

POSTSCRIPT

What are the consequences of *rahui*?

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The *rahui* maybe *the* institution belonging to island civilisation that has been least coloured with Western romanticism. Each author in this volume agrees more or less on the same features, the same rules and the same consequences. The same vegetable symbol is fastened to a coconut trunk, or built outside it, with the same coconut at different stages of maturity. More important, the story told about it is globally the same in Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. This could mean that the *rahui* is in effect at the centre of all things, which conclusion may be regarded as slightly adventurous.

The frequent and relative consistency of any discourse about the *rahui* brings us to hunt around to make things clearer. The importance of the *rahui* is in its consequences and it is there that the professional stance falters so often. We have next to no analysis featuring numbers, the amount of food obtained and saved through the *rahui* for a given event, how it is brought in, where, in what quantities, by whom and how *exactly* it is shared and consumed.

The trouble so often is that any study aiming to generalise tends to cite all authors, all of whom are European. Some are good, some are bad, even very bad, some are in the middle, but all must be cited, even if they are only second-line cabinet anthropologists, who tend to repeat what everybody has said before. Anything told by a missionary should be under suspicion and checked in the field, given the set ideas that they brought to Polynesia from London, France or America

about infanticide, cannibalism and human sacrifice, which they received from their superficial studies of the religious situation in the Roman Empire at the time of the beginning of the Christian religion, with the near Eastern messianic religions invading Rome and being *de facto* rivals of the nascent Christian faith. Only those who base their conclusions on solid field research should be cited. What is the value of a judgement about Polynesian culture and society by an author who has never been there? Or who has only passed through?

The classical rule, accepted through many centuries, is that a vernacular concept can only be analysed through taking all its known contexts in all vernacular texts available over the generations. Which is, or should be, amongst others, the job of authors of dictionaries. Analysing the interpretations by European authors only is a specific deviation from the rule by authors interested in Tahiti for the last 300 years. What Claude Lévi-Strauss calls normative anthropology is not the best way of analysing the cultures and societies of the islands. We have for so long disregarded facts and been satisfied with value judgements. Real facts were few and far between, in a sea of pure invention conceived by white self-imposed witnesses.

Texts uttered and taken down, or written down by vernacular authors themselves at leisure, at different dates in time, are what we need, and what we do not have (a very little in the Society Islands and none in the Marquesas). The Aotearoa New Zealand Maori written tradition is richer, so much so that we can ignore useless authors, such as Elsdon Best, who is useful only in precise instances. When he starts generalising, he is useless. This Maori universe represents, at least for a great part, the Society Islands as it existed 1,000 years before James Cook. This is a new field to be worked upon, abandoning for a time the imprecise conclusions of the *pakeha* (when they are not wholly wrong).

This brings us to the true consequences of *rahui*, that is the problem of *the circulation of goods and riches*, illustrated by Marcel Mauss's famed essay *The Gift*. There are some problems with this author, who was a cabinet sociologist (he never called himself an anthropologist) — this species survived long in France — and never went out of his study, except to see out his military service in Morocco, which means he did not always understand the details of the proceedings described by Malinowski or other authors. How can you apply a theoretical

analysis to the exchange of yams when you have never seen a yam, much less eaten one, know how it is planted and looked after, and by whom? Mauss was so revered inside the French academic scene that nobody asked such an irreverent question, nor do they today.

The problem of method is thus to go back to reality. What are the *details* of the social and economic consequences of the *rahui*? One is evident: feeding a mass of people. The amount of food saved through the *rahui*, but *equally* through the physical labour allowing the yams and other tubers and *varia* to be grown is astounding. The two always go together. Tons of food are needed to satisfy the ceremonial appetite of approximately 3,000 people gathered together for five days, which was the usual length of any collective outburst of island privilege, prestige and power. They may stay another five days, but this was infrequent.

The rules of the game — as I know them from Southern Melanesia, which is so close, geographically and culturally, to Polynesia — are as interesting as they are unheralded. The principal one, which must not be infringed without dire consequences (it would be an insult) is that *the food one brings into the collective pot must never be found inside it*. The chief's first legitimate wife, known as *isola* inside the so-called chiefly language of the Loyalty Islands (used by commoners addressing chiefs, her individual name must never be used), has the difficult job, with a ceremonial man servant called *ahnyaba* (the man of the house), to check where the food brought from the outside is stored, so as never to give it back, as food or as a gift, to the exact people who brought it. This rule, which is equally valid in Vanuatu, has been little noted up to now. It underlines the essential function of the first-born lady having become the first legitimate wife of a chief, whom she always outranks.

The other, rarely described evidence relates to the circulation of goods. The reality is that there is very little circulation. Most of the food is eaten on the spot, it does not circulate in any way, except through the consequences of the biological function — the spot where one eats and the one where one defecates. This food has been brought directly from the gardens, far and wide, which also happens daily. There is no fundamental discrepancy with everyday life.

The only economic function of the tons of food put together is feeding the thousands of people for the duration of their stay. The economic consequence is that the same people, brought together on a single spot, will have only grown a percentage of the food brought together and put on exhibition before being consumed. They have come to eat, not to trade. But there is a physical limit to what they can eat.

Part of the prestige of a large feast is when there is more food left over than was needed, plus the gifts of food that are returned to the representatives — men, women and children — of the visiting descent lines, which will be shared at home, including with the old ladies who could not come to receive their rightful share. These specific gifts are theoretically *less* than what the recipients brought in, if they are linked to the paternal line of the husband of the married couple, or of the deceased man or woman; *more* if they are linked to the wife's line, or the maternal line of the deceased person. The fact is that *one never gets back the exact amount of what one has brought*, but either *more* or *less*, and this in varying amounts. This is one of the two great problems of the hosting group, to feed enough and well, and to give back what should be according to the available amounts, which must be calculated precisely before everybody arrives.

Various tricks are used to arrive at precise figures, which are checked at each stage of the preparations and of the five days, usually by using the fronds of the cycas palm tree. Creating heaps of 10 tubers fastened with a stone or shell to indicate the descent line that has brought the specific cycas frond in the first instance, and has chosen the added symbol.

The other reality is that, for the greater part, the same amount of food would have been grown, outside of any feast, so as to feed the same people. What has changed for the time is the method of allocation: centralisation of the same tons of food, for the same people, inside a single spot for five days. The validity of the process is symbolic, what is processed socially is not food but prestige, added to the demonstration of the legitimate forms of an island power of sorts. This is no form of tribute, part of the food coming from the chief's gardens and being the result of his own and his wife's physical exertions. The chief is the host, but he is equally one of the producers, and he too must not eat his own food. He would fall sick, hurt by the reverse operation of his own *mana*.

One may complete this kind of return to base by examining the concept of the circulation of riches. The first evident remark is that they are not consumed. They are never destroyed, ritually. They gain in prestige as they circulate, if they circulate. The problem is that they do not always circulate. The crown made from the hair of successive legitimate wives, over the generations of Te Ariki Kafika on Tikopia, worn by his wife does not circulate, it is added to at each generation. The necklaces made of green stone beads of the Loyalty Islands *isola*, and the New Caledonian first-born legitimate wives and first-born daughters are handed over, generation after generation, through the female line; they are never, as such, part of an exchange process. The riches that circulate are the shell money (*miö, adi*), and the circular shaped ritual axe (*gi o kono, sio*), built from a succession of male and female symbols.

The Latin motto '*Do ut des*', which has for so long governed anthropological interpretations, is completely wrong here. What is given is never wholly given back, if it is only something that can be divided in equal parts (so many dry coconuts, so many yams, so many taros, so many sugar canes — note that tubers are never cut into pieces except for cooking purposes). Some recipients do receive back an equal amount of anything, which is understood as a kind of insult intended by the island givers, but never understood by the European unconscious takers. It means only this, through a silent message: 'the present relation is hereby terminated, we do not want to build a long standing relation with you'. No white man, in the islands, has ever comprehended this disrespectful symbolic language. They may often have acted as if, in fact, they are only visitors, often invited for a short visit, and were effectively uninterested in a long-term relationship, as understood by the people, which, if started knowingly, could later become costly, costs growing along with the prestige claimed.

Another moot point is the one of the sanctions against those who did not respect the *rahui*. European authors dealing with the islands, be they missionaries, lay people, but also anthropologists, have from the beginning loved death (the one of island people, not their own) as a constant described sanction for any misdeed, violating *rahui* included. The fear of sanctions is given as an explanation for the start of a migration, somebody having for instance touched inadvertently the head of a chief's son. The whole social group goes overseas for fear of being wholesale murdered.

Having worked all over a wide area through searching for every single descent line, alive or dead, I have noted what happened to lines of which an ancestor had broken a *tapu*, for instance, by killing the paramount chief of the Wetr district in Lifou before the advent of the white man. The culprit's line was said to have been victims of a curse, mass murdered and died out through the lack of male members. The problem is that I found the descendants three miles away, they had been only obliged to change their name and as a consequence lost their former land tenure. They were on sufferance in their new environment, but apparently quite prosperous nevertheless. As of their preceding name, they had died out. As of those with the new name, they were shipshape. This is not the only instance of such a silent, peaceful change hidden behind a dramatic discourse for the benefit of expatriate curiosity.

Over the years, I have accumulated the knowledge of quite a few theoretically disappeared lineages, some close to Nouméa, who were meant to have died out here, but who are alive and kicking elsewhere. I do not believe anymore in sanctions by death for traditional reasons. The people have so often changed name and location at the same time, for all sorts of reasons — quarrels between siblings being quite a frequent explanation. Most culprits are just a little away — that is their descendants — and everybody knows it. Only a few are ever far away.

If the sanctions by death accumulated by the *pakeha*, *haole*, *pwopale* (north-east New Caledonia), *kamaadra* (men of the colour of blood, Lifou) authors had been genuine, plus human sacrifices, children killed by their *ari 'oi* mothers, victims of cannibals, how many islanders would there be left? That is the question none of these authors has ever answered over the last four centuries. The thousands of corpses have never been found, neither on land, nor inside the lagoons. The concrete consequence of their assertions, repeated over time, have never been considered by classical authors dealing with the Pacific islands. Going on saying that the violators of the *rahui* were punished by death is not believable today. Bring me a corpse with the necessary contextual data, and the physical traces of his execution. I have them in south central Vanuatu for quite different reasons. But they are there. They are absent in Polynesia, where massacres described by authors yield no material proof. Go down deep inside genealogies and get to the real sanctions, those that a healthy, living society could tolerate. I know of more chiefs killed or obliged to go into exile than

of offenders of a *tapu*. Most offenders are found in the next island, or even the next Christian village today — that is their descendants — but who searched for them? Any stupid assertion by a missionary is regarded as being an unassailable truth. These clerics came from Europe and the Americas with those very ideas, so they interpreted everything according to their primitive views. White missionaries have been saying those things about everywhere: Madagascar, South Africa, India, China, and so on. Even from Ethiopia, where the people were Christians before us, and even from the Nestorian Christian Mongols of the famed Priest John along the Silk Road.

Another wrong idea is the use of poison as a hidden sanction for the breaking of a *tapu* or a *rahui*. This goes with the prevalent white idea of the presence of witchcraft, the theory of which was brought to the islands by missionaries. The islanders know well what plants are dangerous, but all use by them as poison is hearsay and again a nasty invention by white authors. This idea by expatriates comes from a pidgin English linguistic transfer of signification, where the white man understood the use of vegetable poison, the islander was talking of having recourse to ritual tools for killing a man, making use of his hair or soil impregnated with his body liquids, or through curses asked from a local god (we have many such instances around the Shepherd Islands of Vanuatu).

This goes with what is the real authority of a chief? The general view of European authors is that chiefs represented a hierarchical system inside a stratified society. This is not at all how the islands' societies I know function, from New Caledonia to north Vanuatu. The stratified aspect is non-functional, except when one has recourse to the ceremonial lexicon. The respectful use of a so-called chiefly language between commoners and chiefly kin are equally used between *cipa*, younger brothers and their father and mother and their first-born sister or elder brother. The parallel respectful behaviour towards the paramount chief, who has been given a collective name, *angajoxue*, that is 'the chiefs', and the secondary chiefs of the lineages (*tixei i angete*) linked to the paramount chieftainship, are found to be the same, with somewhat less flourish, less complexity inside the devilish details, between children and their parents or elder brothers and sisters. The result is that it is unfeasible to bring about the concept of castes, as there is no fixed social status at birth. The name given to a child brings him at the same time his future social and land tenure

status, but this name is the result of a discussion between a number of people, representatives of the lineage at birth and some outside people according to the demographic situation, and what lines need a new person to take over because there are no males left, or not enough. Thus, the situation of the new-born baby is not fixed, except by negotiations that might have started long before his birth.

In this context, one woman stands out — the *first-born sister* — whose social status is higher than that of her father and mother, higher than the elder brother (see Tonga, Samoa and Fiji, as well as New Caledonia, the Loyalty Islands and Vanuatu). If she is of high rank, she has been trained to exert a commanding position over men. I have never seen a man standing up to a first-born woman, not even her husband, who is also of lower rank than her. This was in Fiji the position of Lady Adi Lala, herself *Tui Rewa* or *Tui Dreketi*, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's wife, himself *Tui Nayau*.

In Lifou, this was the status of my mother-in-law, Charlotte Xutepec Wahnyamala, who chose a commoner as a husband but also talked as an equal to any of the three male paramount chiefs of the island. She never said to them *angajoxue*, as I would do, but called them by their personal names, which no one else would dare to do. She would be slightly more respectful with their legitimate wives, first-born women as she was. In fact, her husband was from another chiefly line, the Wanakamwe on Ouvéa, but this was never recognised openly.

The first-born sister has everywhere the choice of her husband. If she has a child out of wedlock, there maybe a special cadet ranking line available nearby where the child will be integrated, so as not to appear inside the official genealogy (on Tongariki, one of the Shepherd islands of Vanuatu, the blood samples taken from every single person, even new-born babies, have shown that 30 per cent of the members of this island community were not the sons or daughters of the parents they officially declared, which means that the biological descendants was not the working concept here). They did not deal in ideas of blood descendants, which are so loved by European authors. The status of a person is the result of a collective decision at birth, and genealogies are partly manipulated social tools, in which are looked for, and organised, the closest possible links with the persons having the greatest *mana*,

that is first-born ladies of yore. Another reason for such collective decisions at birth is to be the instrument of achieving access to land tenure rights that were previously not available.

The place is equally full of rejected elder brothers who have been found to be non-functional, that is brutal or stupid, unfitted to reign. A non-functional chief can be killed and there are numerous, well-documented cases of this. The lineage of the present Melanesian president of the local congress in Nouméa is one. The murder of Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Ouvéa is another, he being killed by the coherent collective will of the lineage chiefs, fathers of the young warriors who died in the cave. They could not accept that Tjibaou had not used his international stature at the time to save the life of their children, instead going to hide inside his tribe, claiming that he had had no previous knowledge of the project, when he was in effect the one to have given the marching orders. They were not concerned with the four members of the armed gendarmerie who were killed by their sons. My wife has close kin in Ouvéa, which helped greatly for a silent inquiry parallel and in complete contradiction to the official one.

The way local meetings are carried out on Ouvéa show a different picture than the one so often peddled around. The chief is present. When he talks, it is in a low voice. He is not the chairman, better playing subtly the role of a servant of his people. The men speaking in a strong tone are those who have inherited the right to do so. They speak as they wish, not specially referring to the chief's opinion, but saying what they have been trained to say. Contrary opinions can be voiced, which more often brings the discussion to a state of no decision, until the next time, a special dignitary being the one who will resume the discussion and state publicly if a decision has been or not been agreed to. During the meeting, children walk from the circle of women sitting on mats outside of the oval open meeting house, and go to speak in their father's ear. He then gets up and talks, telling what his wife has thus reminded him he should say.

The complexity of Melanesian chieftainships go from the outmost simplicity and in effect the lack of chieftainship (the Tchamba valley, north-east New Caledonia) to the affluent and celebrated chiefdoms in the Loyalty Islands, but also lesser known ones on Koumak, Gomen, Bondé and Pouébo in north New Caledonia, all the others being in between in all sorts of cunning ways. In the same way the Vanuatu

situation moves from the absence of classical chiefs (Tanna) to the more elaborate situations in north Malekula (with patrilineal chiefs) and the area from Efate to Epi (matrilineal chiefs in the south, elected chiefs through a title system on the Shepherd Islands to the north).

This complexity is not an instrument of chiefs having the right of life and death on their subjects, as is expressed in so many white man's interpretations, but a way of creating, under all kinds of ritual or ceremonial pretences, real autonomies which protect such and such lines that can only be called upon for a specific task, the lineage chief sending a cadet to attend to the matter and never coming himself. Some lineages are only called upon to be present at ceremonial times, nothing being asked from them. Their chief is only meant to be what is called the 'shell' (*mo ni angajoxue*); that is, to be a kind of ornament at the chief's court. Catholic or Protestant missionaries tend to be considered as being of this kind, a prestigious piece of furniture. They rarely concur with this view, but they have rarely known about it.

The official explanations for all these autonomies are varied. There are no 'talking chiefs', such as on Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, but the list of privileges is still the one noted on Tonga by James Mariner, which is very little cited by anthropologists of all kinds, but is nevertheless one of the best things written about Polynesia. The original, primeval list is Melanesian, here on Ouvéa is:¹

- the man who holds the right to speak for the chief, *hnyimen than*, *mutu de aliki*; he has been trained in all circumstances and knows what discourse he is to deliver in each instance; he is the introducer at all formal meetings;
- the man of the house, *ahnyaba*, he is the sole person allowed to sleep with the chief inside the *hnyeule*, round hut where are kept the yams brought at the first fruits ritual; he has the right to eat the bananas from the tree at the foot of which the chief, *than*, *aliki*, urinates and defecates at night; he is thus said to be another sort of wife for the chief, and said also, symbolically, to eat the chief's faeces, which some ill-disposed authors have taken as being the reality;

1 Quoted from Guiart, Jean, 1963. *Structure de la chefferie en Mélanésie du Sud*, Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

- *obotrkong*, the man whose duty is to conclude, positively or negatively, a meeting. He is the sole person allowed to say if a decision has been agreed to or deferred to another meeting;
- *hingat in than*, the man who is meant to be, or more than one man, an adviser to the chief; he holds also the right to remonstrate with the chief, or even beat him if what the latter is doing is not right by the traditional criteria (i.e. having sexual relations with a married woman); the *ta hingat* are also called upon to participate in, that is in the role of directing, construction work inside the chief's fence (*hag*);
- *tang tangen than*, the man who cares for and holds the chief's traditional riches (shell money, *sio*, etc.). Some in modern times have sold them to white men, or given them to Christian missionaries.

The island of Lifou adds to this list:

- the *angatresi* (*acania* on Maré island) are those who play the role of intermediate between the chief, *joxue* or *angajoxue*, and the *alalu* (because they are so often cited two by two) or *ten adro* (he who stands on the land), or *angete haze* (the men mastering the gods), according to context, in as much as they are meant to be the oldest inhabitants of the land, anywhere, are said to have chosen the chief on the area which is theirs and the only ones having the privilege of a direct relation to the gods (*haze, kaze* on Maré); for this reason their *men* (= *mana*) is great and their contact dangerous. Their contribution in yams for the first fruits ritual must go through each of their specific *atresi*, who keeps them and substitutes his own to go to the *angajoxue*, so as to protect him. This contribution, made in their name, is deposited outside, not inside, as with all the other contributions, the chiefly yard (*hag*);
- A specific line is called the 'chief's meat'. This has been interpreted by missionaries, and even by authors such as Maurice Leenhardt, as having the dubious privilege of giving one of its members when the paramount chief Bula wanted to taste human meat.

This interpretation is completely wrong. A man is said to have been 'eaten by the chief' when he has been chosen to be the one to take over the name (all the names linked to the dead lineage: place names, names of godly beings, names of places oozing with *men*) of a line without any male representative left, which gives him the benefit of

that line's land tenure, which he holds in trust, redistributing the land as fast as he bears male children. If he has only daughters, it will be the job of his first-born daughter. He loses at the same time his birth names, and his previous land tenure. He is another man. All cannibal interpretations by white authors should go to the wastepaper basket.

Vanuatu systems have more or less the same list, to which they add the carpenter (*namataisau*) the one who has inherited the knowledge of the minute details of the building of large seagoing canoes (he exists also on Ouvéa). And also the *takoari* (the great warrior and executioner) found on the islands from Efate to Epi, but equally on north Malekula. The execution of the French settler Mazoyer, in 1939, on the orders of the chief of Tènamit (Big Nambas area), was done by the chief's *takoari*, who was sent home to fetch his gun and kill the white man while he was sleeping in his boat. The latter had abducted the three wives of a relative of the chief and would not give them back, even with the offer by the chief of a tusker pig. The *takoari* could not evade doing exactly what was his function. Such details are not from the devil, although he may be roaming around. They are functional, and they are at the basis of Polynesian ideology. Melanesian *rahui* predated the Polynesian ones by many thousands of years. Speaking of Polynesia only when dealing with concepts such a *tapu* and *mana* might be a fatal mistake for the profession.

A last remark is the unhappy effect of deeming so many things 'sacred', when 'sacredness' is a concept considered as being so natural as not being necessary to study. The parallel *vernacular* concepts of *tapu* and *mana*, could have nothing to do with 'sacredness', which is a *white man's* theological concept brought in by Protestant and Catholic missionaries. 'Sacred' may be the catchword of the anthropology of our time. It should be the theme of another book.

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