

The New Shape of Old Island Cultures: a half century of social change in Micronesia.
Francis X. Hezel, SJ. Honolulu. University of Hawaii Press, 2001. xi + 199 pp.
Map, b & w photographs, bib., index. ISBN 0-8248-2393-1 (pbk)

Every now and then one comes across a book that really resonates with one's experience. For me, this book falls into that category. I was delighted with it. For years I have tried to discuss with my students at the University of Papua New Guinea and The University of the South Pacific the changes that I have observed taking place at family and household level throughout Pacific Island societies. In my teaching on such topics, I have generally used Ben Finney's work on Tahiti (1973) as my starting point. An especially stimulating resource has been his chapter 'Social Change', which discusses in detail his observations on changes in Tahitian household structures and in the roles of individual household members, as the economy of that society shifted from a subsistence to a cash base, and from a rural to an urban way of living. I have supplemented Finney's work with that of Paul Kay (1971) because it is also about Tahiti, and corroborates and extends some of Finney's findings. More recently, I have been able to introduce some of the writings from the Micronesian Seminar, directed by Fr Hezel, published in their series of occasional papers, *The Micronesian Counselor*.

Both Finney's and Kay's works were published during the early 1970s, and my Island students sometimes ask me why we should study findings that are more than three decades old. My responses have been twofold. In the first place, these works remain relevant: despite their age, both accounts are still remarkably apposite. They accord very broadly with my own observations of changes over the last thirty or so years in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Kiribati, and of changes suggested by authors such as Schoeffel (1994), O'Meara (1990) and Holmes (1992) for Samoa. Secondly, until now, Finney's has been the only published work known to me that makes an intensive examination of a whole series of closely related changes taking place in Pacific family life. This new book by Hezel, coupled with reports in ethnographic studies such as those mentioned in this paragraph, helps to bring our knowledge up to date, and confirms the impression that similar changes are taking place throughout the region.

Hezel's volume is a wide-ranging study of the modern Micronesian family and household. In his 'Introduction', he characterises the period from 1950 to the present as an era of unprecedented economic and political change. His nine chapters, sandwiched between an introduction and a summing up, build on the work of the Micronesian Seminar, to explore sociocultural implications of various processes of change during the last half-century. The sense of recognition, for readers familiar with other parts of the island Pacific, is overwhelming. Those who have spent any time reading about Micronesia will already be familiar with Hezel's name. He has lived in the region for more than four decades, always observing keenly and sympathetically, and has established for himself a respected name as an insightful and informed social commentator.

In the first chapter, 'Family', Hezel sets the scene, quickly outlining 'traditional' household and family structures—and these are ones that we can broadly recognise from all over the Pacific—then writing:

The households of the extended family that once ate together, worked together, and formed a single economic unit began to operate more and more as independent entities. The lineage head no longer presides over the distribution of food prepared from the land; it is now up to the master of each household to provide for those residing in his house. As the availability of money increased, households no longer depended on the lineage head for resources, as they once did. With the surrender of his responsibility to feed the households, the lineage head has also lost the authority over them he once enjoyed. Hence, for example, the main burden of supervising youth now rests with the father of the family in each house rather than with the entire lineage unit under its leader.

In short, the new Micronesian family has gradually retreated into the nuclear household. (12– 13)

This description exudes the whiff of regret about the changes, without stepping into absolute value judgment. Subsequent chapters probe how this change has come about, and the consequences for present day Micronesian society.

The second chapter, 'Land', looks at the conversion of land itself to a saleable commodity, where before it had been joint lineage property

on which crops were grown for subsistence, exchange and sale. Concomitant with this is the shift from group to individual ownership, which has had three interrelated effects: the concentration of land into the hands of a few wealthy families; a growing class of landless people; and a further weakening of lineage bonds. Finney (1973) and O'Meara (1990) for Tahiti and Samoa respectively, demonstrate similar shifts towards individual control of land and cash crops, as nuclear households prefer to keep cash earnings for their own use. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this trend is very widespread in the Pacific.

Under the heading of 'Gender Roles', the third chapter begins by outlining the older pattern of strictly separate but complementary roles of men and women in the household and community economy: 'opposite halves of a single system' (49). Reciprocal respect between the sexes was inherent in these relationships. Against this backdrop, Hezel turns to examine the changing balance between men's and women's tasks in the house and the wider society. Where once tasks were fairly evenly divided, the changing economy has seemingly reduced men's tasks, while widening those of women. Hezel shows, however, that 'the role division . . . in the household remains essentially what it was thirty or forty years ago—men are the providers and women the preparers' (56). If this should seem somewhat unexceptional, the chapter goes on to discuss the important roles of women as custodians of the land and peacemakers, and their strong informal political influence in their societies. While the weakening of the extended family has reduced some of these roles, the rise in civic and church organisations has given women a new voice in community affairs.

Chapter 4, 'Birth', ponders some of the social ramifications of the choice a woman makes about where she will go to deliver her child. Most of the communities discussed by Hezel are matrilineal. In the past, childbirth was such a 'harrowing event' (68) with such high infant and maternal mortality rates (67) that women preferred to give birth among their own close blood relatives—often staying for long periods following the birth. This reinforced their matrilineal ties, so that even decisions so apparently straightforward as whether to give birth at home on her own land with her own people, or travel to the urban maternity hospital, can affect ties to lineage, land and the sense of identity. Nevertheless, mobility and urbanisation mean that most deliveries now take place in

hospitals, though women still prefer to have close blood relatives with them at the time (69).

The chapter also includes an account of the changes occurring in the conduct and meaning of ceremonies such as first birthday parties. Where these once celebrated the survival of newborn children and affirmed the links between their Mothers' and Fathers' lineages, their main emphasis today is more to declare the social status of the child's nuclear family. Hezel describes the big celebrations as 'public displays of wealth staged by individuals to signal their membership of the elite class' (78).

Next in the discussion of changes in areas of kinship relationships is a chapter dealing with aspects of 'Marriage'. In particular, Hezel here presents an account of the changing patterns in the choice of marriage partners. The observable trend is the withdrawal of the parents and lineage from that choice. In its place has emerged a new pattern of young couples setting up their own households separately from the lineage. This frees them from some customary obligations, but simultaneously—as we read in earlier chapters—weakens the important ties of support that they might have expected from the lineage during the socialisation of children and in times of difficulty.

A chapter on 'Death', at the other end of the life cycle, demonstrates the way funeral ceremonies have grown—in size and expense—imposing an ever heavier burden on the living in the feeding of mourners. But like birthday parties, funerals have become prime occasions for the competitive offering of gifts of food, and the recognition of chiefly authority. Hezel comments: 'In every island group in Micronesia the funeral feast has escalated in recent decades, even though this change has been largely unrecognized' (107). Nor is it simply a matter of the escalating financial burden. Funeral gatherings—bringing together large groups of kin and affirming their relationship—once provided important opportunities for the resolution of family and interpersonal disputes. Partly because of the increase in the size and competitiveness of funerals, they are losing their effectiveness in this function.

Changing direction again, chapter 7, on 'Sexuality', explores the persisting myths and the realities about the 'permissiveness' of South Seas societies. The author reminds us that sexual behaviour was in the past 'much more tightly regulated . . . than might at first appear to be the case' (111) but that all regulating forces have been weakened by the social changes of the last half-century.

In former times prohibitions discouraged any discussion of and behaviour hinting at sexual matters, in front of certain classes of people. This reticence, not uncommon in Pacific societies, applied between parents and children, across genders or in front of various categories of kin. A man's relationship with his daughter was once 'as formally correct as the relationship between a man and his chief' (115). At puberty, boys were sent to live in the men's house, and banned from sleeping under the same roof as their sisters.

These and other practices that once safeguarded family integrity and cross-gender respect have fallen into disuse as coeducation has permitted boys and girls more direct access to each other; men's houses have disappeared; bars and nightclubs have introduced new forms of socialising; and mass media, especially video rentals, have injected explicit sexuality right into the family home, from which acknowledgment of it was once excluded (116).

Hezel notes an apparent increase in incest accusations in Micronesia (and readers of newspapers in Fiji and Samoa will find basis for unease on similar grounds) but he remains uncertain if this 'apparently growing problem . . . can be attributed . . . to the breakdown of restraints on sexual matters within the family'. He concludes: 'these forms may prove to be more essential than they might have seemed' (117).

The final chapters move away from examination of changes in the kinship-related bases of family, socialisation, life cycle and personal identity. 'Political Authority', chapter 8, discusses 'traditional' chiefly authority and the reciprocal respect and obligations expected between leaders and their people. The chapter notes criticisms, expressed not only in Micronesia but widely in the Pacific—that while chiefs still expect what is due to them, many no longer make full reciprocal returns to their followers, especially when it involves cash. whether or not the allegation is true, the fact that it is voiced at all is a telling indicator of the extent to which the traditions have been undermined.

The chapter also outlines the dual authority that has emerged, a demarcation between the traditional leadership and present-day parliamentary (congressional) leadership. With the exception of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia has been firm over the last fifty years that traditional chiefs should *not* run for public office. Like other Pacific communities, Micronesians are still struggling to legitimise a balance between old and new forms of authority in present day society.

Chapter 9, 'Population and Migration' presents one of the most striking correlatives of social change. One in eight Micronesians now lives overseas (147) and this chapter examines demographic changes in the Islands, the outflow of individuals seeking cash-paying employment, and the close linkages maintained between emigrants and those left at home.

In the final chapter, 'Summing up', Hezel suggests that the 'web of change' discussed in his monograph has reached to the deepest roots of Island societies, altering the fundamental relationships between the people and their institutions (155). He argues that 'the single change that has had the most profound and far-reaching effects on the islands in the last fifty years is the introduction of the cash economy' (160), which has liberated the individual and the household from the wider kin group (155). What are some of the consequences?

The extended family that ate together was bound by strong ties of responsibility towards each other:

sharing food with someone doesn't just express kin ties with that person, it forms them. The opposite is also true, however. As the extended family loses the responsibility for feeding the household, it also surrenders many of the social obligations and rights that it once enjoyed with respect to members of this household. (155–6).

Donald Rubinstein, who has long worked with Hezel at the Micronesian Seminar, sums up the trends in what he calls 'the social ecology of families and children in Micronesia' (1994: 2), suggesting three general trends that increase the vulnerability of children and contribute to youth problems, including suicide. First is 'a shift from collective, shared authority over children, to a much more narrowly focused parental authority'. In broad terms this is the change from the extended to the nuclear family. Second is 'the shift from the social inclusion and incorporation of children and adolescents, towards [their] social isolation and differentiation . . . from adults'. This includes the collapse of social supports for male youth as a result of the loss of institutions such as the village men's houses. Third is 'the introduction of major new stresses' such as urbanisation, migration and alcohol abuse.

Studies such as these by Hezel and Rubinstein are important, because sometimes it seems that too many of our senior officials, policy planners and religious leaders simply echo popular or 'common sense' explanations of the issues underlying such phenomena as rising domestic violence, abuse, delinquency and increasing numbers of 'street kids'. It is, for instance, quite usual to lay the blame for these social problems at the feet of the 'breakdown of the family'. Yet rarely do such jeremiads propose an honest and clear idea of what is meant by 'breakdown' or even of 'the family' (Monsell-Davis 1994). At least two Prime Ministers of Fiji (Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Sitiveni Rabuka) have within the last twenty years been reported as making public statements about the need to strengthen 'the family', even suggesting that Fijians need to learn from Indians how to look after their children. At first sight, such comments might be dismissed as naïve, even insulting to Fijians. But they reflect the frustration and feelings of helplessness often associated with social change—especially changes in what have previously been considered fundamental and enduring 'good' institutions, such as the family.

It is here that the question of definition becomes critical. What is the family? Leading politicians and churchmen and -women of today—along with most of my students and much of the general public—appear to speak of the family in nuclear terms. Their statements refer to it as the household of a man (who is supposed to be the 'breadwinner') his wife and their children (and perhaps including also an elderly parent or other relative). In the context of domestic violence and rising levels of delinquency, and the perceived need to strengthen the family, the rhetoric of these speakers does not acknowledge the extended family—the nuclear household is apparently their point of reference (Monsell-Davis 1994). Parents, it is said, are too occupied with work and choir practice. Parents do not spend enough time with their children. Parents do not know what their children are doing. Such laments overlook the possibility that satisfactory parenting may also be a contribution made by grandparents, aunts, uncles and other kin who in this important, non-material way may be contributing members of the household.

If there is in fact a demonstrable trend towards the dominance of the nuclear family form, two important points arise. First, as Hezel shows, the changes of the last half-century have tended to take the broad responsibilities for the socialisation and welfare of young people—

responsibilities that were shared by all members of the extended family—and dumped them willy-nilly onto the shoulders of individual mothers and fathers in nuclear households. These sets of parents are not well prepared by either their own socialisation or the broad mores of their society (or we might add, by the pressures of the urban industrial economy) for such lonely responsibilities. The work being carried out by Hezel and the Micronesian Seminar is important in that it asks a whole series of questions about the consequences of this transition in responsibilities.

The second, and related, point questions just what constitutes the household. Until perhaps the first half of the twentieth century, most Pacific Island societies were unlikely to have thought of the nuclear unit in isolation from the extended family. Of course they would have recognised the special relations between a man, his wife and their children, but for most everyday purposes this relationship was subsumed under the broader extended group, often living under one roof, or under several roofs, but centred on one hearth and meeting house.

Parenthetically, we ought also to question the extent to which the English terms ‘family’ and ‘extended family’ are in any sense adequate to embody Islander ideas about the *aiga*, *mataqali*, *vanna*, *kaiga* and their equivalents. These terms refer to a whole complex of issues surrounding blood and affinal relationships, adoption, land, polity, history, socialisation, gifts and exchange, the consumption of food, governance, the rights and duties of individuals and groups and so on (see, for example, Ravuvu 1987: 14–5). The nuclear family per se may have no nominal equivalent in this social context.

When I consider the evidence presented previously by the various authors referred to, my own observations and the consistently corroborative remarks of my Island students, it seems to me that throughout the Pacific there is a growing preference for the nuclear household for everyday purposes, even in rural areas. But at the same time, there continues a great deal of interaction with the broader extended family for major social and ceremonial affairs. Yet in urban areas, even while the rhetoric is of nuclear households, we actually find increasing numbers of extended households. However, and this is important, the modern, urban extended household is very different from the older, rural extended family. Among other differences, it is, for instance, often composed of people who are more distantly related to

the household head than would have been the case in the village. Moreover, the members of these households tend to be less cooperative—or perhaps to have fewer means—in their contribution to the household economy than is the case in rural areas (Finney 1973; Kay 1971; Monsell-Davis 1994; 1998).

Hezel does not emphasise this particular aspect of these changes. But this volume—along with the work of such authors as Finney, Kay, O’Meara, Schoeffel, Shore and Holmes, and general observations and the anecdotal evidence of my Island students—alerts us to the fundamental changes taking place. In the structure of the family and the roles of members; in the relationships between the people and their traditional leaders; in the individualisation of land; and in the increasing expense of mortuary and other ceremonies as host families use such occasions to promote their own reputations—all these and countless other areas of life already bear witness to the adaptation, the evolution and the difficulties associated with post-contact existence. These changes, which appear to result, at least in part, from the introduction of the cash economy and urbanisation, have put increasing strain on families, leading to growing concerns about alcoholism, domestic violence, youth suicide, child abuse, the use of drugs and rising crime.

Hezel’s book—distilling half a century of ‘getting under the skin of another culture—is written in straightforward language, without sociological jargon, and is easy to read. It should be consulted by our politicians, church leaders and planners, and by anyone else who seriously wishes to understand some of the problem area of Island life today. The book provides no solutions, but as an exposition of the complexities of life in a rapidly changing late twentieth-century Pacific world it has few rivals. And without an understanding of the nature of the phenomena, the search for constructive ways of coping with the problems and their implications is likely to be unsuccessful.

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