

MODERNIZATION AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

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I Pacific Region as Seen by an Anthropologist

In the past twenty years, many independent island nations were born in the Pacific region, each seeking to establish self-direction and self-reliance as a people in their own right. These island states vary in size, from Papua New Guinea with a land area of 461.7 km² and a population of 3 million, to the Republic of Nauru where no more than seven thousand people live on 22 km² of land, and even to countries like Kiribati and Tuvalu which are just made up of atolls. When talking about the island states, there is a tendency to generalize about them in terms of what one knows about Papua New Guinea, a country rich in natural resources, or about Fiji where economic development has gotten under way; but one should not forget about these atoll states, where people depend on imported goods for all their needs, including foodstuffs. All of these island states began as independent nations faced with many demanding tasks: modernization, economic development, regional cooperation as a member of the Pacific community and so forth.

The economic, social and political self-direction and self-reliance which people everywhere seek are no doubt sought also by these Pacific islanders. However, the set formula that economic independence equals political independence does not apply to these island states. They find it difficult to understand each other's perception of appropriate goals and strategies for an effective Pacific island development. This is caused mainly by their unique features as island states. Due to their differences in size, resources, traditions and the extent of isolation, they all have different perspectives on what development means. However, the newly-rising island states have also had problems that are common to them all

from the start of their independence. While they have indeed gained independence, none of them is in a position to stand on their own without economic assistance from their former suzerain state. Their people still rely heavily on a self-sufficient economy. An increasing concentration of the population in the capital; the break-down, due to development, of the subtle equilibrium between traditional society and the ecological system; high unemployment (in terms of both the real and the potential jobless); a rapid population growth; an extreme trade imbalance (i.e., an import-dependent economy); increasing reliance on aid from other countries; a growing desire for economic independence; a thirst for cash and consumer goods – these features are common to them all.

The Pacific region can be divided geographically into Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia, each representing different ethnic groups and cultures. The process of acculturation that has taken place as a result of contact with Western civilization is not uniform either. In order to understand the present-day culture and society of the Pacific islands, it is important to know how Western culture came into the region. It came in three stages: 1) during the age of exploration (1520-1780); 2) through missionaries, whalers, merchants, etc. (1780-1850); and 3) with the introduction of planters, blackbirders and trading companies into the region (1850-1914). To expand the plantations and develop the mineral resources, they sought the necessary labor outside. Thus Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and other Asians came in as migrant laborers or as contract laborers. Some of them settled permanently to create a multi-racial society such as what we see today in the Pacific cities of Port Town, Suva, Noumea, Papeete and so forth. The Asians who settled there came to hold real power in commerce and business, with the result that there emerged a gap between them and the local people in their respective levels of modernization. Fiji offers a good example of this: while Fijians, as indigenous people, own land and are politically dominant, the Indians are the ones who hold the dominant economic position. There is a big difference in culture, social structure, life style and patterns of thinking between the two of them, and the tension thus produced affects the country's cultural policy.

Islanders suffered a great deal of damage with the inflow of foreign culture. Their population dropped sharply, the problem of people of mixed blood emerged, and lethargy prevailed in their life. But towards the mid 20th century, they gradually began to respond to their new situation more positively. The political independence of Western Samoa in 1962 inspired the inhabitants of other islands, particularly the Polynesian islands, into political awareness. Polynesians feel a very strong spiritual tie among themselves on account of the fact that they share a similar language and customs as well as a common ancestry. With the independence of Western Samoa for momentum, there spread among the Polynesians a surge of ethnic consciousness and a feeling of solidarity, and several small nations came into birth one after another as though in a chain reaction. I was in the region while this was happening and was able to observe at close hand, from within the local community, the changes and developments that were taking place in several of the countries in Polynesia and Melanesia. What struck me immediately was the question of "modernization and tradition."

II Modernization and Cultural Heritage

In comparison with the developing nations of Southeast Asia where such firmly-established religions as Buddhism and Hinduism have served as the basis of the culture and society, the newly-rising nations of the Pacific may be characterized culturally as lacking a firm basis for their traditional culture. The fact that their culture had no writing at the time of contact with foreign culture also adds to make their link with the past weak and fragile. These newly-rising nations have all been governed by one of the modern Western nations, and this has resulted in the introduction of second-rate and third-rate Western culture into the lives of the people. Where Christianity and its cultural value system had been brought in, a sort of mindless, blind respect for advanced European nations became a conspicuous feature among people with education and among those of mixed blood. The fervor with which developing nations look to the West in longing adoration is usually most pronounced among those in the upper strata of society and among the intelligentsia. This is a

feature which has been observed in Japan too since the onset of modernization in the Meiji era but which later came to extend to the masses as well with the high economic growth of the country.

People seem to believe that modernization means Westernization. The Europeans themselves apparently think so too. However, as a nation gains independence from its white master, there is only one way for it to shake off white influences and pit itself against the white nations. It is by establishing its own uniqueness. It is this desire for emotional independence which often acts as a strong motivation for reconsidering tradition and cultural heritage. Leaders of the island nations are in a dilemma, for, while eager and anxious to develop their countries, they are, at the same time, afraid that something might be lost in the process of social change. "We want to go forward but are fearful of losing something in the process of change. As leaders of the Pacific, we should be able to identify our goals." This statement well reveals the confusion felt by the countries of the Pacific community as they try to choose their own industrial model out of the multitude presented to them. As it stands, there is heavy stress on economic development at the expense of appropriate social and cultural programs.

Acculturation in the Pacific varies in content as well as in extent depending on the length and frequency of contact with the West. There is quite a difference in acculturation between Polynesians, who are the descendants of an open and hospitable seagoing people, and Melanesians, who refused to be assimilated into foreign culture and whose interest never went beyond the boundaries of their tribe. In Polynesia, where almost two centuries have passed since Christian missionaries started their work, traditional society has disintegrated for the most part, and what cultural heritage remains, whether tangible or intangible, is no longer in its original form. Instead, what these people have been left with is a culture transformed by the influences of foreign culture. The situation is quite different in Melanesia, where the suzerain states did not introduce modernization policies into tribal society nor implemented any educational system to speak of. Here, the indigenous culture co-existed with Western culture during the colonial period, and the majority

of the tribes still had no written language at the time of their independence.

Island people have a stronger tribal or ethnic identity than national identity. The ethnic identity of the Polynesians is based on a cultural identity of a shared language and culture. This makes for easy maintenance of a feeling of solidarity among their islands. In contrast, Melanesians lack cultural homogeneity; but as Pidgin English, which had come into being as the lingua franca of the Melanesian slaves sent to Queensland, Australia, in the 19th century, spread across the tribal boundaries, it began to play a part in fostering mutual understanding and a feeling of solidarity among the Melanesian people.

One thing which is worthy of special mention when talking about Melanesia is the highland society of Papua New Guinea. Two-thirds of the nation's population live here, but it wasn't until the middle of 20th century that the veil of mystery cast over it for thousands of years was lifted. Since then, missionaries representing more than sixty religious sects have been at work in the region, but the manner in which these missionaries react to the traditional culture of the Melanesians differ from sect to sect. The cargo-cult which came into being in several of these missions has quite often developed into a social movement. The cargo-cult of recent years originated from a strong envy felt by the local people towards the wealth and power of the white people, but it can also be said to have generated the positive stance which Melanesians have towards economic development.

While there is no racial discrimination to speak of among Polynesians, Micronesians and Melanesians on the basis of their color, there is also little feeling of solidarity among them. This fact is well revealed in the problematic independent split of Gilbert-Ellice Islands from Britain, which had governed them as one since 1892, into two separate nations, Kiribati (Gilbert Islands) and Tuvalu (Ellice Islands). Micronesians, who inhabit the Gilbert Islands, and Polynesians, who inhabit the Ellice Islands, share many features in their everyday life — i.e., in terms of food, clothing and shelter. This is inevitable as both Islands are in fact just a collection of similarly-situated poor atolls. They have also both

converted to Christianity. Yet, one crucial difference between them is that they have each preserved their own language, and thus their own cultural identity. When it came to the question of independence, each asserted its own cultural identity, with the result that two separate nations came into being. Lack of unity and solidarity among the Pacific island states is also born out in the manner in which they all respond differently to regional organizations and schemes. The various regional schemes that have come about under the initiative of the advanced nations are, however, not functioning all that effectively and are therefore not regarded too highly by the island states.

What is modernization? If there was a yardstick by which one could measure modernization objectively, that yardstick would be industrialization. And the theory goes that the more industrialized a country is, the more advanced it is. The strongest driving force behind modernization, however, is nationalism; and in order to cultivate nationalism or national identity, it is of vital importance that tradition and cultural heritage be held in esteem. Culture, as anthropologists define it in the wider sense of the term, has traditionally meant an integrated whole of institutions, artefacts, the ways of life, the style of housing, modes of production, marriage, ceremonies, songs and dances, etc. However, there has since emerged a new way of looking at culture as a symbolic system — i.e., as a mode of expressing meanings through language and through non-verbal actions. Any contemporary definition of culture must encompass both of these aspects — the pragmatic and the symbolic — and culture must be viewed as an interplay of the two.

In the Pacific islands, population doubled in the last thirty years; and what is more, 60% of the present population are under twenty years of age. This has come as an added pressure on their traditional culture. Radical changes in the Pacific region are the result of new social conditions brought about by the introduction of new consumer goods, by the expansion of labor market and so forth. One fundamental issue concerning development and cultural heritage is this: To what extent can people save their cultural identity while embracing the aims of development? The answer is not simple. But if people have enough unity of purpose,

they will probably be able to maintain or re-create their cultural identity even if they push forward with their aims of development. The real problem posed for the leaders is that, even if awareness and interest in their own culture grow, given their limited budget and the demand for economic development, they are not able to fully pursue their policy to preserve their culture. The leaders must think out plans for an appropriate island development and set themselves against the big city planning undertaken in the West. Islanders need to deepen their understanding of their own region. Generally speaking, they are more interested in understanding the West; and this is because they are, as mentioned earlier, obsessed with the notion that modernization means Westernization. However, the attitude of the Solomon Islands, an independent nation in Melanesia, toward its neighbor, Papua New Guinea, quite impressed me in terms of better and real efficiency in development planning. Instead of just imitating Papua New Guinea which had gained independence first, the people of the Solomon Islands are seeking to develop their country at their own pace and in their own way.

Some people define cultural development in terms of economic development. Unlike industrialized advanced nations, it is dangerous to judge the degree of cultural development of a small island state in terms of the standard of values held in advanced nations. Japan's high economic growth reached even the remotest villages in the country. However, there are quite a few cases in which the application of the economic principles of high economic growth to traditional industries in the provinces resulted in irretrievable disaster. The reason why these traditional industries have, after enjoying temporary success, failed in their attempt to modernize themselves is that culture stood in their way as a presence and power over which the principles of economic development could wield little influence. When radical changes take place, culture offers resistance to the very economic principles that have brought about the changes. Such resistance is already beginning to show, although on a small scale, among the island states of the South Pacific.

Efforts to develop tourism, on which people had placed much hope, are not bearing much success and are in fact turning culture into a matter

of commercial competition. There is a proliferation of plastic artefacts that have been made in one or another of the advanced nations. Their traditional dances have now turned into a show to meet the demands from tourists for something with a dramatic and flashy appeal. Dancing, for the islanders, no longer means recreation, nor is it for ritual ceremonies. Instead, it is a means of earning an income, and the dancers themselves are no longer familiar with the customs of their ancestors. In some cases, dancing is identified with a particular group as though it were the group's property. Then again, there are cases in which tourism has proved to be just a temporary boom, after which the local tourist industry begins to lag and lose its competition against the wild inflow of foreign capital. Development by foreign corporations, who feel no attachment to the land, history or tradition of the region, can only be destructive for the region. Also, from the standpoint of establishing economic self-direction and self-reliance, development of a region ought to be undertaken by local corporations, with foreign capital aiding them in their efforts instead of overpowering them. As one Solomon Island leader said to me, the imposition by advanced nations of their culture as a model to be followed by developing nations can at times only impede the real progress and development of the nations in the Pacific.

The fact that rapid modernization can cause problems is well illustrated in the Tahitian, as well as in Hawaiian, local community. One sign of the danger of rapid modernization is the loss of the vernacular language. The loss of the vernacular language of an ethnic group will inevitably lead to the loss of their ethnic identity, and eventually to the loss and death of the group itself. Vernacular language is directly associated with cultural heritage and its presence is extremely important as a means of expressing and communicating ideas. I once conducted a field research in Reao in eastern Polynesia, and there I was amazed to find that despite the progressive Tahiti-zation of the atoll in recent years, there still remained some old chants. This is almost a miracle. But as songs and dances have much appeal to human emotions, people become especially attached to them. This special attachment may be said to have enabled the retention of the chants in Reao. The language used in the chants is

Old Polynesian, which the singers themselves no longer understand. They are not able to comprehend the epic of the tribe narrated in the chants, nor are they interested in it. The conversion to Christianity has indeed meant for the people the renunciation of their past.

For the people of this poor atoll, Tahitians, who are Polynesians of mixed race and are identified with the West, are an object of strong adoration; and in an effort to identify themselves with the Tahitians (and thus with the West), people of Reao have, in the last half century, consciously destroyed their own vernacular language, which is a unique language even among the islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago. For investigating the history of the migration of the Polynesian people, linguistic studies are as indispensable as archaeological studies. However, the transcription and translation of the chants that have survived is no easy task, even with help from linguists. The people of Reao no longer have an identity as Reao islanders. For Westerners, they are Tahitians; and for Tahitians, they are Tuamotu islanders, named after their administrative district.

Under modern conditions, cultural heritage has at least three functions. Firstly, it functions as a kind of identity marker for the people. Like the Fa'a Samoa tribe in Western Samoa, there are tribes which have strengthened their identity by consciously maintaining their custom. In the Pacific region, the word "custom" has become almost a vernacular word as the symbol of their cultural heritage. The identity marker is indispensable for the growth of nationalism. Secondly, cultural heritage functions as a channel through which to express values and sentiments, and thus as a form of communication – communication on the verbal and non-verbal level for the insiders, and on the non-verbal level for the outsiders. The third function is, at times, as a useful marketable asset. Cultural items are like any other marketable goods; and as such, they are subjected to competition, with the same criteria of efficiency – in terms of time, energy and material resources – applied to them as to any other marketable goods.

The material culture of these resource-poor islands has hardly anything to offer that deserves to be called cultural heritage. Besides, much of the material culture they have is generally incompatible with efforts

for modernization. However, they have the traditions and conventions that have been handed down to them. The various ceremonies involved in marriages, funerals, initiation and so forth can embody the soul of the tribe. These ceremonies, together with the few surviving pieces of oral literature and the preservation of the remains of megalithic culture, are important in the function of identity marker for the people.

What does development mean to the Pacific islands? — this issue is a very complex one, especially as each Pacific island has its own unique features in terms of size, resources, customs, etc. The advanced nations must understand these differences, and, on that understanding, formulate their policies and attitudes to the Pacific islands. The future ahead of these island states is indeed a very difficult one; but the key to success, I believe, lies in education — and in *basic* education. Japan, as it emerged as a modern nation, had a high literacy rate. Despite the fact that the enrollment rates for secondary and higher education were lower than those of developing nations today, there was hardly any illiteracy in Japan — and this was because basic education had so thoroughly penetrated into the masses. Among the developing nations that are advocating Japan as their model, there are, however, those that seem more interested in increasing the number of university graduates as a way of quickening the pace of modernization. In attempting to modernize their countries, these Pacific island states should — instead of modelling themselves after advanced nations — try to understand their own culture, their own country and region, including all the neighboring island states. Otherwise, regional solidarity and cooperation will be hard to achieve. As for the advanced nations, it is necessary that, in proposing schemes for cooperation, they first of all understand the culture of these island states, and, through this, deepen their understanding of their society. In order to foster solidarity with them, it is important that the advanced nations set their clock on the pace of modernization chosen by the island states, and not vice versa.

The Pacific Basin Cooperation Concept which Japan proposed includes such concrete objectives as furthering mutual understanding, developing marine resources, cooperating in matters regarding resources,

promoting industrial adjustments and so forth. Before WWII, Japan was interested in the Pacific islands for military and defense purposes. Culture and people were of secondary concern. After the war, the interest merely shifted from military to economic. Frankly speaking, I feel that the Pacific Basin Cooperation Concept displays a lack of understanding of the reality of the situation in the Pacific. It generalizes the Pacific island states as though they were all the same. It conceptualizes and pictures the Pacific – the South Pacific – as some sort of a paradise. And above all, it does not touch upon the question of what modernization means to the small island states. These shortcomings must be recognized and amended.

Sir Kamisese Mara, the Prime Minister of Fiji, who is highly considered among the Pacific island states for his leadership, stressed the importance of the “Pacific Way” in a speech he delivered at the United Nations in 1970. The “Pacific Way” he proposed is thought to be a good guiding principle for the Pacific island states, now so dependent economically on foreign countries, as they head for the future, each in their own way. Hasty cooperation from modernized advanced nations, I think, is not only too strong a stimulant to these island states but may actually impede their development along the “Pacific Way.”

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