

EPILOGUE: A NEW LOOK AT GRANDPARENTING

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The papers in this special issue of *Pacific Studies* signal a growing interest in grandparents and the roles that they play in times of profound social, cultural, and demographic change. In this *Épilogue* we attempt to distill from the preceding seven essays' themes that reflect the various ways in which grandparenthood is adapting to these conditions in selected Pacific Islands. The challenge, as we see it, is to establish how senior citizens, including grandparents and great-grandparents, are embedded in a set of social relationships, and then to determine which variables—lineage and household structures, economic contributions, proximity, activities participated in, conceptions of rights and obligations, etc.—account for their circumstances.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY will be the century of grandparents: that is the observation made by two French social scientists, Claudine Attias-Donfût and Martine Segalen, in the introduction to their book *Le Siècle des Grands-parents: Une Génération Phare, Ici et Ailleurs* (2001). That grandparents have been a forgotten subject during the last century, in public life as well as in social science research, is a fact with which the majority of the authors in this issue would agree.

Although the study of grandparents has been neglected until recently, it has lately undergone a major expansion, as testified by the multiplication of sociological and psychological studies on the subject. It is only recently that anthropology in general (and Pacific anthropology is no different in this

regard) has taken into account the place and the role of grandparents in social life (Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, and Merriwether-deVries 1995; Douaire-Marsaudon 2008; Hirshorn 1998; Ikels 1998; Rensel and Howard 1997; Shomaker 1989). As Sela Panapasa (2007) accurately observes in her contribution to this issue, “population and societal aging and more specifically the practice of grandparenting is a widely understudied area in contemporary Pacific societies.” This issue represents an effort to fill that scientific gap and to illuminate a relationship that dates to the beginning of human time, but which has remained until now largely underestimated and understudied.

There are multiple reasons for this new infatuation with grandparenthood, with two of the most important being the demographic expansion of the group known as senior citizens or seniors and the increasing attention given to the care and education of children. As underlined by Sally Keeling (2007), because of this new demographic situation, the role of grandparents has changed in terms of duration, complexity, and variety. Indeed, the period known as the senior years, or simply old age, has become longer and hence more heterogeneous than ever. Old age is today increasingly subdivided into two phases, the first corresponding to the first generation of grandparents, generally in good health, still active and engaged in social life, and the second to great-grandparents, whose dependence augments with age. These two categories are defined as the young-old and old-old and discussed by Jocelyn Armstrong (2007) for New Zealand. This emergence of two generations of grandparents (instead of just one), a phenomenon without a doubt unprecedented in human history, blurs the traditional view of the life cycle.

The new heterogeneity of the senior years also signifies a transformation of intergenerational ties. One of the characteristics of contemporary grandparental ties is that they link old people not only to young children but also to adolescents and even adults. Their young grandchildren are considered a subject of pride and source of joy today as in the past, but there also exists another side of this ongoing grandparental responsibility, marked by anxiety and concern for the success of their grandchildren as they enter their twenties and thirties (Keeling 2007). A number of the studies in this issue have shown that beyond emotional support, Pacific grandparents also give practical or financial help to their grandchildren just entering adulthood.

Sociological studies of contemporary grandparenting in developed societies have shown that when men and women become grandparents, they are often still in the prime of life, working and living like parents, and serving as “second parents” to their grandchildren (Attias-Donfût and Segalen 1998), rather than acting as grandparents in the classic sense of the term. In regards to aging great-grandparents, even with their increasing dependency on the succeeding generation of “young” grandparents, the great-grandparents still

offer their descendants a strong symbolic resource; their presence, beyond the grandparents, places a protective screen that holds death at a distance and concentrates the energy of grandparents in their relationship with their grandchildren (Attias-Donfût and Segalen 2001; see also Hogan, Eggebeen, and Snaith 1996).

Variability in Grandparenting

In both developed and developing societies, both western and nonwestern, there is more diversity in grandparent/grandchild relationships today than in the past. Rather than conforming to an agreed-on ideal model, today's relationships typically result from negotiation among all parties involved. Sally Keeling's analysis of Anglo-European relationships in New Zealand's developed society (2007), and Jeanette Dickerson-Putman's Raivavaea case material (2007) from a developing society setting in French Polynesia (2007) provide a pair of Pacific examples.

The value of a cross-cultural approach to grandparenting as exemplified by the papers in this issue is to demonstrate, beyond the sociological aspects of intergenerational ties, the variability of these forms from one culture or society to another. Nevertheless, the authors stay faithful to their announced objective: not so much to focus on the idiosyncratic character of grandparental ties and practices in this or that Pacific society, as to demonstrate how contemporary grandparenting in these societies results from a series of transformations induced by the history of each society and by foreign, notably western, parental models or ideals.

Reactions to the pressures of modernization have varied in accordance both with the pragmatics of living in a rapidly changing environment and with the nature and viability of prior cultural systems. All of the societal settings dealt with in this issue can be described as being in a process of complexification, with more options, more contingencies, more coping strategies, and a wider range of cultural models available than in the past. Changes in the physical environment (including availability of different types of housing), in opportunities for mobility and wage labor, in the relative value of various commodities and resources (including land), and in other practical considerations go a long way toward shaping the context within which grandparents act. At the same time the cultural models provided by traditional legacies and modern importations allow for alternative means of evaluating actions and relationships. The challenge, therefore, is to establish how senior citizens, including grandparents and great-grandparents, are embedded in a set of social relationships, and then to determine which variables—lineage and household structures, economic contributions, proximity, activities

participated in, conceptions of rights and obligations, etc.—account for their circumstances. The contributors to this issue have made significant strides toward meeting this challenge.

In Micronesian societies such as Guam, Pollap, and the Marshalls, the traditional matrilineal descent system, which accords an important role to women and old people in the conduct of household affairs, grandmothers remain preeminent family figures. Among the Chamorro of Guam, who experienced the most drastic changes under colonization, Spanish colonization nonetheless had little effect on the descent system. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the U.S. administration has prompted Chamorros to adopt the U.S. legal system, which has affected relations between grandparents and grandchildren in pace with the growing Americanization of the Chamorro lifestyle. Still, as Vicki Torsch tells us, the Anglo-American ideal of “the distanced style of noninterfering, affectionate grandparents who live independently in their own homes at some distance from the nuclear parental family” is considered an aberration by Chamorros. Rather, she says, “The ideal among Chamorros is the multigenerational, extended family living in the family compound, sharing a common kitchen and social area in mostly modern, American-style homes” (Torsch 2007).

The existence of the extended family and the coresidence of grandparents with parents and grandchildren is conceived in Micronesian societies—as well as in Fiji (Panapasa 2007)—as an essential aspect of a quality lifestyle. The question is whether or not the extended family will remain viable in these societies as they are being rapidly transformed. The extended family seems to be in good health on Pollap (Flinn 2007) but clearly menaced in Guam, where the development of salaried employment has engulfed the traditional domestic economy. Whether or not the extended family has a future in Pacific societies cannot yet be determined because there are so many contingencies that account for household composition, but it is clearly premature to announce its imminent disappearance and replacement by the nuclear family, along with American or other imported styles of grandparenting.

As anthropologists have shown, extended families cannot be reduced simply to domestic units composed of parents, children, and others (including grandparents). The kinship system organizes social interactions well beyond the interpersonal relations within the domestic unit and the production of material necessities, the distribution of resources, support networks, and perhaps even political alliances. Within the extended family, shared residence and the visibility of the generational order render the respective roles of parents and grandparents more clear-cut than in societies where the nuclear family prevails as it does in most western societies. In societies where

the extended family has continued to be the base of social structure, parents and grandparents each contribute daily to the life of the group. Grandparents, although they are usually excluded from the most arduous tasks, are considered to be guardians of the hearth, of family lands, and of family history.

An anthropological perspective also allows us to focus on another crucial facet of grandparenthood: the subjective manner in which individuals live and express themselves in grandparental roles. Thus, Juliana Flinn (2007) properly warns us against the tendency to consider the role of grandparents as sharply distinct from that of parents and as standardized in the grandparents' relationships with grandchildren. On Pollap, to be a grandfather, and even more so, to become a grandmother, is to continue to be a parent, but in another mode, since the children have become adults. In other words, grandmothers on Pollap live their grandparenthood as a kind of logical continuation and culmination of parenthood. This reminds us that the relationship of grandparent/grandchild necessarily operates through the parent/child relationship; these social interactions bring into play not just two but three or even four generations—the entire extended family. As Laurence Carucci observes for the Marshall Islanders he has studied, referencing Bourdieu (1977), “Grandparenting/grandchilding is an embodied social relational practice or style of action that cannot be separated out from the broad set of practical relationships of which it is a part” (Carucci 2007). Indeed, the relevance of practice can apply on numerous levels, including economic ones. Increasingly today, the family support system must be able to stand up to the challenge of integrating both the benefits and costs of two degrees of grandparenthood—able/active and frail/dependent (see Panapasa 2007).

Today, although the status of grandparenthood remains one of the primary markers of social old age for the majority of people interviewed by the authors of this issue, it is not an assured transition, nor does everyone necessarily have a choice. Late marriage, delayed maternity, childless unions, divorce, and so on have all made becoming a grandparent more uncertain than in the past. On the other hand, in many of today's societies, as Jocelyn Armstrong (2007) documents for both Maori and European grandmothers in New Zealand, the status of grandparent may be either ascribed or achieved: ascribed in biological terms when a woman's child gives birth but achieved in social terms when a woman takes on or is given the role of fictive or adoptive grandmother.

Inclusive Grandparenting

An interesting aspect of the studies included in this issue is that many of the grandparents who were interviewed, no matter what their culture of origin,

conceive of their role in an inclusive manner, extending beyond strict genealogical descent relationships (see e.g., Armstrong 2007; Keeling 2007). Among Maori, as elsewhere in Polynesia, this inclusiveness is inscribed in the kinship terminology: men or women call not only their own grandchildren but also the grandchildren of their siblings and cousins by the same term (*mokopuna* in Maori). As noted by the contributors to this issue, this inclusiveness is widespread even among grandparents of European origin, although the terminology is different, and may sometimes be extended to the grandchildren of friends and neighbors. This flexibility of kinship terminology underscores the relative significance in Pacific societies of action over “blood” ties in signifying relationships (Linnekin and Poyer 1990). Thus, individuals who take on grandparental responsibilities vis-à-vis others become de facto “grandparents” and are referred to or addressed by the appropriate term, whether or not genealogical ties exist. Likewise, a biological grandparent who does not act appropriately in the role may be referred to or addressed without using any concept of grandparenthood.

The significance of behavior over blood for determining the nature of relationships is nicely illustrated by Carucci’s analysis of Marshallese grandparenting. On Ujelang and Enewetak Atolls, in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, grandparental ties are conceived as one of the facets of a more encompassing relationship designated by the reciprocal and multireferential term *jibw-*. The relationship is “typified by lightheartedness and indulgence; always involving endeared persons, often two generations apart,” but not necessarily in a biological grandparent/grandchild relationship. Carucci further explains that this encompassing relationship has another, more surprising characteristic. While seniors are accorded the greatest of respect in these societies, the *jibw-* relation between two people can reverse this, and the generationally older member of the pair may become “junior” to the younger, even to a newborn (Carucci 2007).

Jeanette Dickerson-Putman’s study of *fa’a’amu* (adoption) on Raivavae in French Polynesia sheds light on one mutation of the grandparental link. As is well known, adoption is a common practice throughout the Polynesian world and principally consists of the transfer of a child from one person (or couple) to another within the same descent group, for example between brother and sister (Shore 1976), or between parents and grandparents. This transference of children creates on Raivavae “networks of exchange and obligation among the biological parents, the adoptive parents, and the adopted child” (Dickerson-Putman 2007; see also Lallemand 1993). Under the pressure of modernization, in particular with the transformation of out-migration from a temporary relocation to a long-standing or permanent phenomenon, the adoption of grandchildren by their grandparents has become more and more common, but less for the purpose of providing

support for the grandparents than for helping the migrating adult children and insuring the welfare of the grandchildren.

The high frequency of adoption of grandchildren throughout Polynesia is suggestive of what may be an important social-psychological phenomenon in these cultures. Howard (1970) has argued that among Hawaiian Americans, adopting grandchildren is a means of extending the stage of parenthood beyond the child-bearing period. His analysis is based on the observation that there are strong reinforcements in childhood for girls to play nurturing roles, resulting in a need for babies as both a source of personal gratification and as a means of validating their adulthood. The dynamics motivate women to replace maturing children with infants, by adoption if the women are no longer fecund. Although men are not so directly socialized toward nurturing behavior, caring for infants and young children is an integral aspect of their adult role that they appear to relish (Howard 1970).

Styles and Roles

Several contributors to this collection of papers have referred to Joan Weibel-Orlando's study of grandparenthood among North American Indians (1997) to classify the great variability of grandparent/grandchild ties. Weibel-Orlando identified six "styles" of grandparents: cultural conservator, custodian, ceremonial, distanced, fictive, and care-needing. Although this allows one to categorize the heterogeneity of contemporary grandparenting, one must nevertheless question whether such a model is adequate to account for the remarkable dynamism of grandparenthood, a characteristic present in each of the papers presented here. Today, "to be a grandparent" cannot be thought of as a clearly limited and defined state, while "becoming a grandparent" must be seen as a long-term process open to many possibilities: grandparenthood takes on more and more the sense of an adventure, or at least a life experiment.

It seems that almost all the grandparents described in this issue are facing modernization and the loss of guideposts and cultural values. Many if not most of them feel they are vested with a mission to remind the young of the rules and constraints as well as the attraction and pleasures of social life that seem to be disappearing (see Schweitzer 1999). The pressure on grandparents who belong to ethnic minorities to act as cultural conservators is especially great in most instances.

However, while received wisdom suggests that grandparents, and older people in general, are the main keepers and transmitters of cultural tradition, such is not always the case. In Hawai'i, and among New Zealand Maori, indigenous language and many aspects of custom were all but lost to several generations. It has been largely the youths who have resurrected tradition in

these societies, and who are in a position to re-educate their parents and grandparents. Nevertheless, even under these conditions, the sense of identification between grandparents and grandchildren remains strong. For the young, grandparents represent a link to a re-valued past; for the old, the young represent affirmation of the worth of a nearly forgotten cultural heritage.

The different lifestyles of grandparents presented in this issue suggest that it is easier to be a grandparent in some societies than in others. Despite dramatic changes in Chamorro lifestyle, the general availability of U.S. Social Security benefits has liberated older people from domestic tasks, allowing them to frequent senior citizen centers, to take some leisure time, and to participate in activities that were not available to previous generations. Under such conditions, where choices are abundant, it is possible for older people to foreground other roles (occupational, political, etc.) and to relegate the grandparent role to the background of their lives.

In contrast, in Fiji, unemployment, poverty, urbanization, and increasing labor force participation by women have destabilized parental ties and increased the need and pressure for grandparents to become caregivers of their grandchildren, or even to become “second time parents” (Panapasa 2007; see also Dickerson-Putman 2007). In other instances, where changes have been the most dramatic, as among Marshallese who were evacuated from their home islands as a result of nuclear testing, grandparents appear to be among the first affected by severe changes in traditional family and community structure. According to Carucci (2007), they express “their disillusionment at changes in the way life should be” and their sense “of powerless and of disenfranchisement.”

Nevertheless, in Guam, on Pollap and the Marshall Islands, in Fiji, New Zealand, and French Polynesia, despite the uncertain destiny of the extended family, no matter what form these grandparent/grandchild links take today, wherever they exist, they play a fundamentally cohesive role, nurturing family and social stability in a world marked by discontinuity and change (cf. Robertson 1995; Smith 1995). Within these changing Pacific societies, grandparents give support and serve as incomparable guides to understanding the transformation of the contemporary world.

NOTES

1. This relationship is fairly close overall to the link between Polynesian elders and those they call *mokopuna* in Maori, *mo'opuna* in Hawaiian, etc.

2. This renaissance has been in part the result of political activism and in part the development of language “immersion” programs that educate children in their native language.

3. The identification of grandparents with grandchildren may be a nearly universal phenomenon. It is suggested in many Pacific cultures where the terms for grandparent and grandchild are the same; that is, they are reciprocal.

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