ON HIERARCHY AND STRATIFICATION IN POLYNESIA

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ABSTRACT

In this article I will discuss the shifting roles of traditional hierarchy and its relationship to modern state structure in Fiji, Western Samoa and the Kingdom of Tonga. The interesting interplay of different levels of social integration has unfolded in conflicting ways in actual social practice. The combination of individualistic ideologies and democracy with traditional chiefly authority in these Pacific societies illuminates the complex ways in which authority and hierarchy are structurally linked, ways which in turn provide insights into the modes whereby hierarchy operates in present day social and political contexts.

Keywords: chieftaincy, democracy, Fiji, hierarchy, politics, Tonga, Western Samoa

Introduction[1]

Certain ideas have long half-lives. One of the perennial questions haunting Western social philosophy has been—and still is—the problem of the transformation of individuals into society, or the way society creates individuals. Jean-Jacques Rousseau formulated the problem in a revealing way in his *Social Contract* when he noted:

> He who dares to undertake the making of a people's institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being; of altering man's constitution for the purpose of strengthening it; and of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence nature has conferred on us all. (1973: 214)

Partial and moral existence is the existence of persons, not one of individual samples of human species, and Rousseau strongly contrasts these two kinds of beings. In Rousseau's reasoning, the physical existence precedes the moral one and thus he follows the main ways of thinking of his times. In recent social philosophy this precedence has been, interestingly, turned on its head. Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) identifies the grounds for the existence of bare life, as he calls biological existence, and according to his interpretation it is the act of law. Creation of out-laws is, however, not only the result of legal acts but before all an essential feature of political structures which claim for themselves a universal validity. Bare, purely biological life is, thus, the result of the acts of politics which deprive an individual of his personhood and agency.

The contrast between an individual and a person is, according to these authors, the contrast between physical and moral, biological and—I dare to claim—political. The

differentiating factor is the lack of morality binding people into something bigger than themselves—obviously through social relations, which are seen as moral in nature—or the lack of recognised political significance of any of the acts of the individual. Both social acts lead to exclusion, which ultimately is the result of lack of acknowledged social relations.

Including difference in the Pacific

In the following I will look at the processes of inclusion and exclusion from the perspective of small islands in the Pacific. As a starting point I use Gregory Schrempp's analysis of New Zealand Maori adoptions of European animal tales. In their original formulation these tales are moralistic and didactic. The story of the ant and the cicada amongst the Maori is as follows:

The ant:	Stick to digging
	A pit against the rain from above
	And the piercing cold of the night
	Gather seeds
	As food for inner man
	And so prosper
The cicada:	What is my pleasure
	Just sitting about
	Clinging to a tree branch
	Basking in the sun that shines
	And playing music with my wings.

The story represents a typical Maori tale type, in which two beings argue with each other over the respective merits of two possible ways of life, and end up going off each to live according to his own preferences (Schrempp 1985: 18). According to the Maori there are many thousand divergent *tangata* (people) or *iwi* (tribes) that make up the universe (ibid. 19). The Maori cosmology thus gives us a non-Western notion of a differentiated universe which has its counterpart in Western modernisation theory: from Adam Smith's pin-makers (1904) to Durkheim's *Division of Labour* (1947), differentiation has been seen as a part of a much wider evolutionary process.

The general tendency of this process—differentiation—is the direct opposite of the denial of difference in Immanuel Kant's philosophy and the utopian view expressed in his *Universal History* (1983 [1784]). For Kant the prerequisite for universal peace and the well-being of humankind is in fact the disappearance of differences on a higher level. True to the ideas of Enlightenment, he places those living in other ways than in constitutional republics some distance behind in history. Rationality and thus the ability to organise society in a way that would enable human development is dependent on movement on a single continuum towards similarity. There is room for the ant and the cicada of the Maori tale only if their division of labour has a single telos. It is worth noting that despite Kant's insistence on the freedom of all citizens in his utopian world, they are still subordinated to

higher universal values: reason and rationality. Kant with his enlightenment individualism thus introduces the possibility of holistic value to his scheme of things.

The distinction between individualistic and holistic cultures is a central and often misused distinction in Louis Dumont's theorising. His other conceptual pair, modern and traditional, are too often understood as expressions of modernisation theory: we have moved from holistic to individualistic, traditional to modern and those are characterised as being exclusive as sources of value. Put in this light the distinction reveals, however, how completely the Rousseauan alchemists mixed their ingredients and end results. Dumont's theorising contains not only an ideal typical distinction but also a realisation that all cultures contain both of his extremes—albeit differently valorised (1994: 7–8)—enabling them to act differently in relation to each other. On top of that Dumont demonstrates how higher levels of socio-cultural integration can operate as individuals and this complicates the picture further (1994: 25).

In the following I will discuss a few familiar Polynesian examples which, according to my interpretation, valorise the interplay between individualism and holism, hierarchy and stratification, and my main aim is to look at the different ways hierarchy has been transformed into stratification in different cases.

Tongan hierarchy and the interplay of holism and individualism

The Kingdom of Tonga is one of the most hierarchical of Polynesian societies. The late King, George Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, succeeded Queen Salote in 1965 and represented an unbroken line of Tupous since the establishment of the Kingdom by Taufa'ahau George Tupou in 1839; the line is continued by the present king George Tupou V. According to the mythic charter of the kingship, the line extends even further back, all the way to the original Tu'i Tonga, 'Aho'eitu, who was the son of a god (Collocott 1924: 282). The break between the unstable traditional sacred kingship and the modern kingdom occurred after major conflicts, with the Vava'u Code of 1839 limiting the power of the remaining chiefs. The rise of the Tupous to the kingship and the unification of the Tongan archipelago had actually occurred through military conquest and the unification or elimination of several important and possibly competing chiefly titles. All other possible lines with connections to royal titles were eliminated in 1918 by Queen Salote, who merged those lines through marriage alliances, and since then the royal line has been uncontested (Lātūkefu 1974; Franco 1997: 72).

The Tongan constitution of 1875 effected a major transformation of the traditional hierarchy, recognising twenty nobles, with ten more being added by the king in 1880. Since then only three noble titles have been created. Thus the traditional chiefly titles were codified by the constitution as nobility and a strict hierarchical social order was created (James 1997: 54). One of the best indicators of the hierarchy is the land tenure system, based on the 1892 law but never completely implemented throughout the archipelago. According to the law, there were three types of estates in Tonga: 1) royal estates controlled directly by members of the royal family; 2) noble estates controlled by individual nobles; and 3) government estates controlled and administered by the Ministry of Lands. The commoners' fate was to cultivate this government land and they are entitled to 8¼ acres

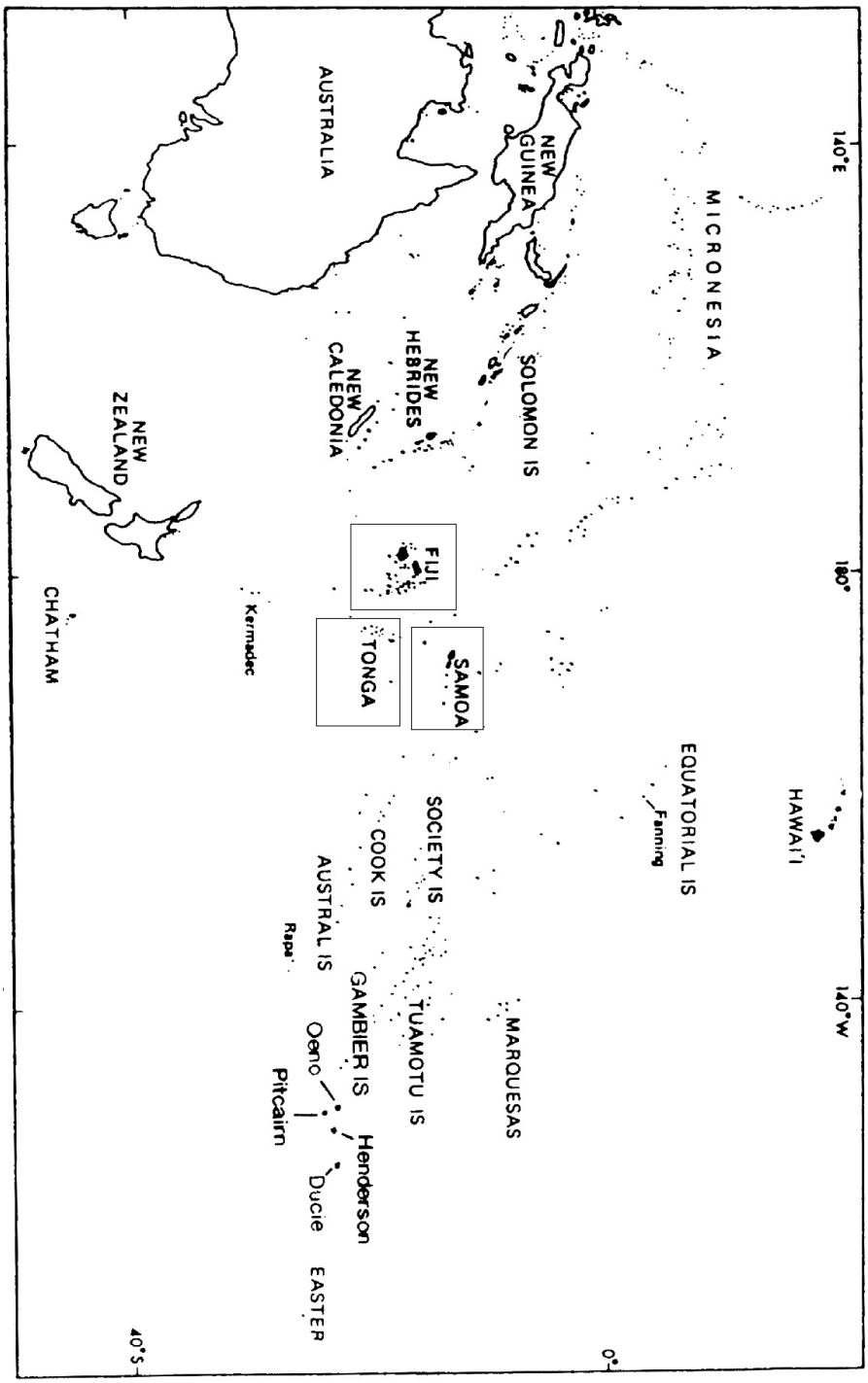

Figure 1: Map of the Polynesian region

of farming land and a house site in a village. The land cannot be repossessed once it has been granted, except according to law. The political process had two effects. First it created a hereditary nobility, which in practice eliminated status rivalry, 'the method by which he had enabled himself [Tupou I] to become a king' (Hau'ofa 1992: 12). Secondly it freed the commoners from the chiefs, who were demoted to the status of a 'submerged aristocracy' (Marcus 1989: 203).

Thus the developments of the nineteenth century created a feudal type of stratified society with clearly defined rights and duties for different strata of the population. The uncontested position of the king has led Valerio Valeri (1990: 56) to state that 'continuity at the core of kingship is achieved by emptying it of anything that can threaten it, by expelling the very possibility of history into an institutionalized, if ideologically peripheral, position'.

Despite the elimination of history at the core, the twentieth century witnessed several kinds of modernising influences that swept the Pacific with significant social and cultural effects. A monetary economy began early in Tonga with a small-scale plantation economy on noble lands. Population pressure and limited land resources, combined with non-existent industrial or other cash-generating economic activities (other than tourism), led to increased emigration, and migrant communities of commoner Tongans emerged in New Zealand and the United States. The commoners' monetary economy on the home islands was almost solely based on the earnings of these overseas Tongans, who were able to send their contributions directly to their natal households and bypass the King and the nobles. During the last twenty years, Tongan emigration has accelerated and migrant communities have emerged in Australia, American Samoa and the traditional migration areas of New Zealand and the United States. With the increase in emigrant communities, the Tongan economy continues to be based on remittances, and the national nobility's access to these resources has been successfully resisted by Tongans overseas (Franco 1997: 80).

What the Tongan royalty and nobility have under their control is a state machinery with diminishing economic resources in a scattered archipelago called the Kingdom of Tonga. They have been able to create an international economic base for their continuing power in Tonga, but they are facing an accelerating escape by their subjects to international labour markets. The Tongans themselves are everywhere and continue to disperse their presence to new areas of the world through new channels. Their economic possibilities far exceed the island's resources and at the same time the local economic potentials of the nobility have become scarcer. The commoners keep their economic resources strictly separated from the exploitative royal-noble political system, which thereby seems to increasingly diminish in importance. As George Marcus (1998: 143) has pointed out, 'the nobility's economic advantages are tied to the nation-state model of Tongan society' and the commoners have been effectively transcending these limits. The homeland for the Tongans became like a prison with extremely limited economic resources over which they had little control, a feudal-like hierarchy which they have been able to escape. But it is an honourable prison. Even the most radical democracy-movement supporter does not want to get rid of the King, who is still the symbol of the Tongan ability to resist colonial powers and remain the only Kingdom in the Pacific which never fully had to give up its independence and autonomy (Franco 1997: 82).