

## Anthropology and Pacific Islanders

IT IS A PAINFUL experience for people to sit and listen to someone talking about himself. But the theme of this symposium and my rather peculiar situation warrant a personal statement that I shall make as briefly as possible. I speak this morning from two standpoints: firstly, as someone who is undergoing training in a particular academic discipline that binds me intellectually with fellow anthropologists, mostly from the West; and secondly as a native of the South Pacific Islands whose cultures have provided, for nearly a century, a very substantial part of the field of exploitation for our anthropological enterprise. As an aspiring anthropologist, I am intellectually part of an international community bound together by a particular discipline; as a Pacific Islander, I am emotionally tied to peoples in a geographical region, some of whom have achieved independent nationhood, and some who have yet to become autonomous. Whatever their political situation may be, most educated people in the Pacific, like myself, are trying to redefine their cultural identities, or endeavouring to shed a kind of mentality bred under conditions of colonialism. And it is within this context that I shall discuss some aspects of what I consider to be the position of our discipline in the esteem of the peoples of the South Seas.

As a former tutor in the University of Papua New Guinea and someone to whom Islanders talk with little self-conscious politeness or deference, I have been struck by claims that "anthropologists do not really understand us," "do not present a complete or fair picture of us," and, as Tongans say, "do not know how we feel."

Recently, I have been told that in New Guinea, among some sensitive university graduates, we are regarded with distaste. This attitude, of course, is not confined to people in our traditional fieldwork areas; I am certain that many people of the New South Wales town of Bowral feel the same way about Dr. Wilde, as is evident in the views that they expressed in a Four Corners T.V. programme last year. But I am not dealing with what New

South Welshmen think about anthropologists; I am specifically concerned with the reactions of educated Pacific Islanders to us, and their attitudes to the products of our work. Before we dismiss the complaints as the voices of people who are incapable of standing back from their cultural milieu and looking at it with the disinterested objectivity of trained social scientists, we should try first to see what are the grounds, if any, for such complaints. A discussion of these is important in that it may help us in reassessing our relationships with Pacific peoples who are living in a world considerably different from that which Malinowski and his intellectual descendants saw. I exclude from this paper the Maori of New Zealand and the Aborigines of Australia because these groups live in predominantly Western-type societies and their problems are different from those of the largely indigenous populations of the rest of the Pacific isles.

I believe that a major part of the problem is the disjunction between people's expectations of us—probably they would like us to draw portraits of them—and of our special social scientific aims. At times this arises from the fact that when we explain our purposes to those among whom we conduct our fieldwork, we feel unable to explain fully to them our real aims. This is so partly because of the problems of communication that we all know. What we often end up saying is that we are there to learn their customs and to write books about them. They cooperate with us thinking that we are going to tell their stories taking their points of view into consideration. When we produce our articles and monographs and they and their children or grandchildren read them, they often cannot see themselves or they see themselves being distorted and misrepresented. In many cases our field of discourse, and our special social scientific language, preclude any comprehension of what we are talking about even to those who have started training in anthropology. Thus, for example, in the late 1960s perhaps the most popular first-year subject taught at the University of Papua New Guinea was the introductory course in social anthropology. Students flocked to it partly because of the belief that anthropology, which purportedly deals with their traditional cultures and societies, would help them with their problems of alienation and partly to see what we are saying about them. Their interest dropped rapidly once they were confronted with our esoteric language. I do not think that we have produced at the University of Papua New Guinea a native graduate who has entered our profession. As in other parts of the Pacific, students are attracted more to history that deals with their past as people.

Essentially, what Pacific peoples expect of us is to be more of the novelist and the social historian and less of the scientist who speaks in jargon. We do not see ourselves as novelists and rightly so; but we could benefit from the approach of the social historian—and from writing in plain, elegant English. Discussing the attitudes of Africans to Europeans in Ghana before independence, Gustav Jahoda has this to say:

The skilled writer or novelist sometimes succeeds in conveying to his readers a balanced impression and the "feel" of the strengths and weaknesses, joys and fears, of a whole people. When a psychologist or sociologist digs below the level of overt behaviour, some of the generalisations he comes up with are apt to look odd, distorted, and unflattering. [1961, 132]

I would go a bit further than Jahoda and assert that some of our writings, especially about Melanesians, actually distort the images of those we have studied. Some of the titles of our books, for example *The Sexual Life of Savages*, are very offensive. It needs only one or two instances of gross distortion, especially in books or articles regarded as influential and essential reading, for our discipline to come under wholesale condemnation by the increasingly sensitive educated men and women. Let me offer a good example. Somehow or other we have projected onto Melanesian leaders the caricature of the quintessential Western capitalist: grasping, manipulative, calculating, and without a stitch of morality. Lest it be charged that I am grossly exaggerating, I shall quote an extract from a famous paper on political types in Melanesia and Polynesia:

Here I find it useful to apply characterisations—or is it caricature?—from our own history to big-men and chiefs. . . . The Melanesian big-man seems so thoroughly bourgeois, so reminiscent of the free enterprising rugged individual of our own heritage. He combines with an ostensible interest in the general welfare a more profound measure of self-interested cunning and economic calculation. His gaze . . . is fixed unswervingly to the main chance. His every public action is designed to make a competitive and invidious comparison with others, to show a standing above the masses that is product of his own personal manufacture. [Sahlins 1963, 164]

The language used here has been taken straight from the factory and the boardroom. The writer denies that traditional Melanesian leaders have

any genuine interest in the welfare of their people and insists that their public actions are all motivated purely by selfishness. This is erroneous, and it would have mattered less had it not been for the fact that the article is required reading in *Pacific Anthropology*. It is an invidious pseudo-evolutionary comparison between the “developed” Polynesian polities and the “underdeveloped” Melanesian ones. It belongs to a genre of literature on Oceania—going back at least two hundred years—written by explorers, navigators, beachcombers, missionaries, colonial officials, and the like who have romanticised Polynesians and denigrated Melanesians. It has been read by hundreds and probably thousands of university students and other interested readers in the English-speaking world and now by students in the Pacific. It has been reprinted in a number of anthropological textbooks. It has the potential of bolstering the long-standing Polynesian racism against Melanesians; and Melanesian students were, in my time, not particularly pleased to read about themselves being unfavourably compared with their eastern neighbours.

This may be an extreme example, but it is indicative of the fact that after decades of anthropological field research in Melanesia we have come up only with pictures of people who fight, compete, trade, pay bride-price, engage in rituals, invent cargo cults, copulate, and sorcerise each other. There is hardly anything in our literature to indicate whether these people have any such sentiments as love, kindness, consideration, altruism, and so on. We cannot tell from our ethnographic writings whether they have a sense of humour. We know little about their systems of morality, specifically their ideas of the good and the bad, and their philosophies; though we sometimes get around to these, wearing dark glasses, through our fascination with cargo cults. We have ignored their physical gestures, their deportment, and their patterns of nonverbal communication. By presenting incomplete and distorted representations of Melanesians we have bastardised our discipline, we have denied people important aspects of their humanity in our literature, and we have thereby unwittingly contributed to the perpetuation of the outrageous stereotypes of them made by ignorant outsiders who lived in their midst.

We should not, therefore, be surprised when we see equally distorted pictures, painted by angry nationalists, depicting them as being more moral and better human beings than us. These are reactions against years of indignities heaped upon them. We talk about this in conversations among ourselves, but we do not care enough to write it down. We are not even

aware that in Papua New Guinea we, and through us our discipline, are being increasingly blamed for most of the nasty stereotypes of the people. We are generally innocent of the sins of commission, but we are guilty of the sins of omission and of insensitivity. We tend to be smug and complacent in our self-generated, self-perpetuated, and self-righteous image of ourselves as being better than any other category of foreigners in Melanesia. We congratulate ourselves for being of economic and medical benefit to the communities we study through our free dispensation of medicines, old clothes, some money, and sticks of tobacco to the natives. We assume that because we live for one and a half years or so in their villages and partake of their foods, people must judge us kindly. Today we are judged not so much on that as on our writings. It will not be through our interference in the affairs of Pacific nations that we improve our relationship with Pacific people; rather it will be on the basis of what we have written, what we are writing, and what we will write.

It is fair to say that in general we have contributed insufficiently in our professional writings towards redressing the distorted image of Melanesians. We have neglected to portray them as rounded human beings who love as well as hate, who laugh joyously as well as quarrel, who are peaceful as well as warlike, and who are generous and kindly as well as mean and calculating. Yet it is these ignored qualities that have enabled us to enter unsolicited and live among them. How, then, have we anthropologists neglected these aspects of human existence in Melanesia? Have the models we have taken to the field, for example, that of conflict, blinded us to these qualities? If we are really concerned about our relationships with peoples among whom we have lived—as well as about the future of our discipline in the region—then we have to take into serious consideration the people’s increasing sensitivity and touchiness about their image and then infuse into our scientific writings about their cultures and societies some elements of the humanist outlook. I do not advocate compromising our discipline to suit changes in the political winds; what I and many other Pacific men and women would appeal for is balance. When we distort the realities with which we are concerned, we not only offend people who have given us their hospitality and confidence; we also bring into question the validity of our science.

In 1972, Derek Freeman published an article in which he corrected the spelling errors of more than one hundred and seventy Samoan words made by Margaret Mead in her book *Social Organization of Manu’a*. He notes not only Mead’s failure to consult Pratt’s Samoan dictionary, which sets down

the orthography of the language, but also the failure of the Bishop Museum to take heed of his warning about the errors before it issued a new edition of the book. As we are so particular about the spelling of English words I find it deplorable that we do not apply the same standard to our spelling of Pacific languages. Those of us who see and understand the indignation in Freeman's publication are already on the road towards comprehending a little of the reactions of Pacific peoples when important elements of their cultures are abused and their feelings are thoughtlessly or contemptuously disregarded by eminent anthropologists.

A fair indication of the interest in our discipline that we have aroused among the educated people of the region is the fact that, after so many years of involvement, we have produced only one native professional anthropologist, the late Dr. Rusiata Nayacakalou, and that was about fifteen or so years ago. I am a probable poor second. Yet we do not seem to care. We are eager to give all manner of advice to Pacific governments on how to handle their developmental problems; we are willing to give handouts; but we have not discussed as a serious proposition the desirability of the existence of fully qualified native anthropologists to work side by side with their international colleagues on the basis of equality. Since I have been in Australia as a student of anthropology, only one person, Professor Peter Lawrence, has raised the subject with me. So far our concern in this direction has been to involve Pacific peoples in our research projects only in the capacity of field assistants, which is paternalism in the extreme.

While we are steeped in our preoccupation with our own problems of trying to maintain access to our traditional fieldwork areas, we should also give serious thought to encouraging actively the rise of fully trained local colleagues, as far as is possible, in each Pacific country. If we act on this it will be a more lasting and valuable contribution to the region, and to our discipline, than the kinds of tokenism we have so far entertained. There are several good reasons for this.

Firstly, the longer we, as outsiders, monopolise the research in the region, the stronger will be the feelings against us and the more difficult will be our task of extricating our discipline from the taint of imperialism and exploitation.

Secondly, things being equal, local anthropologists, by their very presence in their own societies, should be in an excellent position for conducting continuous research and keeping in touch with local happenings. Those of us who live outside the region have our own commitments to our institutions and societies, and we find it difficult to visit our fieldwork areas as

often as we would like. We tend to be absent for many years, and sometimes we do not even return at all. We thus lose the immediacy of the lived-in reality; people and events become blurred images in our memories; so we inevitably write things that come out flat and lifeless, or we escape into ever refined analyses of kinship terminologies that are of no value or interest to humankind except to ourselves.

Thirdly, local anthropologists should have an advantage that most of us lack—namely a thorough knowledge and deep appreciation of the nuances of their own languages. This is one reason why we are often unable to produce multidimensional representations of the realities we deal with: although we may be proficient in the languages of those among whom we conduct our fieldwork, we generally do not have the appreciation that local speakers do. The time we spend in the field is too short. I speak here in terms of averages; there are notable exceptions.

Finally, local anthropologists should have the intuitive knowledge and a built-in "feel" for the subtleties of their cultures and their human relationships. Cynics and people without vision say that natives are too stupid or too closely involved in their own societies to be objective in their research. Let us face facts: everywhere men and women of ability and wisdom can and do overcome great difficulties. Professor Meyer Fortes (pers. comm.) has pointed out that West African anthropologists—who, significantly, call themselves sociologists—are not different from their British and other non-African colleagues in terms of their products. Despite their initial advantages, he adds, African social scientists have not produced anything that others have not been able to accomplish. This is so because African anthropologists were trained in the rigours of uncompromising empiricism and other Western intellectual traditions that had effectively suppressed any expression of the subjective insights they might have into their own communities. We must devise ways—or, better still, widen the horizon of our discipline—in order to tap instead of suppress the subjectivity to which I have referred and thereby humanise our study of the conditions of the peoples and cultures of the Pacific.

#### Note

This essay is a revised form of a paper I read to the symposium "The Future of Anthropology in Melanesia" at the 46th ANZAAS Congress held in Canberra in January 1975. The paper was subsequently published in *Oceania* 45 (1975):283–

289. From the original paper I have deleted some words and added roughly one typed page. I wish to express my appreciation to Marie Reay, who was immensely helpful in discussing some of the ideas expressed in the essay; Inge Riebe, who read an early draft and pronounced it too tame; and Barbara Hau'ofa, who reads my mind and says wise and critical things that are not always flattering.

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## The New South Pacific Society

### INTEGRATION AND INDEPENDENCE

I WOULD LIKE to advance the view that there already exists in our part of the world a single regional economy upon which has emerged a South Pacific society, the privileged groups of which share a single dominant culture with increasingly marginalised local subcultures shared by the poorer classes. The regional society is emerging from the process of decolonisation that, contrary to stated intentions, has integrated the Pacific Islands into the Australian/New Zealand economy and society to the extent that the islands cannot or will not disentangle themselves. In view of this integration, we must reexamine many of the assumptions we have about development in our region.

All the countries in the South Pacific have been drawn into a single economic system controlled by transnational industrial, commercial, and financial interests backed and defended by powerful governmental and military organisations working closely with each other. In saying this I do not propose to enter into a discussion of the world economy; I confine myself to our South Pacific region because it directly and immediately concerns us. By isolating our region from the world economy I do not imply that ours is in any way a closed system; rather our region is a distinct subgroup of the global unit, a subgrouping based on geographic alignment and on a growing multiplicity of economic, social, and cultural ties including a common concern with the security and well-being of our part of the world. By "South Pacific" I mean the region covered by Australia and Papua New Guinea in the west, Kiribati in the north, New Zealand in the south, and the Cook Islands in the east. I would also include French Polynesia and New Caledonia, whose full membership in our regional subgrouping is but a matter of time.

It is probably true to say that no major geographic region in the world is as integrated as the South Pacific. We are, for all practical purposes, a single economy and increasingly a single society. All the economies of the