

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS TO PACIFIC ISLANDERS

by Daniel T. Hughes

In recent years we have seen a number of articles and papers discussing the role of anthropologists in the Pacific and elsewhere. These analyses vary in quality considerably with some being stronger in emotional than in intellectual content. An example of this style of writing is Gale's review of anthropological work in Micronesia (1973). Gale's main thesis is that all anthropologists who have worked in Micronesia since World War II have been concerned mainly with keeping the Micronesians in their place. It could not have been otherwise, he assures us (1973:4), since all those anthropologists were guilty of working for the American administration or at least of being Americans working in an American controlled territory. Starting with this premise, Gale, not surprisingly, continues in the vein of a petulant child who demands attention under threat of doing or saying even more shocking things. Other critiques of the anthropologists' role in the Pacific have been more mature and thoughtful analyses. Hau'ofa's work (1975) is representative of this genre of writing. Rather than comment on his article now, I shall refer to it in the course of this paper when borrowing some of his main ideas.

Like other anthropologists, I have reflected on the criticisms of our profession and have tried to examine my own research interests in the light of the criticisms. A few years ago I was corresponding with several other anthropologists and a political scientist in an attempt to formulate a proposal for a research project in which we would simultaneously study similar aspects of political change in various districts of Micronesia. In the summer of 1975, I spent two months visiting all the districts of Micronesia conducting a pilot study for this project with a grant from The Ohio State University. I was especially interested in obtaining the reactions of Micronesians, and I discussed this project and the question of the responsibilities of anthropologists with people in various walks of life in each district. Some Micronesians were politely favorable to the project but offered few comments. Others, particularly some whom I had known previously, discussed at length the need for Micronesian collaboration in this project and in social science research in general in Micronesia.

The suggestions from my Micronesian friends led me to organize an informal session in February 1976 at the annual meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) in Charleston, South Carolina. There were no formal papers at that session. I merely stated some of the problems concerning our responsibilities to Pacific islanders as reflect-

ed in many comments I had heard the previous summer, and then I opened the floor to discussion by the twenty-five or so anthropologists attending the session. There was strong interest and a great deal of discussion on the subject. Many ideas presented in this paper derive from that session in Charleston as well as from the comments of a number of Micronesians.

The point stressed most consistently by the Micronesians as well as by a number of anthropologists at Charleston is that there is a definite need for anthropologists to deal with people they study more as collaborators in their work and less simply as subjects of study. In this paper I shall discuss some possibilities and some problems in such collaboration in the various phases of anthropological research: selecting and planning a research project; gathering data in fieldwork; and reporting the results of a research project.

Selecting Topic and Planning Research Project

If one believes, as I do, that the systematic study of “man and his works” is a worthwhile human endeavor, then it follows that anthropologists should select topics for research that will advance our general understanding of human society, whether the research is intended to test particular hypotheses or to supply descriptions of societies on which we have little or no reliable information. However, there are always other considerations influencing the selection of a research topic, not the least of which is money. The subjects for which research foundations are disposed to finance research are the subjects that will be most researched. Another important factor in selecting a research topic is the personal interest of the researcher. Ogan is correct in observing that all too often anthropologists have been interested in studying “the *most profoundly exotic* phenomena available” (1975:5).

In selecting topics for research, we can and should put greater emphasis on the needs and desires of the people being studied. I would agree with Jorgensen and Lee that anthropologists should analyze that nature of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism through which so many peoples in developing nations have been and continue to be exploited by the metropolitan nations (1974:9). However, perhaps the best approach to take in selecting topics for research is to consult the people we intend to study.

One problem an anthropologist faces in trying to consult with the people to be studied is precisely who should be considered as legitimately representing the people. If the national government is a dictatorship whose legitimacy is questioned by many of the people of that nation, then

the representativeness of the national government itself is suspect. But in many areas of the Pacific, the legitimacy of the government is well established on both the national and the local levels. We can consult with government officials as well as with traditional leaders and with officials of social and religious organizations concerning the research needs of that area. Another problem in this type of consultation is that people who are not social scientists will usually not feel competent to discuss the kind of research that would be helpful to them. They will, however, feel confident in discussing their hopes and plans for economic, social, and educational development. Perhaps the dialogue should begin here and possible topics for research should emerge from such discussions.

Regardless of how the research topic is selected, the anthropologist should obtain permission from indigenous authorities to conduct the research project. Obviously, any individual, any village, any island, or any nation has the right to refuse to be studied. The anthropologist should submit a research proposal to authorities at various levels to obtain approval to conduct the research. Indigenous authorities have the right to exclude some or all research projects. They also have the right to impose certain restrictions such as requiring the anthropologist to submit research plans, to divulge all sources of funding and sponsorship, and to submit research reports. Some restrictions on research, however, would not be legitimate. Outright censorship of publications is such a restriction. Unless there are some truly extraordinary circumstances to justify such a restriction, censorship of publications should be no more tolerable to the social scientist whether it is imposed by the government of an island state in the Pacific or by the American government.

One difficulty that indigenous authorities have in reviewing proposals for research projects is finding people who have sufficient background and sufficient time to evaluate the proposals. In cases where island authorities do want to screen anthropological research proposals before approving research projects and where they do not have the personnel to perform this task, perhaps some professional organizations like the ASAO could be useful by providing panels of respected anthropologists to give professional evaluations of the proposals. This is not to say that such an evaluation should be the sole criterion for accepting or rejecting any research project. But evaluations of this sort could be useful to indigenous authorities in making their decision.

We should not see the responsibilities of indigenous authorities in reviewing anthropological research projects merely as negative, i.e., as rejecting those projects they find unsuitable for whatever reason. If it is true, and I believe that it is, that some social science research can be useful to governmental officials in planning developmental programs (in the Pa-

cific or anywhere else), then indigenous authorities should actively encourage such research. This encouragement can take a variety of forms such as formal letters of approval and perhaps a promise of logistical support for the project. This kind of positive support from local authorities could well influence funding agencies in the US and other metropolitan nations to finance particular projects. It might also encourage more senior anthropologists to return to areas where they have done research previously and to do further research geared to assist developmental programs.

I am not saying that indigenous authorities should actively support any anthropologist who wants to do any kind of research in their area. But I am suggesting that indigenous authorities and other local leaders often know some anthropologists to be men of integrity who have acquired valuable knowledge of their society and who have maintained a continued interest in the people of the society. It is very fitting that such anthropologists (or other social scientists) receive active encouragement to conduct research concerning problems of development. In a symposium on the responsibilities of scholars concerning the struggles of indigenous peoples, Harold Cardinal, President of the Indian Association of Alberta, claimed that anthropologists could assist indigenous people acting as technicians interpreting social science data for indigenous leaders (Jorgensen and Lee 1973:14). Cardinal noted that the reason why many anthropologists are not more involved with indigenous movements is because they are human beings often entangled in academic, bureaucratic restrictions and in family obligations. While Cardinal was referring specifically to anthropologists working with indigenous resistance movements, his point is equally valid for anthropologists working for developmental movements.

Conducting Research

Anthropologists have been criticized recently for growing rich from their studies of indigenous peoples and of giving little or nothing in return. I become impatient with this criticism because it is so wide of the mark. I have known only one anthropologist who could be classified as wealthy, and his wealth came from family inheritance, not from his work in anthropology. Most anthropologists are employed in academia and their salaries are no higher than academicians in other fields. Nor do many anthropologists make money from their writings. For the most part the only books that anthropologists receive substantial royalties from are popular textbooks.

All of this does not excuse the anthropologist from paying a fair price for goods and services he receives while doing fieldwork. But I do agree

with Ogan (1975:5) that in the vast majority of cases anthropologists do make a fair exchange for what they receive in the field and that they could not conduct their research if they did not do so. Ogan also makes the point that the exchange between the anthropologist and the people he studies involves so many and such varied types of items that on scale can really measure the exchange.

To my mind, a much more significant question than how much the anthropologist should pay for goods and services is the extent to which indigenous people can and should be collaborators in the research project. Mason speaks for many anthropologists in saying that it is imperative that we expand such collaboration (1973:20). I'm convinced that the major obstacle to effective collaboration of this kind is financial. Most islanders who could truly collaborate with anthropologists and other social scientists in research projects are already employed (often by the territorial or national governments) at good salaries. There is no possibility of their giving up these positions to collaborate in a research project. They can collaborate extensively in research only if we can get funding for them to do so from the same funding agencies that finance the project or if the administration for which they work will give them released time with pay. Only a great deal of persuasion will succeed in obtaining funds from either of these sources.

Hau'ofa makes the point that full collaboration of indigenous people in anthropological studies comes only when some indigenous people have become fully professional anthropologists themselves (1975:287). He maintains that in addition to the advantage of being able to conduct continuous research the indigenous anthropologist can provide insights into a culture which the foreign anthropologist could never attain. I think Hau'ofa is correct in stressing the desirability of training indigenous persons to be professional anthropologists and the potential contributions of such professionals. In a recent article, Honigmann criticizes the trend to overemphasize objective methods in anthropological research and defends the validity of a personal approach in cultural anthropological research (1976:244).

In addition to employing sensitivity and other creative faculties, every person using the personal approach brings to bear on his/her work a unique biographical background and configuration of personal interests, concepts, theories, techniques, and standards and a style of presenting the results. The assumption is that each unique configuration of interests and values can yield interesting results in its own right; therefore it need not--indeed cannot--be standardized, nor should it be suppressed in the interests of replicability.

Honigmann and those of us who share his view of the validity of a personal approach would have to agree with Hau'ofa that some insights into a culture simply cannot come from a foreigner, but must come from someone raised in the culture. Hau'ofa makes a final point on this issue which is worth repeating. If indigenous anthropologists are to make unique contributions to the analysis of their own societies, we must make sure that "any special 'feel' for or subjective insights they may have into their own communities and people" are not suppressed by the rigorous empiricist tradition in formal Western education (1975:289).

Reporting Research Findings

From the perspective of administrative officials, students, and others who might use our reports, one problem with much of the professional publications of anthropologists is the esoteric language in which it is couched. The fact that our discipline is not alone in this offense does not excuse us from the obligation of striving to make our reports more intelligible to nonprofessionals. We can be of little use to others if in our professional publications we speak only to each other.

The length of time that it usually takes to get anthropological reports published is another hindrance to their being used effectively. It is not at all unusual for a number of years to elapse between the completion of an anthropological research project and the publication of even the first report on the project. In fairness to myself and my colleagues, I would like to note that when an anthropologist returns from fieldwork he normally rather quickly goes back to a routine of teaching, counselling, and administrative work which leaves him little or no time to analyze the data from his study. Once he has found time to prepare a manuscript reporting on his project, there are long delays while it is reviewed for possible publication. Finally, even after the manuscript has been accepted for publication in a journal or in book form, it may still take the publisher a year to actually have it published. If we anthropologists want our studies to be of greater use to those planning developmental projects and to others, then we must drastically reduce the time we take to make our findings available to them. I would suggest that we might make oral reports on our research to local officials and to other interested individuals while we are still in the field and that we might supply at least preliminary written reports shortly after we return from the field even if this means giving only partial analysis of the data. Something else that will help in this regard is to include in our research plans, whenever possible, a period immediately following fieldwork during which we spend full time analyzing the data and preparing our reports. This arrangement presupposes addi-

tional financial support from the funding agency that financed the project or from our universities.

Another criticism that Hau'ofa makes of anthropologists who have worked in the Pacific, especially those who have worked in Melanesia, is that their writings have given a distorted and negative image of the people they have studied (1975:285). Ogan is probably correct in responding to this criticism by saying that an historical perspective is important in evaluating anthropological reports and that because a particular ethnographic description is not valid today, it does not necessarily follow that it was inaccurate at the time it was written (1975:3). He is also correct in observing that anthropologists have sometimes given a distorted picture of a society because of their interest in the exotic rather than the typical elements of a culture. We anthropologists can present a more balanced picture of Pacific societies, and one that will be more useful to those in charge of developmental programs, if we focus our studies more on the contemporary culture and on contemporary problems of these societies. Actually my impression is that this is precisely what an increasing number of anthropologists are doing in the Pacific.

There is one further observation that I would like to make on the question of the anthropologist portraying a society accurately in his reports. Obviously the anthropologist must strive to be as objective and as balanced as possible in his research. But we should remember what Redfield told us many years ago (1953:157). It is neither possible nor desirable for anthropologists to be so objective and so balanced that they lose their own humanity in the process. We do not need perfectly balanced ethnographies as much as we need a well balanced profession in which anthropologists correct the mistakes and distortions in each others' works. Obviously, if we find that in the past anthropologists have overlooked key elements in a particular culture, we should in our own studies focus on these elements to present a more balanced picture of that culture. But we should certainly do so in the same spirit of kindness and cooperation with which we would have future anthropologists correct the inevitable distortions of our own writings.

The last problem I want to discuss concerning the responsibilities of anthropologists in reporting their research findings is the obligation of the anthropologist to report honestly findings that are critical of the political administration of the area in which he is working. Mason notes that this responsibility can be a serious problem when it brings the anthropologist to the point of criticizing the colonial administration of his own government (1973:20). I would maintain that it is sometimes equally or even more difficult for an anthropologist to criticize an indigenous political administration, when the conclusion of his research points in that direction.

At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex question, I would say that when his research findings justify it, an anthropologist should be as willing to criticize an indigenous administration as he is to criticize a colonial administration. I don't see how we can expect to maintain the trust of the people we are studying, if we are not willing to do so.

Conclusion

Some criticisms of anthropological work in the Pacific are completely irresponsible and should be labeled for what they really are--blatant nonsense. Others are sincere, mature attempts to examine the past performance of anthropologists and to identify the shortcomings of that performance. These latter criticisms can well serve as the basis for a reexamination of the responsibilities of the anthropologist to the people he studies. From insightful critiques like that of Hau'ofa as well as from the comments of many Micronesians with whom I have discussed this issue, I am convinced that anthropologists must devise ways of dealing with the people they study in the Pacific (and elsewhere) more as collaborators and less as mere subjects of study. In this paper I have presented some possibilities and some problems of such collaboration in the various states of anthropological research; selecting and planning a research project; gathering data in fieldwork; and reporting the results of a research project.

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