

*Review:* RICHARD J. PARMENTIER  
BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

### **Cannibalizing Theorists of Polynesia**

*Out of Time* by the Cambridge Oceanic specialist Nicholas Thomas constitutes theoretical reflections that parallel his extensive archival research resulting in the companion volume *Marquesan Societies: Inequality and Political Transformation in Eastern Polynesia* (1990). For some reason, Thomas decided not to publish a single work that would express a methodological and empirical synthesis; so readers will need to switch back and forth between the two volumes (and in doing so find that some material appears in both books). Whereas *Marquesan Societies* is clearly organized, exhaustively documented, and fully argued, *Out of Time* is the opposite. I do not know what stimulated the author's anger toward other Oceanic researchers and his hostility toward the discipline of anthropology, but the bitter tone will certainly annoy many readers. Traditional Marquesan society is often described as highly competitive, with pervasive warfare, personal aggressiveness, and even cannibalism; *Out of Time* can be seen as the ultimate expression of this cultural theme.

Thomas is out to show that anthropological discourse about Pacific societies (and by extension all societies) is fundamentally flawed by the neglect of short-term historical processes and long-term evolutionary transformations. To advance his critique, Thomas seeks to demonstrate that precisely those works that are intended by their authors to contribute to the study of short-term and long-term change are vitiated by unarticulated, "submerged" antihistorical assumptions. The widespread contemporary attention to ethnohistory and local "concepts of history" is rejected as a diversion from the real task of studying "history," by which Thomas always and only means concrete events. What angers Thomas are three sorts of anthropological discourses: those grounded in fieldwork experience, those based on comparative evolutionary reconstruction, and those informed by an interpretive approach to cultural analysis. The assault on fieldwork depends on the idea that ethnographers either privilege the ethnographic present and thus tend to offer a synchronic, functionalist account of society or rely too heavily

on informants' memories and as a result generate an ahistorical image of "traditional" culture. The attack on evolution focuses on the problem that linear typologies of development violate the actual historical connectedness of societies and fail to account for the possibility of local devolutionary transformation. The campaign against interpretive analysis is motivated by the opinion that the effort to show the coherence and consistency of symbolic systems fails to pay attention to "historicizing culture" itself.

Thomas's quest for a truly historical anthropology and his critique of existing theory and ethnography is summarized in the following prospectus (which also nicely reveals the flavor of the book's rhetoric):

The opposition is not, of course, between ideology and actuality, or between internal, culture-bound models and scientific description. Deep-seated notions of various kinds animate all descriptions, whether they are enunciated by or elicited from tribal people, fabricated in the heat of the moment or with scientific detachment by intruders, and whether they allude to moments or propensities. I am not asserting that accounts of events and notions can be construed as transparent and opaque respectively, but the permeation and constitution of depiction is an uneven process which therefore permits different conclusions to be drawn from different kinds of descriptions, precludes others sometimes and perhaps some all the time. Some accounts can be read against the grain and turned perversely to an analyst's purpose. The circumstances in which cultural structures are manifested and played out in action can be drawn into a discussion of cultural and social dynamics, but the notions and metaphors of the structure itself often cannot. Ideas do not usually offer a commentary upon their own formation. Anthropologists must therefore attend to events and practices, as well as representations. (Pp. 67-68)

This perspective can usefully be compared to the position of Sahlins, long an advocate of the analytical linkage among events, practices, and representations:

Empirical realities, then, are appropriated as social meanings, worldly instances of cultural classes. The meanings may or may not have been known before; moreover, as selective valuations of experience they can only imperfectly notice the "objective properties"-- descriptions of what are inexhaustible. Nonethe-

less, worldly experiences are socialized as referential tokens of cultural types, of concepts that can be conceivably motivated in the existing scheme. Notice that just because there is a culture this does not mean there is no invention or novel response to material realities --albeit *by the same token*, the realities will then have effects of a distinct cultural type. (1988:45)

The principal victims of Thomas's "polemic collage" are Irving Goldman, E. S. C. Handy, Marshall Sahlins, and Jonathan Friedman. Smaller stabs are taken at John Beattie, Peter Buck, Raymond Firth, Clifford Geertz, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ralph Linton, Sherry Ortner, Nancy Munn, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. (While reading the book, I wondered if Marquesan warriors consumed long-deceased enemies or restricted their feasting to freshly killed victims?) These and other scholars are accused of a variety of errors, confusions, misinterpretations, biases, dishonesties, and limitations, which, thanks to this 122-page essay, have not only been identified but corrected.

The line of argument runs something like this: when Handy went to the Marquesas in the 1920s as part of the Bishop Museum team, he was fooled into reconstructing a picture of early Marquesan society on the basis of informants' recollections. The resulting ahistorical report, *The Native Culture in the Marquesas* (Handy 1923), was then used by Goldman to build a general evolutionary account in *Ancient Polynesian Society* (1970), which uses unilineal typologizing in place of real developmental sequence. (How the alleged synchronic perspective of Handy influenced the evolutionary perspective of Goldman is never revealed.) The evolutionary argument found in two articles by Friedman is then dismissed on the theoretical grounds that it subordinates regional variation to "a teleology of increasing centralization" (p. 92) and on the empirical grounds that intragroup exchange is neglected. Finally, Sahlins's work on Captain Cook in Hawaii and on Maori cosmology and history is rejected as saying "nothing about the historical processes which actually make the conditions of life and culture variable across time and space" (p. 109)--a charge that will shock anyone who has actually read Sahlins's many books and articles. (I can recall the summer when I worked as Sahlins's research assistant in the Hawaiian archives wondering why he was so tireless in establishing the historical context for the "conditions of life" of the Hawaiians.) The fact that Sahlins triangulates among Hawaiian, Maori, and Fijian ethnographic cases is evidence enough for Thomas to label his research program "implicit evolutionism" (p. 109).

Rather than subjecting these four scholars' work to extended, critical

examination, Thomas devotes several pages at most to each, claiming all along that he is "out of time" and does not have space to engage in more substantive treatment. The issue of space is not convincing, since Thomas finds the opportunity in this short book to talk about non-Polynesian topics such as economic development in Madagascar, Kongo exchange systems, Javanese ritual, Australian aboriginal social organization, Andaman Island contact history, and Melanesian obsidian trade.

What is the ultimate source, in Thomas's opinion, of all this bad anthropology? He insists that the bulk of the problem is not that these ethnographers consciously constructed fallacious arguments but that their work is undermined by disciplinary assumptions, hidden metaphors, and unexamined biases, which often run counter to their explicit intentions and published rationalizations. Of course, the biggest "submerged" assumption is that the empirical object of anthropological research is essentially non-eventual. This "exclusion of history"--remember that "history" for Thomas does not include cultural categories, discursive forms, or semiotic records--strikes those who, on the surface, appear most open to a historical approach. The second hidden cause of error is that anthropologists' honest efforts to understand social processes are vitiated by the uncritical use of ethnographic source materials. Thomas is especially critical of the massive corpus of works on Polynesia published by the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. These books are marred not only by vague memories of informants living long after "traditional" cultures had disappeared in the islands, but also by careless use of writings by voyagers, missionaries, colonial officials, and castaways. I find these twin accusations paradoxical in two senses. First, while affirming the power of the demon of ahistoricity to mislead even the most processually oriented researcher, Thomas is confident that he alone has developed the ability to overcome these submerged disciplinary hazards in his work on the Marquesas. Second, while well-intentioned scholars are led astray by biases in archival sources, Thomas's use of these same sources is not similarly affected. Theoretical assumptions and tainted sources seem to conquer everyone not armed with Thomas's uniquely keen insight and Archimedean hubris.

This leads to a particularly puzzling problem when Thomas then argues that one of the solutions to this morass is for anthropologists to combine a "decentering" of fieldwork with a return to the utilization of missionary records, which should not be too quickly dismissed just because they are systematically biased. At one point Thomas states, "Forms of evidence and analysis tend to be mutually implicated in an

implicit and almost surreptitious way. The force of argument arises frequently from unexamined metaphors, rather than from overt claims" (p. 42). At another point, however, he claims that "ethnographic depiction is not generally or uniformly invalid because a major or the principal interpretive threads are rejected [sic]" (p. 79). In other words, Thomas can dismiss the work of his professional colleagues because, despite positive merits or demonstrated expertise, they are victims of theoretical assumptions and, at the same moment, rescue a source of historical data the biases of which are part of the reason many scholars are misled! It seems only one principle guides whether a given body of written material is to be rejected because of submerged assumptions (i.e., fieldwork evidence) or embraced despite understandable bias (i.e., missionary records): evidence central to anthropology's disciplinary identity is to be shunned while evidence generally regarded with suspicion is to be welcomed. (In a concluding summary, Thomas makes the troubling suggestion that "judgements about the worth of particular texts can only be made on a case-by-base basis, and depend as much on the project of the reader as the intrinsic features of the text" [p. 121].)

Since Friedman and Sahlins can fully defend themselves, I turn now to a brief consideration of Marquesan society as a background for evaluating Thomas's critique of Handy and Goldman. The Marquesas are a fascinating case because the group seems, on the one hand, to be the central locus for the development of eastern Polynesian culture (Kirch 1984) and, on the other hand, to manifest transformations in the system of chieftainship that parallel changes in Easter Island and that contrast with the better-known centralization processes found in Tahiti and Hawaii. Archaeological, linguistic, and ethnobotanical evidence points to the settlement of the Marquesas by voyagers from the western Polynesian hearth (Fiji, Samoa, Tonga) about 200 B.C.; from the Marquesas were then settled the outposts of Polynesia such as Easter Island and Hawaii about A.D. 500. Unfortunately for those interested in lineal typologizing and historical reconstruction, the settlement sequence of Samoa-to-Marquesas-to-Hawaii does not correspond to a stepped increase in hierarchy or stratification. In fact, something seems to have happened in the Marquesas so that the power of chiefs became disjoined from the spheres of ritual efficacy, economic wealth, and military might.

The question then becomes: Does Marquesan society represent an evolutionary midpoint--that is, on the way "toward" Hawaii and Tahiti, where chiefly power encompasses all domains of the society--or does the evidence point to a historical collapse from a fully stratified sys-

tern to one with a more fluid hierarchy and disconnected spheres of power? Thomas not only thinks the latter more probable (and thus assumes the real existence of Ancestral Polynesian Society in the Marquesas) but adds the point, made earlier by Denig (1974:26-29) and others, that some of the changes are the direct result of the penetration of Western colonial forces.

Turning to Thomas's specific criticism of Handy's interpretation of early Marquesan society, let me list seven of his claims: (1) Handy mistakenly sees Marquesan society as "egalitarian" and achievement-oriented in contrast to the ascribed rank systems of Hawaii and Tahiti; (2) Handy's book is subject to hidden "Boasian" diffusionist assumptions about sequential waves of migration, especially in accounting for stronger hierarchical phenomena in certain islands; (3) in focusing too simply on the potential for violence, Handy fails to see that political power was contextually specific; (4) Handy makes uncritical use of missionary generalizations; (5) Handy falsely assumes that the memories of his informants refer to a precontact period, when in fact they refer to a substantially altered postcontact period; (6) Handy's account neglects the presence of nonchiefly landowners; and (7) Handy's view of Marquesan chiefs is blurred by his lumping Marquesan data with the typical Polynesian pattern.

These are serious charges against a distinguished Polynesianist, but one only has to read Handy's ethnography to see that many of Thomas's accusations are false and contradictory. (1) Though Thomas uses the term repeatedly, Handy does not refer to Marquesan society as "egalitarian." Rather than describing an egalitarian society, Handy talks about chiefs as wearing fine ornaments, having servants and retainers, using special regalia, engaging in intrarank marriage alliances, inheriting by primogeniture, being the objects of sacred *tapus*, embodying the fertility of their social groups, and having the benefit of elaborate funeral rites--hardly data pointing to egalitarianism! Contrary to Thomas's direct claim, Handy's use of a quotation from the missionary Stewart does not "posit" (p. 58) an identity between the United States and the Marquesas as egalitarian societies; after citing the passage from Stewart, Handy says *absolutely nothing*. (2) Handy's book does not rely heavily on a submerged diffusionism; rather, he merely suggests that some systematic intergroup differences might be attributed to different settlement histories. (3) Handy is perfectly aware of the contextualization of power and in fact carefully distinguishes chiefly, religious, military, and economic dimensions of power. (4) Despite the small bibliographic slip that Thomas makes so much of, Handy makes extensive use

of missionary evidence, something strongly advocated by Thomas himself, and at every point in his book balances ethnographic testimony, voyage literature, and archival records. (5) Handy is careful to present the temporal referent of his data and several times suggests that the memory of his informants is to be questioned. To Handy's reference to "one great war" in which "the Mata'a and the Mo'ota were driven to take refuge temporarily at Vai Tahu, Tahu Ata, where they were subsequently returned" (1923:30), Thomas objects on the grounds that Handy thinks it "belonged to some distant, pre-European past" (p. 56). But Handy's sentence is located in a section giving a brief summary of tribal divisions and makes no such claim that the "great war" occurred in precontact times. In fact, Handy speculates about three possible historical trajectories of tribal divisions and explicitly discusses the differences between political patterns recalled by his informants and those appearing in the writings of early foreign visitors. And, to express the general importance of warfare in the society, Handy cites battles that took place in 1837, that is, in the postcontact period. (6) Handy makes specific references to nonchiefly landowners and even makes the same comparative reference to the Tahitian case that Thomas uses by way of criticism. (7) Handy is not at all confused by the typical pattern of Polynesian chieftainship; in fact, Handy repeatedly states that the Marquesan case differs from Hawaii and Tahiti. He is also aware of variation in degrees of inequality within the group and notes historical changes in the strength of chiefly authority.

What, then, is Thomas's new view of Marquesan chieftainship? His discovery boils down to four points: (1) that chiefly relations did not structure fixed group relations, (2) that the chief was only one of several power roles in the society, (3) that the chiefs relation to the people was based on patronage rather than hierarchical encompassment, and (4) that the operation of *tapu* was localized rather than regionalized. All these points can be found in Handy's excellent ethnography. Not only are Thomas's accusations against Handy false, but his reconstruction of Marquesan chieftainship is not original.

I wish I could end by noting that this heavy-handed book is relieved by lighter moments. The only amusement I found was in Thomas's description (p. 90) of generalized exchange as group A giving "husbands" to group B and his statement that in matrilineal cross-cousin marriage systems wife-takers normally outrank wife-givers! Such errors would not be made by any ethnographer who has actually struggled to analyze marriage data gathered in the field or by any anthropologist familiar with the standard works in the discipline. Finally, readers

interested in a clear and comprehensive assessment of the "state of the art" in Polynesian studies should consult the essays in Alan Howard and Robert Borofsky's recent edited collection, *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology* (1989).

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