

HISTORY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF POLYNESIAN SOCIETIES

Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman
University of Auckland

Once upon a time, it seems reasonable to suppose, the only people aware of the Polynesian past were Polynesians themselves. Just who among them concerned themselves with it is now largely a matter for speculation; nor can we know for certain just how that past was represented, or how the representations themselves changed before those historic encounters with the expanding European world. From that point on, however, Polynesia became entangled in a vastly expanded social and political context which transformed, often with dramatic suddenness, the old certitudes and modes of historical practice. All that we can now know of the old ways is representations of them put together, for diverse and innovative purposes, either during or after the very circumstances that led to their transformation. The rest, one might say, is history.

If only it were, matters might be a lot more straightforward. The difficulties, of course, lie in the very categories by which we know and speak of such things, what Sahlins (1985: xvii) refers to as the “analytically debilitating” oppositions engendered by most discussions conjoining the notions of “Culture” and “History”. At an abstract level such debilitating can of course be overcome by ascending to cooler air and subjecting everyone to a bracing regime of theoretical argumentation. In the warm, moister regions round about sea level, however, where most of the people live, and indeed feel more comfortable, the oppositions are accepted as being as

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much a part of the order of things as other practical, commonsense distinctions — such as those between “inland” and “seaward”, “commoner” and “chief”. Far from inducing ennui and resignation, they give energy and bite to discussion about a lot of contemporary issues.

Our point is simply that both “Culture” and “History” are very much alive in the Polynesian world, nurtured by the economic and political changes which are integrating the island nations ever more closely with the outside metropolitan world. Nor is any of this particularly new. For at least the past couple of generations most people in island Polynesia, those from remote backwater villages as much as the Western-educated urban elites, have had a very acute sense of the direction in which their world is heading. “Development” is the prevalent ethos, willingly embraced not so much because it opposes “culture” or the “traditional” certainties, but because it carries a sense of historical inevitability — the next really major step in the direction which the island societies took when they stepped from “darkness” into the “light” of 19th century Christianity.

The position of “culture and traditions” in relation to this is shifting and, not infrequently, ambiguous. As we see it, the ambiguity is not at all extraneous. Nor is it the result of simple befuddlement. The whole point of the way in which “culture and tradition”, or more commonly and directly just “tradition”, is used in island Polynesia today, is precisely that it is an attempt to dissolve just those debilitating oppositions between system and event, past and present, which Sahlins draws attention to. Depending on the context in which it is used, it can be made to serve a host of conflicting interests.

The Tongan anthropologist and writer Epeli Hau‘ofa has few doubts about the direction in which the South Pacific is heading, and where this leaves the distinctive island cultures. His view is 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 increasing marginalised local subcultures shared by the poorer classes (1987: 1).

Hau‘ofa goes on to point up the way in which the interlocking educated elites of the region increasingly share the same language, ideologies and material lifestyle, leaving the less fortunate to draw what comfort they can from their distinctive, more traditional ways

of doing things. There is much in this characterisation which is stimulating and novel. Throughout the South Pacific, “development” has led to new dimensions of stratification, greater diversity of occupations and growing disparities of wealth. It makes clear sense, in many places, to characterise this in class terms.

At the same time, however, much of this stratification depends upon notions of “culture” and “tradition” for its legitimacy and continued vitality. The *matai* system of Western Samoa, the monarchy and nobles of Tonga and the Fijian chiefly system are all modified traditional hierarchies. They maintain a fundamental relevance for contemporary political life in the countries concerned, and the ideologies supporting them have persistence and power, as much for “the people” as for “the chiefs”. Given the current impulses toward integration throughout the South Pacific it may indeed make sense to refer to these political forms as sub-cultures, but they cannot by any stretch of the imagination be seen as “marginalised” in any way.

This very point is one that underlies the interesting issue of the “Pacific Way”, which also hinges upon the way in which notions of traditional culture might be related to those of history, progress and development. The term itself was apparently used by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in a speech to the United Nations in 1970 (Crocombe 1976). From that point on it passed into more general usage in the region, coming to connote those aspects of local life (communalism, negotiated compromises, “brotherhood” and a common rejection of colonial rule) which were seen to set the people of the newly independent Pacific apart from others, and particularly Europeans. It was also general enough to gather in, for Polynesians at any rate, the notion of a unity based upon common descent and traditions. All in all, it was a serviceable enough doctrine, and it was not really until an outsider to the region (Howard 1983) drew attention to its obvious ideological aspects that local scholars began to pay much attention. Howard’s main point was that the Pacific Way very clearly supported the interests of traditional elites in places like Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa, using consensus to avoid substantive debate and subsuming chiefly status within the ideas of communalism “...in such a way as to hide the class basis of the system” (1983: 181). With the debate opened up in these terms, it rapidly expanded to embrace the broader issues of the interpretation of the post-colonial history of the region, and the appropriate models for national development. Meleisea and Schoeffel (1984) made what was certainly the most eloquent immediate reply, damning both Modernisation theorists and

“paleo Marxists” alike for their unilineal notions of progress based upon Eurocentric frames of reference, their views about the inevitability of class formation and the obsolescence of preindustrial societies. Against this, they pointed to the resilience, utility and adaptability of traditional institutions, their capacity to provide barriers to class formation and to effectively disable the exploitative aspects of development schemes.

In one form or another, the issues involved in the brief published debate over the Pacific Way are ubiquitous in the region — surfacing again and again in political debate, journalism, sermons and administrative reports of many sorts. In all of this “tradition” is clearly linked with issues of social stratification and differential privilege in ways which are only apparently contradictory. While “culture and tradition” are firmly associated with privilege and political authority in Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa, in Hawai‘i they form the central ideological principles of the Hawaiian radical movement (Trask 1987), concerned to speak for the underprivileged and dispossessed. Again, in French Polynesia, the urban *demi*, long assimilated to French ways and with privileged positions in the political establishment, urge their hinterland cousins to hold fast to “traditional” ways. Ironically though, what is meant by this in most cases is a way of life dominated by small-scale copra production, long the mainstay of the colonial economy.

In all of this argumentation it is probably irrelevant to try and clarify the ambiguities involved in “culture” and “tradition” by introducing further distinctions. Hau‘ofa, in another context (1984: 2–3), makes the eminently sensible suggestion that we, as scholars, should distinguish indigenous elements from introduced ones and simply accept that there are old traditions (“...those that have been well-established over a number of generations”) as well as new ones (“... [more] recently established but increasingly accepted and having potential for long-term growth and survival”). In many instances this might indeed be sufficient to shift discussions onto a different plane. But it would necessarily challenge the authority which many see as inherent in the very notion of tradition, and also lead off into lengthy considerations of what actually happened in the past. One would thus be back to History, which is not at all the point for those who argue from the rhetorical high ground of Culture and Tradition.

One could go on. But let that characterisation stand as an indication of some of the broad social and political trends in the South Pacific and the ways in which the notions of “History” and “Culture” are implicated and talked about in the region. We turn now to consider other less obviously *engage* academic works by

historians and anthropologists, relating them very broadly to the social contexts in which they were produced.

What particularly interest us are projects which seek to establish a relationship of some sort between Polynesian representations (from whatever period) and those formulated on the basis of European historical sources. This is by no means the same thing as the “insider versus outsider” perspective which crops up from time to time in discussions within the region, counterpoising “authentic” indigenes to foreigners using Pacific data for irrelevant foreign academic argumentation. The distinction is sometimes apt, but frequently it sheds no light at all, except perhaps that which illuminates special interests. More relevant to our concerns is a distinction that may be drawn between the “orally literate” and the “orally illiterate” (happy terms which we owe to our colleague Ross Clark). The point is that in many parts of island Polynesia there is still a lively representation of aspects of the past within ongoing oral traditions, generally not accessible to those who do not know the language. “Oral literacy” is by no means given to all. Insiders may be as ignorant of it as they are apt to portray all outsiders as being, and they may in fact have more difficulty in gaining access to it than those who cannot be so closely identified with local factions and concerns. There is, we shall argue, a complex and inherently problematic relationship between oral traditions and written historical accounts.

We begin our characterisations with the work of outsider academic historians. In the 1950s, Pacific historians distinguished themselves from Colonial and Commonwealth historians by writing “island oriented” histories about what had happened “on the ground” in the islands of the Pacific since European contact, and by using new kinds of documents (beachcomber narratives, missionary letters and journals, etc.). Their sleuthing has been formidable, their histories are fine-grained, but their projects have rarely been culturally informed. The actors have primarily been named European voyagers, traders, missionaries and colonial officials, for these are the persons who have written their sources or of whom their sources speak. Polynesians have tended to be shadowy figures; some have been sensitively portrayed, but few have spoken. Critics have labelled the Pacific historians as eurocentric, bereft of the “insider point of view”; it would, however, be difficult for them to be otherwise given the nature of their project and its context. But these works are nonetheless invaluable. We now have detailed and abundantly documented histories of diverse intrusions and developments in Pacific societies, telling of how the islands were incorporated into wider

political and economic systems (Davidson 1967; Gilson 1970). However, these virtues of the Pacific historians' works have latterly been viewed as faults by some among them, who call for comprehensive (or synthetic) histories of the whole Pacific rather than more "monograph myopia" devoted to particular islands or island groups (Howe 1979). But wide-ranging histories (such as Howe 1984) falter in trying to deal with diverse island histories and seem to end up as little more than a series of case studies. European intrusions may have much in common, but the ways of life they encountered in the separate islands were quite diverse. Therefore, it is difficult to connect the island-oriented histories with one another, especially when they pay no particular attention to gaining culturally informed insights into the nature of Polynesian reactions.

Ethnohistorians have set as their particular project the description of Pacific societies as they were at the time of European contact and their response to early European intrusions. While linked with Pacific history, rather than chronicling economic and political developments in the islands, they have traced the demise of indigenous systems (Denning 1980). Ethnohistory, by its nature, seems to be a rather disheartening project — inevitably a record of decline and fall. Furthermore, teasing out an ethnographic description from the diversely biased European documents according to the canons of historiography is both a tedious and problematic undertaking. Accordingly, among ethnohistorians a cleavage has developed between those who would restrict the evidence to "the description of illiterate societies by literate observers at the time when contact between the two had not changed or destroyed the illiterate society" (Denning 1966) and those who would listen to the "oral testimony" of latter-day Islanders, albeit with caution (Lātūkefu 1968).

Whether called Pacific history or ethnohistory, these academic projects aim to establish what actually happened in particular places at particular times. In recent years, practitioners of both have listened to "oral testimony" cautiously and have consulted indigenous texts judiciously as adjuncts to their usual sources. For good reason, those who have done so have usually been academically-trained Pacific Islanders. Even if they are not full "oral literates", they speak the language in which the texts are given.

This leads us to consider "insider history", in some ways an outgrowth of the ethnohistorians' work, though not so restricted and promoted as a quite different project. "Insider history" gives precedence to representations of the past as contemporary Pacific Islanders tell or write them. More often than not these are written

by insiders who, although knowing the language, are not wholly “orally literate”, and who seek to connect what they have heard from the “oral literates” with academic histories in order to construct a composite, factual “insider history”. In many instances, the distinction between oral and written texts, local and European texts, is either ignored or consciously elided. The projects are beset with other contradictions as well. We have historians strategically promoting “insider history” and politicians calling for truly national histories; we have the situation of insiders who are writing the histories being not only “orally illiterate” but also being denied texts simply because they are insiders, and editors and advisors reframing what is written to satisfy academic historical conventions. These apparently straightforward and laudable projects are beset with many special difficulties.

Ironically, representations of the past by Polynesians have a long history, though they have been somewhat ignored by historians. George Grey, Governor of New Zealand during the periods 1845–1853 and 1861–1868, employed a number of Māori scribes to assist him in learning the language and customs of their people. The most prominent among them was Te Rangikaheke, an Arawa chief from Rotorua, and his most renowned works are his comprehensive historical accounts telling of the creation of the universe, of the world and its beings, and of the origins of the ancestors and their migrations, settlement and subsequent history in New Zealand. These accounts appear as appendices in Grey’s *Ko nga Moteatea*, and are the basis of his *Polynesian Mythology* — all unacknowledged as to their true authorship. Jenifer Curnow (1983, 1985) has established that what Te Rangikaheke intended was two manuscripts, each covering essentially the same material, but addressed to different audiences. One manuscript (known as 81) was intended for the Governor; the other (which at some point got separated into two and is known as 43 and 44) was intended for the Hawaiians. This latter manuscript was inspired by a chance meeting with a visiting Hawaiian, one Maau Tione, who, as Te Rangikaheke envisioned, would take it to Hawai’i for the other descendants of the ancestors to check and correct (Curnow 1985: 121–22). This did not happen, so Grey ended up with two parallel, if not identical, historical accounts in his collection.

“Te Rangikaheke selected his material according to the needs and interests of its attended recipient” (Curnow 1985: 122). He was an accomplished orator with a fine sense of his audience. Thus the differences between the two accounts (which were written in the same year, 1849) indicate how he perceived his audiences. For Grey he is far more explicit, explaining the motivations and meanings of

various happenings; evidently he assumed that the Hawaiian would understand without being told (Curnow 1985: 127–28) — and they probably would have. For his Hawaiian audience he made comparisons between Māori and Pakeha beliefs, which would have had no purpose in writings intended for the Governor (Curnow 1985: 122). But both audiences, if in somewhat different ways, were to be impressed with the supremacy of Te Arawa, the tribe of which Te Rangikaheke was a chief. Te Arawa was the first canoe; Te Arawa were the most brave; Te Arawa were foremost leaders. “Te Arawa were the source from which all other tribes sprang... Te Arawa were the seeds scattered over the land, whose runners and branches stretched forth north and south” (Curnow 1985: 137). Schrempp, acknowledging Curnow’s characterisation of Te Rangikaheke’s histories as “Arawa-centric”, points to the parallel between Tu, precedence over his brothers, and the primacy attributed to Te Arawa — both “alone” are brave (Schrempp 1985: 24–25).

Both of Te Rangikaheke’s historical projects were collaborative in nature. The first collaboration was initiated by Grey, and in a real sense appropriated by him. Yet both men had a shared intention — that the Governor would learn Māori language and custom so as to govern more effectively. Te Rangikaheke’s separate project was his account for the Hawaiians, but presumably had the Hawaiians amplified and corrected his account as he planned they would, he would have passed these on to Grey, as he did other corrections (Curnow 1985: 123). We do not know whether Grey had in mind in 1849 to plunder Te Rangikaheke’s manuscripts for his own writing projects. But we can be quite certain that Te Rangikaheke had a further agenda in all his writing: “...to claim *mana* and land for his tribe” (Curnow 1985: 141).

The 19th century Hawaiian language historians of Hawai‘i were relatively numerous: roughly in birth-order, K. Kamakau, David Malo, John Papa ‘Ī‘i, Samuel M. Kamakau, Kepelino (see Valeri 1985: xxiii–xxvii). We take as our example Samuel M. Kamakau, who was not an eye-witness but a prolific writer, thus an historian more than a reporter. Kamakau was one of the ten Lahainaluna Seminary students who, at the instigation of Sheldon Dibble in 1836–1837, collected and put together a manuscript history of Hawai‘i, which was attributed to David Malo. Dibble tells how they worked (1843: iv, cited in Borofsky and Howard MS):

At the time of... meeting each scholar read what he had written — discrepancies were reconciled and corrections made by each other, and then all the compositions were

handed to me, out of which I endeavored to make one connected and true account.

Dibble, like Grey after him, published his own *History of the Sandwich Islands* (1843) from the collections he instigated, but unlike Grey's work, his was a truly synthetic account. Malo also later wrote his own Hawaiian language history which bears many similarities with the earlier collective work. Kamakau was junior to Malo in both age and status, but nonetheless took it upon himself some years later to extend and amplify what had earlier been written by (or attributed to) Malo by interviewing people older than himself, e.g., his grandfather, and publishing his accounts in Hawaiian language newspapers (1865–1871). His stated aim was to “discover an independent Hawaiian antiquity” to counter the bizarre foreign speculations about Hawaiian origins — “foreigners only know so much and they are superficial!” (Denning 1988: 12). Though Kamakau was disdainful of foreigner interpretations, and was the most prolific of the Hawaiian historians of his era, he was not a romantic about the Hawaiian past — he did not approve of it all. Ending his accounts of *heiau* and sacrifice, he wrote (1976: 145):

...It is impossible to count the hundreds and thousands of years of sacrificing. It is well for the upright to ponder these things, and to thrust away the clouds from the nation, and to separate the nation from them. Then, to eat together with the nations of the world that eat without tabus without disassociating themselves from God. A kingdom that eats without tabus in a good kingdom.

Kamakau seems to have been primarily motivated by the desire to set the record of the Hawaiian past straight, in the face of fanciful notions of non-Hawaiians. This past, however, was not one that he celebrated; the present was the more desirable state.

The late Queen Sālote of Tonga was a historian of another time and place, of the 20th century and of an independent Kingdom, who attached importance “to the preservation of tradition” both on the record and in action. To this end she established the Tongan Traditions Committee in 1952, and at the time of its formation declared, “The customs of a people are its heritage” (Wood and Wood Ellem 1977: 194). The Queen wished to preserve her own knowledge of Tongan custom — “people regarded the Queen as the great authority on Tongan custom” (Bott 1981: 7) — and in the mid-50s sought an anthropologist-amanuensis (oral tradition at the University of Auckland has it that she contacted the newly established Department of Anthropology). She found her scribe in

Elizabeth Bott, who had gone to Tonga with another anthropological enterprise in mind but willingly assisted the Queen's project. This was by all accounts a most congenial collaboration and in 1960 Bott left for the Queen and the Tongan Traditions Committee a substantial manuscript based on extensive interviews with the Queen, which over 20 years later was published (Bott 1982) after slight revisions and meticulous checking, and with the blessing of the Queen's son and successor. Though the material presented therein is mostly from the Queen, Bott gives it a framework and form. She took as her point of entry, Tonga in the late 18th century as recorded, if not understood, by Cook, and explained and interpreted by the Queen — i.e., a European record with an informed Tongan exegesis. Then, on the basis of this, she gives a “generalised account of principles of Tongan political and social organisation in the 18th century” (1982: 8) — clearly the contribution of the anthropologist. Finally, in what is the major section of the book, there is the account of how Tongan society came to be as it was found in the 18th century. This is a “thick” account staying “fairly close to the content and tone of the account given to me by Queen Sālote” (Bott 1982: 8), or the Queen's representation of the Tongan past, which “presents a somewhat idealised picture of the classical period of Tongan society as visualised by... then the greatest... authority” (Bott 1982: 9). It would, we believe, be cynical to say that the Queen was only creating a dynastic document, legitimating by the past the real power of the Tupou dynasty created by her great-grandfather. Given the sources of her knowledge, her reputation and her pre-eminent position, she could not help but create a “new orthodoxy”, one that has some decades later come to be challenged.

As these examples show, the projects of the “orally literate” are (like other projects) grounded in social situations. Outsiders cannot be “orally literate” since “oral literacy” implies a primary identification by and with particular representations of the past. Outsiders may, however, come to comprehend an oral literature by listening and recording, by reading and contemplating its texts. Furthermore, the “orally literate” do on occasion record their representations of the past in writing. Here we will not discuss the characteristic of oral versus written texts, except to note that texts written by the “orally literate” tend to have characteristics of orality (see Thornton 1985). It is vitally important to identify the social context and project of the representation by the “orally literate”, for these should be discerned and appreciated by the “orally illiterate” who may use these representations in their own projects.

Take the incident related by Malama Meleisea (1980), which

though brief is telling and not at all extraordinary. In the course of recording oral history in Samoa he returned to a *matai* from whom he had previously recorded a text to clarify some points. The *matai* in “repeating” the text gave a different version with a significantly different outcome, though it was the “same story”. It transpired that the *matai* held two titles in two different villages, and both his location and social role had changed between the two tellings, and so appropriately had his rendering or representation of the past. Both tellings were “true” in the context he told them. Again, Torben Monberg (1975) recounts how his informants “fired back” after reading *From the Two Canoes* (1965) because the representations of the past therein were “one-sided” and derogatory, i.e., representing the interests of one faction of the population. Our examples could continue, but these two will suffice to make our point. Project and context should not be overlooked; the “oral literate” is well aware of them, but the “orally illiterate” may not always be.

The “orally literate” expect their representations to be challenged. They guard against challenges by telling them to audiences whose interests they represent, or, as in the case of the Samoan *matai*, adapting them to the interests of their particular audiences. Therein lies the great virtue of orality as well as a well-recognised paradox. Representations are attributed by their tellers to generalised or specific ancestors. These narrators portray themselves not as creators but as conduits transmitting “words of the ancestors” to their audiences and to future generations. The truly “orally literate”, that is, those who effectively relate these representations, do not take such assertions literally — they know what they are doing. Though their representations may promote their own projects, they must be phrased to accord with group projects if they are to be acceptable to their audiences. One cannot become an oral pundit by telling stories to oneself. The representations of the “orally literate” are both formed by a group’s perceptions of the past and inform that group’s perceptions, and they tacitly challenge other perceptions by asserting the authenticity and “truth” of their own. The point is that these representations are assertions — they do not debate them, they state them. The argument enters by way of other assertions, and what the real argument is recognised by the “orally literate”: but has to be discovered by the “orally illiterate”. Naïve “illiterates” tend either to dismiss the asserted representations as so much rubbish (if they do not conform to their own projects) or embrace them as true (if they do), whether they are insiders or outsiders. This is only to be expected. But when an elite intelligentsia implicates the representations of the “oral literates” by conflating their projects with their own, we should beware.

When oral traditions are combined and denatured to produce an “insider national history” by orally illiterate insiders abetted by orally illiterate outsiders, how many projects are conflated?

This is not to say that all “oral illiterates” are naïve — Bott certainly was not. Indeed, a good deal has been written about the projects and contexts of “orally literate” representations, but these are often not taken into account when the representations are used in other projects and contexts. Attending to them is not just necessary, it is worthwhile; as much insight may be gained from considering them as from the representations themselves. What is required is the analysis of multiple texts in terms of their specific contexts in order to identify their separate projects, and judicious use of all available texts (see, for example, Valeri 1985). We need to discern in their texts the projects of the “orally literate”: the issues they address and the questions they answer, before using them as sources for our own projects. When this has not been done, we need to untangle the projects.

As if all this were not enough, we now have anthropologists, professional muddlers of all sorts of distinctions, taking a new interest in the Polynesian past. Something of what they have been up to may be shown by reference to an intramural debate in which a number of them have been involved, about the work of a renowned elder. In his *History and Traditions of Tikopia*, Raymond Firth (1961) presented the texts he had recorded in the late 1920s as a “quasihistorical” chronicle of the Tikopian past, explaining the different renderings recorded were in the interests of particular tellers and groups. Edmund Leach (1962), in reviewing the volume, expressed surprise that Firth had not included texts concerning the doings of gods and spirits simply because he regarded them as unbelievable “myth”. Sceptical of Firth’s distinction between myth and quasihistory, Leach dismissed the whole enterprise, declaring that while significant things had undoubtedly happened in the island’s past, none of them were recorded between the covers of Firth’s book. What Leach was saying was that all Firth’s Tikopia texts (published and unpublished) were myth, not history, and should therefore be analysed as myth, in structural-symbolic terms. Hooper (1981) and McKinnon (1976) independently took up this point, treating the texts as expressions of Tikopian cultural concepts about their social order and linking them with the copious Tikopian ethnography. Though starting with different problems in mind, these two analyses have much in common. Finally, Kirch and Yen (1982) literally grounded some of Firth’s “quasi-history” by relating it to their archaeological findings. Here is a stark contrast between a literal reading of texts (Firth, Kirch and Yen) seeking to establish the

facts of Tikopia's past, and a structural-symbolic reading (Hooper and McKinnon) unravelling Tikopian statements about their social order. These are two very different projects, and while academic historians might rightly be suspicious of the literal readings, anthropologists have questioned the symbolic one.

What historians might make of the symbolic reading we are not at all sure. There are so few archival sources on Tikopia that we doubt that they would consider the question worthy of their attentions at all. (Tikopians, as far as we know, have not been consulted.) Matters are somewhat different, though, for larger Polynesian societies which have more copious historical documentation. Valeri's analysis of Hawaiian sacrifice (1985) shows perhaps better than any other recent work in the field the use of wholly historical sources for a characteristically anthropological project — the depiction of an alien cultural practice in terms of its motivating cultural logic. There are also other examples which more directly illuminate historical processes. Sahlins' recent studies (1985) of Hawai'i and Fiji use historically documented myth, ritual and tradition not simply to extend the historical record (in the manner of an older anthropological style and more recent insider histories) but to interpret it. The innovation, of course, is a structural- symbolic reading of Polynesian texts to provide accounts of the past which are both historical and culturally motivated. Siikala's as yet unpublished work is a project of the same kind, which promises to provide much richer Cook Island history, as well as Sissons's studies of New Zealand Māori (Sissons 1984, and Sissons, Wi Hongi and Hohepa 1987). There is also our own work in Tokelau (1985) which is part of a larger historical ethnography of the group. In all these accounts, Polynesians are not portrayed as simply the passive subjects of dominating intrusions of one sort or another, but as active agents harnessing the new situations to historical projects of their own.

Such anthropological projects, one might think, should sit comfortably with the insider ones, in spite of the fact that they have all been done by scholars outside the region. In many respects they do, more especially among insiders who are aware that the remote Polynesian past is as alien to their own historical and cultural context as it is to that of outsiders. Yet within the South Pacific, and especially in Fiji, a lot more attention is currently being paid to studies which fit in to one or another variety of "world system theory" (Narsey 1979; Howard *et al.* 1983; Narayan 1984). It is plain why this should be so, given the contemporary social and political context. (Note that we wrote this in early 1987, before the military coups in Fiji.) The historic changes wrought by the intrusions of the

capitalist world system can be connected very easily to the immediate concerns with issues of class and tradition. Yet it is also evident that the world system studies done so far within the region have been of a most general kind, ignoring much contrary evidence and giving little or no attention to the wide variety of specific outcomes (Meleisea and Schoeffel 1984). In the South Pacific, as elsewhere in the Third World, the advancing capitalist system has also been plainly modified and adapted to many local cultural and social circumstances, and it is this process the world system approach brutally elides. There is much more historical work to be done before this particular problem gets sorted out.

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