SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY AUSTRONESIAN COLONISERS

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INTRODUCTION

Very little is generally written about the social characteristics of the earliest groups that colonized the islands east of Melanesia, although some authors occasionally reveal their assumptions about the matter in incidental statements (e.g. Bellwood 1979:255). I am specifically referring here to the social characteristics of Lapita communities and by extension to the social characteristics of all early Austronesian communities. Lapita, of course, was first defined and its importance in the initial occupation of Polynesia was recognized by Gifford and Shutler in 1956. Their insights have provided an unusually fertile basis for subsequent advances in our understanding of Oceanic prehistory. In this paper, I will argue that consideration of social characteristics can be a critical link to our understanding of why Lapita and Austronesian groups expanded so rapidly and over such long distances, as well as to our understanding of other important aspects of Oceanic prehistory.

THE MODELS

At the extremes, there are two alternative assumptions that can be made concerning the fundamental social characteristics of the original Lapita communities. First, it can be assumed that they were derived from egalitarian, or even status ranked, communities very similar to those found in many parts of New Guinea. This model is most consistent with the view sometimes proposed that Lapita groups expanded because they were swidden horticulturalists who "consumed" land at a rapid pace (Bellwood 1980:178; Kennedy 1981; White and Allen 1980:733).

The alternative is to view proto-Lapita and proto-Austronesian communities as being stratified in the form of incipient chiefdoms - or at least societies with inherent trends towards stratification - more or less similar to the chiefdoms of Polynesia at the time of contact.

In sum, the issue being raised is whether stratification evolved in Polynesia after the area was colonized, or whether tendencies toward social stratification were part of the cultural repertory originally brought into the area. If the view is adopted that stratification was brought into the area by the first migrants, then there are several problems to resolve. In the first place, if the original communities entering the area were stratified already, why did some of them subsequently undergo a reduction or loss of

their stratification, while others maintained it? Sahlins (1958:248-50; Pawley 1981:19-20) has argued that this was due to unsuitable resource bases for maintaining chiefdoms on the smaller islands. However, if this is true, it must be asked what resources the larger islands had which were favorable to the maintenance of chiefdoms, if not for their emergence? Population levels and productivity here were similar to areas of New Guinea where no stratification emerged. Moreover, Peebles and Kus (1977:424-7) have pointed out that, contrary to Sahlins' model of the conditions under which chiefdoms should emerge, there is actually very little redistribution of raw materials, such as foodstuffs, which occurs in Polynesian chiefdoms. In fact almost all of the member communities in Polynesian chiefdoms either were self-sufficient in terms of food, or they traded directly with other communities for necessary materials without going through the chiefly bureaucracy. Under these conditions, even if Lapita communities had originated from stratified groups, what would have held them together? "Tradition" certainly does not seem to be a suitable explanation.

What I would like to argue is that in comparison to subsistence economies, economies involving significant trade of scarce and monopolizable resources are much more consistent with the assumption of originally stratified communities, and also that these types of trade economies are much more likely to leave archaeological sequences such as those found in Oceania.

EVALUATING THE MODELS

The Egalitarian Model

The assumption of egalitarian founding communities suffers from several major drawbacks. In the first place, Melanesia displays just as much geographical and ecological diversity, if not much more, as the rest of Oceania. Moreover, major parts of Melanesia were occupied vastly longer than the rest of Oceania and maintained comparable agricultural productivity with similar population densities. In spite of these apparently equally or even more favorable conditions for the emergence of social stratification (according to Sanders and Price 1968; Sahlins 1968; and others), it did not develop to any significant extent in Melanesia. If it did not develop in Melanesia from founding communities which can reasonably be assumed to have been egalitarian, why should it have developed anywhere else in Oceania? There are no obvious environmental conditions present in the rest of Oceania which are missing in Melanesia.

Secondly, the assumption of population pressure due to the consumption of land or stemming from an inherent population expansion does not adequately account for the extremely rapid expansion of the Lapita and subsequent Polynesian groups. Where

groups are constantly coming up short of resources, they should be expected to curtail reproduction and survival to at least low levels, if not to equilibrium. Under these conditions, it is difficult to imagine any overall rate of population increase high enough to account for rapid population expansions such as that exhibited by Lapita and later Polynesian communities. Furthermore, if it is assumed that their inherent rates of increase were high, we are left wondering what people did after they ran out of islands to colonize. Moreover, the close correlation between population and resources documented for the recent past of the area (Hainline 1965) implies that populations which do not experience significant resource stress today are fairly well regulated. Why would this not have been the case prehistorically, especially since it could not have been known a priori at any particular time that there were or were not additional islands to colonize?

In sum, the egalitarian-founder model might be applicable to the initial colonization of Melanesia, with its slow rate of spread, and limited distances travelled. However, it seems difficult to apply it to the Lapita expansion.

The Stratificaton Model

The assumption of stratified or incipiently stratified founding communities is not without its problems as well. Before dealing with these, I would like to set out the strong points of this model.

Firstly, since social stratification did not develop in Melanesia even after many thousands of years of occupation, it seems unlikely that it would have developed in situ in the rest of Oceania after a much shorter period of occupation.

A second strong point for assuming that founding communities were already stratified to some degree is that socially stratified societies tend to generate expansive population movements, even where the overall rate of population growth is relatively low. These migrations come about due to the tendency of members of the upper classes to acquire numerous wives and concubines, who produce more offspring than can be accommodated in the upper class bureaucracy. This situation, for example, reached chronic proportions in China at the time of Confucious, who was himself a "poor" aristocrat. Examples of similar situations can be found in the history of Europe, and appear to have affected such groups as the Itza Maya (Carmack 1981). One common solution to this situation has been to equip lower ranking nobles who feel that they have been cheated of their rightful economic inheritance with the means to go out and establish themselves in new domains, by conquest if necessary. If this does not occur, fighting often breaks out within noble lineages, and the loosing factions are forced to submit

or flee, either to conquer new territory, or to discover uninhabited lands. Polynesian oral history is replete with such episodes. Whether "poor" nobles leave willingly or are forced out in feuds, the result in terms of out-migration is the same. Where there is unoccupied land or inhabitants who cannot defend themselves effectively, this leads to surprisingly rapid population spreads. In fact, it often happens that the emigrating groups are composed primarily of male warriors or those wishing to control the means of production, who succeed for a time in establishing their authority over subjugated groups, but who in the long term lack sufficient numbers or enough women to maintain either their genetic or their linguistic coherence. They are forced to intermarry with local inhabitants and to deal with them on an intensive basis. This pattern has been well documented for the Mexican Itza who conquered Maya groups (Carmack 1981:44-55) and subsequently lost their linguistic and social distinctiveness. This process accounts very well for the hodge-podge of linguistic, racial, political, and material patterning that characterizes the areas where Lapita groups settled and where there were already well established populations, as in Melanesia (see Dutton 1978 for examples of Austronesian absorption). Pawley (1981) has recently argued this same point using linguistic and political structure data for Austronesian groups.

As I noted previously, the major difficulty with this model is that no one has proposed an adequate basis for the evolution or maintenance of stratified communities. In Oceania, the social and population pressure models of chiefdom development fail completely as explanatory frameworks since they do not account for the lack of chiefdoms in New Guinea. Economic models, however, are potentially much more productive given some modification. According to the most prevalent archaeological theory (Sanders and Price 1968; Harris 1971; Sahlins 1968; Gilman 1981), chiefdoms imply control over important resources by a small proportion of the population. The only problem is in identifying important resources that could have been effectively controlled by incipient or established elites. At first there seem to be no such resources which everyone would not have had adequate access to, or which they could not have obtained via individual exchange, as in New Guinea (Peebles and Kus 1977). However, closer examination of the situation reveals that archaeologists have overlooked a relatively important item, in a manner reminiscent of the Polish customs agents who stopped the same man daily for 20 years and vigorously searched through his wheelbarrow of straw. They were convinced he was smuggling something, but were never able to catch him with anything. When he finally retired, they said to him, "Stanislaus, we know that you were smuggling things during these past 20 years, now that you are retired, won't you tell us what it was?" "Sure," said Stanislaus, "Wheelbarrows!"

Similarly, I would suggest that boats are the key to understanding the problem of stratification in Polynesia. I am not referring to all classes of boats, but to boats capable of reliably and repeatedly making trips of several hundred or thousand kilometers in the open ocean. In order to construct such boats, large amounts of labor and materials had to be assembled. The construction of a single medium-sized long-distance canoe took about one to three years (Ferdon 1981:244; Dodd 1972:100). In addition, the labor had to be highly skilled. As a result, canoe builders were full-time specialists trained through a rigid system of apprenticeship and they occupied elevated social positions (Thompson and Taylor 1980:21). This indicates the key role they played in sustaining the power of the elites. Similarly, sail makers, wood carvers, and rope makers for boats had relatively high status, sometimes approaching the level of village chiefs (ibid). Underwriting the construction of such boats, and chiefs often owned several, might well be compared to the capital and labor required to establish a factory in the Industrial World. In fact, the paramount chief in Tahiti is described as maintaining a regular dockyard (Ferdon 1981:240). Average individuals would find the task of building such boats almost insurmountable, and cooperative ventures would be unlikely to succeed due to the magnitude of the task and the high potential for disputes over the many important decisions that had to be made not only in building the boats, but in sailing them and managing the economies of long-distance transactions as well.

Large, long-distance boats cannot be built and sailed safely and effectively without clearly defined hierarchies of command and responsibilities. It would require individuals of considerable wealth and power to successfully complete these construction projects, not to mention maintaining the sailing enterprises with skilled navigators and repairmen as noted by early observers (Dodd 1972:138, 159; see also Haudricourt 1962:46-8). It is no coincidence that these boats were captained by chiefs and priests on war, trading, and exploratory expeditions (Thompson and Taylor 1980:5; Dodd 1972:138). Thus, construction, ownership, and the sailing of long-distance boats, I would argue, was probably one of the keys to the maintenance and perhaps to the origin of the unusually strong social stratification on islands occupied by Lapita and Polynesian groups. On the other hand, as Sahlins (1958) has argued, where population levels dropped below certain critical limits, such as on small atolls, it might prove difficult to maintain rigid stratification.

However, the proposition that ownership of long-distance boats sustained, and/or created Oceanic social stratification still leaves unanswered the question as to why such boats were important. Few prehistorians doubt that such boats must have existed right from the outset of the Lapita migrations, for there is a considerable

body of evidence indicating that even early Lapita communities maintained continuing contacts with widely dispersed areas, including other Lapita communities (Dickinson and Shutler 1974, 1979:1658; Green 1975; Bellwood 1979:247-8; White and Allen 1980-732; Kennedy 1981), while the Proto-Austronesian language contained terms for outrigger seagoing canoes (Pawley and Green 1973; Bellwood 1980:178), and Proto-Oceanic contained terms for "chief" and "commoners" or "subjects" (Pawley 1981:14-18). What would have induced members of these communities to undertake voyages requiring tremendous outlays of energy and materials, involving considerable risks? From a cultural materialist perspective, I would argue that both the construction of large boats and the undertaking of long voyages entail major outlays of time and effort. The persistent patterns of long-distance contacts documented for Lapita groups must have more than repaid the initial investments for those underwriting the projects. The only reasonable activity which is likely to have generated such a surplus over the initial investment would have been trade. I do not refer to local, relatively unrestricted exchange of foodstuffs or other local resources, such as occurred in much of Melanesia. Given the limited capacities of boats, and the relatively abundant food staples that existed within the Oceanic sphere, it seems dubious that the Lapita voyagers were exchanging common staples. Rather, it is likely that they were purveyors of highly access-restricted, unusual goods - primitive valuables, or specialty items - which high ranking individuals would be willing to pay high prices for.

While Green (1974:257; 1976:245) and others have argued for Lapita as a culture based on the economic specialization of long-distance trade, this view has recently been challenged by White and Allen (1980:733) and modified by Green himself. What I wish to argue is that the view of Lapita as significantly, but not entirely, based on a long-distance economic trade specialization still is the most powerful explanatory model available. Such a view accounts for the maintenance of stratification where sufficient population existed to support it. It places the elites in the position of monopolistic ownership of the means of acquisition for a very important segment, although far from the only segment, of the economy. It is consistent with the shoreline locations of the vast majority of Lapita sites, and with the relatively large nucleated Lapita sites, of sizes which tend to characterize trading and manufacturing communities (e.g. see Hayden 1978). It is consistent with the frequent occurrence of various types of ornaments (primitive valuables) in Lapita sites, including the very elaborate Lapita ceramics, shell rings, shell bracelets, pig tusks, shark teeth and bone pendants, pearl shell disks, human skull tablets, tattooing chisels, round stone gaming disks, adzes made of rare rock types, obsidian and other unusual rocks as well as unusual fauna such as wallabies, plus an unknown number of perishable organic artifacts made of wood, fiber, cloth, skins and feathers. In fact,

if my basic arguments are correct, I predict that a substantially greater and richer array of primitive valuables will be found in Lapita sites as more and more are excavated. Most importantly, however, is the fact that highly profitable long-distance trade would certainly provide one of the strongest positive inducements known for daring explorations and colonizations of unknown areas of the world. And in the Polynesian context, intentional exploration of Oceania makes much more sense than colonization due to accidental voyages because the dominant winds and currents come from the east, making it unlikely that any but the most determined sailors would travel from west to east.

In fact, I would argue that traders looking for new sources of primitive valuables, which could be exchanged to elites at considerable profit, provide a consistent pattern of rapid expansion and colonization throughout the world. Examples can be taken from the early sea traders who penetrated all the major rivers along the eastern seaboard of North and South America within a few years of Columbus' first voyage. Nor should it be forgotten that Columbus' entire daring trip toward the 'edge' of the world was for the same purpose, especially for spices. There were also the fur-traders who penetrated the most desolate parts of the boreal forests of Canada. There were the traders of the Classic world who penetrated into the heart of the barbarian Celtic domain; there were the Phoenicians; and there were the Mesoamerican Pochteca. In all these cases, the possibility of substantial profits from trade (not necessarily in terms of cash) often drove some individuals to take extreme risks and to explore every square kilometer within their reach for the sake of gaining potential profit. Moreover, they often established colonies, initially for the purpose of exploiting tradeable resources, and subsequently for the purpose of using the subsistence potentials of the areas. White and Allen's (1980) and Kennedy's (1981:758) arguments that no populations existed in Oceania to trade with (therefore Lapita voyages were not traders) ignore the following facts: (1) that Lapita traders could not have known that Polynesia was uninhabited; (2) that traders can exploit tradeable resources themselves if there are no indigenous populations, just as Tahitians traveled to small, uninhabited atolls to procure rare feathers (Ferdon 1981:225); and (3) that traders operating from home bases with mixed (subsistence/trading) economies would be on the lookout for more favorable locations to farm and locations less susceptible to predation from other traders. Thus, even though Lapita voyagers were motivated by economic trade incentives to explore the Pacific, these motives would have led to colonization and expansion, with new settlements becoming permanent parts of the trade network. Thus, trade and wealth were the motivating factors, while ownership of boats capable of transporting cargo long distances resulted in restricted access to this wealth and kept its control among a small elite.

1981; Chang 1980; Young 1982). And it certainly seems far from coincidental that Austronesian languages were used as long-distance trading languages even by non-Austronesians in some parts of Melanesia (Dutton 1978), whereas indigenous dialects were apparently adequate for local exchange.

The model, as I have extended it, is almost entirely an economic and cultural materialist model. It accounts more succinctly than any of the other alternatives for a large number of characteristics of the Lapita expansions, and may be relevant to the Austronesian expansions as a whole. It is consistent with the archaeological data, with the ethnographic data, with the physical anthropological data, with the linguistic data, and perhaps most importantly with the values of Polynesians at the time of contact. These were values which sanctioned the elite monopoly of trade on the high seas, which held chiefs to be semidivine, and which actively promoted expansion and conquest.

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