

The link with land : questions about change

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THE 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 Bonnemaïson'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 (Bonnemaïson 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). Bonnemaïson'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 ». Bonnemaïson 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

(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 landowner, 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 indigenous 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 community 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 interacting 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 population now live in urban areas (ESCAP, 1997).

Although the proportions of urban dwellers and expatriate islanders are lower in Melanesian 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"* » (Bonnemaïson, 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

