society Islands [i.e., Tahiti], but it is simpler and more patriarchal. . . . the inhabitants of the Low Islands, or [Tuamotus], to the east of Tahiti, stripped of institutions and dispersed in small tribes, live in a state little removed from that of the Melanesian tribes, and perhaps show the transition between the two races.

The Melanesians were characterized by their blackness, by their "hideous" women, by the great diversity of their languages, and by the attenuated character of their polities [p. 11].

These blacks are almost always grouped in very fragile tribes, the chiefs of which exercise arbitrary power, often in a manner as tyrannical as that of many petty African despots. More degraded towards the state of barbarism than the Polynesians or Micronesians, one encounters neither a form of government nor laws nor established religious ceremonies amongst them. All their institutions appear still to be in their infancy; their dispositions and intelligence are also generally inferior to those of the tan race.

Another point which had been mentioned occasionally by earlier writers was restated by Dumont d'Urville: unlike the hospitable Polynesians, the savage Melanesians

3. "une seule grande famille dont les membres se trouvent dispersés à des distances immenses les uns des autres." . . . "la langue est partout exactement la même."
4. "L'état politique des insulaires d'Hamoa [Samoas], aux formes athlétiques, est presque inconnu, mais la relation de Lapérouse donne lieu de penser qu'il se rapproche beaucoup de celui de Tonga. La forme du gouvernement aux îles Marquises a de grands rapports avec celui des îles de la Société, mais il est plus simple et plus patriarchal. . . . les habitants des îles Basses, ou Pomotou [Tuamotu], situées dans l’est de Taïti, dénués d'institutions et dispersés en petites peuplades, vivent dans un état peu différent de celui qui est propre aux tribus mélanesiennes, et offrent peut-être la transition entre les deux races."
5. "Ces noirs sont presque toujours réunis en peuplades très-faibles dont le chef jouit d'une autorité arbitraire et qu'il exerce souvent d'une manière aussi tyrannique que la plupart des petits despotes africains. Bien plus reculés vers l'état de la Barbarie que les Polynesiens et les Micronésiens, on ne trouve chez eux ni forme de gouvernement, ni lois, ni cérémonies religieuses régulièrement établies. Toutes leurs institutions paraissent être encore dans l'enfance; leur dispositions et leur intelligence sont aussi généralement bien inférieures à celles de la race cuivrée."
always met Europeans with defiance and hostility (pp. 11–12), for the Western writers there was thus a happy correspondence between the advancement of the different peoples and their sense of appropriate behaviour towards foreigners. As Hale (1846:73) added, “the difference of character in the three Oceanic races is most clearly displayed in the reception which they have given to their earliest civilized visiters.”

This scheme was drawn into English-language geography and anthropology through various channels, among the more significant of which were the publications associated with the United States Exploring Expedition to the Pacific of 1838–42 [Wilkes 1845, Hale 1846]. Hale acknowledged the work of “French voyagers and geographers” in mapping out Pacific migrations and ethnic divisions along lines very close to those of Dumont d’Urville [1846:3–8 and “Chart of Oceanic Migrations”]. Like the earlier writers, he approved of various characteristics of the Polynesians, such as their innovative “readiness to adopt new customs and new modes of thinking” [p. 13]. The paramount feature of Polynesian society, though, was not this flexibility but the degree of political organization, “4 grade of civilization nearly as high as their circumstances would permit,” which took the general form of divisions between chiefs, landholders, and common people [pp. 14, 29].

The crucial axis of difference was thus that between hierarchy or ordered government and less differentiated, more “tribal” organization. Nothing positive was said at this stage about social equality as opposed to Polynesian autocracy, as the emphasis was certainly on the negative features of the Melanesian “race.” The tenacious and profound character of this racist adjudication emerges particularly in Hale’s brave attempt to deal with the contrived and implausible boundary between western Polynesia and Fiji. The Fijians represented something of a paradox in that they seemed physically Melanesian yet had a “regular and artificial system of government” and were skilled in various crafts [p. 50]:

[The Fijians] are spoken of by all voyagers as savages, and uniformly treated as such, while the Polynesians are regarded rather as a semi-civilized race. Nor can there be any doubt that this distinction, so universally and involuntarily made, is a just one. Yet it is difficult to perceive, at the first view, the grounds on which it rests. . . .

The truth perhaps is, that the difference in character. . . lies not so much in any particular trait, as in a general debasement of the whole,—a lower grade of moral feeling, and a greater activity of the evil passions. . . .

The Feejeean may be said to differ from the Polynesian as the wolf from the dog, both, when wild, are perhaps equally fierce, but the ferocity of the one may be easily subdued, while that of the other is deep-seated and untameable.

This assertion that the more primitive type was possessed of a more distinctly savage character beneath the surface, a primitive nature which was fundamental yet invisible, amounts to a kind of essentialism which can now be recognized to be a crucial element of racist discourse, standing in direct opposition to notions of intrinsic human sameness and equivalent worth. This striking element of this text is, however, also highly misleading for the history of ideas, because it obscures an underlying continuity between these earlier Western representations of Oceanic social forms and the constructs of modern anthropologists.

Later Anthropological Constructs

The confusion emerges from shifts in anthropological attitudes and values. Polynesians were upheld by 19th-century writers because the women seemed attractive, because they had made a step or two closer to our own exalted state of civilization, and because they displayed some readiness to adopt a variety of Western goods and practices, which Melanesians conservatively and intrinsically resisted. Although still celebrated in popular (and especially tourist) culture, Polynesia came to seem of limited interest to anthropologists, presumably because the societies appeared to be heavily acculturated. In contrast, during the early decades of professional anthropology, and even after the Second World War, many authentic and traditional tribal societies were seemingly to be found in Melanesia. The relative interest of each region was not of course a matter which was explicitly discussed, but there is an enormous discrepancy between the intensity of ethnographic studies in Papua New Guinea, in particular, and the sporadic and isolated character of Polynesian research. This difference is not readily explicable on grounds such as the inaccessibility of one region compared with the other but presumably follows largely from some perception of the potential significance of work emerging from one area as opposed to the other. In fact it was the case that even by 1900 virtually all traditional Polynesian religions had been nominally replaced by Christianity, dislocation and administration had clearly had far-reaching effects upon village society, and, especially in the east, traditional rank structures and chieftainship had been obliterated by settler regimes [see, e.g., for Hawai‘i, Kent 1983]. The manifestly “non-traditional” character of 20th-century Polynesian societies placed them outside the category of small-scale tribal groups which formerly constituted the core objects of anthropological interest. It is no coincidence that widely discussed Polynesian studies [e.g., Sahlins 1985] have appeared only with the surge of interest in historical anthropology.

Apart from this recent upturn, the significance of Polynesia to the discipline in general has been marginal, while anthropologists are mostly less enthusiastic about the cultural and ideological commitments which led their 18th- and 19th-century predecessors to celebrate Polynesia.6 With regard to Melanesia, on the other hand,

6. Although the literature on canoe voyages [e.g., Finney 1979] perpetuates the “Vikings of the Sunrise” theme.
there had been a sharp value reversal. This was associated with a broad trend in anthropology, notable especially amongst humanistic and relativist writers such as Mauss, Malinowski, Mead, and many others since, to represent a tribal condition positively, as one which provides for an integrated, non-alienated life suffused by kinship bonds, solidarity, reciprocity, and gift giving. Melanesian societies exemplified these virtues, and some of the groups which became most widely known also appealed to liberal notions about sex equality and sexual freedom [Malinowski 1929, Mead 1935], although such ideals hardly matched most societies in the region. A strong element of moral approval is thus often expressed in anthropological studies of egalitarian Melanesian societies, both in classic ethnographies [Malinowski 1929:15] and in recent work.

For instance, in the introductory sections of her recent work on the Mendi, Lederman [1986] suggests that in general there are two forms of democracy, one involving the representation of interests which are assumed to be in conflict and another directed at establishing consensus on the basis of interests which are thought to be held in common. It is implied that state political processes in modern Western societies involve the former but not the latter, while community-based participant organizations may rely too much on the consensual model. However, the combination in Mendi of an ethic of individual autonomy with clan projects "in the common interest" creates a situation in which "diverging individual and factional interests are accommodated but not submerged by a common group policy." The Mendi are actually seen as resolving the Western political problem: "political action in Mendi and other Highland societies . . . provides an example of how these kinds of democratic process might be combined" [p. 27]. There is some ambiguity in what is expressed here, and at another point comparison with Western anarchistic or communal movements is implied [p. 4]. However, it is notable that the ideologically saturated equation between Melanesian actualities and Western ideals harks back to earlier identifications between egalitarian Pacific societies and America [e.g., Stewart 1832:170] as well as to Sahlin's comparison between big-men and capitalists under circumstances of equality of opportunity [1963:289].

The romanticism masks some confusion between modern Western egalitarian ideals and the forms of equality which may be taken to exist in small-scale societies [see Jolly 1987]. This is not to suggest that an attitude of empathy toward the people one studies is inappropriate [the reverse is rather the case]; nor do I wish to pursue the question of the extent to which such attitudes may have led to misconstruction of tribal societies as inversions of the negative features of our own. The point here is rather that positive character of these value judgements obscures a connection with the Melanesia/Polynesia division constructed by Dumont d'Urville, Hale, and their predecessors. The principle which organizes social diversity and makes it comprehensible in this general scheme is evolutionary; difference is recognized primarily on a scale between hierarchy or centralization, associated with hereditary leadership and a variety of more regularized institutions [such as a formal priesthood], and more local "patrarchal" authority, a kinship order rather than a polity, flexibility [which can be negatively represented as anarchy and disorder], and the absence of the distinctive features of the more developed or stratified Polynesian systems. Among the earlier writers, hierarchy was associated with institutions such as aristocracy, which were approved of, and the tribal condition was seen largely in terms of what was absent, while modern anthropology represents the less stratified condition as complex and organic and has until recently regarded "rank" as a feature of largely sociological [rather than cultural] interest. What has persisted through this partial inversion is the master trope for social differentiation of inequality and equality or centralization and dispersal.

This general principle reduces social difference almost to a quantitative form, a matter of "more" or "less" hierarchy, rather than a system of a distinctive sort. Local variations have always been acknowledged but equally have always been subordinated to a larger scheme postulating a continuum between egalitarian groups and proto-states such as Hawaii [see Thomas n.d.]. Pacific anthropology no longer appears to be heavily coloured by an evolutionary orientation, and there is in fact no longer a dominant belief that societies can be ordered on a linear scale, those lower down reflecting the earlier condition of those higher up. But although the notion of variation along such a continuum has largely been excised from explicit evolutionary argument, it persists as the basis for perceiving larger-scale social difference. The equation Melanesia:Polynesia: equality:hierarchy thus seems inescapable.

These crude categories have obstructed the understanding of aboriginal Pacific societies in a number of ways. They have obscured varieties of inequality and divergent social transformations which are not readily mapped onto the axis which links small-scale egalitarian systems to chiefly confederacies and states. By associating inequality with ascribed leadership and rank, they have diverted attention from local and domestic power asymmetries. As Jolly [1987:172] has stressed, "ethnographic studies of Melanesian politics in the late sixties and early seventies often used the term egalitarian without explanation and in so doing obscured both the facts of inequality among men and those between men and women." Focussed discussions of these inequalities have taken place only relatively recently [A. Strathern 1982; M. Strathern 1972, 1987]. More fundamental, the very association of "hierarchy" and "equality" with Polynesia and Melanesia sets up a series of tautologies whereby social features are "explained" through reference to the ethnic category to which a particular group belongs or sometimes to an intrusive influence of Polynesian or Melanesian culture. These identifications merely close off the questions they purport to resolve.

An example appears in the rhetorical play with these larger labels in Lindstrom's [1985] recent discussion of the significance of name transmission in Tannese cul-
culture (Vanuatu). He begins by referring to Sahlins’s discussions of Hawaiian kingship and “heroic history,” that is, the situation in which aristocratic acts are disproportionately significant and in which history and social life in general are closely identified with the divine ruler and royal action. In moving from this material to his own case, from Polynesia to Melanesia, Lindstrom suggests that “we depart the realm of Hero and enter the land of Everyman” (p. 27). The actual analysis of the significance of naming in social reproduction is informative, but the overall explanatory device turns simply on the fact that Melanesia is the opposite of Polynesia (p. 42):

On Tanna, Hero-King, genealogical descent, positional succession, and a division of labour in historical consciousness are supplanted by Everyman, nomination, positional replacement, and “historylessness.” In heroic society, social reproduction is made possible by various devices the most important of which is a distinction in social significance between the weighty acts of the elite and the invisibility of the unheroic. In panheroic society, where everyone’s being defines that of everyone else, reproduction proceeds by defining and constituting local groups and social personalities with naming rather than at birth. The problem, here, is not just to reproduce the singular cosmic-copy hero in order to maintain a system of right relations between categories, but to reproduce an entire Hall of Fame.

The expressive trope obscures differentiation within the Tannese population; there were, for example, asymmetries between men and women and between powerful sorcerers and other people which early accounts would suggest were hardly consequential [e.g., Turner 1861]. And [unless it is simply ironic] the idea of society’s being “panheroic” or constituting a “hall of fame” is absurd, since notions of heroism and fame are obviously meaningful only in opposition to their absence, to the ordinary and inconsequential. The general contrasts with Polynesia which are offered are thus merely tautological and suppress rather than illuminate the complexities of Tannese society.

A similar problem has been apparent in discussions of social variation within Fiji. Ever since anthropologists, historians, and administrators began to reflect on this matter, they have expressed difference in terms of the relative influence of Melanesian and Polynesian culture in different parts of the island group. The fact that central and eastern Fijian societies were centralized and markedly hierarchical was linked with Tongan influence, while the smaller-scale character of societies in the west (and particularly in the interior of the large island of Viti Levu) was attributed to their “Melanesian” character [e.g., Brewster 1922; Burns 1963:25; Clunie 1986:1; Routledge 1985:27; Durutalo 1985:34–35]. In fact Tongans did have a great deal of influence in the political confederations of eastern Fiji, and this is a matter of historical record rather than diffusionist speculation. Although there are certain similarities in material culture between western Fiji and New Caledonia, the “Melanesian” presence in Viti Levu is more hypothetical. The point, however, is that these labels and attributions disguise rather than explain the political systems of Fiji.

In unidimensional social evolutionary terms, eastern Fiji was “Polynesian” because it was more hierarchical than western Fiji, but such an identification obscures the fact that the actual features and dynamics of the centralized Fijian confederations were entirely different to those of, say, Tongan polities. A comparable “degree of stratification” masks distinctions between systems based on the manipulation of genealogies and exchange paths and [in Fiji] on the creation of relations of dominance through intervention in elite factional struggles in potentially subject places [see Thomas 1986 for extended analysis]. Likewise, the Samoan system has long been misrecognized in anthropological models because hierarchy did not correlate with centralization, this “unitary system of dispersed power” [Meleisea 1987:1, italics removed] was incompatible with essentially unilinear political typologies. On the other hand, the societies of the west and interior of Viti Levu have been regarded as “Melanesian” because of their “petty” chiefs, yet, as Scarr [1984:3] has noted, political processes in these societies were not comparable to what have been regarded as typical of Melanesia. These local complexities can only be explained through analyses which attempt to determine how particular societies operated, otherwise, understanding remains at the level of tautology apparent in the following: “there was a complex Polynesian-style political organization, with powerful chiefs, in eastern Viti Levu and a more democratic Melanesian-style arrangement on the western side of the island. This situation was probably a result of Fiji’s geographical situation [on the borderline between Melanesia and Polynesia] and the complex movements of people throughout the Pacific Ocean” [Freeman 1985:149].7

**Conclusion**

Anthropologists and others engaged in Pacific studies have persistently characterized particular social groups in Polynesia and Melanesia in terms of the presence or absence of some kind of centralization or hierarchy. Circularities develop such that “Polynesian” explicates “hierarchy” and vice versa, while the category of “Melanesian egalitarianism” has been defined in part simply in terms of the absence of “Polynesian” features such as chiefs and stratification. The overt racism of earlier adjudications has been suppressed, but the notion that Polynesians are more advanced culturally was still explicit in Sahlins’s 1963 article. The value judgements and particular features of these constructions have, of course, varied substantially in the 200 years since Euro-

7. Freeman’s thesis, however, provides the first extended systematic discussion of differences, especially in material culture, between western and eastern Fiji.
peans began to represent human and cultural variation in the Pacific, but the distinction has retained an "ethnological" character in the sense that dominant social attributes are above all features of regional "cultures" (which happen to correspond with apparent racial types). While a great deal of systematic analysis of particular societies has taken place, there is a larger level of characterization at which the identification of a society as "Polynesian" is meaningful. Because ethnological and evolutionary categories are compounded, political variation at the larger regional level has been recognized only in relation to a unidimensional continuum between localized egalitarianism and chiefdoms or proto-states. The exercise of characterization has thus collapsed into one of typology. Although much sophistication has emerged in ethnographic studies, this has somehow not been translated into a more subtle multilinear view of regional political forms. In this regard, the development of Western thought concerning Pacific societies appears to have been constrained by the categories of those who initiated it.

Comments

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18 VIII 88

Thomas argues that anthropological romanticism has boosted the evolutionist image of "Melanesian" societies, now seen as having an "integrated, non-alienated life suffused by kinship bonds, solidarity, reciprocity, and gift giving." However, as he notes elsewhere, this type of study has largely been superseded by a relativistic approach that aims at the ethnographically particular in societies of this region rather than at their uniform degree of civilised decentralisation and equality. At the same time, the relative cultural uniformity that is presumed for the Eastern Pacific has, in practice, been deemed anthropologically uninteresting and neglected. He considers this ethnographic approach best understood as a legitimate though analytically weak attempt to deconstruct the broader categories of Melanesia and Polynesia, but there is surely more to the matter than this. The approach has little applied to Polynesian societies and has inadvertently become established as a regional discourse on difference within Papua New Guinea to the exclusion of other Melanesian societies. Whereas studies in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji have probably not in fact diminished in numbers, those who do research in these areas have been somewhat marginalised, institutionally, by the trend in Pacific anthropology that has made Papua New Guinea studies its métier.

This is not at all to belittle either the findings or the scholarship of Papua New Guinea studies in social anthropology. It is, though, to raise the possibility that the deconstruction of the old "Melanesia" category that seems to have elicted this trend towards ethnic particularism and cultural contrast is in fact more apparent than real—or, at least, only partial. Thus, in playing down the possible significance of general cultural process and intergroup connections in the construction of particular ethnicities in Papua New Guinea, a general culture-area category similar to the old "Melanesia" apparently remains in force. This residual category designates the fragmentation and diversity of Papua New Guinea societies as quintessential, a fact which makes the sub-region both coherent and anthropologically interesting. This is in contrast to a now expanded and—supposedly—uniform "Polynesia." Such quintessential fragmentation was an explicit element of the old culture-area category; its diversity was an uninteresting correlate. In effect, the old region of Melanesia has shrunk for the new ethnographic trend, but its structurally irreducible diffuseness remains conceptually crucial.

What is disturbing in this context is not so much the paradoxical reproduction of the old general category in the new study of the culturally specific as the fact that the nature of linguistic pluralism and cultural diversity in Papua New Guinea cannot be posed as a research problem. It is fairly clear—given the converse historical tendency in the Eastern Pacific—that an indigenous desire for, if not thrust towards, particularity underlies distinctness in small-scale Melanesia and that the phenomenon's structural achievement is as much a function of general cultural process and of interethnic relations as it is of local conditions. Moreover, if this degree of ethnic singularity and diversity is only one possible outcome of a more basic process of sociocultural formation in Austronesia (the extreme opposite of which is the cultural uniformity of states and paramount chieftaincies in "offshore Melanesia" and "Polynesia"), then its investigation demands a coming together of all researchers in Pacific anthropology. This coming together would have to start from the rejection of the unrelatable regional essences of "Melanesia" and "Polynesia" (and now Papua New Guinea as well).

What also seems clear is that questions of broader Pacific interest such as this—and there are many more—have to become more determining, paradigmatically, if Austronesian social anthropology is to avoid professional introversion. It is a curious fact, highlighted by Thomas's essay, that the old general categories of "Melanesia" and "Polynesia" remain alive and active but no longer serve to generate a broad and serious discussion of Austronesian history and social structures based upon the pooling of particular studies.

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24 VIII 88

Thomas argues cogently that the old "culture-area" classifications that separate Polynesia and Melanesia are
less satisfactory today than they once were; that the history of the problem shows the variable but vested interests of the colonial cultures that first explored these areas; and, speaking more broadly, that the danger of radically refiguring the ethnology we once had is that we may unintentionally lose something of value, both in a historical sense and in terms of practical applications to contemporary anthropological problems. The "postmodern" transition from emphasizing what we know to developing questions about how we know it throughout the social sciences and the humanities is now most certainly under way in Pacific studies. The trait-counting and evolutionary anthropology that enlarged the focus on "culture-area" concepts is no longer de rigueur. Culture-area studies have given way to more specialized interests that nonetheless "can be made to speak to general anthropological problems." But does this mean that ethnology is really "dead"? Or has it just slipped into its own form of evolutionary change?

As the discipline struggles for/against sticking all of its appendages into the variously perceived holy water/tar pit of "postmodernism," it is important to recall what may unnecessarily be erased or left behind. In this context Thomas is quite right to point out the slippage of problems with changing perspectives in Pacific ethnology. His lament also fits [perhaps unintentionally] into a common reaction to the avant-garde of self-conscious science and related developments today—into "what the French are calling la mode rétro, the chilling world view in which the past, any past, has more appeal than the present and the future" (Marien 1988). There may be no room for such romantic nostalgia in solving Thomas's problem, however, and the great "undoings" of contemporary criticism may work to our advantage in the long run. We may swing back to the kind of regional and comparative interests he discusses, having passed through new dimensions for analysis, and therefore be better prepared not to reclaim the past but to refit it to current methods and concerns. Thomas seems to be prompting us to do that. His valuable point is that we cannot afford to lose all interest in that level of study. But he offers no concrete solutions and establishes no specific directions to follow in our salvage operation.

As for remaking the culture areas themselves, there is much to be said. Sahlin may have been the chief proponent of what is now found to be lopsided labeling in Polynesia and Melanesia. The usefulness of his political classifications [in the piece mentioned, his influential dissertation [1958], and elsewhere] can be challenged with some authority. But his recent work sets new challenges for Pacific studies along similar lines, and by no means can we claim that all of his early work has been undone. These early schemes were not just names for kinds of political systems. They were tied by argument to ecological margins and limits of exploitation in relation to social and political organization and are not so easily abandoned.

Furthermore, contrary to some conceits in area studies that need not be revived, analytic classifications may seem to come from nowhere [the muses are clever] but are always invented, not discovered—and they are not "magic windows" on the world. They can be tailored more or less to our shared experiences, of course, as Thomas says. If, for example, we smooth out what we agree is a disruptive overlap in "chieftiness" between Polynesia and Melanesia by lumping them under a new heading—call it "Macronesia" [and worry about its relation to "Micronesia" later]—it might solve the problem at one level, but it gives no privileged view. By itself it proves nothing in particular; it does nothing except sort our experience in more or less meaningful ways. And it is either useful or not. To the extent that it is not [e.g., fails to address Sahlin's ecological variables], it must be revised or discarded. There is nothing sacred about the process. The danger is carrying it out cavalierly: unless Wittgenstein was wrong, changing the language of our descriptions also changes the analytic game itself in important ways.

Thomas concludes that "thought concerning Pacific societies appears to have been constrained by the categories of those who initiated it." Perhaps he is just being polite. Given today's heightened awareness of the role of the observer in ethnographic work, this is about like saying that he suspects that the sun rises in the east—an unnecessary understatement in an otherwise productive argument.

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10 viii 88

Despite Thomas's assertions, some culture historians in Oceania remain interested in defining cultural boundaries "which derive from the time and space of prehistory" and attempt to use them in their analyses. Thus they may find aspects of Thomas's presentation puzzling, yet with much of what he has to say there will be agreement. Their writings have already addressed the inherited problems stemming from the use of a Melanesian/Polynesian contrast set which he poses, though perhaps not in quite the focused fashion of his discussion on Sahlin's attempt to outline the political evolution of the region, in which historical priority in developmental terms was assigned to the 19th-century situation of societies in Melanesia. For some decades now those concerned with historical processes in the region have found the outdated Oceanic divisions of Melanesia and Micronesia largely unhelpful in their analyses (Golson 1961; Green 1969:712; Pawley 1981:np. 46; Spriggs 1984; Terrell 1986a:195; 1986b:15-41). Still, as Thomas has recognised, some people continue to find that "the identification of a society as 'Polynesian' is meaningful," that it has a certain geographic, ethnological, biological, and linguistic salience (Green 1987). Our point would be the evolutionary one that for a long time there were other, continually shifting boundary contrasts. The one which sets off Polynesia has in fact developed only relatively recently. That case, moreover, simply marks the set of societies lumped under that rubric.
as an ancestrally related, isolated, and rather cohesive grouping that forms an extension of the more diverse sets of Oceanic societies in the geographic area to the west of it. Thus, as Pawley [1981:298] indicates, it is no longer possible to subscribe to the view “that there is one law for Polynesians and another for Melanesians.” In fact, many researchers examining Oceania’s cultural history would favour abandoning “Melanesia” as a category of any utility at all in matters of prehistory, biology, language, or ethology. As Allen [1984:410], following Sahlins [1972:209], notes, in respect to social and political matters associated with chiefly redistribution versus kinship-rank reciprocity, one is merely a highly organized form of the other, and “specialized tribal traders in Papua adopt forms of trade as complicated as many redistributive systems” [Allen 1984:451] such as obtain in areas of Polynesia. Thus in certain social and political aspects of culture a large group of anthropologists would wish to turn around the “evolutionary” sequence implied by Sahlins whereby egalitarian big-man systems develop into chiefly societies, beginning instead in the 2nd millennium B.C. with a set of weakly ranked and stratified societies throughout the Island Melanesian and Western Polynesian world [Bellwood 1978a:225; 1978b:52, 53; 1983:80; Pawley 1981:283–87, 1982; Hayden 1983; Best 1984:603–17; Kirch 1984:62–68; Cordy 1985:187 and n. 2; Lilley 1985; Lichtenberk 1986; Green 1986:52]. Over the course of time these societies throughout Oceania diversified in numerous ways, making the contrast set up by Sahlins rather meaningless and a variety of outcomes along the multiple lines envisioned by Douglas and noted by Thomas far more likely. In short, it seems that, in contrast to present-day ethnographers in Oceania, numbers of archaeologists in the last decade have not been held back from contrary views by the “force of ethology.”

What we think we can say is that an area designated Near Oceania, uncorrelated with 19th-century views of race, language, or culture, has been inhabited for 20,000 to 30,000 years by a variety of peoples whose origins and history are probably very complex and as yet little understood, while in Remote Oceania settlement was after 1500 B.C. and the first known boundary to have any significance occurs between those two regions at that time. For these periods, concepts of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia are untenable. Furthermore, following the rapid settlement of Remote Oceania, and especially its Fijian and West Polynesian parts, after ca. 1300 B.C., no further readily apparent linguistic, cultural, or biological boundary seems capable of definition in that area for perhaps another 1,000 years [Green 1981, 1987]. After that interval sufficient internal divergence and differentiation between the Fijian and West Polynesian areas appears to identify a culturally and linguistically valid boundary which marks off a set of societies as Polynesian much as we conceive of them ethnographically. In sum, for culture historians, “history matters,” and analytically useful boundaries and contrast sets are not to be found in the timeless concerns of present-day ethnography or in 19th-century categories. Rather, they will be the outcome of a combination of modern historical linguistics, archaeology, and biological anthropology that has time, space, and content as its principal dimensions.

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I once heard Peter Worsley respond to the charge that his position had changed from the “cruder ideas” expressed in his earlier writings by saying, “It’s true there was a Worsley 1 and a Worsley 2, but I will not repudiate the Worsley 1, as I owe a lot to the young man.” Likewise, I would not now defend the crude progressivist arguments of my 1963 paper on so-called Melanesia and so-called Polynesia, but since the issue is ethnological stereotypes I might as well take the opportunity to object to a persistent misconstruction, here reproduced at length by Thomas, of what I wrote in that long ago. I mean the misleading reduction of the distinction between “big men” and “chiefs”—not to mention the larger political relations they respectively represent—to the difference between ‘achievement’ and ‘ascription.’ Even from the abbreviated passages quoted by Thomas to support his assertion that “the words which summed up the difference were thus ‘achievement’ and ‘ascription,’ “ it seems self-evident that these terms cannot do so, since the critical issue is not how power is obtained but what kind of power. The latter is “the important point” [Sahlins 1963:295]. “Ascription” and “achievement” classically refer to the means by which persons come to power. They do not designate the types of power as such, the determinate relations of authority, that people in one way or another accede to. I always thought I was writing about the difference between positional or office power and personal dominance. In any event, this cannot be resolved as achievement-ascription, since the two oppositions do not correspond. One may achieve a chiefship, as one achieves the presidency of the United States, but the powers and privileges reside in the position, not in the achievement. Conversely, even the apparent oxymoron of “ascribed big man” may be sociologically approximated, as in Melpa, where the majority of big men are sons of big men. (It is interesting how many people who were unable to forgive the characterization of big men and chiefs as Melanesian and Polynesian because of the empirical exceptions to this distribution were nevertheless content to describe the distinction as “achievement” versus “ascribed.”) In an article cited by Thomas, Jolly [1987:171] suggests that the common analytic “slide” from the idea of equality as a condition of social being to that of an “equality” of opportunity is a typically bourgeois ideological move. So I wish I had a kina for every time the big man—chief contrast has been subjected to the analogous reduction of achievement-ascription.

The historicist arguments of Thomas’s paper may be as good as his structural perceptions. Consider the tortu-
ous allegation that modern anthropologists who use the terms “Melanesia” and “Polynesia” are thereby purveying an unconscious racist nostalgia, a sublimated or “suppressed” modality of an older bigotry. (I am referring to Thomas’s “insinuendos,” if they may be so called, regarding the “underlying continuity between . . . earlier Western representations of Oceanic social forms and the constructs of modern anthropologists.”) Apart from some questionable ideas about historical seman-
tics, this sinister implication depends on certain nominal-
ist suppositions about the validity of the regional cat-
categories. The scholarly libel could only be sustained if it could be proved that the designations “Melanesia” and “Polynesia” have no anthropological value—or, what is the same, that distinguishing one from the other has no such value—in which case their continued existence is just some kind of ideological survival. But Thomas’s curious remarks about the marginal significance of Poly-
nesia to the anthropological discipline amount to no such proof. On the contrary, the historical unities of Polynesia give it a special theoretical value and thus determine a certain contrast with adjacent regions [Melanesia and Micronesia]. The facts that Polynesian languages are more closely related to each other than they are to any other Austronesian language, that there is a remarkable and distinctive prehistory of expansion into the area which is just now being figured out, that the cognate cultural orders [including social structures] of Polynesian peoples are permutations of one another make “Polynesia” a privileged theoretical category for a comparative anthropology. The privilege is that because the cultural variations among Polynesian societies are actual historical transformations, it is possible here to study structure historically and vice versa. This alone would be sufficient to explain the continuing anthropo-
logical disposition to distinguish Polynesia and Melane-
sia—despite rather than because of the original basis of the contrast, long ago disavowed, and despite the com-
parative heterogeneity of Melanesia. [Indeed, even this last difference between the two regions has been the subject of fruitful discussion [Pawley 1981.] But then, there is probably no historical need, let alone historical reason, to get panicry about the persistence of the areal categories. “Europe” no longer means what the ancient Greeks thought about it.

On the other hand, Thomas’s own arguments could well support an outmoded differentiation of Melanesia from Polynesia, for example, by tracing an exaggerated structural divide right through their most disputed boundary, between Fiji and Tonga. “The actual features and dynamics of the centralized Fijian confederacies,” he writes, “were entirely different to those of, say, Tongan polities.” For Thomas the radical difference is be-
tween Tongan manipulations of genealogies and ex-
change paths and the interventions of powerful Fijian chiefs in the succession struggles of other places. He refers us to his 1986 work for details, but as the analysis there of the Fijian order is far from thorough or penetrat-
ing and neglects the complementary relations between the genealogical and alliance modes of the Fijian-

chiefdom formation [matanitū], this study cannot bear the weight of his present assertions. We are left unpre-
pared for the numerous structural correspondences be-
tween Fiji and Tonga, notably including the extensions of the polity by wife taking and wife giving, relying on cognate forms of the “sacred nephew” relation [ZS: vasu
[F], fahu [T]; cf. Bott 1981:40–41] for a relevant mode of extension of chiefship in Tonga well known to Bau in Lomaiviti and I Sōkula in the Cakaudrove area of Fiji.

In other arguments as well, Thomas would do more to preserve the received meanings of the Melanesia-
Polynesia split than to repeal them. Something like this happens when he chooses to impoverish the Lindstrom piece on Tanna as just another example of the old pro-
portion Melanesia:Polynesia:equality:hierarchy—pre-
tending also that this is the only way the author can explain his comparative observations. Yet the reading not only ignores the determinate structures of reproduc-
tion and historicity described by Lindstrom, it must then violate Thomas’s own strictures against merging incommensurable modes of social distinction within crude linear categories such as “hierarchy.” Odd too that this Dumontian-Valerian era Thomas fails to acknow-
edge that the “hierarchy” at issue [in Lindstrom’s study] is the specific form of hegemonic encompassment, in which the paramount incarnates and includes the exis-
tence of others in his own. [There are a lot of ironies here, since the Polynesian ariki may so function indepen-
dently of any centralized or coercive power, e.g., Ma-
ori, Marquesas, Mangai, etc.].] Instead, having forced Lindstrom’s analysis into the showcases of “equality” and “hierarchy” in his museum of ethnological antiq-
uites, Thomas is able to criticize the comparative effort by pointing out the existence of other kinds of “dif-
erentiation” on Tanna such as—this must be news to Lindstrom—the “asymmetries” between men and women, sorcerers and laymen. [There are also big men and followers, mentioned by Lindstrom.] But what is this criticism supposed to mean? That the Tannese are also “hierarchical”?

Thomas’s use of Lindstrom’s work is like his treat-
ment of Lederman and other “modern anthropologists.” There are too many cheap shots.

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29 VIII 88

Thomas calls our attention to the role of ethnicity in estab-
lishing and maintaining the Melanesia/Polynesia distinc-
tion. He notes historical antecedents for the dis-
tinction as well as more recent ethnographic evidence.
Much of the historical material produced by explorers,
adventurers, and scientists of the day was blatantly ethnocentric [Thomas uses the term “rasic,” but I think the evidence for ethnocentrism is stronger]. With refer-
ence to these accounts, his argument is convincing. His more recent ethnographic evidence I find less satisfying.
He particularly draws on Lederman (1986) and Lindstrom (1985), both Melanesian case studies. Data from central Polynesia, excluding Fiji, would enhance his discourse. The significant ethnological accounts, especially by Polynesian social scientists, published by the University of the South Pacific’s Institute of Pacific Studies in the last few years should be carefully studied by those of us who seek to understand Polynesian culture and lifeways.

The general Melanesia/Polynesia distinction is still an appropriate working sociocultural contrast (and, parenthetically, reinforces the appropriateness of our studies of Micronesia as a third contrastive Pacific entity). I see no need to avoid the basic equation Melanesia: Polynesia::equality:hedonism. Maybe we do need to explore, however, via solid contemporary ethnographic data, whether Melanesia is becoming “less equal” and Polynesia “less hierarchical.” Thomas cites Lederman [p. 27] on “the combination in Mendi of an ethic of individual autonomy with clan projects ‘in the common interest’” and says that “the Mendi are actually seen as resolving the Western political problem” by combining political processes assuming conflict with those directed at consensus. I am not sure whether Lederman is describing this phenomenon as a long-held or a more recent coping strategy. In my work since 1973 with Atiuan in the southern Cook group, I have suggested that they also combine these processes, matters requiring cooperation (usually in the mode of consensus) for the well-being of the Atiuan community being skillfully monitored by socially and culturally acceptable means of competition [Stephenson 1981, 1987]. Recently, however, the needs of individuals and families seem to over-ride the classic cooperation model, and competition (e.g., for the acquisition of material goods, for community recognition) is fierce at the individual and household levels. One may succeed to a title because of being a good speaker or a good community organizer or well-liked and trusted rather than because of being first in line for it. A new titleholder may be a feeding child of a previous one. Disagreements over succession to titles may be taken to court when attempts to resolve the matter by consensus reach a stalemate. Borofsky [1987] has pointed out (while studying Pukapuka in the northern Cooks) that in the process of learning and validating their traditions people in fact perpetually change them. Anthropologists, in turn, according to Borofsky, overstructure cultural traditions, emphasizing uniformity at the expense of diversity, stasis at the expense of change.

Thomas’s paper has only one reference to voyaging [Finney 1979] and only one concerning archaeology [Spriggs 1984]. We cannot disregard the historical and archaeological evidence that allows us to compare and contrast cultural traditions in the Pacific, as well as serving to validate the linkages among Pacific Islands settlers in precontact times. In 1987, in the course of an archaeological excavation on Atiu, southern Cook group, funded by Earthwatch, an ancient pottery sherd was unearthed [Cook Islands News, July 5, 1988] that has been determined to be of Melanesian origin. This first sherd to be found in the Cook Islands, one of only about a dozen known from eastern Polynesia, is evidence of precontact voyaging from Melanesia to central Polynesia. Representatives of some 25 Pacific Island groups from some 22 nations gathered this month in Townsville, Australia, for the 5th Festival of Pacific Arts. In artistry, craftsmanship, singing and dancing, they shared the best of themselves with each other. In public forums, they voiced their common concerns for the well-being of the Pacific region. Many Melanesians, Polynesians, and Micronesians now ardently articulate their personal perceptions of their ethnic identities. Perhaps those of us who were not in attendance missed an important learning experience.

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23 VIII 88

Tackling the long-standing problems of comparison and generalisation in a Pacific anthropology encumbered by misleading concepts, notions, and associations has only recently assumed importance. Far from claiming the abandonment of dubious criteria for areal studies (the latter—not the former—paradoxically dismissed by social anthropologists), Thomas makes a good start by clarifying the ancestry of a pervasive discourse involving exoticism, ethnicity, tribalism, and the like. In pointing out its forceful though disguised appeal, he rightly rejects some of the assumptions underlying the “old-fashioned ethnological distinctions” attributed to Melanesia/Polynesia.

Although I am not sure that ethnology as a whole is at risk, superficial delimitations and stereotypes for the sake of justification of a self-contained discipline certainly are. There can be no quarrel with his brief analysis of 18th- and 19th-century antecedents of the tenet of the cultural “advance” of Polynesia over Melanesia or with his conclusion that the delineation of major ethnic subdivisions suited a discipline obsessed with human types and racial distributions in search of a hierarchical framework for the evolution of mankind. Historiography being absent or defective, it is no wonder that even a redesigned anthropology, filling in the gaps (notably in the southwestern Pacific), overlooked the opportunity to rethink preconceived standards.

One may raise [as Thomas does] the aborted question of cultural distributions on a geographic scale (are they altogether spurious?) and, at the same time, have doubts about the real impact of a refined culture history not cast in crude evolutionary terms. Thomas alludes to such attempts, but it is not clear whether he is mainly concerned with a refutation of discredited formulas (“tribal” vs. “proto-state” and the like) or with an endorsement of recent comparative studies (e.g., Kirch 1984) in contradistinction to former ethnological surveys. Would he include in his criticism the regional
syntheses of non-ethnologists now assuming the role of their predecessors? And what about the subtle influence of 19th-century thinking on ethnohistory at large?

There is, after all, a certain continuity in contemporary evolutionary arguments, even if they are cast differently. [It goes without saying that they are based upon different, even conflicting methodological grounds [see Terrell 1986b.]] In the light of Thomas's arguments one must suspect more than a coincidence of ancient and modern anthropological reasoning, notwithstanding their different backgrounds and despite considerable diversification. And if one doubts the soundness of former theories, why not include modern neo-evolutionism in the criticism of one-sided regional emphasis or, as Thomas puts it, in reference to "a unidimensional continuum" that compounds ethnological and evolutionary categories? When the foundations laid down in regional terms follow a convenient classification, as is usually the case, Thomas's criticism implies that even updated anthropological concepts may be unsatisfactory, reflecting a confusion in the interpretation of institutions, a blend of the particular and the general. This begs the question not only of spurious distinctions, to which Thomas draws attention, but of the empirical soundness of research done since the fifties.

No doubt, historical generalisation needs careful consideration. In reading Thomas, however, one gets the impression that a refined subdivision of Oceanic cultures is nearly out of reach. Except for Pawley [1981] and Spriggs [1984], no mention is made of the relatively large amounts of comparative linguistics and ethnarchaeology, both of crucial importance for a "systematizing anthropology." Aimed at a revised classification of internal and external relationships in Oceania, these areal studies are no longer conceived in terms of an all-embracing "culture area" or any Melanesia/Polynesia-type distinction. It therefore appears an exaggeration that "there is virtually no discussion now of what regions are, of what status they are supposed to have as entities in anthropological talk." That social or cultural anthropology sometimes seems unaware of mundane classification and that neither small-scale ethnographic research nor ethnology has yet accomplished a shift in terminology analogous to that in Pacific linguistics is another matter. The same is true of the failure of some quarters of ethnology to face the changed conditions for research, but this seems secondary to the lack of middle-range approaches to historical questions. As ethnology no longer stands alone, "a more subtle multilinear view of regional political forms," for instance, might also be achieved by other disciplines. One can only guess why Thomas is not more explicit on these matters.

His silence on the possible implications of the reorientation in the last two or three decades is troubling. Pointing only to the cavalier way in which historical research has been treated by ethnologists offers little help. In that context it would be insufficient to stress the "pan-Oceanic stock" in culture and society without taking into account the variation of peoples, their languages, and their institutions over time and space.

Whether these patterns were regionally bounded or transcended by far-reaching inter-island contacts ("areal" influences) that stimulated cultural innovation instead of promoting divergence through isolation, one cannot simply reduce by definitional manoeuvres the significance of markers of distinction, as in the case of Fiji (noted by Thomas) or of Vanuatu and New Caledonia, influenced from Polynesia [Valjavec 1989]. Speaking, for example, of "non-Polynesian Oceanic" features influenced by eastern Oceania would not resolve the issue of inferred properties. On the other hand, even without clear definitions and in spite of disagreement over "emergent" properties, modern research has notably contributed to a better understanding of interactions in that regional puzzle.

What is missing, then, in Thomas's paper is any hint of more substantial "multidisciplinary" results on the very fine-grained genetic relationships between Oceanic societies and the mutual regional influences in prehistorical times beyond the Melanesia/Polynesia line of demarcation. By the way, overcoming entrenched distinctions without denying differences is a matter of fact, not of fiction, and this means evaluation outside the limits of discourse, be it ancient or modern. Moreover, alternatives formulated against the background of simplistic dichotomies should be more than a mere rejection of antecedents, more than a reversal of positions.

In spite of its limitations, Thomas's contribution leads to a central question which needs further clarification: Are differences in approach and methodology inherent to regional systematics and, moreover, to the specificity of the regions under study, or are they rather results [and constructs for the sake] of anthropological traditions? What is at issue is more than perceptions: it is the reality of reconstructed cultural units in reference to our present knowledge. In his encounter with unsolved problems of comparison, Thomas has begun by drawing upon historical antecedents. Certainly, instead of disguising rhetoric we must have more detailed explanations of systems in operation, but, in ethnology at least, focusing on desiderata depends on overcoming research obstacles beyond those scrutinised by Thomas.

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20 VIII 88

As to specific contrast of Polynesian centralized hierarchies as against Melanesian egalitarianism, I can say little. Thoms's objection to the reification [not used pejoratively] of an ethnic contrast between a golden Polynesian and an ominously black Melanesian seems to me to be justified, but to blame "Western thought" seems to me simply reversed racism. In fact, acculturation has worked in both directions. While many elements of European culture have been transmitted throughout the world, elements of other cultures have found their way back to Europe; even anthropologists have found it convenient to use such words and concepts as taboo, mana,
and totem. A partial solution might be to form native anthropologists through Western training to study their own cultures.

As a linguistic term “Polynesian” seems quite clear-cut to me, “Melanesian” much less so (but cf. Pawley 1981). Ordinary observation does well enough for a start. This has been checked out with lexicostatistical and comparative methods, which have no racial or racist overtones and are ethnocentric only to the extent of the selection of basic vocabulary items (which may be modified somewhat to fit local requirements) and the methods of comparison and mathematical analysis. While it may be possible to fault some of the methodology, I think it is free of ethnic prejudice, avoidance of which should be but in fact is not a basic prerequisite in anthropological research.

Because I could not decide whether Thomas was proclaiming or decrying the death of “Ethnology,” I tried to check out the definitions in English and French of ethnology and anthropo-terms. The results were inadequate and disconcerting, with a constant emphasis on tracing back in time the evolution of a race, custom, culture, society, etc. While this attitude is acceptable to me for archaeology and history, I had expected at least ethnography to be aimed at synchronic description without any ulterior motives. As most of the primitive world is no longer primitive (phases of which evolution I have witnessed), it might be salutary to formulate new definitions or else create new fields of research.

In the older anthropological literature the theme of race dominates the scene, with a more or less biological definition, descriptively correlated with geographical distribution and linguistic and cultural unity. The present (justified) antipathy to racism has had a dampening effect on discussion of race, leaving anthropological and ethnological coffers rather depleted. In any case, the names “Polynesia,” “Micronesia,” and “Melanesia” were coined as geographical terms. The ethnic (linguistic) unity of Polynesia was a sort of fringe benefit. But it should be emphasized that correlation between genetic similarity, geographical distribution, and linguistic unity is not necessary but simply the result of particular circumstances. Proof: the genetic history of the speakers of Tahitian in 1940 was very different from that of the speakers of 1767. And how do we interpret an ethnic definition of the Tahitian colony in New Caledonia? Or classify Polynesians who can speak only English or French? This may seem like hair-splitting, but that is what science is!

Our basic problem is what kind of answers we should expect to the question[s] “What is [was] a Polynesian (a Melanesian)?” Should the answer be in terms of geographical distribution, in ethnic or racial terms, in historical or prehistorical terms, synchronous or diachronous, etc.? It is conceivable that the words have no proper anthropological referents.

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