The link with land : questions about change

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T HE LINKS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND LAND, people and place, and the identity or the sense of belonging which people draw from these links and hold secure at the core of their being were strong elements in Joel Bonnemaison's writing. Personally he had his own strong identity with particular places. The sensitivity and insights he had for the people of Vanuatu and their ties to their lands no doubt stemmed in part from his own attachment to place, and his own acknowledgment of his own parallel identity with places of origin and belonging. Such places were for him both the static and enduring roots of life and the fulcrum around which his own migratory life as a geographer revolved. The core of some of his most important work is the explication of the relationship between the fixed place of origin and belonging, « the tree », and the movement symbolized by « the canoe » which takes one away and back in safety along routes sanctioned by myth, society and alliances (Bonnemaison 1984 ; 1994). In recent years place, space and landscape, long central concerns of geographers, have attracted more attention from anthropologists recognizing that territory as well as society shapes and unites communities (e.g. Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995 ; Fox, 1997). Bonnemaison's work, which blends geography,

anthropology and history, foreshadows and contributes to this trend (Fox, 1997 : 10).

Timelessness and change

Much writing about Pacific Island societies has a sense of timelessness stemming from an intentional or unintentional focus on the « ethnographic present » and a fascination with « untouched cultures » (Ogan, 1996 : 96) as they might have been before significant contact with a wider world. Yet communities and settlement patterns were not always stable prior to contact with the « west » and shifts in the location of groups were perhaps more common than long-term residence in the one place (Ward, 1980). Therefore, links with place were far from static. France (1969 : 13) reports that of the officially recorded stories (*tukutuku raraba*) of over 600 Fijian groups, « *only twenty-one tell of a tribe which claims to occupy the site on which it was founded* ». Bonnemaison shows that change is an integral part of the origin and location myths of the Tannese, with periods of tumult and movement, and with custom being modified into « *a "new kastom" partly rediscovered and partly re-created* » in the face of crises

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(1994 : 112). Despite such acknowledged mobility in the past, people in many Pacific Islands frequently make claim to specific lands, and to community and individual identity with that land, on the basis of supposed traditional occupation since time immemorial. In recent years identity with land and status as a land-owner, or as a *man ples*, has become a major plank of ethnic and even national identity in several countries in Polynesia and Melanesia. In conveying an image of an unchanging relationship to places, such claims by indige-nous groups are not dissimilar to those made in academic presentations of the « ethnographic present ». Both tend to ignore the obvious societal and spatial changes of the last century or more. Both offer an intellectual model of a « traditional » society rather than a picture of the practice of either the more distant past or the present. By their silence on change, both prompt the question of how the relationship between people and place changes as new forms of migration become more common, take place over longer distances and times, and reach beyond the former security of the zone and social norms of « the canoe » of their natal or ancestral communities. Furthermore, the continued reality and validity of concepts of identity based on congruence between commu-nity and land or place may be called into question.

New Migration Patterns

The last 30 years have seen major changes in the distribution of Pacific Islanders as the inter-acting forces of commercialism, urbanization, and internal and overseas migration have resulted in high proportions of many island populations moving away from the natal or ancestral lands. In countries such as Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Marshall Islands and Palau, more than half of the resident popula-tion now live in urban areas (ESCAP, 1997).

Although the proportions of urban dwellers and expatriate islanders are lower in Mela-nesian countries, the annual rate of growth of urban populations is high in several of them, being 3.9 per cent in both Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and reaching 6.5 per cent in Solomon Islands (ESCAP 1997). Apart from rural-urban migrants, many other Melanesians are rural-rural migrants having left their natal villages to work on plantations or settle on development projects. Although circularity has been a common feature of much Melanesian migration, sustaining the « canoe » analogy, settlement projects and towns now have sizable groups of the second and third generation who have never lived in the natal villages of their parents or grandparents. Such groups may assert some affinity with those ancestral places but the validity of such claims, especially in relation to land, may be problematic. Children born in Melanesian urban centres often have parents who come from different parts of the country and are brought up with one of the pidgin lingua franca as the language of their household, rather than the natal language of either of their parents. Morauta and Hasu (1979) and Ryan (1989) have described how kinship associations changed amongst urban residents and how their attitudes towards reciprocal obligations with the kinsfolk still living in their ancestral villages have become much more selective and guarded. While some urban residents, particularly those of the first generation of rural-urban migrants, maintain close links with their rural kin, many do not, and within later generations there are many people with very few functional links to their rural kin or their rural places. Circular migration is still important in Melanesia, and for the young a period of urban residence may be regarded as a rite of passage. Education beyond the first few years of school may require a move to town. However, what begins as an intended short-term visit for education or expe-

rience often becomes a long-term stay in which the intended return to the rural home place is indefinitely postponed resulting in « *the progressive transformation of the circular cycle into an "uncontrolled migration"* » (Bonnemaison, 1977 : 132).

Recent research on urban societies in Melanesia has been relatively sparse but studies by Jourdan (1995 ; 1996) and Jourdan and Philibert (1994) are notable exceptions. They show that young migrants to the towns « *feel a sense of reprieve from customary obligations* » and « *follow customary rules only inasmuch as it allows them to remain in town in security and comfort* » (Jourdan, 1995: 211). Without established cultural norms for living in towns they develop « *a form of generic culture that overcomes ethnic and generational boundaries* » (Jourdan, 1995: 212). For residents of the capital of Solomon Islands, Honiara, this « *socio-cultural creolisation* » is central to the « *the shaping of Honiara identity* » (Jourdan, 1996: 43) which in turn may be a key component in shaping national identities. Such trends were also recognizable in Papua New Guinea at an earlier period when it was clear that « *the concept of the Papua New Guinea nation* » would be forged in the essentially urban educational and political institutions, and in events such as urban political demonstrations (Ward, 1971 : 106).

The Polynesian case of new identities

Within Melanesia the transition from rural to urban residence amongst the indigenous population is most advanced in Fiji where approximately 40 per cent of ethnic Fijians now live in urban or peri-urban areas (Ward, Chandra, 1997 : 168). The process is far more developed in Polynesia and Micronesia where the range of migrants has been greatly extended to encompass countries of the Pacific Rim and beyond. More Cook Islanders and Niueans live in New Zealand than in their respective ances-

tral islands and high proportions of Micronesians are now resident in the United States (Ward, 1997 : 185). As most of the Polynesians and Micronesians living outside their ancestral countries of the tropical Pacific are residents of Auckland, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sydney, or other cities of the Pacific Rim, the majority of Polynesians and Micronesians, perhaps 60 per cent of their total number, are urban dwellers. The experience of these long-distance or long-term migrants in seeking to maintain their identity and ties with home societies, islands or places, or in accepting or fostering new levels of locational or social identity, may be suggestive of future tendencies in Melanesia.

In recent decades Polynesians have been adding new levels of identity to the older identities based in language, island and village communities. As in Melanesia, education and work in areas away from natal communities have been big factors. The longer periods for which some Polynesian countries have been politically independent compared with Melanesia, combined with the greater linguistic uniformity within Polynesian countries have speeded the formation of national identities. But above this many Tongans, Samoans and others now recognise a Pan-Pacific identity as citizens of Oceania (Thaman, 1985 : 106 ; Wendt, 1982 : 202). Furthermore, ethnic Polynesians living in New Zealand or the United States consciously recognize their dual identities as, for example, Samoans and New Zealanders. This duality is especially true for those born outside the island homeland of their parents or grandparents. New Zealand-born Samoans, Niueans, Cook Island Maori and Tongans may acknowledge the common elements of their non-island identity in the new names they give their multi-ethnic group, « Polys » or « PIs », to distinguish themselves from their island-born parents (Pers. comm. Cluny Macpherson, March 1996). In all these

cases, people are redefining their personal identities through wider cultural groupings less tied to land and local places than was formerly the case.

The links between land ownership or rights of usufruct and personal or cultural identity are also being weakened. This is most clearly seen in the contrasting claims between Polynesians resident in their ancestral island country and those now living overseas. In former times, the land rights of people who moved away from their ancestral land and group would, in time, become « cold ». Those who have remained at home now often assert that those permanently resident overseas no longer have active rights to land in their ancestral places. The latter often claim that their rights remain valid and that their contributions through remittances or during short visits are sufficient to keep their rights warm. The same differences of opinion can be found between village residents and absentees now living away from their village of origin in parts of Melanesia. In Fiji, where the process of commercialization of agriculture has gone furthest in Melanesia, some kinship groups (*mataqali*) would have insufficient land available to provide for absentees if such people returned to their ancestral places.

In a paper originally presented in 1983, Bonnemaison (1984 : 144) asked whether « *current mobility [is] the sign not only of a new identity but also that the traditional culture, linked with the semiology of place, is dead ?* ». He thought it was not. One might now argue that as people migrate more freely, over greater distances, and into more contrasting socio-economic situations in Melanesia and beyond, the evidence of the changing forms of identity and « *socio-cultural creolisation* » visible in the towns requires reconsideration of this view. It seems that the rural ancestral place is becoming a smaller component in the formation of the identities and cultures of many Polynesians.

Many, particularly those resident outside their ancestral homelands, now have « *dual or multiple identities, consciously and deliberately cultivated* » (Hereniko, 1994 : 421), each based on different associations, and each used for different pragmatic purposes. Those layers of identity and attachment that do reach back to the homelands, may now be based on a generalised image rather than the specific features and associations of a particular place. Will Melanesians follow this course ? It is very sad that Joel Bonnemaison's deep understanding of Melanesian identity and sense of place can no longer be focused on the question. But perhaps he has already given us the keys when he described how culture and *kastom* can change and be recreated (1994 : 96) ; how « *a relationship* » can evolve « *freely through space* » (1994 : 143) ; and how identities and cultures may remain strong when the « *territorial anchor assume[s] a mystical dimension which is often expressed in a myth of origin* » (1985 : 59) less tied than formerly to a specific geographical site. Association with some idealised ancestral place is likely to remain a basic level in the new multi-layered identities of Melanesians.

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