

INTRODUCTION

The articles in this volume are mainly based on the papers given in the symposium “Culture and History in the Pacific” organised by the Academy of Finland during the freezing January in 1987. The context for the symposium was provided by an exhibition arranged jointly by the Academy of Finland and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In this exhibition a large collection of Pacific material from the Leningrad Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography was on display.

A symposium organised in connection with a museum exhibition naturally derives some of its topics from that context. The artefacts in the museum are detached objectifications of culture. The purpose of a museum to preserve these artefacts and thus to provide durability for some aspects of culture. Historical consciousness has always been part of the anthropological project and this consciousness has survived even the most extreme forms of ethnographic presentism. Anthropological history has consisted not of durable artefacts but of something else. The structures of action, features of social organisation, modes of ritual action and above all, the structures and transformations of meaning have been in the locus of anthropological discussions. However, the recent debate on ethnography has revealed the way in which ethnographic construction of culture in fact creates it as an artefact which has form and boundaries. Furthermore in the ideal case this artefact has a place which can be pinned on a map. In the evolutionistic project the map is superseded by the historical metanarrative and the construed culture has to have a place in the plot of this narrative — it becomes a stage instead of a place.

The place and the project determine each other in multiple ways. First anthropology is divided into areal discussions, and despite the geographical proximity of the research areas these discussions are often intellectually incommensurable. In the Pacific the interaction between the specialists on New Guinea, Melanesia and Polynesia

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has been surprisingly scant compared to the intensity of the areal discourse. The fragmentation of anthropology is further increased by the localities of the discussants. The national traditions of Britain have been slowly transmitted to the American academic field, but the contrary process has been even slower. Soviet ethnography has for a long time been isolated from the mainstream discussions and has developed a character of its own. In Europe the orientations have been determined in multiple ways by the specialisations of the individuals and their connections. Among the mixed group of determinants shaping the anthropological projects the objects of the research have preserved their nature as distinct objects with historical continuity.

The distinctiveness of the objects is, however, questioned, by the historical process itself. The localised cultures on the ethnographic map do not want to remain in the niches provided for them. The trespassing of boundaries leads to culture contacts of several kinds. The colonial era in the Pacific led not only to decline and fall but also to the establishment of such institutions as the Tongan Traditions Committee, as described by Hooper and Huntsman in their chapter. The Tongan traditions do, of course, serve a political purpose: they try to preserve or create something on the basis of the legitimating power of tradition. The power of tradition as a device of social stratification is also discussed in the Polynesian context by Valerio Valeri, Aletta Biersack and Jukka Siikala. Genealogical representation of the past is a typical feature of Polynesian cultures and as such has attracted the attention of generations of Polynesianists. In fact genealogies are a typical “collector’s items” in the Polynesian context, and the construction of more and more comprehensive genealogies has long been one of the main features of Polynesian studies. As legitimising devices, genealogies have provided anthropologists with solid ground for interpretation. Ascribed statuses can be derived from the positions of the individuals in the genealogical structure. The main problem of the above chapters is no longer the kind of derivation of prescribed statuses, but a more complex form of analysis of the interplay between different determinants of social hierarchy — or as Valeri puts it in the context of Hawaiian society:

History is at the core of kingship and the kingship is, in a sense, the condition of possibility, the source of legitimacy and acceptability, of history.

History consists of events in which the past structures are not stereotypically reproduced — it is a series of unexpected events.

The most unexpected event, not culturally provided for, was in the Pacific context of course the coming of the Europeans. The surprise on the appearance of the outsiders is contrasted by Marilyn Strathern with the way the people constantly take themselves by surprise. The surprises have effects, and the uniqueness of the surprise — the unexpected event — is transformed in the presentation of both the people themselves and the causes of surprise. The presentation requires images, and the presentation of surprises calls for new ones, something which had not existed before — i.e. history. From the Papua New Guinea perspective history thus is not durability and continuity but the emergence of something new. The relationship of this notion can be related to the Polynesian through the key concept “image”. As the people of New Guinea created new images because of the new images, so also the Polynesians created new representations — genealogical or annalistic — of their own society, and even in the form of historical monuments, which are not only illustrations of the events but the effects themselves.

The problem of historical representation makes sense in the context of local cultural discourse. One of the most important discursive cultural formations in the Pacific is without doubt Kula. The exchange systems of Melanesia are as ambivalent as the historical events of Polynesian polities. On the other hand exchange systems have articulated to political and economic forces of the modern world system, as is emphasised by John Liep and exemplified by David Lawrence. The modern world does not only enter the exchange systems of Melanesia, but also the music performances of Polynesia, as is told by Helen Reeves Lawrence. Both these performances and the exchange systems “represent a continuity and resiliency against the depersonalizing effects of the commercial and bureaucratic forces of capitalist states” (Liep). This problem of political economy and cultural meaning is introduced by Roger Keesing, who ends with an attempt at reconciliation. The “seducing” and “marrying” exchange goods attached to singular big men and acting as icons of past lives have to be analysed according to him not only through decoding attempts by symbolic anthropologists but also through the articulation of these symbolic systems with the perspectives of political economy. The meanings have place in the social formations of class, which cut across social societal borders.

The meanings, either given by the anthropological analysis or attached to artefacts or events by the people themselves are social and cultural constructions. The significance of some social or cultural feature can be derived not only from the inside perspective.

Broad historical perspectives, either evolutionistic ones or more historicist prehistoric projects have not lost their legitimacy in anthropology. The contrast between these projects can be seen in the chapters by V.A. Shnirelman and E-M. Kotilainen. The former analyses the differentiation of chiefdoms and big men systems from a principally evolutionistic point of view. The perspective reflects a shift in Soviet ethnography towards a more culturalistic approach. The interpretive scheme is general and comparative, aiming at a theory of social evolution. The other kind of general historical project is prehistory itself. Artefacts are, of course, one of the main sources of prehistory, and more so, if something can be known about their cultural context. Kotilainen follows this kind of approach in her attempt to analyse the use of bark cloth in Austronesian cultures in a cultural historical framework.

Form and meaning are closely connected. Be the artefact a Sabarl axe and the multiplicity of interpretations attached to it (Strathern) or an Easter Island script, the decoding has to be culturally informed and contextualised. Such of decoding is done by N.A. Butinov with interesting results. Butinov's approach is in direct contrast to G.M.G. Scoditti's analysis of Kitawa Island prowboards. Scoditti's analysis ends with the basic result: not all forms are based on meanings constructed culturally; cultural forms can have universal motivations in the form of harmony.

Bringing a group of Pacific experts to Finland in the middle of winter for discussion decontextualises not only their projects but also the people themselves. The result was a situation in which the juxtapositioning of place-bound projects opened up new perspectives. The Melanesianist, the New Guineanist and the Polynesianist were not only areal specialists but also represented a wide variety of scholarly traditions. My firm belief is that if there is a future for ethnographic analysis, it can be found by crossing the borders of these traditions and breaking the boundaries of areal discussions.

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Jukka Siikala