



NEW ZEALAND  
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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEW

Daniel Frimigacci, *Aux temps de la Terre Noire. Ethnoarchéologie des îles Futuna et Alofi*. Peeters, Paris, in association with CNRS and ORSTOM. Langues et Cultures du Pacifique 7. 1990. 251 pp., maps, figs, tables, 15 plates. Belgian francs 1770 (approx. \$94).

It is a great pity that language difficulties and book prices inhibit the exchange of information between English and French speaking archaeologists working in Polynesia. There is much interesting work going on in French-speaking territories and New Zealand archaeologists keen to draw together the data of archaeology and the often rich oral traditions of Polynesian communities would find much of interest in this book.

*Le kele uli*: 'temps de la Terre Noire' or 'the time of the black earth' is the way Futunans characterise the remote past, and the time before the introduction of Christianity. Frimigacci and his associates (for he makes it clear that this is a collaborative work) have in fact used it to characterise the earliest of three periods of Futunan history – the remote time largely beyond the reach of oral tradition when Futuna was first settled by pottery-making people who dwelled around the coast. The second period is *le kele mea*, the time of red or ochre coloured earth when the population spread inland. The third is *le kele kula* (brown earth) when in relatively recent times they returned to the coast. Evidence from archaeology and oral history is presented for each of these periods, and an attempt is then made to explain some of the important transformations in Futunan society. In the early sections of the book the evidence of archaeology and that of mythology and oral history are presented separately, but as the work progresses and the voice of oral history becomes stronger the two become at times rather messily mingled.

The first chapter presents Futunan creation myths and a description of the various kinds of Futunan deities, but then concludes that historical information on remote periods is better obtained from archaeology and ends with a review of Polynesian origins and the peopling of the Pacific.

The second chapter covers Futunan history from the arrival of Lapita colonists until the traditionally remembered Tongan invasions. Building on the earlier work of Pat Kirch, French archaeologists have recorded 78 ceramic sites in Futuna and Alofi and excavated in 10 – producing an important body of data only briefly summarised here. The earliest site, Asipani, dates to about 700 BC and contains early Eastern Lapita pottery. Very little is known about the middle period. The spread inland is thought to have begun in the middle of the first millennium AD when pottery was still in use. The stories about Tongan invasions, which can to some extent be correlated with Tongan oral history sources, describe events which are thought to have taken place around the 16th century.

The next three chapters present the turbulent history of the last few centuries of Futunan society in an increasingly chronological fashion, using genealogies as a framework. A number of archaeological sites are described and illustrated and excavations, particularly in burial sites, are touched upon.

The final analytical chapter discusses the validity of oral traditions, establishes a genealogically based chronological framework and reviews a number of important issues in the Futunan past which have relevance to other parts of Polynesia.

Oral traditions include both fixed and free forms. The former include toasts at kava ceremonies and two kinds of dances accompanied by chants. The latter include narratives known and told by many people and narratives that are the property of their authors. These provide commentaries in whose light the fixed forms can be understood, but have the danger that they may be slanted to a particular point of view. This can be countered to some extent by collecting and discussing as many versions as possible. The genealogical framework, using 28 years to a generation, provided much detail about the period estimated at AD 1756 to 1840, and reached back much more sparsely to the late 15th or early 16th centuries.

Interesting ideas abound in the last section. For example, it is suggested that the loss of pottery relates to the development of chiefdoms, with intensification of agriculture, loss of arboriculture, and changes in cooking and storage requirements; and that the rise of the chiefdoms contributed to intensification of agriculture, rather than intensification leading to chiefdoms. Pottery is thought to have lasted as late as AD 1400 (on the basis of a single unweathered sherd in a dated context). The cause of war is seen primarily as the desire for power.

Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence is not presented in sufficient detail to permit it to be assessed. There are, however, some rather naive interpretations which cast doubt on the level of archaeological interpretation generally. A single shell adze of a very widespread form is hailed as evidence of Micronesian influence. There is frequent reference to cannibal ovens – an interpretation presumably derived from informants. The general tenor of the narrative makes this a likely interpretation, but other possibilities, such as *umu ti*, should at least be considered.

The work is presented as an academic monograph, and is well illustrated, documented and referenced. It includes a number of examples of oral traditions in both Futunan and French. However, the treatment of the archaeological evidence is in the nature of a popular summary and much of it does not seem to be yet available elsewhere.

Nonetheless the work presents some fascinating glimpses of the prehistory of an island little known to most New Zealanders. Among the points I found most striking were the following. There is obviously a wealth of archaeological evidence, from the early ceramic sites to the abundant field monuments of more recent times. The period covered by consistent and apparently factual oral traditions is remarkably short – extending back only about 150 years before the arrival of missionaries. Even events that are deemed to have taken place in the 17th century contain strong mythical elements. There was a great deal of inter-

island mobility and presumably influence in the protohistoric period – one of three powerful chiefs in Sigave around about 1800 is said to have been the son of an American whaler and a Fijian woman. Last but not least, the oral traditions, unsanitised by a liberal and culturally sensitive perspective, are a reminder of just how vicious and relentless the quest for chiefly power in a small Polynesian society could be.

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