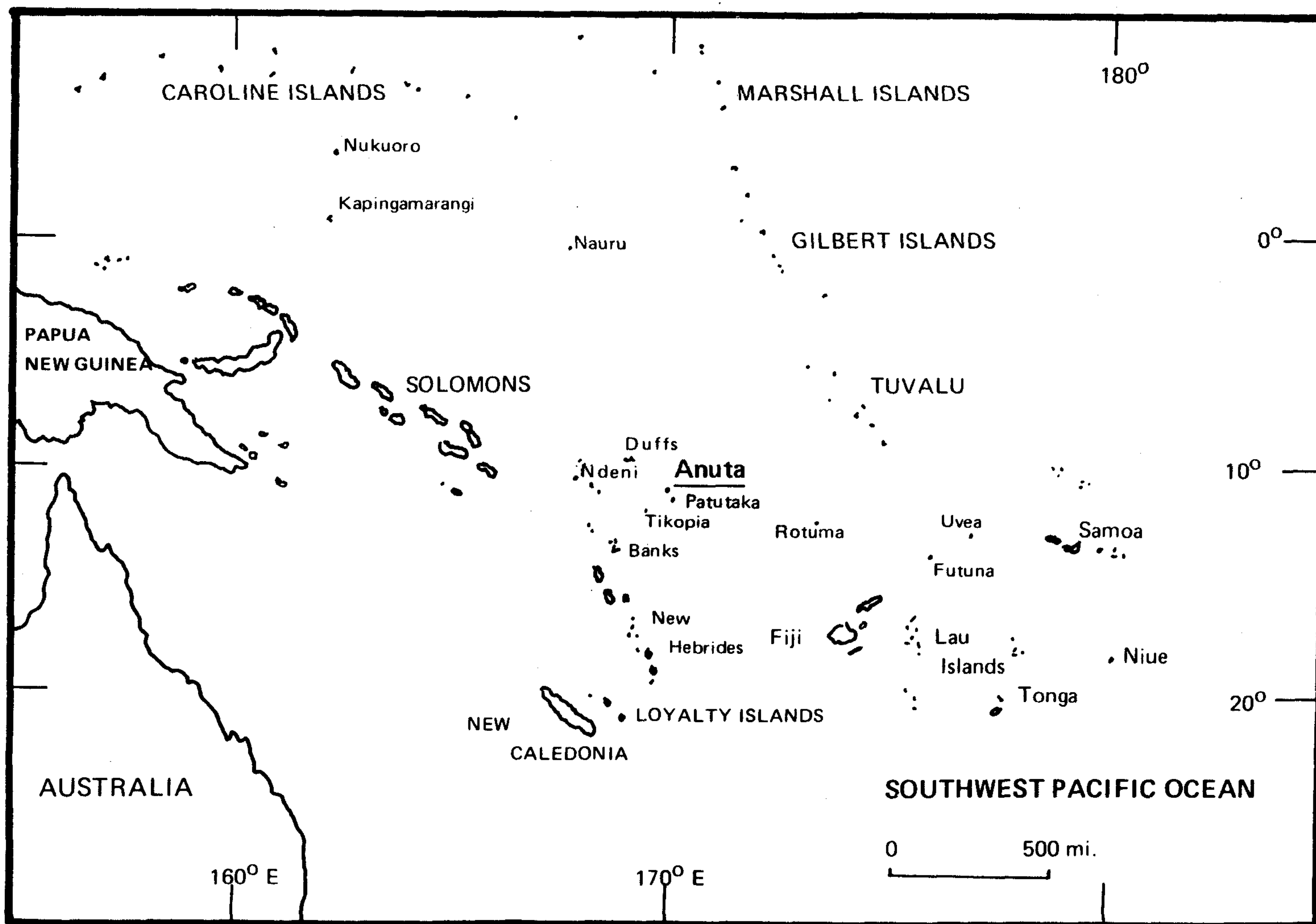
THE ROLE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHER IN SHAPING ATTITUDES TOWARD ANTHROPOLOGISTS: A CASE IN POINT

by Richard Feinberg

I: *Who are you?*
CUOL: *A man.*
I: *What is your name?*
CUOL: *Do you want to know my name?*
I: *Yes.*
CUOL: *You want to know my name?*
I: *Yes, you have come to visit me in my tent and I would like to know who you are.*
CUOL: *All right. I am Cuol. What is your name?*
I: *My name is Pritchard.*
CUOL: *What is your father's name?*
I: *My father's name is also Pritchard.*
CUOL: *No, that cannot be true. You cannot have the same name as your father.*
I: *It is the name of my lineage. What is the name of your lineage?*
CUOL: *Do you want to know the name of my lineage?*
I: *Yes.*
CUOL: *What will you do with it if I tell you? Will you take it to your country?*
I: *I don't want to do anything with it. I just want to know it since I am living at your camp.*
CUOL: *Oh well, we are Lou.*
I: *I did not ask you the name of your tribe. I know that. I am asking you the name of your lineage.*
CUOL: *Why do you want to know the name of my lineage?*
I: *I don't want to know it.*
CUOL: *Then why do you ask me for it? Give me some tobacco.*

Encounters such as the above, which helped drive Evans-Pritchard to his "neurosis" are commonly experienced by anthropologists engaged in



CAROLINE ISLANDS
MARSHALL ISLANDS
180°
Nukuoro
Kapingamarangi
Nauru
GILBERT ISLANDS
0°
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
SOLOMONS
TUVALU
Duffs
Ndeni
Anuta
Patutaka
10°
Tikopia
Rotuma
Uvea
Samoa
Banks
Futuna
New Hebrides
Fiji
Lau Islands
Niue
Tonga
20°
NEW CALEDONIA
LOYALTY ISLANDS
AUSTRALIA
SOUTHWEST PACIFIC OCEAN
0
500 mi.
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field research.[1] Indigenous peoples are often suspicious of inquisitive outsiders, sometimes for good reason, and are frequently reluctant to provide the anthropologist with data he is seeking. In his monograph, *Behind Many Masks,* Berreman has described at length his many months of tribulation as he attempted to obtain the confidence of residents of a Pahari village in the Himalayas.[2] Even such a generally admired field worker as Malinowski attested in his diary to the occasional reluctance of his Trobriand informants to confide in him,[3] and his experiences have been shared by most ethnographers even in the best of circumstances. In cases where someone identified as belonging to the same group as the anthropologist (this may be a missionary, trader, colonial administrator, tourist, or a previous ethnographer) has acted in a manner which the local people find offensive, the task of establishing rapport sufficient for the conduct of efficient research may become nearly impossible.[4] This situation has been decried repeatedly by anthropologists, and the question of responsibility to one's informants has become a major issue for discussion.[5] Even with the best intentions sometimes we unwittingly exacerbate disputes, promote the growth of factions, and antagonize informants by what we write.[6] In the midst of our self-criticism, however, often we lose sight of

[1]E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 12-13.

[2]Gerald D. Berreman, *Behind Many Masks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962).

[3]This is evidenced in comments such as: "The old man began to lie about burials. I became enraged. . . . With great effort I wormed out of him material relating to kinship. . . . I was fed up with the niggers and with my work." Quoted from Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), pp. 35, 66, and 154. Under conditions of physical discomfort, pressure, isolation, and frustration, of course, sometimes one makes statements that he later might regret. Nonetheless, it is apparent that Malinowski's relations with his informants were not always so harmonious as some of his writings might lead us to believe.

[4]This point is made emphatically by Margaret Mead. She notes in her autobiography that, "many a young field worker has known heartbreak in those first weeks. He has been made to feel so miserable, so unwelcomed, and so maligned--perhaps in terms of another anthropologist who got everyone's back up--that his whole field trip is ruined before he has really got under way." See Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), p. 146.

[5]This may be seen in textbook chapters, journal articles, workshops, and symposia dealing with the problem of field ethics, which have become common in the past several years.

[6]A recent illustration with respect to a Pacific community is Torben Monberg's discussion of his book on oral traditions of Rennell and Bellona, a pair of Polynesian outliers in the central Solomon Islands, and its unintended consequences. Toren Monberg, "Informants Fire Back: A Micro-study in Anthropological Method," *Journal of the Polynesian Society,* 84 (1975), 218-24.

the congenial relations some field workers have established with the people they have studied and the role that these relationships have played in facilitating further research. In the following pages I discuss the work of Raymond Firth on Tikopia and how this served to expedite my research on Anuta, Tikopia's nearest neighbor, some forty-four years after his first venture in the field.

Firth and the Tikopia

Firth was on Tikopia for a year in 1928 and 1929, at a time when half the island's population, including three of the four chiefs, were still practicing the traditional religion. He was greeted warmly by the Tikopians and welcomed into their community, but although people were prepared to tell him of their social organization, for many months their ritual procedures and religious beliefs remained a closely guarded secret. In fact, during his first weeks on the island, the Tikopians were conducting a lengthy, elaborate ritual cycle called the Work--of--the--Gods which Firth has described as "the crowning point of their social life."[7] Yet, it was many months before he was permitted to become cognizant of what had been taking place practically before his very eyes.

Firth spent his first months on the island becoming fluent in the language and learning what he could of Tikopian culture, continually taking pains to let informants know that he approved of what he learned and attempting to abide as well as possible by local etiquette. The presence of a European who spoke favorably of the old religion was particularly gratifying to the pagans,[8] who were under constant criticism by the local population on the grounds that they were evil, backward, unsophisticated, and were threatening the welfare and prosperity of the community. Gradually, the Tikopian pagans were convinced that Firth respected their beliefs and would not use any esoteric knowledge that he gained against them. After some months the Ariki Kafika, the premier chief, began to treat him as a confidant, and eventually he was permitted to take part in religious ceremonies, including the elaborate Work--of--the--Gods rituals. Then, once he was accepted by the senior chief as someone who com-

[7]Raymond Firth, *We, the Tikopia: Kinship in Primitive Polynesia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. xvii.

[8]By "pagan" I mean to indicate simply an adherent to a form of worship and belief that falls outside the bounds of the major world religions. No perjorative connotations, whatsoever, are intended.

manded trust, this served as a signal for other Tikopians to confide in him as well.

This, of course, was not a unilinear progression. Shortly after the Ariki Kafika began to tell Firth of the ancient gods and worship practices, the anthropologist became severely ill. The general consensus was that the chief had second thoughts after having divulged important secrets, and in order to undo the damage he had imposed a deadly curse. When Firth finally recovered, common knowledge had it that the chief, for fear that he would be held responsible should a European meet death on his island, had recinded the initial invocation. Even so, the *ariki* stated, "Friend, I have told you the secrets of my kava; my *ora* (life) and that of my people and this land Tikopia will go with you. I shall sit here and watch; if evil comes to this land then I shall know that it is through your doing."[9] Fortunately for everyone, no evil did befall.

Throughout his career, Firth has attempted to be worthy of the trust the Tikopians placed in him. He has not tried to hide the sources of occasional annoyance, which it seems one never can escape, but the tenor of his commentary--both oral and in writing, and both on and off the island--always has been sympathetic. A paragraph from Chapter I of *We, the Tikopia* tell us much of Firth's relationship with his informants. He notes:

> What I have set down in this book, and what will appear in subsequent publications I have tried to make an exact and scientific record, keeping back nothing that I have learned, and documenting opinions in order that as accurate an estimate as possible may be formed of the institutions and ways of life of these people. Much that was told to me, especially in matters of religion, was given in confidence on the understanding that it would be made known only to *tangata poto,* to adepts, to persons of wisdom. I publish it in the belief that this is being done. Should there be among the readers of this book any who may visit Tikopia, in a professional capacity or otherwise, I trust that the knowledge they may gain from it may give them an understanding and a respect for the native custom and belief, and that nothing which they find herein will be used to the discomfiture of the people or as a lever to disturb their mode of life, whatever be the motive. If this is observed I will have made no breach of faith.[10]

[9]Firth, *We, the Tikopia,* p. 9.
[10]Firth, *We, the Tikopia,* pp. 9-10.

The Tikopians, it seems, concurred in this evaluation, and far from a breach of faith, they have considered Firth's writings to be a credit both to him and to themselves.

In addition to his writings, Firth has made concerted efforts to retain close contacts with the people of the island. He has been a major contributor to the Tikopia Development Fund, has kept up correspondence with many of his informants, and has demonstrated continued interest through subsequent field studies in 1952 and 1965 on Tikopia, and in 1973 with Tikopians residing elsewhere in the Solomons. In all, he made a lasting and most favorable impression. During my fourteen months of field research I had the opportunity to speak at length with many (perhaps several dozen) Tikopians. In many of those conversations Firth was mentioned. Everyone spoke highly of him as a man and of his work. In addition, I was fortunate to be in Honiara, the Solomons' capital, during Firth's most recent field trip. We spent several days together in the company of Tikopians and Anutans, and the mutual respect between the anthropologist and his informant-friends was obvious, as was the fact that each enjoyed quite thoroughly the other's company.

Anutan Reactions

When I landed on Anuta in March 1972, I was greeted with enthusiasm. I was taken into the household of the senior chief who provided for my clothing, food, and shelter. (In return I was expected to help out with trade goods, money, and occasional labor.)[11] I was encouraged to take part in all household activities, and practically required to participate in both secular and church-related rituals,[12] including several rites of passage in which I was the initiate. The Anutans seemed to take almost as great an interest in my study as I did. On rare occasion information was withheld, but this was almost always due to the informant's lack of expertise and a reluctance to provide me with inaccurate data. In such cases I would always be referred to the acknowledged expert. Just one man was

[11]For further discussion of this point, see my forthcoming work *Social Structure of Anuta Island* (Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark, in press).

[12]By "secular" I do not necessarily mean "profane" in Durkheim's sense. Rites of passage, preparation of tumeric pigment, and several other rituals were surrounded by stringent taboos and generally imbued with a sense of awe or reverence such that it would be appropriate to call them "sacred." [See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1915).] "Secular," in this context, simply indicates that the rites in question are not particularly associated with the Christian church.

genuinely uncooperative, and he was seen by other people on Anuta as mentally disturbed.[13] Aside from this the only topic my informants were, for a long time, reluctant to discuss was their encounters with spirit beings, and toward the culmination of my stay this subject opened up as well.[14] There were many reasons for my warm reception and acceptance, but the groundwork laid by Firth through his dealings with the Tikopia was prominent among them.

A major problem often faced by anthropologists is how to explain and justify their work to people whom they plan to study. As Berreman has aptly stated:

> Every ethnographer, when he reaches the field, is faced immediately with accounting for himself before the people he proposes to learn to know. Only when this has been accomplished can he proceed to his avowed task of seeking to understand and interpret the way of life of those people. The second of these endeavors is more frequently discussed in anthropological literature than the first, although the success of the enterprise depends as largely upon one as the other.[15]

For me this problem was resolved quite simply. Since Tikopia is Anuta's nearest neighbor and the islands are in constant contact, the Anutans were aware of Firth and of the nature of his work. They knew that' he had lived among the Tikopians, learned about their language and their customs, and had written books on what he learned. The books portrayed the Tikopians' customs sympathetically, and through them, the Anutans were convinced that people the world over had received a favorable image of the island's people and their way of life.

With the Anutans' knowledge of Firth's work it was an easy matter to explain my plans. I would try to do what he had done on Tikopia. As the

[13]For a more detailed description of this case, its significance and implications, see my forthcoming monograph, *Anutan Concepts of Disease: A Polynesian Study* (Laie, Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1979).

[14]There was a good reason, I might add, to expect this to be a sensitive subject. The Anutans are at least nominally Christian and have been for over half a century. Acknowledgment of traditional spirits, they are aware, is looked upon with disfavor by the church authorities, and even Europeans not tied to the church view such beliefs as foolish. Yet, it became apparent that belief in pagan deities and spirits was universal on the island, and virtually everyone, the catechist included, had experienced encounters with such spirits on a number of occasions.

[15]Berreman, *Behind Many Masks,* p. 5.

Anutans' culture has not been faced with serious disruption and their fundamental values never have been threatened, they remain a proud, self-confident, and forthright people.[16] Thus, not only were they delighted to be given the same recognition that had already been accorded to the Tikopians, but they seemed to feel that I was doing all the world a favor by reporting their beliefs and social practices. And from what they knew of their neighbors' experience they perceived an anthropologist as someone they could trust.

Additional Reflections

Not all the reasons for my generous, enthusiastic treatment had to do, of course, with Firth directly. The Anutans are a thoroughly hospitable and friendly group of people. Although they admire physical strength they are not characterized by the belligerent aggressiveness reported for the Nuer by Evans-Pritchard, the Yanomamo by Chagnon,[17] and innumerable other people. Nor are the Anutans overly suspicious of outsiders, as seems to be the case with many Melanesians or the people of Sirkanda.[18]

In my case the Anutans' normal hospitality was magnified by the esteem accorded Europeans. As is the case with many Polynesians, they

[16]The statement that Anutan culture has undergone no major disruption applies to approximately the past two hundred years. About eight generations ago, according to oral traditions, one man and his two brothers and one brother-in-law slew the remainder of Anuta's male population and began the present *kainanga* system. (See my *Social Structure of Anuta Island,* forthcoming, chapter VI.) Since that time, the only major change seems to have been the nominal adoption of the Christian religion, and even this alteration has been largely ephemeral. No one doubted the validity of the old religion (see footnote 14 above); the people merely felt the ancient deities and rites of worship had been replaced by new and more efficacious ones.

[17]Napoleon A. Chagnon, *The Yanomamo: The Fierce People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

[18]Several investigators have gone so far as to characterize Melanesian culture and personality structure as paranoid. For example, see R. F. Fortune, *The Sorcerers of Dobu* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1903); Ruth F. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934); and Theodore Schwartz, "The Cargo Cult: A Melanesian Type-Response," in *Responses to Change,* ed. George A. DeVos (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1976). This paranoia may even be directed toward members of a different descent group or residents of different villages on one's own island. Similarly, the people of Sirkanda are renowned for their suspicious attitudes toward immigrants even from other Pahari villages (Berreman, *Behind Many Masks,* pp. 5-6). In such settings even the most sensitive field worker may experience difficulty establishing rapport.

consider light skin and fair hair to be particularly attractive.[19] East is held, symbolically, to be superior to west, and Europeans originally came to Anuta from the east. Moreover, the Anutans respect technological accomplishment, military power, and material wealth, especially when coupled with mutual respect and generosity. Given the Anutans' value system, it is not surprising that the most esteemed of "Europeans" are held to be Americans, and being an American weighed strongly in my favor.[20]

Among the most pervasive, positively valued units in Anutan culture is one they term *aropa. Aropa* denotes positive affect for another person or being, but it is only recognized insofar as it is validated by the giving and/or sharing of material goods. My grant from the United States Public Health Service made it possible for me to be a source of rare and useful items, which not only provided my informants with a material incentive

[19]Not only was this preference expressed verbally, but the Anutans often act on it. They avoid spending long periods of time in the direct sunlight in order to prevent unnecessary darkening of the skin as well as to avoid the physical discomfort of heat and sunburn. And they are among the few Polynesian people remaining who still bleach their hair with lime from the reef in order to make it as light as possible, It is common for unmarried Anutans, and even a few married men to have a head of platinum-blond hair atop their copper-colored bodies.

[20]In the Solomon Islands generally, Americans appear to be much loved, respected, and admired. Shortly prior to my arrival in what was then the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, a member of the Governing Council is reputed to have threatened to expel the British so that America could take charge and run the territory properly. A friend of mine was told by a Malaitan headman, that, "America, hem close-up heaven." (Meltzoff, personal communication.) I was once assured by a Malaitan, for several hours running, that "My people love your people because you came to die for us during the war." [World War II.] And I was told repeatedly by the Anutans that Americans were the finest, cleverest, strongest, and most generous people they had ever known. Some of these comments may have been calculated attempts at ingratiation, but I do not believe that they were wholly insincere. It was the Americans who drove out the Japanese during World War II, and the US military forces evidently were more sympathetic than the Japanese in their dealings with the local people. Moreover, since the war those Americans with whom the Solomon Islanders have had the most contact have been pleasure yachters, Peace Corps volunteers, and anthropologists. These are people who usually come with useful gifts or services, who associate with local people more or less as equals, who make an effort to learn the local languages, and who respect the people's customs. Englishmen, Australians, and New Zealanders have tended, on the other hand, to be missionaries, merchants, or administrators. Such persons may have money, but they are perceived as stingy, they make relatively little effort to "rub shoulders" with the islanders, and they exercise potentially coercive power over them. This distinction between Americans and other Europeans, undoubtedly, was not so clearly formulated at the time of Firth's first field experience in 1928 and 1929.

to maintain my friendship, but equally important, enabled me to express *aropa* through my behavior.[21]

It is significant that most of the Anutans' dealings with European powers, thus far, have been amicable. It is true that "blackbirders," from time to time, appear to have antagonized the population. There are even stories of two European ships whose crews were slain by the Anutans. And today, many Anutans and Tikopians have worked for Levers Copra Plantations, the Solomon Islands' government, or assorted firms, and they are aware that working conditions and wages may not be the best.[22] However, geographical isolation, small size, and absence of commercially exploitable resources on the two islands have effectively discouraged European governments and corporations from attempting to make inroads as they have in other sections of the globe. The Anutans, then, had less objective reason for suspicion than do many other "Third World" peoples.

Finally, I ought to note that I was preceded on Anuta by a team of Douglas Yen, an ethnobotanist, and Patrick Kirch and Paul Rosendahl, two archaeologists, from the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The respect and generosity with which these three researchers treated the Anutans made a favorable impression on the people of the island and undoubtedly had much to do with my own treatment and reception.

Many of the factors I have enumerated served as aids to Firth in his investigations, just as they did to me in mine. A cultural value enjoining hospitality, respect for Europeans, appreciation of acts of generosity, and relative freedom from foreign domination or commercial exploitation, all characterize Tikopia of the 1920s as well as present-day Anuta. Yet, I had one great advantage that Firth could not share: the precedent that he, himself, established in the minds of my informants.

[21]For a more extensive discussion of *aropa,* its definition, and its implications in Anutan culture, see my forthcoming work, *Social Structure of Anuta Island,* in press.

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