

Ancestral Oceanic Society and the Origins of the Hawaiians

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In *Evolution of the Polynesian Chiefdoms*, Patrick Kirch (1984) discussed Ancestral Polynesian Society, reconstructed from linguistics, archaeology, and comparative ethnography. This is seen as the baseline from which the Hawaiian and other contemporary Polynesian societies originated and from which they have been transformed over time (Kirch and Green 1987). Ancestral Polynesian Society did not of course appear out of nothing, its own origins were in the Lapita Culture which can be traced back to the Bismarck Archipelago to the immediate east of the Island of New Guinea.¹ The question of ultimate Lapita origins is a more controversial one and will not be pursued in detail in this paper (but see Allen and White 1989, Gosden et al. 1989; Spriggs 1989). Instead, the nature of early Lapita culture in the Bismarcks will be examined as the culture directly ancestral to Ancestral Polynesian Society.

This examination seems worth attempting for several reasons. The issue of Polynesian origins is still a hot topic in Pacific archaeology as it has been since the inception of the subject. Since Kirch's 1984 book a lot of new data have come to light bearing on this issue in archaeology, linguistics, and genetics, and these confirm the centrality of the 'Lapita homeland' region in addressing it. Second, it seems important in assessing the uniqueness, or otherwise, of Polynesian culture and sociopolitical organization that its degree of transformation from an ancestral base outside Polynesia is evaluated and that the different subsequent histories of Polynesia and Island Melanesia are examined in relation to this ancestral base. Third, there is a tradition of Polynesian racism as regards the inhabitants of Melanesia, typified by Peter Buck's *Vikings of the Sunrise* (1938) but going back to the last century. Restating the Melanesian roots of Polynesian culture helps to confound that racism, a racism bolstered by a particular reading of the region's prehistory.

Lapita Culture in the Bismarcks

In looking at Lapita culture in the Bismarcks one is struck by how similar it is to Lapita and early Polynesian culture in the Fiji-Tonga-Samoa area, except more so: the pottery is more complex in design and vessel form, there are a wider range of domesticated plants in evidence and the Lapita occupation begins earlier.

Based on pottery from three Bismarcks sites, Dimitri Anson in 1983 defined a 'Far Western' Lapita pottery style with more complex and more finely-executed dentate stamped designs than found in previously defined 'Western' and 'Eastern' Lapita styles (Anson 1983, cf. Anson 1986). The explosion of archaeological work in the Bismarcks as a result of the 1985 Australian National University's Lapita Homeland Project (Allen and Gosden 1991) has confirmed this picture, despite an initial questioning of the 'Far Western' concept (Kirch et al. 1987). The earliest Lapita sites have the most complex vessel forms and designs and there is a trend towards simplification in both over time and as Lapita culture expanded east to Polynesia.

Several of the Bismarcks' Lapita sites have produced plant remains (Gosden et al. 1989:574; Kirch 1988a) which show that the full complement of the Oceanic root and tree crop complex was present at that time. Several of the tree species which remain important in Melanesia were apparently never transported as far as Fiji and/or Polynesia.

In a review of Lapita dates, Kirch and Hunt (1988) suggested an archaeologically instantaneous spread of Lapita, with sites in Fiji and Western Polynesia being as early as any in the Bismarcks. A re-study of these, and analysis of further dates, now available suggests a pause in the Bismarcks before rapid spread to the east at about 3200–3000 BP (Spriggs 1990). How long this pause took is not yet established. The earliest secure dates for Lapita sites in the Bismarcks start at about 3650–3450 BP with the single early date of 3850 BP from Kohin Cave, Manus (Kennedy 1981) now looking increasingly unlikely.

Early Lapita culture was fully horticultural with domestic pigs, dogs, and chickens. Settlements were nucleated, permanent villages, some at least consisting of stilt houses out over the reefs. Evidence for social organization is equivocal. Shell ornaments resembling ethnographic shell 'valuables' have been taken to imply ranking (Kirch 1988b), and evidence for intrasite spatial differentiation in the occurrence of decorated pottery might also be interpreted in this way (but see Gosden 1989 for alternative views on Lapita social organization). The new Lapita evidence is summarized by Gosden et al. (1989), but see also some more recent results and opinions (Allen and White 1989; Gosden 1989; Kirch 1988a, 1988b; Specht et al. 1988; Torrence et al. 1990).

The question of the origins of Bismarcks Lapita culture is hotly debated, the two extremes of opinion being that it is intrusive to the region from Southeast Asia, or alternatively that it is an indigenous development in Melanesia. The truth is probably that it is a bit of both. While at one level it can be seen as an extension of the Island Southeast Asian Neolithic, this does not explain the Lapita design system which is not paralleled in earlier Southeast Asian pottery styles although there are later echoes of it there (Spriggs 1989:607). Nor does it explain the suite of root and tree crops that are present in the earliest sites and are clearly of Melanesian origin. Long-distance exchange networks for obsidian and other materials had existed in the region for thousands of years prior to Lapita. There is no earlier pottery tradition in the Bismarcks, however, and also no earlier occurrences of the Southeast Asian pig, dog, and chicken. The range of shell ornaments also seem to have no local antecedents but do have clear parallels in Island Southeast Asian assemblages (Spriggs 1990).

My view is that Lapita is basically an intrusive culture but one that took on a suite of local plants and aspects of technology from the populations among whom its culture bearers settled. The longer these cultures lived side by side, the greater the influences which passed between them.

The post-Lapita prehistory of the Bismarcks suggests a lot of continuity from Lapita times to the present and I see no reason to alter the views on

this matter I put forward in 1984 (Spriggs 1984). Lapita is ancestral to many modern Island Melanesian societies, just as it is ancestral to *all* Polynesian and presumably many Micronesian societies. The difference is that parts of Island Melanesia were already settled prior to Lapita and modern Island Melanesian societies are also descended from these. Polynesia was settled early in the Lapita period and developed in comparative isolation from this 'dual inheritance' in Melanesia. To put it crudely Bismarcks Lapita culture became progressively 'Melanesianized' after Polynesia had been settled and so the latter area retained a 'purer' Lapita-based culture because of isolation. Both areas, however, are the inheritors of Lapita culture.

A Lapita Language?

It has long been a commonplace assumption that there is a link between the Lapita expansion and the spread of Austronesian languages in the Pacific (Pawley and Green 1973, 1984), but recent advances in linguistics have made the connection much clearer by a revision of the subgrouping of Austronesian (AN) languages in Western Melanesia by Ross (1988, 1989). If we attempt to 'map' the linguistic prehistory of the region on to the archaeological prehistory we find that there is not only a plausible fit, but that there are also important additional implications for the archaeology posed by the linguistic picture. The Southeast Asian origin of the AN languages has never been seriously challenged, despite arguments put forward by Terrell (1981, 1986). An ultimate Southeast Asian origin for the many AN languages of Melanesia and Polynesia points up the links between the cultures of these two areas also witnessed by the spread of Lapita culture across both. AN languages of Island Melanesia and Polynesia both belong to the Oceanic Subgroup. Ross (1989) reconstructs the place where Proto-Oceanic was probably spoken as being on the north coast of New Britain in an area that centers on the Willaumez Peninsula, the area of the Talasea obsidian quarries and a concentration of early Lapita sites currently being investigated by Jim Specht and his colleagues at the Australian Museum (Specht et al. 1988). The pattern of spread

makes it clear that the makers of Lapita pottery spoke Proto-Oceanic and its successor stages down to Proto Central-Pacific in Fiji-West Polynesia. Going back 'Pre-Lapita', if a map of major AN subgroups in Southeast Asia with an understanding of the sequence of language splits from Proto-Austronesian is put down over a map of the spread of the Neolithic in the region, it fits almost perfectly (Spriggs 1989:608). This further supports a Southeast Asian origin for Lapita culture.

Polynesian and related languages in the Southeast Solomons and Vanuatu do not show features explicable by contact with Non-Austronesian languages and so the movement out of the Bismarcks of languages ancestral to them must have occurred at a time before significant contact-induced language change took place. This suggests that early Oceanic speakers kept themselves apart from other language groups in the Bismarcks. That the 'stay at home' AN speakers in the Bismarcks did later undergo such contact-induced change is clear from Ross' analysis. This parallels the 'Melanesianization' of Lapita culture in the Bismarcks. It is also interesting to note that the AN languages along the north New Guinea coast do not represent the original west to east movement to the Bismarcks out of Island Southeast Asia but a back-migration from the Bismarcks westward. The spread of AN language to the Bismarcks appears to have been a direct movement from the Biak area at the western end of New Guinea to the Willaumez Peninsula, perhaps following already long-established obsidian exchange networks back to their source. A subsequent pause in the Bismarcks for the innovations characteristic of the Oceanic group to develop is also indicated.

A Lapita People?

Advances in genetics over the last few years hold out the hope of establishing the biological origins of the Polynesians (Hill and Serjeantson 1989). An origin in Island Southeast Asia now seems certain, with some evidence of genetic admixture with populations in northern Island Melanesia.

As summarized by Serjeantson and Hill (1989: 287–88):

The lack of particular coastal New Guinea [genetic] markers in Polynesians, such as the high-frequency $-a^{4.2}$ thalassaemia Selection, the albumin NG variant, the HLA-B13.Cwf haplotype, and the B allele of the ABO blood group, all argue that the pre-Polynesians moved rapidly through this part of Melanesia. However, the presence of a substantial frequency of the Melanesian α -globin haplotypes IIIa and IVa in all Polynesians indicates that at some point there was significant interbreeding with Melanesians. The presence of the $-a^{3.7}$ III but not the $-a^{4.2}$ α thalassaemia deletion indicates that this contact was probably mainly in northern island Melanesia rather than in New Guinea, unless the $-a^{4.2}$ thalassaemia deletion was uncommon in northern New Guinea at that time and has been rapidly selected by malaria since then.

Not all bearers of the Lapita culture moved to Polynesia of course and the genes of the 'stay at homes' can be found in coastal and island Melanesian groups who are genetically the descendants of the Pre-Lapita populations in the area and of the intrusive Southeast Asian population who also gave rise to the Polynesians. The latest evidence is that Fijians have undergone admixture with Island Melanesian groups post-Lapita, thus restating an earlier and partly discredited view of Fijian culture history (Serjeantson and Hill 1989:288–89). The original Fijian population would have been more Polynesian in appearance. The new genetic evidence also disproves any direct link between Polynesians and Micronesians. Micronesian populations are diverse but in general are a distinct Island Southeast Asia population with genetic input from Melanesia in varying degrees (Serjeantson and Hill 1989:290–91). You certainly can't get a Polynesian out of a Micronesian, as Howells (1973) once believed.

'Ancestral Oceanic Society'

Ancestral Polynesian Society can be taken back further to its immediate roots in the Bismarck Archipelago, almost certainly on the north coast of New

Britain in the area of the Talasea obsidian sources about 3500 years ago. Members of this 'Ancestral Oceanic Society' were agriculturalists and fisher-people who lived in villages, in part at least consisting of stilt houses. They were accomplished sailors who had 'captured' the regional obsidian exchange network. They spoke a language which we today call 'Proto-Oceanic' and initially at least they would perhaps have looked somewhat like modern Polynesians, although intermarriage with local populations progressively led to a genetic 'swamping' of this phenotype. Interaction with groups already occupying the area led to the adoption of a range of local useful plants, many of which were later transferred to Polynesia. They made highly decorated Lapita pottery of 'Far Western' (perhaps better called 'Early Western') style. There is some evidence that they had hereditary leaders and may have been organized in clans called *kainana* (Pawley and Green 1984:132–3).

After several generations some groups of these people moved off to settle the rest of Island Melanesia and Polynesia. Although regular contacts were maintained between the Bismarcks and areas as far away as the Southeast Solomons for many hundreds of years, those who reached Fiji and Western Polynesia were effectively beyond regular communication range and began to diverge culturally in isolation. Those who remained, continued to mix with other Bismarcks populations and their distinctive identity faded as a variety of more local cultures developed from Lapita and pre-Lapita roots to produce the diversity found in the Island Melanesian region today.

Polynesian Racism

In the colonial encounter in Polynesia it was sometimes comforting and useful to both sides to stress apparent similarities between institutions and appearance, aristocracy, and light skin. An accepted racial hierarchy was soon adopted. Whites at the top of course, then Polynesians, then Melanesians, with Australian Aborigines, and particularly Tasmanians at the bottom. Of similar skin color to Polynesians were Island Southeast Asians whose languages were clearly related to Polynesian languages.

Polynesia was not thought to have been long-settled and an Asian and ultimately 'Europoid' (Buck's term for Caucasian) origin was therefore postulated. The problem was that Melanesia lay in between, large areas of which were not under colonial control until well into this century and whose inhabitants were not only 'savage' in reputation but whose cultures were more diverse and very different in organization to those in Polynesia. Among educated Polynesians the idea of a Melanesian past was unthinkable and stories of earlier dark-skinned races exterminated by the later arriving Polynesians were either re-made or created to identify the defeated as Melanesians.

Sadly this colonial legacy is still with us and can be seen enshrined in the Hawai'i Maritime Museum in Honolulu in its large wall map (observed in 1989) showing the settlement of Polynesia by a route studiously avoiding all contact with the islands of Melanesia, and in the process ignoring the vast weight of archaeological, linguistic, and genetic data now available.

Conclusion

In 1984 my remarks were apparently misunderstood (see reviews by Bellwood 1986 and Turner 1985) so they are perhaps worth restating. The archaeological and other evidence links Polynesia and Melanesia culturally, and in a very real sense the origins of the Polynesians can be seen in the Melanesian Lapita culture. Part of colonialist 'tactics' involved creating an artificial separation between the inhabitants of the two regions, with the Polynesians seen and seeing themselves as superior and of different origin than the inhabitants of Melanesia. The political results of this 'tactic' are still with us today and are hindering the development of a Pan-Pacific consciousness and nationalism. Full recognition of the evidence that this separation has no real basis will help to foster links between the nations of Polynesia and Melanesia which can only be to the better welfare of their inhabitants. There are important political implications in getting the picture straight and not cutting off the Polynesian story at the present boundaries of Polynesia.

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Notes

1. Terrell, along similar lines, in a recent review of *Evolution of the Polynesian Chiefdoms* suggests that Kirch's use of the term 'Ancestral Polynesian Society' is misleading for many aspects of the founding culture of Polynesia as there is "little that is peculiarly 'Polynesian' about" them (Terrell 1990:29 cf. Green 1991; Thomas 1989).