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THE EVOLUTION AND ORGANISATION OF PREHISTORIC SOCIETY IN POLYNESIA

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COMMUNITY-LEVEL ORGANISATION, POWER AND ELITES IN POLYNESIAN SETTLEMENT PATTERN STUDIES

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"Long after the culture-area approach waned in cultural and social anthropology generally, it has remained strong in Polynesia, partially as a consequence of overlapping histories of origin and differentiation of island societies. The study of any particular island group is thus often reflected against a backdrop of controlled comparison that periodically surfaces in someone's effort to tie the results of research together in a single panoramic view." (Marcus 1989:179)

Early on in Polynesian settlement pattern studies Groube (1964) identified three socio-political levels which were reflected in much of the evidence recorded by archaeologists. These were the domestic level, the community level and the political level. I (Green 1986) more recently looked at some of the probable basic components of the ancestral Polynesian settlement from which later developments were constructed. One, the household unit, obviously equates to Groube's domestic level. It is becoming reasonably well delineated through structural evidence dating to the 12th or 13th century A.D. and thereafter (Green 1986:52-53). The best evidence, of course, stems from the period just before and after European contact, and the least satisfactory evidence from the period at the time of Ancestral Polynesian society. Still the household's basic elements are reasonably predictable. Rather, it is variations in details of household units from island group to island group, and through time, that provide most of the differences encountered. Particularly useful are the patterns between and within these units and their association with various monumental forms.

In contrast, at the community and political levels, things are more complex. First, largely on distributional and linguistic evidence, there are several communal structures that may be anticipated as having been present from the beginning and thus formed basic components of the ancestral Polynesian settlement system. The argument is set out in Green (1986) and uses various kinds of evidence, linguistic, ethnographic and archaeological, to predict what these would be: 1. a community house for guests, assemblies and entertainment, 2. a "Polynesian style" men's house, and 3.

a god-house. Other components were predicted to be a *tafua or platform for various secular meetings or council meetings and the installation of high ranking members of society, the *mala'e or public meeting place, with strong religious connotations, and the *afu, a raised place for a specialised house or religious structure.

Before the 12th to 13th century A.D. identification of such structures in the archaeological record is minimal. Predictable, yes, but evidence of their actual physical form, size and composition is entirely lacking. The sad fact is that settlement pattern studies at the community level, with extensive excavations of large areas in which household units and communal structures are exposed, have not taken place. Only a few such sites of this age have been found, and in none do we have the kinds of excavations required. Nor do the structures involved survive as obvious surface remains. This last perhaps suggests that in what were probably very small scale societies with limited populations and socio-political differentiation, monumental constructions were not a common practice (Trigger 1990:120). In Polynesia such a built environment containing large-scale architectural features may only be a late phenomenon.

Two things occur after A.D. 1200 to 1300, when population sizes were larger, and there was growing diversity in Polynesia in the composition of its social and political arrangements and in the archaeological forms in which these are reflected. One is that supra-household level new types of physical structures are identified in the archaeological record, and the second is that some of these take on what archaeologists refer to as monumental form (Trigger 1990).

On the community level, dwellings serving larger groups become identifiable, though none of them, even for the highest levels of social ranking take on anything approaching monumental form. 'Palaces' or palatial estates for the elites are apparently only a phenomenon of the post-European contact period. It is also possible to interpret some buildings as "Polynesian style" houses for unmarried, usually younger members of society, and as god-houses (Green

1986:53). Yet structures to contain gods, or their representations, never took on monumental form. One might in the monumental category mention the Easter Island *moai* (statues) and debate whether they were representations of gods or just venerated ancestors (Van Tilburg 1986:305, 333, 347-349), but no attempt was ever made to 'house' them.

What then were the supra-household entities that took on truly monumental form at least in certain Polynesian societies? Some were likely derived from basic elements that would seem to go back to Ancestral Polynesian society. Among these are the **tafua*, the *mala'e* and the *ahu*. But many others are structures for which there is no distributional, ethnographic, linguistic or archaeological reason to predict such a time depth or origin. Here I have reference to the burial mounds (*langi*, *mala'e* and *fa'itoka*) of Tonga, and a few in Futuna and 'Uvea, the *'esi* or chiefly resting places of Tonga, the *sia* or *tia heu* or *seu lupe* or pigeon mounds of Tonga and Samoa, the *tia* or house mounds of 'Uvea and Samoa, the star mounds of Samoa, and the fortifications or *kolo* (*'olo*, *koro*) of Tonga, Futuna, 'Uvea and Samoa.

Except for one form of burial mound in Tonga sometimes associated with the Tu'i Kanokupolu line or other ranking members of society and called *mala'e*, *marae* in West Polynesia never seemed to have taken on monumental form, or to have had more than ordinary size structures erected on them. Similarly, except perhaps in Niue, the *tafua* as a platform for installation and deliberation among ranking members of society, never took on monumental form in West Polynesia. Rather a type of a community dwelling, embracing the *fono*, seems to have served that purpose throughout much of that region though it is still difficult to identify archaeologically. Finally the *ahu*, except perhaps in Fiji, never became an impressive field monument in western Polynesia. Thus development of supra-household monumental constructions in West Polynesia focussed on structures that appear only in the last 800 years of a 3000 year archaeological record, and many are specific types centred on one or two of the societies in that region. Large scale fortification, also linked to Fiji, is the most widespread. More will be said below about the archaeological interpretation of these structures, but it is evident that in none of them is a religious role in relation to the gods particularly to the fore, though it is not entirely lacking.

When one turns to East Polynesia the built environment contains a number of larger-scale architectural features. In contrast to West Polynesia, except in two societies, these are for the most part religious and deity-oriented in nature. Moreover they usually cover an extended size range from small shrines and household *marae* to large religious constructions. Interpreted within the context of other structures, they serve on the individual, domestic, community and political levels, with those of monumental size usually being limited to the last two categories. Thus the *marae*, *ahu*, *tahua* and *heiau* of East Polynesia range from numerous small entities that occur at the household level, and a few much larger structures whose articulation is at a supra-household scale. Finally, all such constructions would seem to have their origins among much more mundane structures present throughout Polynesia. What has happened within Polynesia is that as communities increased in size, and as discrete polities began to expand and compete, larger structures reflecting these developments appear in the archaeological record. In East Polynesia, it is old structures in new and larger guises which take on this role, while in West Polynesia structural types that lack such antecedents perform those functions.

Three societies do not fit this pattern in East Polynesia. Two are New Zealand and Rapa. There toward the later end of the sequence fortifications become the dominant field monument after A.D. 1400 or 1500. In New Zealand the archaeological form of the *marae-ahu-tahua* complex takes on a rather different and not easily identified surface architectural form. Rather, as Sutton (1990:204-205) has argued, "the prototypical marae was a domestic-level structure [the highest Type I house within a complex kainga with a made flat area in front, and cooking-food storage area to the rear and/or right] which was modified in form, expanded in size and incorporated into pa after 1400 AD." In Rapa, with one or two exceptions of larger *marae*, it takes on a mini-"model *marae*" form as a feature within the fort (Ferdon 1965:72-74). Other large-scale architectural forms in the archaeological landscapes of these two societies are few, and most of the settlement pattern field evidence falls into the food production and consumption categories.

In the third society, Easter Island, there is instead a major change in the sequence after A.D. 1600. The monumental *ahu-tahua-moai* complex almost everywhere is slowly displaced (at times literally covered over) by the semi-pyramidal burial mound and the focus shifts to a single nucleated ceremonial centre, Orongo, of quite different form. Scattered about are the occasional *tupa* and *hare moa* which are probably supra-household constructions of somewhat uncertain function.

In terms of high level interpretation what does all this suggest to a culture-historical anthropologist? My thoughts take the following line. If one tries to reconstruct the principal gods or the nights of the moon for Polynesia, you find only a few, Maui, Tangaloa and the like, able to be confidently reconstructed for Proto-Polynesian. But for

Proto-Eastern Polynesian a longer list of common, widespread gods is easily reconstructed. Their names appear in the nights of the moon (Green 1988:Table 4) and one or more of them plays an important role in each of the contact ethnographies. The names, in various cognate forms, are familiar: Filo, Tu, Tane, Longo, etc. Not surprisingly there is a strong correlation between the physical precincts in which those gods are addressed - the *marae-ahu-tahua* complex and this pantheon. Variations, of course, occur from one society to the next. The contrast is with West Polynesia, where the gods seem more remote and physical monuments to them rare or absent. The energies of the societies in their built environment beyond the domestic level went into the construction of large mounds for the living, or the dead and for expressions of competition (warfare and defence, pigeon catching). Things in society were focussed on more person-oriented station and status levels. Burley (1992) provides a good example of such intense monument construction for this reason in the mid-15th century (and later) archaeological landscape of Ha'apai, Tonga.

In East Polynesia the energies went into constructions from the household level up into architectural forms which represented individuals and a society's structured relationships to the gods. At the community and political level one had to work in concert with and be seen to have the active support of the gods to achieve various community-wide and political ends.

I do not wish to pursue this western-eastern difference further here; the pattern is familiar to most ethnologists. It is best developed in a recent essay of Shore (1989:162-163, 165), in which the power relations are brought out as follows:

"There is certainly strong evidence for this general distinction between the complementary dualisms of Western Polynesia and the monolithic and quantitative gradient of power and status in the east. Thus, for instance, the (unstable) complementarily between sacred and utilitarian power in Western Polynesian cultures was replaced in the east by a tendency towards a single rank continuum from sacred to common." (Shore 1989:160)

Rather I wish to end with these observations. Kirch (1990) has recently compared the monumental architecture of Tonga with that of Hawaii. The comparison, however, is from a fairly synchronic point of view reflecting the late forms in each sequence. These, of course, are also the two societies that stand out as the politically most complex in Polynesia at the time of European contact. He finds that Tongan and Hawaiian monuments display hierarchical distributions that correspond to the political hierarchy itself.

This is evident in the rank-size distributions of monumental volume and area, in the spatial distribution of the very few large monuments marking central places of elite power, and in the regular distribution of smaller and medium sized monuments that mark individual territorial units.

Taking a more diachronic viewpoint and surveying all of Polynesia, what I see is two trajectories or trends reflected in the supra-household field monuments of Polynesia that are most highly developed in Tonga and Hawaii. One takes the ancient *marae-ahu-tahua* complex centred in the household and community and develops this as part of major expansions at the community and political level at later points in each sequence. The outcome is reflected in a number of societies of East Polynesia in which political endeavours are bound up with the works of the gods. It is also evident in Tikopia in the composition of the ranking chief's house complex within a village (Green 1970:21 and Fig. 3) and in the community *marae* at Uta (Green 1970:Fig. 4). As discrete polities form and intensify in these societies they continue to exhibit a strongly religious basis, organisation and structure.

The second trajectory suppresses or incorporates and minimalises this orientation and does not draw heavily on ancestral components of Polynesian society. Instead, it innovates new forms of monumental architecture, often not historically related, which reflect the later community and political level developments being played out in those societies. The two divergent paths of socio-political evolution evident in Polynesia, display parallel trajectories among a set of societies, which differ only in their specific features. The major field monuments of the later Polynesian settlement systems offer us a diachronic perspective on these trends; yet, in our interpretations, we are still addressing only historically particular and isolated cases. They are more than that, as I have tried to sketch out here.

NOTE

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