Review: JEAN FRANÇOIS BARÉ
ORSTOM
PARIS

The Pacific Islands, as shown by this third edition since 1951, could be described as a successful challenge. It was a gamble, indeed, to have kept a balance between readability and rigor about such a huge topic. In the same book are sketched the ethnography of the Islands societies, the main historical trends of the Western irruption, and the various encounters of both, in such a wide and diverse area that the "search for broad regional labels" can be considered "fruitless" in the author's own words (p. 15), although he stresses, with good grounds I think, the cultural and historical relevance of the concept of Polynesia.

Undoubtedly this challenge was implicit in the very project that gave birth to the book: to write something informative and of high quality about something difficult to define, something that happened to be called, around the end of World War II, "the Pacific Islands," the modern version of "Oceania." This was a very specific and geopolitical notion; it was followed, in the Anglo-Saxon world, by concepts no less idiosyncratic when one thinks of it: "Pacific Studies" in the academic world, "Pacific Islanders" (or even "true Pacific Islanders" as I heard recently, an expression that forgets, at least, that nothing can be "true" culturally speaking when expressed in nonnative languages or concepts, like "Pacific"). When Oliver wrote the first edition the very notion of "the Pacific" was in the air, so the book itself, epitomizing the vision of contemporary Pacific Islands societies and histories as a whole, is "in history."

The book's scope was a wide one indeed, which, all things equal, could be compared to General de Gaulle's conception of Europe, "de l'Atlantique à l'Oural": something that confusedly makes sense—as recent geopolitics seem to show—but what sense? The topic certainly needed someone as talented and fiercely cautious as Doug Oliver—an ethnographer but also a high-level, if transitory, civil servant at about the time he wrote the book, someone who rubbed elbows not only with Tahitian fishermen and Siuaian chiefs, but also with American generals and French governors, who lived so closely the contemporary history of the Pacific—to make something clear and readable out of Nauru's phosphates, Micronesian mothers' brothers, Queensland's British settlers, Spanish explorers, Japanese expansion, German protectorates, Polynesian gods, New Guinea languages, Solomon Islands weather conditions, and the rest.

Given the diversity in time and space, this challenge could only be faced through a bias of some kind in the organization of the book, biases that are the common fate of whoever wishes to say something about "the Pacific." One can think of an organization by the colonial or Western powers' spheres of influence, but this solution can aggregate societies that sometimes, historically and culturally, have little in common—except, precisely, this influence—like the French-controlled territories of French Polynesia and New Caledonia. One can choose to speak of the Pacific islands geographical cluster by geographical cluster or archipelago by archipelago, then face the risk of repeating uselessly fairly identical issues—like the ecological constraints of atoll life or the behavior of whaling crews. One can take for granted cultural or "regional" labels like Polynesia, at the risk of understating, for instance, what makes Hawaiian and Western Samoan histories and contemporary societies so different, that is, the nature of the confrontations of the societies and foreign powers.

Oliver's choice was resolutely transversal and laconic: "Pre-Colonial Times," "Explorers," "Whalers," "Planters," "Miners," "Change," "Lives," "Souls," "Coconuts," and so forth (a nonexhaustive and abridged list of chapter titles). It is only within this framework that the islands' societies and spatial networks appear as such, as illustrations of more general features or issues that they share or did share, sometimes unknowingly, including the contemporary trials of Western irruptions of all kinds. This choice appeared relevant: the simplicity and power of words like "Lives" or "Souls" let the book breathe, if one may say so; the reader—student or older—was kept comfortable; and the thorny difficulties of the project, the varieties of its issues were therefore reduced to a common and smoother landscape. This framework, without giving

too much way to teleology, is not surprising given Oliver's renowned commitment towards the "basics" in ethnography—a way, actually, of keeping at a distance jargon and intellectual arrogance—and his down-to-earth attitude towards things human, so explicit in his famous *Ancient Tahitian Society* (1974), organized with words as lonely as in *The Pacific Islands* ("Grooming," "Food," Cosmology," etc.), where he can sound sometimes like the eighteenth-century explorers and naturalists he is so familiar with, Banks, the Forsters, Wales, Cook, and the others, as directly and straightforwardly attentive as they used to be.

These qualities have certainly contributed largely to *The Pacific Islands'* enduring success, and to its still unreplaceable function as a handbook or a high-level introduction to the Pacific islands' world. One could note particularly, amongst the richness of paragraphs to be underlined, the description of ecological issues (the formation of phosphate deposits on "low" islands is, for instance, a literary masterpiece in its way), the remarkably clear presentation of the whaling and labor-recruiting phases (the famous "blackbirding"), or the well-documented parts on Japanese policy and expansion, notably in northern Micronesia, all the more relevant given current trends in Pacific geopolitics.

One can note also a definitely critical approach towards Western influence in terms of "Losses and Gains" (chap. 15) on the island societies' side, hence the repeated scathing remarks about "the historian's commitment to the all's well that ends well" (p. 90).

Like any intellectual choice, the ones that presided over *The Pacific Islands'* production have some drawbacks, and it is certainly not questioning the book's outstanding quality to comment further on them. If the book's scope is the "Pacific Islands," then its attention must be directed towards the Pacific Islands' *specificity.* In that sense a fast reading of the table of contents could lead the hurried reviewer to a mishap: "Lives," "Souls," "Coconuts," "Planters," "Explorers: 1521–1792," "Islands and Islanders in Pre-colonial Times," "Sugar," "Bases"—this must be Indonesia. In fact, the book's patient way of proceeding through examples and hints gives the reader a Pacific feeling, if this makes any sense, more surely than would a less empirical way of writing things, not to speak of megalomaniac—hence meaningless—intellectual constructions.

Still this question, the "Pacific's" "specificity," deserves some attention. Oliver's legitimate concern for placing the Westerners in front of their responsibilities leads him to target a "new generation of Pacific Islands historians" for their tendency to stress "the active roles some Islanders have played in the interactive process [with Westerners]" (pp.

87–88). This is swept over by the argument that Westerners "have been overwhelmingly preponderant in the cultural and political interchange" (ibid.). This is certainly worth repeating, but it does not help by itself to ascertain the specific features of contemporary Pacific Islands societies, which are the results of no less specific historical processes. Observing the imprint of island cultures *on* Western irruption itself—the example of the island churches' organization is certainly one of the most illustrative—does not mean that Western influence is of no importance; it helps rather, to my point of view, to describe more adequately the transformations, hence the contemporary societies. The carelessness and cynicism through which diseases brought havoc to island populations is worth noting, but it is no less necessary for the historian and the anthropologist to note the way traditional land tenures adapted to lower population densities, like in the Leeward islands of Tahiti or in Rapa, southernmost of Tahiti's Austral Islands (Baré 1987; Hanson 1970).

So we are here involved in a broader debate that concerns intercultural history, the history of Western expansion being in that sense a particular case of the former. This discussion pertains particularly, if not exclusively, to the Pacific world, since Western expansion and the island societies' responses were such good issues for myth-making and rewritten history. Either we take what the historian Paul Veyne calls humorously "God's point of view" (1971) (we give rewards and punishments after the event, because we supposedly know what should have happened or what the people should have done), or we try to describe what happened, and both sides have indeed to be taken into account. It is an absolute duty, intellectually speaking, to be committed to ethical concerns, to stress the whaler's brutality, or more generally the part played by force in the Western irruption in the Pacific Islands. Still, force *in itself* is certainly not a clue to Pacific history and contemporary societies, no more than whaling is a Pacific Islands specificity. So, if force, whaling, or mining do not make "the Pacific" by themselves, and if the subject of the book is indeed the contemporary Pacific Islands' specificity, what is left is: what the Pacific Islanders did do with Western models like whaling, mining, or something more complicated called "God-the-Father" (see below).

It is worth noting that Oliver, critical as he is about this "new history" (whose existence as a consistent intellectual field one can actually question), could not help regularly pointing out interesting ethnographic issues that would precisely pertain to this way of seeing things. For example, the classical way of seeing bartering as crookery—"a handful

of glass beads . . . for, say, a hundred-weight of sandalwood"—is challenged by noting that this is so "by Western ethical standards, . . . but not viewed as such in many native eyes" (pp. 52–53). Similarly he notes that the Hawaiian people who had the best fate in the difficult 1940s were cowboys, because "the cowboy life, exciting and varied, . . . corresponded to the Hawaiians' life before Western contact" (p. 192); and that the missionary task of transmitting the notion of God the Father was of a different nature, and certainly a more painful one, in societies with matrilineal clans where "a 'God-the-Father' was less important, socially, than a 'God-the-Mother's-Brother' " (p. 116); and so forth.

So the book's points of view tend to oscillate between a legitimate concern for stressing Western-oriented destructuration and the unavoidable evidence that transformation processes were to some degree oriented by the islanders themselves, but without delving very far into the synthesis of these two apparent antinomies. In other words the book, successful as it is, exposes some of the difficulties involved in speaking about "the Pacific," a not-insignificant quality. It is this kind of oscillation that must have led to some slightly contradictory ways of dealing with certain issues. Although, for instance, the invention of metaphorical "kingdoms" is rightly related to "the nature of native leadership" (p. 59), the creation of these "kingdoms" is related a few lines later, rightly but incompletely, to the Western mind's difficulty in dealing with "something politically . . . inconceivable" like "small, separate, mostly community-sized political entities, each with its own chief . . . about equal in power and influence." But there is not a word about the political tendencies towards centralization that were very often implicit in Polynesian hierarchies themselves (as in Tahiti and Tonga; the Samoan case again giving a perfect counterinstance). If traditional leaders could so easily play the part of metaphorical kings and queens, as did Tahiti's Pomares or Tonga's Tupou, it is obviously because they were interiorizing to some extent this model themselves, as representatives of their political culture. (Hence, in a good many Polynesian historical conjunctures the relevance of the idea of a "working" or "productive" misunderstanding, even in areas other than the political.) This lapse is all the more surprising given Oliver's fascinating analysis (1974, vol. 3) of the reciprocal relationships between the Tahitian god Oro's cult and centralizing policy at the end of the eighteenth century.

It is surprising also that the episode of Cook's death in Hawaii is dismissed with "the causes [of it] are still being debated" (p. 45), when one knows the rich and innovative work devoted by Marshall Sahlins (1985) to this episode as epitomizing precisely many problems of Pacific cultural history. No doubt this is attributable to Oliver's understandable

defiance towards the boldnesses or maybe the imprudences of a so-called new history, but Sahlins's recent work about this conjuncture, and the general inspiration of it, would have deserved at least a footnote, critical or not.

What could seem, not without a certain paradox, an underrated treatment of the action of island cultural systems on the events could have led to some fairly questionable dealings, like the one about Catholicism in Tahiti, which is presented as a successful result of the French seizure of the central archipelago, "thereby legitimizing and assisting the spread of Catholicism throughout most of southeastern Polynesia" (p. 57). One should remember first that the French protectorate on Tahiti in 1842–1845 was set by royalist officers of the "Restauration" period—a monarchical reaction against revolution and laicism—which was not exactly the context in subsequent periods. So on the Western side there is already something specific going on. But mention should have been made anyway that on the Tahitian side Catholicism was only successful in sociopolitical entities distant and autonomous from the Society Islands, like the "Gambiers" (Mangareva) or the Marquesas; that the French administration had to negotiate, like it or not, with British missionaries (or even employ them, as the case with Orsmond and Simpson) whose relationships with the chiefs and an important majority of the *ma'ohi* population were impossible to circumvene, and that French Protestant missionaries had to be requested to replace the departing London Missionary Society ones in the 1860s; that, at the end, a good part of the Catholic audience was constituted by the Chinese community, whatever the actual social and historical importance of the Pape'ete bishopric; and that in a good part of rural French Polynesia a Catholic church is still something of an oddity. Mentioning all this composes of course a different picture than what seems to be a rather slight, if usual in Pacific studies, equation: "Catholicism equals France." As I tried to show (1985, 1987), the so important "religious" question in Tahiti (and, very likely, throughout Polynesia) can only be seized in the celebrated Fernand Braudel's *"longue durée"*—for Tahiti, from the fascinating years 1803–1820 onwards, much ahead of the French protectorate, when a Protestant god becomes *mau*, altogether "permanent" and "empirically true"—and this can only be done by taking into account what we can reconstruct of the *ma'ohi* cultural system of the time. These kinds of remarks can be extended to other historical issues. This being said, the book's parts devoted to the Catholic question in the Pacific are, as far as I can know, of a high interest, given the space that could be devoted to them.

Any bibliography—especially given the huge bibliography on the

Pacific—is also a choice. This edition's being the third since 1951, one can personally regret the absence of certain references, among them some more or less recent publications in French, although Oliver pays more attention to them than some of his English-speaking colleagues. I noted (by alphabetical order) the absence of Bensa and Rivierre's monograph on rural New Caledonia (1984), Bonnemaison's historical and geographical work on Vanuatu's Tanna Island (1986a, 1986b), the synthesis on the important adoption question throughout Polynesia by Vern Carroll et al. (1970), the synthesis on Polynesian societial transformation by Antony Hooper et al. (Hooper and Huntsman 1985) (some essays pertaining to the "new history"?), Garanger's ethnoarchaeological work on Efate (Vanuatu), worth quoting because of the use of oral tradition (1972), and Ottino's monograph on the Tuamotu archipelago of French Polynesia, especially important because of the outstanding land tenure analysis (1972).

Oliver notes that the book's "narrative" ends in 1951 and necessarily skips new trends in contemporary Pacific societies. It is true that through important evolutions—like the postwar "trusteeship" doctrine —almost all Pacific island societies are now institutionally organized in independent states, the organization of nonjurally independent collectivites like France's "Overseas Territories" being perhaps less different *in their structure* from their island neighbors than is generally stated. The more we go, the more it seems that to be a Pacific Islander has something to do with talking "balance of payments" and "cultural identity." It is hardly possible to resist speculating about a fourth edition of *The Pacific Islands*, let's say in 2000, and take a few bets: Will Tonga still be so centralized? Will Tahiti still be shaken by money scandals? Will Western Samoans still be one of the poorest, yet best fed people in the world? Why? I hope Oliver will change his mind that this edition is to be the last (p. xi), and confront even more closely these long-run (and specific!) evolutions, for the sake of our pleasure and learning.

REFERENCES

Baré, J.-F.

1985 *Le malentendu pacifique. Des premières rencontres entre Polynésiens et Anglais et de ce qui s'ensuivit avec les Français jusqu'à nos jours.* Histoire des Gens. Paris: Hachette.

1987 *Tahiti, les temps et les pouvoirs. Pour une anthropologie historique du Tahiti post Européen.* Paris: ORSTOM.

Bensa, A., and J. C. Rivierre
1984 *Les chemins de l'alliance.* Paris: l'Harmattan.

Bonnemaison, J.
1986a *L'arbre et la pirogue. Les fondements d'une identité, territoire, histoire et société dans l'archipel de Vanuatu (Mélanésie).* 2 tomes. Paris: ORSTOM.
1986b *La dernière île.* Paris: ARLEA-ORSTOM.

Carroll, V., ed.
1970 *Adoption in Eastern Oceania.* A.S.A.O. Monographs. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Garanger, J.
1972 *Archéologie des Nouvelles Hébrides.* Paris: ORSTOM et C.N.R.S.

Hanson, F. A.
1970 *Rapan Lifeways.* Boston: Little, Brown.

Hooper, A., and J. Huntsman, eds.
1985 *Transformations of Polynesian Culture.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Oliver, D.
1974 *Ancient Tahitian Society.* 3 vols. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

Ottino, P.
1972 *Rangiroa. Parenté étendue, résidence et terres dans un atoll polynésien.* Paris: Cujas.

Sahlins, M.
1985 *Islands of History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Veyne, P.
1971 *Comment on écrit l'histoire.* Paris: Editions du Seuil.