

*Review:* PAUL SHANKMAN  
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Douglas Oliver's *Two Tahitian Villages* is at once direct and overwhelming. It is descriptive ethnography on a scale that most ethnographers cannot sustain. It is not embellished description or "thick description," but rather straightforward, meticulous, honest, and unpretentious description. *Two Tahitian Villages* is a labor of love, or more precisely, a labor of dedication. Oliver has modestly and correctly assessed his contribution, stating that "a description of a unique and vanished way of life, however small in scale and however inconsequential to the rest of the present day world, will always have some value in the future's Museum of the Human Experience" (xiii).

Oceanists who take the time to wade through this very sizable ethnography will appreciate Oliver's careful eye and his candor. Although his emphasis is on the economic aspects of Tahitian life, I particularly enjoyed the chapters on marriage and passing through life. He has admirably captured the two villages in his study--Atea and Fatata--at a particular moment in time. Although that moment has now passed,

Oliver resists the temptations of the ethnographic present as well as other anthropological devices that distance the reader from reality. *Two Tahitian Villages* lacks the lyricism of Robert Levy's *Tahitians*. Nor is it as engaging as Ben Finney's *Polynesian Peasants and Proletarians*. What we have here is old-fashioned, no-nonsense ethnography.

The fact that Oliver has strategically limited what he sets out to do in *Two Tahitian Villages* makes criticism of the book very difficult. For example, these two villages were among eight different Tahitian communities researched by Oliver's Harvard-based Society Islands project. But Oliver makes little use of the other studies done by Levy, Finney, Antony Hooper, Paul Kay, and Richard Moench, preferring instead to concentrate on the similarities and differences between Atea and Fatata. He anticipates someday combining observations about all eight communities within a single comprehensive framework, but for now that project will have to wait (xii).

One cannot fault Oliver for his sense of priorities. Writing a 557-page monograph would be the work of a lifetime for most cultural anthropologists. On the other hand, Oliver has as one of his objectives a demonstration of the usefulness of the method of controlled comparison. While he clearly has superb control over the villages of Atea and Fatata, the method employed seems to be one of "compare-and-contrast" rather than the use of the range of controls available from all eight communities.

Some of the tantalizing questions that Oliver raises about land use, households, and other topics could benefit from more systematic comparison with other Tahitian communities. So, in his final chapter, Oliver briefly mentions the differential response of Atea and Fatata to the same external political stress (526-529). Data from other Tahitian communities might help clarify why the two villages responded differently.

Other kinds of comparisons would also help. As Oliver notes, Atea and Fatata seem to be on a continuum of change. While this continuum rests on an unproven assumption (according to Oliver), comparison with the other six Tahitian communities might provide controls for testing such an assumption. The peasant-proletarian distinction that Finney uses might be one way of further organizing the data, making it comparable to other Oceanic societies. But again, Oliver reiterates his objective: "it is my limited purpose in this monograph to compare the economies of two small village societies *one* with the *other*, and not with *all other* societal economies, or *any other* known societal economy" (xiv, original emphasis).

For the economic anthropologist, *Two Tahitian Villages* is a mine of data. Yet even with his economic emphasis, Oliver eschews theory. Since much that passes for theory in economic anthropology, including the formalist-substantivist debate, is only marginally relevant to ethnography, this is understandable. But what of other theories concerning incipient economic stratification, or narrowing spheres of exchange, or increasing monetization and commercialization, or peasantization and proletarianization? These are not particularly controversial and could prove valuable frameworks for analyzing Oliver's Tahitian material.

Because *Two Tahitian Villages* is so empirically oriented and because its author has been so careful in delimiting his task, the book is not easily reviewed. It is a book that deserves to be read rather than summarized, which would be an impossibility in any case. The patient reader will be well rewarded, but on completion may feel as one does after the proverbial Chinese meal--hungry half an hour later. In this case, the hunger is for more theory, more comparison, and more generalization. Although this may seem like an unreasonable request to a man whose many and diverse contributions have already left their imprint on Oceanic scholarship, one can only hope that Douglas Oliver will provide a companion study to complement his meticulous ethnography.