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CHANGING CONCEPTS OF CHIEF AND HIERARCHY ON A POLYNESIAN OUTLIER

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Sikaiana is a Polynesian society with a legend of a powerful, centralized chief or *aliki*. However, Sikaiana is a very egalitarian society, and it has resisted efforts by Protectorate and national government administrators to establish a local chief. This article examines the legendary and modern history of Sikaiana chiefs to show how power and authority became and remained decentralized. The ideology of Sikaiana egalitarianism is supported by familiarity and face-to-face experience with personally known others. This egalitarianism faces new challenges because Sikaiana society both differentiates internally and becomes incorporated into larger, regional and international social systems. There is a dynamic interaction between the environment, past experience, and foreign influences as the Sikaiana reformulate their notions of chiefdomship and hierarchy.

The chief T. complained that he could get no respect from the people. The people complained that they could not respect him as he seldom came to the main island and they had no confidence in him.

(BSIP 1 III F 49/6: report dated December 19, 1939).

On the occasion of my last visit in September 1948, I noted that there was a certain amount of friction between the headman and a section of the community; I did not raise the matter. M. is not a good chief—rather foolish of mien and manner . . . .

In view of the friction which exists and the obvious unpopularity of the present headman, I informed the people that M. would relinquish his office as headman on 31st December 1949.

(BSIP 1 III F 49/6; attached to report dated May 1949).

> The morale of the island is lower than on my last visit and I gather that the chief, TK, has lost his grip and that the people are trying to show Government that he needs changing by very half-hearted response to his efforts.
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> (BSIP 1 III F 49/6: report dated May 17, 1956).

THESE QUOTES DESCRIBING THE TROUBLES of three different Sikaiana "chiefs" are from the files of colonial district officers who visited Sikaiana in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Sikaiana offers an interesting anomaly. It is a Polynesian society with a legendary tradition of a centralized and hierarchical ranked office, which corresponds with classic anthropological conceptualizations of a chiefdom, but Sikaiana is a very egalitarian society where most people have an aversion to hierarchy and centralized authority. In this paper, I want to describe the environmental, historical, and cultural factors that shape various, changing, and sometimes conflicting concepts of chiefdomship and leadership on Sikaiana.

Anthropologists once made a distinction between the relatively egalitarian "bigman" societies of Melanesia and the stratified "chiefly" societies of Polynesia (Sahlins 1963). More recent scholarship, however, has called conceptualizations of chief and bigman into question, arguing that such contrasts are misleading simplifications (see Thomas 1989; Feinberg 2002; Feinberg and Watson-Gegeo 1996; also Flanagan 1989). In the late 1950s, Sahlins (1958) proposed that variations in Polynesian chiefdomship can be understood in terms of the redistribution of resources and environmental adaptation: generally the larger the amount of surplus resources that were produced the higher the stratification. In contrast, Goldman (1970) proposed that Polynesian chiefdomships could be understood in more cultural or ideological terms as the outcome of "status rivalry" between competing chiefs. By the 1980s, Sahlins (1981, 1985) developed a perspective that described the reciprocal relationship between historical events and cultural interpretations shaping conceptualizations of Polynesian chiefs, especially during contact with Europeans. Generally, there has been a trend toward examining the specific dynamics that shape leadership, perhaps reflecting a more general trend in social theory to examine the relations between culture and action (see Ortner 1984; Giddens 1984; Sahlins 1985; Bourdieu 1990). There is now a general agreement that traditional Polynesian chiefdoms were dynamic systems in which chiefs had to combine divine legitimacy and popular support (see Marcus 1989; Howard 1985; Valeri 1985; Shore 1996; Feinberg and Watson-Gegeo 1996).

Kirch (1984) and Kirch and Yen (1982) have shown that change is an inevitable feature of island adaptations, especially small islands and atolls, because humans alter their environment as they use it. Combining cultural

and environmental factors, Kirch (1984, 2000) has used extensive archeological and ethno-historical sources to argue that Polynesian chiefdomships are the outcome of an interplay between cultural ideologies and historical events that operate within certain environmental constraints. These environmental constraints change as human populations increase and human use of the environment alters that environment.

The historical, cultural, and environmental context of chieftaincy broadens radically with colonization and modernization. Chiefs became political issues in colonial relations and Western contact, and often times chiefs serve as centers of contention between exogenous and indigenous interests. In some cases, colonial forces worked through chiefs, trying to get chiefs to serve their interests, and sometimes, as on Sikaiana, they tried to create politically stable chiefs where there had been none. Recently, anthropologists have found that local communities have rallied around chiefs as symbolic centers of an indigenous identity, often presented in opposition to dominating external powers (Keesing 1989; Firth 1979; White 1992; White and Lindstrom 1997; Feinberg and Watson-Gegeo 1996).

Sikaiana chiefs and leadership can best be understood as reflecting some general Polynesian cultural themes about hierarchy that are modified to specific environmental and historical circumstances. As a small atoll with limited resources, Sikaiana never generated the surplus wealth that is associated with a hierarchical system of resource control and redistribution. Sikaiana's settlers retained an image of a centralized, hierarchical chief, probably derived from an important institution in the social relations of their ancestors. But cultural institutions respond to environmental and historical forces. In the Sikaiana case, the centralized, hierarchical chief was maintained as an image in a legend that legitimated the distribution of important land resources to commoners and decentralized the authority system. By 1900, before the introduction of Western institutions, Sikaiana is remembered and described by elderly people as egalitarian in its social relations with institutions that limited centralized authority. Throughout the twentieth century, the Sikaiana people incorporated new Western institutions into their lives in a manner that supported and reflected their egalitarian relationships. British colonial officials tried to establish a chief as part of their colonial policy, and more recently there has been a trend to try to identify local chiefs as part of efforts to establish customary rules in the independent Solomon Islands.

Generally, the Sikaiana people tried to resist these trends to centralized authority and leadership, but there are new contexts that continue to reshape Sikaiana social relations. Sikaiana egalitarianism emphasizes equality of outcomes, whereas the Sikaiana people participate in many Western institutions and a global economic system that almost ensure inequality of outcomes.

Furthermore, Sikaiana egalitarianism is expressed in a small-scale, face-to-face society; increasingly, the Sikaiana have become involved in new forms of hierarchy and leadership that are remote, impersonal, and global. In the following pages, I will describe Sikaiana concepts of chiefs and their resistance to centralized authority throughout my stays in the 1980s and early 1990s. In doing so, I will use a variety of sources including Sikaiana legends and memories, British colonial records, the organization of Sikaiana groups, their interactions, and the way they talked about daily life and events. I want to show how conceptualizations of the past, the organization of social institutions, and everyday interactions and speech shape Sikaiana social relations. In the case of Sikaiana, there is a clear recognition of hierarchy in legends, but there are strong values for egalitarianism in their institutions, ideology, and interactions.[1]

Legendary Chiefs

Sikaiana is an atoll about 100 miles east of Malaita in the Solomon Islands. Its inhabitants are Polynesian in their language, culture, and traditions. Before intensive contact with Europeans, the atoll had about 200 inhabitants. But over the past 150 years, Sikaiana life has undergone many changes, most of which are the direct or indirect result of contact with Western cultural traditions and Sikaiana's partial incorporation into regional and global social systems. The population had more than tripled between 1900 and the time of my first arrival in 1980, and more ethnic Sikaiana resided in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, than resided on the atoll. Nevertheless, most Sikaiana people, including those living abroad and those on the atoll, form a community of shared interests, cultural traditions, and dense, interlocking relationships.

Sikaiana legends claim that the atoll's present settlement was founded in the remote past by Tehui Atahu who sailed from Luahatu, an unknown location. As he journeyed, Tehui Atahu took on different people from various Pacific islands as members of his crew. When he first arrived at Sikaiana, it was still submerged under shallow water and he asked one of his crewmen to stake a claim. Then he sailed on to Luaniua (in Ontong Java) and befriended a leader there, Tehui Luaniua. When Tehui Atahu returned to Sikaiana, it had emerged above the water and was occupied by a different people, the Hetuna. Tehui Atahu tricked and eventually annihilated all the Hetuna and claimed the land for his own. After a dispute with Tehui Luaniua, and a draw in a tug-of-war contest, they divided the land into two sides, Tehui Atahu taking the larger share. Tehui Luaniua and Tehui Atahu became Sikaiana's gods, and images were erected to represent them in the central ritual house,

Hale Aitu. Their patrilineal descendants alternated in succeeding to the position of *aliki*, which is cognate with the widespread Polynesian term for chief.

Over the following generations, migrants arrived on Sikaiana from various islands. Sometimes immigrants were allowed to live and intermarried with the Sikaiana people; other times they were put to death. The patrilineal descendants of Tehui Atahu and Tehui Luaniua are still called the *heto aliki* or *mata aliki* (chiefly clans) and are recognized as having the right to succeed to the chieftaincy. The patrilineal clans formed by descendants of the migrants who were allowed to survive are called *tantavale*. There are three named clans (*hale akina*) that claim chiefly descent from Tehui Luaniua and Tehui Atahu (Saalupe, Vaka Vusu, and Saatui), although they dispute each other's legitimacy. There are four named clans (Saakava, Saapei, and two different clans sharing the name Saatelua) that are tantavale or "commoner clans."[2]

The Sikaiana use the term *aliki*, a reflex of the common Polynesian term for chief, to refer to Tehui Atahu and all the succeeding chiefs. The chiefs of this legendary period are described as having considerable authority and power, controlling all of Sikaiana's land and managing its ritual life. Indeed, some Sikaiana people told me that commoners starved when these chiefs controlled all of the atoll's resources. Commoner descent lines gained access to land about six to ten generations ago, although there is disagreement among the Sikaiana about the specific manner in which rights to land became distributed. Some people say that several successive chiefs felt compassion (*aloha*) for the landless commoner tantavale and decreed that land could be claimed by anyone who cleared (*kai taa*) or worked it. Any man who developed plots of land for use attained the rights to this land. This land includes swamps for taro and dry land for coconut groves. These plots of land were inherited by the patrilineal descendants of the original clearer, or in some accounts, the children designated by him. One chiefly descent line, Vaka Vusu, disagrees with this version and claims that one of their ancestral chiefs took many wives and then gave his wives' families conditional rights to use plots of land.

There is also controversy about the principles governing use of these land rights. Some people, mostly in chiefly lines, argue that the chiefly lines retain residual rights of eminent domain over all land on Sikaiana and under certain circumstances can repossess land from commoners. Others, including some members of chiefly clans, claim that cleared land (kai taa) belongs inalienably to the patrilineal descendants of the original clearer, whether chiefly or commoner. In whatever manner land was distributed and howsoever it is held, present-day groups of people with rights to use tracts of land can be

thought of as patrilineages (*kano hale*) whose genealogical origins can be traced back to founding ancestors from about ten generations ago. These patrilineages are segments of the clans (hale akina) described above.

At present, there also is bitter controversy about competing claims to legitimacy among different descent groups within the chiefly descent lines. One clan claiming descent from Tehui Luaniua is divided into two separate land-holding lineages (kano hale), but one of these lineages has disputed the genealogical legitimacy of the other.[3] There are two chiefly clans, Saalupe and Vaka Vusu, claiming descent from Tehui Atahu, each of which challenges the legitimacy of the other. Members of Saalupe claim that the members of Vaka Vusu are not descended from Tehui Atahu; instead they are the descendants of Vusu, a man favored by Tehui Atahu with the right to succeed to the chieftainship because of Vusu's kindness when no one else would help Tehui Atahu. Although they do not dispute the Vaka Vusu clan's right to succeed to the chieftaincy, they do dispute its claims to rights of eminent domain over land. Representatives of Vaka Vusu assert that the Saalupe are commoners, tantavale, who never had the right to succeed to the chieftaincy and, therefore, do not have any rights of eminent domain over land on Tehui Atahu's side of Sikaiana. Among the Saalupe themselves, there is some discord concerning who can succeed to the chieftaincy. Traditionally, only one of several different Saalupe lineages has provided the chief (aliki), although the nominal "paramount chief" during my stay in the 1980s was from a different Saalupe line.

The egalitarian nature of Sikaiana social relations is supported by the fact that lineages provide their membership with autonomous control over land. Sometimes members of chiefly clans asserted rights of eminent domain over all land; but as a practical matter, each lineage, whether chiefly or commoner, operated independently of others in its management of land. Moreover, the disagreements about land distribution and chiefly legitimacy further limit the possibility of centralization of power and any attempts to actually exercise claims of eminent domain over land. The disputes themselves can be understood as functioning to support a decentralized political structure.

The Traditional Chief

I find it difficult to define any period of Sikaiana history as "traditional" because it seems clear that Sikaiana was undergoing constant change before intensive contact with Europeans. I consider the early 1900s as a kind of traditional baseline for my study of Sikaiana history because that is a time period remembered by my oldest informants during my first stay in 1980–1983.

However, even by 1900, sporadic contacts with Europeans had made impacts on Sikaiana life, especially in their use of Western manufactured goods including steel tools and clothing.

The aliki of the early 1900s is remembered as being a ceremonial and ritual role but not a political office with authority. The aliki oversaw the ceremonies that ensured the atoll's welfare. He is not remembered as receiving any ceremonial deference or restrictions (*tapu*): unlike many Polynesian chiefs, his person does not seem to have been sacred (see Marcus 1989). Older Sikaiana, including the two oldest living people during my stays, denied that the chief had any authority to settle disputes. In some ritual ceremonies, the chief is described as taking on his ritual role after dressing, with the aid of a female assistant, the *sapai ulu*. All this suggests that the role of aliki was somewhat transitory: a person moved in and out of a ritual role.[4]

Some chiefly authority was manifested during certain harvest ceremonies that were overseen by the aliki and his successor, the *takala*. Ritual assistants, the *pule*, made sure no one harvested fruits before they were ripe and oversaw their collection and distribution. Although this can be viewed as a first fruits ritual enjoyed by chiefs in other Polynesian societies, this right of first fruits did not extend to other more important foods, including taro and fish, which are the main staples in the diet. The ceremony and its prohibitions on harvesting probably prevented the premature harvest of these seasonal fruits and ensured the communal collection and distribution of mature fruits.[5]

By 1900, there were a variety of other ways in which the aliki's power was limited and decentralized. Succession to the chieftaincy alternated between the lines descended from Tehui Luaniua and Tehui Atahu, so that, if one of Tehui Atahu's descendants held the office, his successor, the takala, should be a descendant of Tehui Luaniua. Both the aliki and the takala had a different set of ceremonial officers; thus, all the atoll's ceremonial positions changed (*hakahiti*) when a new chief succeeded. Many of these ceremonial assistants came from commoner descent lines. During one of the traditional ceremonies, the *teika llee*, which was performed when a very large fish or unusual animal washed ashore, a young person could be designated as aliki for the ceremony.

Furthermore, supernatural power was decentralized. When older Sikaiana people talked about supernatural activity during the period before their conversion to Christianity, they most often described the activities of ancestral spirits, *aitu mate*, and their mediums, who were their immediate descendants, usually sons or grandsons. These mediums and their ancestral spirits could be from any lineage, commoner or chiefly, and are remembered with great fear for causing much harm and many deaths. As opposed to the aliki, whose activities were concerned with the welfare of the entire community,

the spirits and their mediums were concerned with personal jealousies and antagonism. In the 1980s, people still remembered the names of especially powerful and feared spirits and their mediums. These powerful mediums came from both commoner and chiefly clans. No one remembered that a powerful ancestral spirit was associated with the last aliki or his successor. The aliki's role in the late nineteenth century was largely ritual, not political, and mostly concerned with communal ritual, as opposed to the more individual concerns of the feared ancestral spirits and their mediums.[6]

By the early twentieth century, life on Sikaiana was influenced by contacts with traders and to a lesser extent by visits of administrators representing the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Trade goods were essential in the local economy, and some young people left the atoll to work for Europeans to earn wages. The last aliki is remembered as living to a very old age, outliving several of his successors, takala. Shortly before this chief's death, a zealous European trader somehow convinced Sikaiana people to destroy their ritual centers. Upon this last chief's death, no one seems to have been interested in succeeding him. Many of his potential successors were either too young or too involved with new activities associated with Western culture contact to learn and practice the ritual considered essential to the position. After the destruction of these ritual houses, some Sikaiana people asked the Melanesian Mission to send missionaries to Sikaiana. These missionaries arrived in 1929; there followed a rapid conversion to Christianity, which included almost the entire population by the outbreak of World War II. Many Sikaiana people told me that, following their conversion to Christianity, their parents and elders were reluctant to teach traditional ritual practices, and younger people, many of whom left the atoll to attend mission boarding schools, were not interested in learning them.

Protectorate reports and travelers' accounts suggest that early in the twentieth century the Protectorate's officials looked upon the last aliki as the local authority and their intermediary with the Sikaiana people under their policy of indirect rule (MacQuarrie 1952; Lambert 1941). However, government influence on the atoll was limited and sporadic before the 1930s. At some point around 1930, the British appointed the last aliki's son as their local headman and the quotations about "T" at the beginning of this paper refer to the troubles experienced by this and succeeding appointees. If the British were interested in traditional legitimacy, the successor should have been from a different clan, because the chiefly clans alternated in succession. However, probably more troublesome for the Sikaiana, there was no legitimate centralized political authority in the nineteenth century similar to the one that the British apparently expected this person to fulfill. Although some Sikaiana people were allied with the appointed choice, many others did not

recognize his legitimacy. The British expected their appointed chief to perform political functions that the last traditional chief did not have.

Throughout the Protectorate period, the appointment of a local headman (or paramount chief) remained a problem. After several changes of appointment (see BSIP 9 F 63, letter dated 2/5/49; BSIP 1 III F 49/6, letters dated 5/18/49, 4/14/50), a man was selected who remained in office for about 20 years, although with decreasing authority. Most people, although not all, agree that he came from the appropriate clan to succeed to the chiefdomship. This headman appointed a council that was responsible for governing the atoll and handling minor court cases pending the arrival of the District Officer. But increasingly, Western institutions, including an elected council and local court, became the main government institutions on Sikaiana.

During my stays in the 1980s, there was a local headman (or as some referred to him, paramount chief), but the position was viewed as ceremonial, and beyond his family and relatives, he did not have any authority or influence as the result of that position. The eldest surviving person on the atoll, who had witnessed the chief's ritual activities as a young woman, told me that she associated the term aliki with the pre-Christian ritual life that ended with the destruction of the ritual houses and the atoll's conversion to Christianity. She refused to consider the present-day paramount chief as having anything to do with the traditional ritual role, which she described as destroyed. A reenactment of Sikaiana traditions involving the traditional ritual activities of the aliki was performed when the Prime Minister visited Sikaiana in 1982. The role of aliki was performed by an influential Sikaiana man who had a medical degree, even though he was not from a chiefly line. The paramount chief was an observer of these reenactments.

Some members of the chiefly clans proudly proclaimed their heritage to me, but they had no real authority deriving solely from that fact. Several rivals disputed the legitimacy of the government's designated paramount chief and supported their own cause for holding that position, but that position in itself had no authority and very little prestige. In over three years of living with the Sikaiana, I never saw the paramount chief act in any official capacity deriving from this position.[7] In 1982 during a court case, the local court asked that a local custom (*kastam, kastomu*) committee give its opinion about several points of traditional land tenure. The custom committee was informally constituted and included the oldest people residing on the atoll regardless of whether they were from commoner or chiefly descent lines. In the meeting of the custom committee in 1982, the three oldest people, all women, had the most influence.

The traditional term for chief, aliki, is presently used to refer to the captain of a boat or of an airplane crew. Most often, however, leadership

positions and influential people are described by the term *tama hakananiu* (person make-big), most likely a loan translation from the Solomon Islands Pijin term *bikman* (bigman), a term that is also used frequently when the Sikaiana are speaking in Pijin. As used on Sikaiana, tama hakananiu and bikman are generic terms referring both to leaders and also to ordinary men who should be respected for their maturity or responsibility. In Sikaiana usage, the term bikman can refer to situations in which a foreign group has a leader, for example the leader of a local community or the supervisor of a group visiting the atoll. However, when used among themselves, its usage is much more inclusive, not isolating a leader but referring to anyone who should be respected.

Consistent with their egalitarian ethos, Sikaiana descriptions of their traditional chiefs often include some disparaging undercurrents. Tehui Atahu is described as having supernatural powers and also as being clever at deception and manipulation, traits that the Sikaiana both grudgingly admire and criticize. The last traditional chief was sometimes described as malleable: some older Sikaiana claim that, during their youth, worship services in their ritual house were actually opportunities for secret romance in the house's total darkness. Several different old people recounted a similar claim that young adults used to offer the last traditional chief pieces of tobacco to hold services in the ritual house (hale aitu) so that young people could go there and engage in sexual activities in the darkness of the house.

In 1985, the Solomon Islands National Parliament passed an act legislating that land dispute cases must be heard by customary councils of chiefs before they were referred to the local court system. In part, the parliament was responding to the large volume and bitterness of land cases in the Solomon Islands court system. The writers of the legislature seem to have assumed that there were explicit customary principles determining land tenure. The Sikaiana agree that there were clear and explicit rules of land use in former times, and they agree that these rules have become twisted in recent generations by people who are trying to gain land where they do not have legitimate entitlement. However, depending on their own interests, they bitterly disagree about who is breaking the rules and trying to deceitfully gain land. Losing sides in court decisions often blame the inadequacies of the court system in deciding customary issues of land tenure and the favoritism of the justices who were hearing the case. My own findings indicate that traditional principles of land tenure were always being disputed and changing, and there never was any formal institution for resolving disputes (Donner 1992a).

The Sikaiana responded to the new legislation by allowing for representation on their "chief's committee" from each of the approximately sixteen

land-holding lineages, including both chiefly and commoner. Furthermore, the meetings I attended were basically community discussions. Some lineages had several people attending and speaking. There was an attempt to reach a consensus of those present. The decisions of the chief's committee tried to find a compromise, asking people to return to the good feeling (*laoi*) of their ancestors when people, supposedly, lived in harmony.[8]

The chief's committee is a classic example of the complexities and ironies of reconstructing, or as some say "inventing," tradition (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Keesing 1989; Hanson 1989; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Jolly and Thomas 1992; Lindstrom and White 1993). The Solomon Islands' national legislature was responding to a model of centralized leadership which is probably not appropriate for many of the local communities within the Solomon Islands. Even more ironic, Sikaiana is a society that did have a tradition of centralized authority and long before contact with Europeans had rejected that form of authority.

New Forms of Equality and Inequality

In many areas of Sikaiana life, the Protectorate brought both new forms of hierarchy along with new forms of egalitarianism. Christian teachings suggested a basic equality and opportunity toward salvation. The first converts to Christianity are remembered as people who believed that their ancestral spirits were weak and, therefore, felt vulnerable to the attacks of the ancestral spirits (aitu mate) of others. These converts felt protected by the new Christian ritual. Schools offered opportunities to everyone who attended, and eventually education became an important goal for most Sikaiana people. In fact many people claim that one of the main reasons that Sikaiana requested missionaries to come there in the late 1920s was to provide for the education of their children. Eventually, education, occupation, and money became the new measures of success, and these were open to everyone who was successful within colonial and later national institutions.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Protectorate government established local institutions on Sikaiana, including a local court and elected government council. The local council consists entirely of elected representatives and its membership reflects the constituencies of its voting wards, which generally correspond with the residential land tracts of different descent groups. This council is now the main governing body on Sikaiana. The government also established a local court with several justices who adjudicate local criminal cases and land disputes. The missionaries of the Melanesia Mission established Sikaiana's first schools and sent students to mission schools in other parts of the Solomon Islands. Late in the Protectorate

period, the national government took over primary responsibility for the school system.

Egalitarian values were expressed in how the Sikaiana incorporated Western institutions. As described above, the atoll's ritual roles were spread among several different men, and the succession alternated between different descent lines that all had different men in these ritual roles. Furthermore, individual supernatural power was acquired through spirit possession, which was accessible to many different men. This decentralization of authority and diversity of roles is maintained in Sikaiana's modern institutions. In addition to the area council and local court, there are a church committee, a school committee, a cooperative store committee (until the store was destroyed by a cyclone), a Mother's Union (a women's religious group), a club (which organized dances), the Companions (a men's religious group), and the chiefs committee, among others. Often these committees are informally formed; anyone who wants to attend meetings does so. There are frequent public meetings to discuss projects and activities that are attended by most of the atoll's residents. In addition, there are a variety of local part-time offices including catechists in the church, area constable, copra graders, court clerk, and radio operator. Although some people are influential, the diversity of roles and organizations and the emphasis upon consensus maintain a decentralized political system.

By the time of my first stay in 1980, there were three Sikaiana men who were recognized by everyone as very influential: the local priest, a doctor, and an important government official. All were among the first people to successfully enter important roles associated with Western institutions. All three were reluctant to take positions of authority, preferring to be circumspect and to lead by influence and persuasion. All also suffered some gossip and opposition when others thought they were exercising too much influence. None was a patrilineal member of the chiefly descent lines.

Sikaiana egalitarianism applies most strongly to indigenous relations. Most Sikaiana were accepting of the hierarchical relations with the British Protectorate officials and church officials, although they appreciated the more egalitarian behavior of the Americans whom they met during World War II (see Donner 1989). One Sikaiana person summed a common attitude when he told me that, when working for wages, it was easy for Solomon Islanders to accept an unfamiliar European as a supervisor, but it was much more difficult for them to accept another Solomon Islander as a supervisor.

Most Sikaiana people admire the Queen of England, who is the nominal head of state in the Solomon Islands, and some hang pictures of the British royal family on their walls. But they do not see such roles as appropriate in their own relations. A common idiom to criticize a lazy person on Sikaiana is

to call that a person a *kuini* (queen), implying a person who sits around and does nothing, waiting to be served by others. Behavior appropriate for a foreign monarch is not appropriate in their own social relations.[9] The Sikaiana are also somewhat distrustful and resentful of the national government, which they do not believe supports them as much as it should. In this respect, however, they are not unlike many other local communities in the Solomon Islands; and, indeed, they are less extreme than some (see Feinberg 1986).[10]

A small society which traditionally had a relatively isolated population of about 200–250 residents, Sikaiana's egalitarianism rests on interpersonal face-to-face interaction. Gossip, ridicule, and public opinion are important sanctions. Also, many of the institutions that reflect and reinforce egalitarianism are themselves structured around close interpersonal interaction. There are strong values that shape egalitarian interaction. Modesty is admired and the term *hakapaapaalalo* (meaning literally to make-flat-below) refers to socially approved interactional behavior. Praise is considered embarrassing for the person who receives it. The term *hakanapa* often is used to refer to situations in which one is praising another, but the literal meaning of hakanapa is to "make embarrassed"; for the Sikaiana, to praise a person is to embarrass that person. The term *tilo* is used to describe situations in which one admires the beauty of another, as showing a young child or looking at oneself in the mirror. But both situations are considered to be immodest and the term tilo is usually used to tease someone for being so concerned about physical appearance that they are admiring themselves in the mirror or showing off the appearance of their children. People are criticized for trying to coerce others. The term *kkolu* means "bend" as in bending a hard substance such as iron. But it is also used to describe the demanding behavior of young children who insist on having their way and to criticize the behavior of adults who may try to bring others to their viewpoint by constantly using pressure and persuasion to "force" a change of opinion.

Men generally have more authority in public affairs than women, and older people are supposed to have more influence than younger people. But there is a considerable tension in these relations, again reflecting a lack of ease with systems of coercion and control. Women can wield considerable influence and authority. There was one important traditional ritual role for women, the sapai ulu. The sapai ulu assisted the aliki, dressing (hakamalo) him when he took on his ritual functions. Because the aliki seems to have been primarily a ritual role, the sapai ulu had a crucial part in transforming the aliki into his ritual status. Moreover, there were ritual occasions when women and men broke into separate groups and composed songs critical of the opposite sex (see Donner 1987). During these occasions, the women

could compose songs that were highly critical of male activities in general and of specific men in particular (see Donner 2008). Sikaiana women founded a religious sisterhood in the Solomon Islands, the *Taina*. They are important participants in many of Sikaiana's present-day activities, and older women may assert their authority over younger men. Age also affects Sikaiana relations, and older people generally have more authority than younger people. But this again creates problems for the egalitarian Sikaiana. Many younger brothers, for example, feel uncomfortable with the theoretically greater authority of their elder brothers. Many younger Sikaiana feel that their elders are less educated and capable in the modern world.

Egalitarianism is also manifest in important institutions. There is widespread fosterage of children, and children often move between different families, extending the range of kinship ties and limiting the effects of wealth differences. Most Sikaiana, including the wealthiest and most successful, have several foster parents to whom they remain loyal, foster children they are now raising, and natal children living with foster parents. The result is to intensively create ties of obligation and commitments among people who may have different resources (Donner 1999). Drinking fermented toddy is integral in Sikaiana life and its patterns of distribution and consumption stress egalitarian relations. Drinking is often a community activity that involves large numbers of people. Moreover, drunken behavior is often erratic and tends to level any distinctions (see Donner 1994). Sikaiana people are dedicated Christians, many on the atoll attend two church services every day. The ideology of the Christianity presented by Anglican missionaries has a strong egalitarian strain in terms of the potential for universal salvation and the common plight of all humanity before God.

Finally, a crucial feature of Sikaiana leadership and egalitarianism is that it is based upon interaction that is face to face. Community projects and activities, both in Honiara and on Sikaiana, are discussed in community meetings where opinions are expressed and widespread participation is possible. Gossip, ridicule, public opinion, and daily association or avoidance are the main mechanisms of social control and they maintain an egalitarian structure.

Sikaiana in Comparative and Historical Perspective

The Sikaiana possess an image of a classic Polynesian centralized hierarchy, but it was not functioning by the time of European contact. Archeological studies by Kirch and Yen (1982) have shown that island adaptations are never at an equilibrium, especially on small atolls: There are continual changes in the environments, often brought about by human usage. A small atoll such as

Sikaiana is especially vulnerable to a variety of environmental changes, resulting from human use, drought and cyclones, and also outside invasion as well (see Donner 1992a, 1995).

Sikaiana shares its closest historical and cultural relations with other Polynesian outliers, including Rennell-Bellona, Tikopia, Anuta, and Ontong Java, and other western Polynesian societies, including Tuvalu and Samoa (see Bayard 1976). Comparative ethnographic information about leadership and hierarchy in the region is variable and often depends upon the interests of the ethnographer and the time period that is being examined. Moreover, there seems to be considerable variability across the region, with Tikopia and Anuta being more hierarchically organized and Bellona seeming to have the least hierarchy.

On Tuvalu at present, there is some desire for traditional hierarchical leadership and the return to a strong chief who was weakened by Western contact. Besnier (1996) writes that there were two types of discourses, or ways of talking about hierarchy, on Nukulaelae. One discourse emphasizes a return to a peaceful time of chiefly rule, whereas another discourse emphasizes egalitarian values. Luem (1996) reports that on Nanumaga atoll there is a desire to reinstate a powerful chief to restore a traditional harmony that is viewed as lost. Sikaiana people sometimes talk about the harmony of former times, but this is not couched in the terminology of chiefs, rather in a terminology of traditional culture, which is sometimes viewed as good and other times as bad (Donner 1993). Some members of chiefly lines argue for a return to their power. This is not a claim for ritual power but part of an argument about asserting rights over land. However, there would be no consensus about the implications of this for land use, nor a consensus about which lines would have these chiefly rights.

Monberg (1996) describes precolonial Bellonese society as largely chiefless, although ritual leaders emerged based upon their acquisition of knowledge and ability to attract followers. Although these ritual leaders were replaced following the island's conversion to Christianity, Monberg speculates that there might be some effort to revive these leaders as part of a way for the Bellonese to preserve traditional culture in a rapidly modernizing context.

Tikopia and Anuta have the most hierarchical organization of all the Polynesian outliers, both in the precolonial past and at present: Their chiefs were ritual leaders who also held political authority over individuals, and they received considerable deference (see Firth 1970; Feinberg 1996). Feinberg (1996: 79–80) reports that succession to Anutan chieftaincy was not based purely upon genealogy. He was told that his own son could succeed to the chieftaincy if he learned the proper knowledge and had the

proper commitment to Anutan life. Although ritual knowledge was an important component of succeeding to the chieftaincy on Sikaiana, I think genealogical succession was considered crucial.

Ontong Java has close historical relations with Sikaiana, in fact one of the founder heroes of Sikaiana, Tehui Luaniua, came from Luanguia, the largest of two villages on Ontong Java (the nasal consonant shifts back from Sikaiana to Ontong Java in pronouncing Luaniua/Luangiua). In many respects, Ontong Java had a ritual system with many similarities to that of Sikaiana. There were leaders of descent groups, *maakua*, who had some authority and ritual responsibility. But Hogbin reports that, about eight generations before his stay in 1927–1928, a secular leader or strong man emerged on Luangiua. Hogbin describes this position as a king and writes that this person had a great deal of secular power, which was based upon his ability to mobilize an army of supporters and to kill opponents. This role, which was called *heku'u* on Luangiua, continued to the time of Hogbin's research. Hogbin states that similar developments took place on Pelau, the smaller village located at the other end of the atoll from Luangiua. Compared to Sikaiana, there was a much stronger centralized authority on Ontong Java and much more violence both in opposition to and support of it (Hogbin 1934/61:224–231). It should be noted that Ontong Java is a very large atoll with a larger population and much more land and sea resources than Sikaiana.

There is a common pattern for people from chiefly descent lines to become prominent in Western administrative roles (for examples on Rotuma, see Howard 1996; on Kapingamarangi, see Lieber 1968: 70–71). This is not the case on Sikaiana, where all descent lines have access to Western leadership roles.

Sikaiana's small size and limited resources make it unlikely to become highly stratified (see Sahlins 1958; Kirch 2000). In addition to environmental limitations, Sikaiana ideology is also grounded in egalitarian values that also shaped how these limited resources were and continue to be managed. These values themselves developed in response to specific historical conditions including competition for Sikaiana's limited resources. Some of the present-day disagreements about chiefly succession and land rights may well be derived from different interests in the past, especially competition between newly arriving immigrants and previously settled people.

However, there are new influences on Sikaiana life and new forms of stratification based upon wealth and globalization that are not localized within the community; indeed, these tend to differentiate and fragment the community. Sikaiana people are now consumers and, to a lesser extent, producers in a world economy in which they of necessity participate but over which they have very little control (Donner 2002; see Wallerstein 1974, 1980,

1990; Bodley 1995). New hierarchical and stratified relations are established quite independently of the face-to-face communal relations, which typified Sikaiana society until recently. In Gidden's (1990, 1991) terms, there are important processes that are "disembedding" local relations by introducing new mechanisms for shaping social relations from outside the community. Many occupations require certification and Western-derived expertise. A national currency is used to purchase commodities; the value of the currency is determined by international monetary markets; and many of the commodities are imported. They are producers and consumers in a global economic system in which they may have little relationship with other, often more advantaged, producers and consumers. Sikaiana people have developed and maintained a distinct face-to-face community, which, in Gidden's terms, is highly embedded (see Donner 1988, 1992b, 1994). However, the members of this community are increasingly involved in a much larger social system with new forms of hierarchy that affect the community but are external to it. It is not clear how they will manage these new forms of hierarchy in the future.

Conclusion

The Sikaiana have several different models for chiefs or aliki: (1) the centralized leaders of its earliest legends with power and authority in both ritual and economic affairs; (2) the chiefs of other Melanesian and Polynesian societies and perhaps European monarchs; (3) the ritual priests of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with ceremonial responsibility for communal welfare but without control over individual ritual power and without secular authority; (4) the government-appointed headmen of the 1930s and 1940s who were controversial intermediaries between the Sikaiana people and the Protectorate's administration; (5) the largely ceremonial office of chief during my stay in the 1980s; (6) the decentralized system in which the leaders of various land-holding lineages attempt to reach consensus that was established in response to national legislation; and (7) the captain of a ship or airplane. Only the first and second of these conceptualizations are close to the centralized, ascribed, ranked, redistributive, and hierarchical positions that anthropology textbooks label as a chief. Even if someone claimed to be designated as this kind of chief, there would be little consensus about who could claim traditional legitimacy for such a position. The Sikaiana have consistently and resourcefully resisted outside efforts to introduce a centralized chief. The disagreements within the community about the claims of legitimacy of different chiefly lines would make any consensus about centralized leadership very unlikely. Moreover, their legendary history provides

them with examples of the abuses of centralized power and legitimates the decentralization of access to land, the major economic resource on the atoll. The disputes and disagreements in fact create a structure that supports egalitarian relations and make any centralization of power very difficult.

Although Sikaiana will tolerate powerful leaders in distant lands and in distant times, they will not tolerate this kind of hierarchy in their present-day social relations. Indigenous history—quite literally "ethno-history"—can be viewed as a local resource offering the Sikaiana various models for understanding hierarchy. These models compare and contrast different views of leadership. Without conceptualizations of hierarchy, conceptualizations of equality are less clear and explicit. In this respect, history provides images of ancestral "others" with whom the Sikaiana can compare themselves and legitimatize their present-day social relations (see Donner 1993).

On Sikaiana, a historical legend of hierarchy is transformed to legitimate egalitarian relations. In the tension found in Polynesia between populist and divine leaders, Sikaiana developed a system that used genealogical hierarchy in shaping ritual offices but decentralized ritual authority by rotating the leadership between different descent lines; furthermore, all men had access to the power of spirit mediumship regardless of their position in the descent system. In secular matters, the Sikaiana completely decentralized political leadership. In part, this reflects a feature of Sikaiana's environment and its history. With scarce resources, it is difficult to maintain the kind of economic surplus that supports a chieftaincy (see Kirch 1984: 162–164; also Kirch 2000).

Sikaiana egalitarianism is not simply grounded in ideology. It is expressed and maintained in their face-to-face relationships and daily life through sharing, modesty, and gossip. Drinking fermented toddy brings people together and levels them in their loss of inhibitions. Very high rates of fosterage move children between different households and further mitigate social and economic difference. There is widespread participation in the many different roles and institutions that organize atoll life. The disagreements about the legitimacy of different chiefly descent lines and the disputes about the distribution of land may reflect these past conflicts and competing interests. At present, these disputes make it very unlikely that there will be any centralization of chieftaincy and or any other authority on the atoll.

The Sikaiana people are now part of a global economic and cultural system. In some respects, new institutions and ideas have enhanced egalitarianism (for example, the universal salvation offered by Christianity and the widespread participation in many different Western roles and institutions). Western contact has introduced new ideologies of egalitarianism, but it has also introduced new institutions of hierarchy. There are new ways in which Sikaiana people find that they are becoming separated in terms of resources

as the result of immigration, different levels of education and differences in wealth. Moreover, they are now part of a global system that has very stark differences in wealth and opportunity. It remains to be seen how Sikaiana egalitarianism, which has its ideological roots in traditional legends and modern experience and expressed in face-to-face interactional behavior on a small atoll, responds to new kinds of economic and global stratification in which many social relationships are far more impersonal, abstract and global. The expression of egalitarian values in everyday community life may have relatively little effect in leveling these new forms of hierarchy.

NOTES

1. I did ethnographic field research on Sikaiana from October 1980 to July 1983, and March 1987 to September 1987. For several weeks in May and June 1993, I lived at the Sikaiana settlement at Tenaru, outside of Honiara. Most of the ethnographic material in this article is based on research done during this period. I have relatively little data about the impact of ethnic fighting that took place in the Solomon Islands in the late 1990s.

2. These migrants intermarried with the descendants of Tehui Atahu's crew members who were the original founders of various *hale akina*. One person said the term *tantavale* is a contraction of *taanata* (men) and *vvale* (crazy, foolish). This person claimed that after a long canoe trip, people arrived on Sikaiana weakened and walked around in a daze as if crazy. But this is probably a false etymology. A usually reliable informant told me that the term, *tantavale*, is a contraction of *taanata* (men) and *aavale* (after). The commoner clans are people who arrived later.

3. Most of the *hale akina* (clans) are divided into patrilineal segments, *kano hale* (lineages) which are corporate groups with rights to separate tracts of land.

4. Hogbin (1934/1961: 174) describes the *maakua*, ritual leaders of Ontong Java, as being in their ceremonial ritual roles only when they were dressed to perform ceremonies. Some of his discussion seems relevant for Sikaiana which has strong historical and cultural ties with Ontong Java.

5. I have been on Sikaiana when some of these crops matured. There are no restrictions on the harvesting of these foods and children often harvest fruits before they are fully ripe.

6. Hogbin (1934/61) describes similar kinds of ancestral spirits on Ontong Java where he argued that they helped preserve social control.

7. However, the headman did have some influence as a president of the local court. Local court members were appointed by British administrators with the consent of local people. In this capacity, the paramount chief did wield some authority and power. When he voluntarily retired from this position in the court in 1982, he kept his position as the local paramount chief. His position on the court was taken by a person from a commoner line that was considered to be knowledgeable about the court's procedures. His selection was made by officials from Malaita Province with the advice of the local council.

8. In fact, this ambiguous "good feeling" may correspond with the conditions of land use in the precontact period when ambiguity may have masked competing interests in the same land tracts (see again Donner 1992a).

9. Some, although far from all, younger men who had been educated abroad were concerned about what they had come view as European (and American) imperialism, both in the past and at present.

10. Sikaiana's isolation makes it especially dependent upon and interested in access to outside resources. British officials were powerful outsiders who provided valued opportunities in education and employment. In the present-day Solomon Islands, other Solomon Islanders are competitors for limited resources and opportunities, and the national government has a difficult task to maintain the resources provided by the former Protectorate government.

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