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Sir Peter Buck and the Samoans

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ABSTRACT

Although Sir Peter Buck consciously tried to use inductive methods in his study of Samoan material culture, it is argued here that his final judgement that Samoan adze technology was more primitive than elsewhere in Polynesia was a response to two contemporary publications that ranked Samoan people as racially more advanced than the Maori. The intellectual background to this response is explored with reference to Buck's education, his contacts and reading, and the prevailing cultural evolutionary pre-occupation with racial ranking.

Keywords: SIR PETER BUCK, SAMOANS, ADZES, RACIAL RANKING, HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY.

As in other social sciences, there is a growing interest among anthropologists in the history of the discipline and of its component branches. Although the development of theories and interpretative frameworks has been examined in many areas, few studies have been made of the factors influencing anthropologists as individuals, such as their educational and intellectual backgrounds, publications they were reading and their relationships with their contemporaries. This paper examines those factors in the life of Peter Buck in an attempt to explain his marked antipathy to the Samoan people, which spilled over from his private correspondence into his scientific monograph on their material culture. As an important figure in the growth of Pacific studies, Buck's career has been well documented (e.g., Condliffe 1971; Sorrenson 1982); however, it was the survival of his correspondence with Sir Apirana Ngata which made this type of detailed analysis possible, and the publication of these letters (Sorrenson 1986, 1987, 1988) which facilitated it.

Sir Peter Buck, who is also known by his Maori name Te Rangihiroa, is renowned among anthropologists for his meticulously researched monographs on traditional Polynesian arts and crafts. In his long career he produced detailed studies of the material culture of Aitutaki (1927), Samoa (1930), Tongareva (1932a), Manihiki-Rakahanga (1932b), Mangareva (1938a), the Cook group as a whole (1944), Kapingamarangi (1950), and Hawai'i (1957). His other publications range from an important study of the evolution of Maori clothing (1924) to the popular account of Polynesian prehistory, *Vikings of the Sunrise* (1938b, [1959 as *Vikings of the Pacific*]), which encapsulates his views on racial origins and type in Polynesia.

Within his extensive correspondence with Sir Apirana Ngata can be found numerous references to the fieldwork and to the long hours of analysis that preceded each monograph on material culture. This included descriptions of how he unravelled the sennit bindings of fishhooks, drawing each stage of the lashing process before restoring them to their original state. With larger cultural items such as traditional Samoan council houses, the concern with detail was equally fastidious and intense. This was not analysis of detail for its own sake,

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as Buck made clear to Ngata in 1928, but an ethnological method for unravelling the origins, migrations and development of the Polynesian cultures :

I feel technique is the most exact measuring rod we will be able to apply to Polynesian material culture to analyse what was held in common and what was developed by the various branches as they became isolated in their respective environments. (Buck to Ngata 20/11/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 146)

In previous letters, Buck spoke of his methodology in terms which allow us to label it as inductive. Criticising the unscholarly treatment of data by certain hyper-diffusionist ethnologists such as Perry (Daniel 1964: 95), he emphasised that technique of manufacture must be virtually identical before cross-cultural identity of artefacts can be claimed :

The round ends of the houses in the Society and Cook Groups can be shown on construction to be due to entirely different modes of thought to those of Samoa. A whole lot of these parallels and diffusions will prove to be different in detail and hence in the mental efforts that brought them into being... (Buck to Ngata 2/7/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 111)

I fully expect to get into trouble with some of the older ethnologists who base their theories on the evolution of culture from the printed errors of unqualified observers. I will endeavour however to continue recording the steps between 'the mental effort and its product' and thus avoid the assertive method of the Perry School. Fortunately I have not yet evolved a theory. Whatever edifice the mobilisation of data may result in must await the assembling. (Buck to Ngata 24/9/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 133)

Even though the recording of detail became tedious at times, Buck remained convinced that "the drudgery of recording details has to be proceeded with if we would avoid the errors of premature conclusions" (Buck to Ngata 4/11/30 in Sorrenson 1987: 73).

From these comments, then, we might assume that all Buck's generalisations about material culture were empirically derived. For example, Buck made the following general comment concerning Samoan stone adzes:

When it comes to worked stone, as exemplified by stone adzes, the Samoans lag far behind their fellow Polynesians to the east, in stone technique. (Buck 1930: 321)

On what empirical grounds was this comment based? The first 'justification' for this statement is Buck's observation that after flaking their stone adzes into shape the Samoans did not practise the common East Polynesian technique of pecking, and furthermore kept the amount of grinding on the common adze types to a minimum. The second 'justification' was that the Samoans, unlike the East Polynesians, made no attempt to reduce the butt of the adze into a tang in order to facilitate lashing (Buck 1930: 332, 355). But without further explanation he then proceeded to argue that two of the common Samoan adze types, as defined by their cross-sections, were therefore more primitive than other types made in East Polynesia:

As Samoan adz technique is more primitive than that of other Polynesian areas with stone available, the triangular adz with the wide surface at the back would appear to be the more primitive form, and the reversed form with the wide surface in front may be regarded as a later development which reached its highest form in the Society, Cook, and neighboring islands. (Buck 1930: 349)

Samoan stone technique is so crude as compared with that of other Polynesian areas that the common Samoan quadrilateral form with sides converging to the front might well be considered as the more primitive type... [compared to] the reversed quadrilateral. (Buck 1930: 356)

This argument presents logical difficulties: on the basis of only two features (degree of finish and presence/absence of tang), Buck pronounces Samoan adzes in general to be more primitive than those from elsewhere in Polynesia. Since Samoan adzes are generally more primitive, he argues, their preferred cross-sections (triangular and trapezoidal) probably also represent primitive traits. Of course there is no logical necessity for this latter conclusion to be true, since the original generalisation was of the type termed 'hasty' by philosophers, or 'statistically unsound' by mathematicians.

In other respects, Buck's analysis of Samoan adze technology was perceptive and well argued. Indeed, a modified version of his typology is still in use today (Green and Davidson 1969; Leach and Witter 1990). But the claim that their technique was crude and primitive cannot be justified. Technique cannot be judged on degree of finish alone. It embodies all the processes of adze manufacture from blank production and preform shaping to grinding and hafting. Buck was not ignorant of these processes, as his monograph displays (Buck 1930: 330–2). For an adze to be functional it need only have the two surfaces immediately adjacent to the cutting edge ground smooth. In the case of their medium-sized adzes, the Samoans did just that minimal amount of grinding before use. With certain larger adzes, they invested similar amounts of energy to achieve the fully ground surfaces seen on some (but by no means all) East Polynesian adzes. It was clearly a matter of choice whether or not to add value to an adze by hours of laborious grinding, not an indication of technical prowess. As for tanging, none of the West Polynesian adze makers employed this hafting technique (and nor did the later Maori)—so why single out the Samoans?

Buck's damning conclusions about Samoan adze technique are clearly not the product of the inductive method he claimed to be using, and there is nothing in the Samoan monograph to explain why he adopted them. His letter to Ngata written just before his departure to Samoa on fieldwork shows that this evaluation was first expressed after a pilot study of the Bishop Museum's Samoan adze collection:

Something drastic occurred between Western and Eastern Polynesia as evidenced in stone adzes alone. Apart from shapes, technique underwent a vast change. The Samoans chip their stone and grind very little outside of the parts necessary to form a cutting edge. The East pecked their material and their finish shows a great advance. This advance is shown by N.Z., Hawaii and all the islands east of and including the Society and Cook. The weapons also of the Samoan area are crude. One end was neglected and though much has been said of the Samoans as a pure type of Polynesian, they certainly lag behind and far behind in stone

implements and weapons of war. (Buck to Ngata 27/8/27 in Sorrenson 1986: 52-3)

From 1927 on, his letters to Ngata reveal an astonishing array of criticisms of many other aspects of Samoan culture, most of which are based on personal judgements of Samoan attitudes and values:

The Samoans are a fine race to look at physically but mentally they are backward. The fact that they are continually making sinnet braid and that tapa cloth is still made when these activities are defunct in all other parts of Polynesia, shows you the culture stage they are in. (Buck to Ngata 12/3/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 72)

Our more remote kinsmen, the Samoans are in the rut of self satisfaction so deep that able bodied men sit round braiding coconut sennit and parcelling out governing positions amongst themselves over a mandated country. (Buck to Ngata 20/11/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 144)

[The Samoans] are far behind the cultural stage attained by our own people. . . . From our Maori standard, the Samoan is ignorant, self-satisfied and arrogant. (Buck to Ngata 9/11/29 in Sorrenson 1986: 262)

...there is no branch of the Polynesians that is more ignorant in their self conceit than our friends of Samoa. (Buck to Ngata 10/2/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 114)

The Samoan philosophy of life is 'narrow, conceited and self-centred' but under present conditions I think it is 'adequate to his limited needs.' (Buck to Ngata 25/8/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 211)

The reasons which lie behind these increasingly dismissive judgements are not obvious. There were no 'incidents' or frustrations commented on by Buck in the letters written during his fieldwork period, September 1927 to early March 1928. On his return to Hawai'i, Buck admitted to Ngata that he has "nothing to change from the opinions previously expressed" (12/3/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 72). We must therefore look further back in time for their formulation.

Again the letters provide useful evidence. Between 1927 and 1931 there were several direct and indirect references to two books that compared (in a ranking sense) different Polynesian peoples. One of these was the *Handbook of Western Samoa* published by the New Zealand Administration in 1925, under the direction of Major-General George Richardson. From the letters it appears that Buck had read the *Handbook* a short time before his fieldwork, since he referred indirectly to one of its claims in a letter to Ngata dated 27 August, 1927. The subject of New Zealand's administration of Western Samoa was a recurrent theme in the letters as the Mau resistance movement increasingly created problems for the Ward government of which Ngata was a member. Thus Buck reported back to Ngata in 1928 on the situation as he had observed it in Western Samoa. Ngata had been reading the second book relevant to this discussion: the Australian geographer Griffith Taylor's work on *Environment and Race* (1927), which Ngata interpreted to Buck as suggesting that the

Maori and Hawaiian were the earlier stratum of Polynesians, while the Samoan "represents the later and higher type" (Ngata to Buck 23/6/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 104-5). In reply Buck stated

The Samoan, after five months residence amongst them, does not strike me as the higher type. On what is the statement based? On the reiterated statements of unscientific writers who assert without producing any evidence except the size of the Samoans. Even Richardson had a paragraph in that Samoan year book thing stating they were the highest branch of the Polynesians... I asked him on what data the statement was founded but of course got no intelligent answer. (Buck to Ngata 29/7/28 in Sorrenson 1986: 120)

The 'year book thing' was of course the *Handbook of Western Samoa*.

Again, in 1931, Buck wrote that superficial impressions of the Samoans lead visitors

to announce to the world at large that here is the purest and most aristocratic branch of the Polynesians. Richardson shared those impressions... (Buck to Ngata 25/8/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 209)

Ngata's rendering of Taylor's views was compiled from several parts of *Environment and Race*. On the level of broad racial groupings, Taylor (1927: 84) ranked Polynesians as uniformly higher than Tasmanians, Australians and Melanesians. When examining internal Polynesian differences he stressed that "the Maori (an early type) was pushed farther and farther away by later types" (Taylor 1927: 89), emphasising order of migration rather than evolutionary rank. But it is also true that Taylor believed in the "superiority of the broad-headed peoples" (*ibid.*: 10), and Ngata would not have missed the significance of the later description of the Maori as "long-headed" and the Samoan as "very brachycephalic" (*ibid.*: 85).

Probably influenced by Ngata's summary of Taylor, Buck's perception of the *Handbook* represents a misinterpretation: he wrote that Richardson described the Samoans as the highest branch of the Polynesians, whereas the *Handbook* had actually called them "perhaps the purest surviving type of Polynesian..." (Western Samoa Administration 1925: 41). The paragraph in which Richardson made this remark was in no way favourable to the Samoans, however. Quoted in full it stated

The Samoan is perhaps the purest surviving type of Polynesian, who is distinguished everywhere by regular almost European features, tall stature (averaging 5ft.10in.), and light-brown complexion. In character he is, in his native state, mild, friendly, and hospitable, and easily led by those who have earned his respect. At the same time he has all the faults natural to imperfect development, and the key to his proper understanding is the recognition of the truth that he is still but a child, well mannered and attractive when pleased, but at times capricious and wayward, with primitive passions easily aroused. That those passions as easily subside again should not obscure the fact that the Samoan is a faulty human being, and not the romantically perfect creature it has been the fashion of

superficial observers to depict him. (Western Samoa Administration 1925: 41–2)

Curiously, Buck did not query this paternalistic judgement, even when he pondered the criteria for assessing “imperfect development” in a letter to Ngata in 1931 (Buck to Ngata 25/8/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 209). His attention remained focused on what he perceived as the unjustified ranking of the Samoan as racially higher than the Maori. He was so concerned about this ranking that he raised it again seven years later in his *Vikings of the Sunrise* (1938b).

Why did Buck believe that Richardson’s concept of racial purity equated with superiority and aristocracy? The answer is straightforward: it was a basic premise in much of the race literature that he had been exposed to during his education and subsequent careers as medical officer and ethnologist. Notions of racial impurity led to active discrimination against half-castes by the authorities in both Western and American Samoa, affecting their rights to property, titles and the vote (Ngata to Buck 3/8/31, and Buck to Ngata 25/8/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 198, 211). Ngata noted that such prejudice was less evident in New Zealand because “in many cases they were the issue of women of the highest families” and they were thus able to fulfil their “proper function of bridging the intellectual social and political gap between the two races” (Ngata to Buck 3/8/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 198). Ngata could hardly have expounded a different viewpoint in the knowledge of Buck’s own mixed origins (Buck’s mother was from Ngati Awa, his father of Irish descent).

Even more significant than the concept of racial purity was the notion of evolutionary ranking. This pervades all ethnological and evolutionary writing from the last few decades of the nineteenth century until the 1930s at least. We know both from Buck’s textbook list while at Medical School at Otago (University of Otago 1899 to 1904), and from the references in his subsequent papers, letters and book reviews, that he read widely and kept up to date in these fields.

From a reference in his “Evolution of Maori Clothing” (Buck 1924a: 29), we know that he was familiar with Ratzel’s influential book *History of Mankind* (1896), a three volume work which still exists in several sets in Dunedin libraries. Although Ratzel emphasised the unity of the human race in its common inheritance, he believed that the ‘natural’ races or ‘lower strata’ of humanity had been prevented by geographical and historical circumstances from ascending ‘to the heights of civilization’ (Ratzel 1896: 3, 9, 14–15, 18–19). This retardation extended beyond culture and technology to intellectual abilities and character. Thus Ratzel wrote that the “Polynesian has not the childish naïvete of the negro; but at the same time he is not so reserved as the Malay nor so calculating as the Chinese” (Ratzel 1896 (I): 187). On Ratzel’s step-wise ranking from ‘natural’ to ‘highly civilized’, the Polynesians were above the Melanesians, the latter representing an earlier development (ibid.: 151). As a result of their isolation, the Australians had degenerated to an even lower rank (ibid.: 152).

While Ratzel linked the Polynesians with the Mongoloid races, Hutchinson *et al.* (1905 (I): 10) in their widely available book, *Living Races of Mankind*, argued that they were one of the very finest races in the whole world with a facial type approaching that of the European. This affiliation was elaborated by Keane (1908) who identified Papuans, Melanesians and Australians as members of the negroid or lowest division (ibid.: 13), while Polynesians were “an Oceanic branch of the Caucasian division” (ibid.: 417) in no way inferior to the average European and therefore of the “highest human type” (ibid.: 10).

With the intensification of anthropometric studies of Pacific peoples (e.g., by Sullivan 1923 and Dixon 1923) using both living and skeletal samples, the simple picture had to be abandoned and replaced by scenarios involving multiple waves of migration and racial mixing. In 1923 Buck attended the second Pan-Pacific Science Congress in Melbourne at which A. C. Haddon, W. J. Perry and Griffith Taylor all speculated about the origins of Oceanic peoples. Haddon quoted Sullivan's conclusions that there were two basic elements in the Polynesian race: Polynesian proper "which may prove to be a very primitive Caucasian type", and an Indonesian element of Mongoloid type showing divergence towards Negro (Haddon 1923: 222). The hyper-diffusionist Perry believed that Maori and Hawaiians were later arrivals than the Tahitians, Samoans and Fijians who represented an Archaic Civilization traceable to Egypt (Perry 1923: 228). Griffith Taylor, whose ideas were more widely accepted, argued that it was Asia that was the chief locus of evolution and that the 'highest' and latest evolved group (the Alpine-Mongolian peoples) had displaced the earlier Polynesians who in turn overlay the Higher Melanesians. To Taylor, the Maori were akin to West Europeans (Iberians), while the broader-headed Polynesians were placed in the more highly evolved Alpine group (Taylor 1923: 252-3).

Another influential contributor to this debate was Dixon, whose book *The Racial History of Man* was reviewed by Buck in 1923. He spoke in terms of Caspian and Alpine types of Polynesians, with long and broad heads respectively, who poured in waves across Oceania overwhelming the Melanesians (Buck 1923: 248-9). Although Dixon did not believe that Melanesians had reached New Zealand, Buck continued to support the presence of a non-Polynesian element within certain Maori physical types. However, the identification of this Melanesian element with Te Matorohanga's Maruiwi was already under attack by Skinner (Buck 1924b: 66-7).

By the time Buck published his own synthesis of Oceanic migrations, first delivered to a conference in Honolulu in 1927, he had settled on a complex wave theory embodying a strong ranking of racial types from the most primitive Tasmanians, up through Australian aborigines, Papuans and Melanesians, to the highly evolved Polynesians. The latter group "was bred from a Caucasian wave" which "came into contact with people of Mongoloid stock", and interbred with them before becoming the "super-Vikings of the Pacific" (Buck 1928: 233, 236). The subsequent history of the Polynesians involved the now widely accepted notion of two dispersal centres, the first based on Samoa, the second on the Society Islands. On the premise advanced by Buck that the "weakest and the most primitive were the first to go" (Buck 1928: 232), the evolutionary position of the most recent Polynesian migrants, the Maori, could be assumed to be higher than that of the Samoans, and of any earlier race in New Zealand. For a while Buck extended this argument to the supposed two waves of Maori migrants to New Zealand, but by 1931 was having some doubts about "the later crowd from Hawaiki with their aristocratic bombast" (Buck to Ngata 21/7/31 in Sorrenson 1987: 188). By 1938, when he wrote *Vikings of the Sunrise*, Buck had abandoned the simplistic view of a Negroid strain in New Zealand, but continued to describe the Polynesians as Caucasian or 'Europoid' for the rest of his career.

Given his ethnic and academic background, therefore, Buck's attitude to the Samoans can be interpreted as a defensive response to Richardson's ill-justified remark in the *Handbook*. A case may be made that as a scientist, he felt it was necessary to oppose the unscientific claims of Richardson (see letter of 29/7/28 quoted above). But this does not explain his disparaging remarks about the character of the Samoans. These were more likely to have been motivated by pride in his own Maori ancestry, and irritation with the difficulties that the Samoans were causing to his friend Ngata and his colleagues. Buck was not able to step

outside the epistemological frameworks of racial characterisation and ranking that dominated both academic and political literature in these decades. Nor was he perceptive enough in this case to realise that his irritation with Richardson and the Samoans was influencing his academic writing on Samoan technology, a work which he took pride in asserting was based on the inductive method.

This investigation of Buck's attitudes to the Samoans is not intended to diminish his reputation as a scholar. Indeed, most of the content of *Samoan Material Culture* is free of obvious bias and represents a major achievement in the documentation and explanation of material culture. The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that even in an academic work which has a 'factual' data base, it is possible to detect traces of the strongly held political and racial views of its author. Recent research in the history of science and in critical anthropology suggests that this is a widespread phenomenon (Hull 1988; Trigger 1989).

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