SOCIO-SPATIAL SYMBOLISM AND
THE LOGIC OF RANK ON TWO
POLYNESIAN OUTLIERS

Richard Feinberg
Kent State University

For decades, anthropologists have recognized a tendency for Polynesian atoll communities to be organized on a more egalitarian basis than their high volcanic island neighbors. Sahlins (1958), in his influential work, attributes these differences in social structure to the limited productive capacity of atoll environments and consequent limits on the opportunity to develop chiefly power through control of the redistributive process. Other commentators have put forth alternative interpretations; still, Sahlins's argument provides the starting point for most discussions of the issue. Such ecological analyses, however, say little about the cultural logic underlying the differences among Polynesian ranking systems. It is to this issue that I address my current reflections.

Polynesian cultures represent variations on a set of common themes. Hence, one finds that throughout much of Polynesia social relations are expressed in spatial terms and represented as an elaborately articulated, hierarchically ordered set of binary oppositions (e.g., for Anuta see Feinberg 1980a; Tikopia, Hooper 1981; Samoa, Shore 1976; 1982; Tonga, Biersack 1982; Fiji, Hocart 1929; Sahlins 1976). This symbolic structure, which very likely developed on the high islands of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, is predicated on an essentially linear concept of space in which oppositions of right to left, front to back, east to west, high to low, and seaward to inland are mutually reinforcing. However, when a linear model is transferred to an atoll environment, consisting of a ring of islets surrounding an inner lagoon and itself surrounded by the ocean, it is beset by ambiguities. The cosmological order underlying Polynesian notions of aristocracy is compromised by spatial ambiguities, and the hierarchical social order becomes insupportable.

Here I illustrate this point through an examination of the ranking systems on two Polynesian outliers: Anuta, a volcanic island in the eastern Solomons, with a system that has been compared to Tonga in its quasifeudal pyramidal structure (Kaeppler 1973); and Nukumanu, an atoll in Papua New Guinea's North Solomons Province, with an apparently more egalitarian system of social relations. Both are small, isolated communities of Polynesian speakers that have maintained much of their old way of life.
Among criteria for determining degree of social stratification, Sahlins (1958) lists the complexity of a community's ranking system (i.e., the number of discrete social strata), degree of chiefly control over land and other resources, and the availability of secular sanctions to enforce the chief's decisions. By these criteria, he assigns each of fourteen Polynesian societies to one of four classes labeled I, IIa, IIb, and III, in descending order of degree of stratification. On the basis of these criteria, he assigns Tikopia, which is structurally similar to Anuta, to Group IIb, making it among the less stratified of Polynesian communities. Nonetheless, Anuta, like Tikopia, has a rather elaborate, typically Polynesian system of rank, based on a predominantly genealogical model. Although I (Feinberg 1978; 1981) have described Anuta's ranking system in detail elsewhere, a summary of the major points is in order.

On Anuta, hierarchical relations are ordered in terms of political authority and ritual honor. These systems are analytically distinct, and empirically they are by no means congruent. Still, they are largely parallel and on the whole tend to be mutually reinforcing. Both systems are dependent on possession of manu (mana) and the associated notion of tapu.

At the apex of Anuta's political and honorific order is the senior chief, known as Te Ariki i Mua or Tui Anuta. He is the senior male patrilineal descendant of a former chief named Tearakura, who lived about nine generations ago and is said to have presided over the slaying of almost the island's entire male population. Tearakura, his two brothers, and two sisters (both of whom were married to the same man) are held to have founded the island's present kainanga (clan) system; and Tearakura, himself, is regarded as the apical ancestor of the leading clan. After his death, Tearakura became Anuta's premier deity.

Ritually, and in many respects politically, the senior chief is followed by the junior chief, who goes by the titles Te Ariki i Muri, Te Ariki Tepuko, or Tui Kainanga. The junior chief is the patrilineal male descendant of Tearakura's younger brother, Pu Tepuko, founder of the second ranking clan.

Chiefs in theory, and to some degree in fact, exercise dominion over all land and natural resources. Because they are considered to be descended from the premier deities, they acted as high priests in the traditional religious system. Even today they are endowed with awesome mana by the Christian God, and they are expected to utilize their mana to protect the community's wellbeing. They organize public works activities, control the ritual cycle, place taboos on crops or parcels of land, and are presented with tribute in the form of first fruit payments and highly esteemed fish. These goods are often redistributed either informally or at feasts. In addition, reciprocity, combined with a sense of noblesse oblige, leads the chiefs to redistribute much of their own garden produce. Chiefs participate in productive activities; but in pre-Christian times, they were excepted from any of the heavier and less desirable tasks. They are not particularly wealthier than commoners, nor are there many obvious insignia of rank; yet, there are some.

Chiefs must be respected and obeyed on pain of supernatural sanctions leading to illness, misfortune, or death; and in most cases appreciation of the
chiefs' contribution to the general wellbeing, combined with fear of supernatural retribution, was sufficient to lead people to treat them with obedience and respect (Feinberg 1979; 1980b; and 1986a). Rarely has it been necessary for chiefs to resort to secular punishment in order to enforce their will. However, informants insist that chiefs have the right to confiscate an offender's land, have him whipped in public, or exile him to the sea—a sentence regarded as tantamount to execution. In past generations, chiefs are said to have been involved in civil wars in which the opposition was entirely annihilated.

At present there are four clans. The first two are led by chiefs (ariki) and claim descent from Tearakura and his younger brother, Pu Tepukō. The other two are chiefless. Of these, one is said to be descended from Tearakura's two sisters, Nau Ariki and Nau Pangatau, while the last traces its ancestry to Tavvakatai, Tearakura's youngest brother and the most junior member of the sibling set.

Men of the two senior clans are called maru (protectors, men of rank), and they act as executive officers and advisors to the chiefs. The two junior clans are not led by chiefs, and their members are called pakaaroa (commoners or pitiable persons). The maru are imbued with mana because of their association with the chiefs and their descent from prominent deities, and like the chiefs, they are expected to employ their mana to protect the pakaaroa, who lack the power to ensure their own wellbeing.

In addition to genealogical seniority, hierarchical relations are ordered on the basis of sex, age, and other evidence of mana. Male is superior to female; age is superior to youth; generational seniority confers superiority; as does physical strength, wisdom, one's position in the church, and so on.

The relationship between men and women replicates that between maru and pakaaroa: women are regarded as possessing little or no mana and are, therefore, dependent on men for protection and support. Similarly, children are lacking in mana, making them dependent on their elders. And in kin relations, members of senior generations must be respected by their juniors. On the other hand, mana must be demonstrated to be recognized, and should someone become senile or feeble with old age, his relationship with junior kinsmen is reversed.

Indices of rank, like rank itself, are typically Polynesian. This may be seen in the obedience and respect that people show to those above them in the social hierarchy. It may be observed in the quiet, humble demeanor that Anutans exhibit when in the company of superiors or the vicinity of a superior's abode. But it is most striking in the spatial metaphor in terms of which Anutans conceptualize and express social relationships.

Thus, mua (before, in front) is superior to muri (behind, in back); runga (up, on top) is superior to raro (down, below, on bottom); and maurunga (high) is superior to mauraro (low). For this reason, the senior chief is referred to as Te Ariki i Mua (The Chief in Front), and his junior colleague is Te Ariki i Muri (The Chief in Back). The leading clan is Te Kainanga i Mua (The Clan in Front), while the Kainanga i Pangatau, the third ranking clan, is sometimes called Te Kainanga i Muri (The Clan Behind) because it is said, unlike the other clans, to be descended not from a man but from a pair of women. The Bishop of Melanesia is known as te ariki maurunga o te rotu
(the high chief of the church), and the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific (the chief executive officer of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in 1972–73, during the period of my first investigation) was also te ariki maurunga.

Corresponding with the metaphorical use of height to convey ritual priority, the head is the most tapu (sacred) part of the body, so that one's head may not be touched by an inferior. The feet are given the lowest ritual esteem, demeaning anyone or anything toward whom they point. Leaders of the nonchiefly kainanga are referred to as pokouru (heads) of their respective clans; the leader of a patongia (elementary domestic unit) is often called te pokouru of his unit; and the senior male and female of each generation in a given domestic unit are termed the urumatua, or sometimes simply te uru, an abbreviated form of pokouru. The junior member of the most junior line is the lowest ranking individual, and termed te murimuri pakaoti (the last [one] in back).

Much behavior marking relationships among persons occupying divergent positions in the social hierarchy is informed by the front/back and high/low dichotomies. A chief's head should be higher than those of his subjects, and in particular, no one may stand in a chief's presence when the chief is seated. One should not turn one's back on a chief or social superior, so that in walking on a narrow path, the individual of highest honor walks in front, while those of lower rank follow behind. If one is seated with a chief inside a dwelling house and should decide to leave, one must crawl backwards, continuing to face the chief until outside. When a chief is seated outdoors with a group of other people, he is elevated physically and ritually by sitting on a mat, stone, coconut, or other object, while the rest of the assembly sits directly in the sand; and when a chief is leaving or returning to the island from overseas, he is carried to (or from) his vessel. He also may be carried as a token of special honor in various ceremonial situations.

When persons of approximately equal rank meet after a long absence, they typically press noses as a form of greeting. If the relationship is one of slight inequality, the inferior may press his nose to the superior's neck; while if the discrepancy is great—as in a commoner greeting a chief—the former presses his nose to the latter's foot or knee. Similarly, a common gesture of contrition involves crawling on hands and knees to the offended party and pressing one's nose to his knee as a token of submission. Should a social superior particularly wish to honor an inferior, on the other hand, this may be underscored by neutralizing or reversing many of these gestures of respect.

The east side of the island, the first to greet the sun each morning, is called matapenua (the face [i.e., front] of the island). The west side is muri penua (the rear portion of the island).

East is higher than (i.e., superior to) west, and all lands to Anuta's east are referred to as i runga (above). Those to the west are said to be below (i raro). To the east are the Polynesian islands, said to constitute Anuta's ancestral homelands, and the Europeans, whom Anutans consider to be the highest form of humanity because of their technology, their light skins which Polynesians value, and probably to a degree because they originally "descended" (ne ipo) to Anuta from the east ("above"). To the west are the Melanesian islands, said to be the home of the lowest human forms. On
Anuta itself, the easternmost *noporanga* (village) is known as Mua (Front); to the west is Muri (Rear).

As is true in many cultures, right is deemed superior to left, so that in formal situations when the two chiefs sit together, the Chief in Front is seated on the right while the Chief in Back sits to his senior partner's left. The right hand is known as *te nima atamai* or *nima matau*. *Atamai* means mind or meaning, and indicates that the right hand is the one, in a sense, that knows what it is doing; *matau* means hook, and this name suggests that the right hand is the one skilled enough to manipulate a fish hook. In accordance with this view, canoes are built with the outrigger on the port side, so that fishing must be done from starboard. The starboard side is called *te paai katea* or *paai pai ika* (fishing side), and the port is *te paai ama* (outrigger side). The left hand is known as *te nima tema*; *tema*, as far as I am aware, has no referent other than left. The left side of an object is *te paai tema*; the right side is *te paai matau*.

Figure 1. Symbolic Structure of the Anutan Dwelling House

![Diagram of Anutan Dwelling House]
Male is superior to female in both the political and ritual domains. Formal decision-making power is always in the hands of men. Women are not called by the title maru (protector, person of rank), regardless of the woman's clan affiliation. Nor do they have a right to speak at the pono, the general assembly of the island's population. Other things being equal, women must defer to men and obey their instructions. A woman may not touch a man's head without his permission, sit on his sleeping mat, use his headrest, or sit with her legs pointing toward a man. In church, the congregation is segregated according to sex, with men sitting on the right side of the aisle and women sitting on the left.

Ngatai (seaward) is superior to ngauta (landward, inland). Only men fish in the ocean beyond the fringing reef, while most garden work is done by women (Yen 1973). Both men and women fish on the reef flat.

On Anuta, as in Fiji (Hocart 1929:126; Sahlins 1976), all of these relationships may be observed in the symbolic structure of the dwelling house. The island is more or less circular, but houses are limited to an erratic line running from east to west along the southern shoreline. The buildings are rectangular, with doors at either end and on the inland side. The side facing the sea has no entranceway. It is the sacred side and place of honor. Only adult males may sit there, and in a chief's house, only the chief himself may occupy that spot.

The inland side of the house is called tuaumu (tua=back; umu=oven). Most houses have a fireplace for small scale cooking; and this is located at tuaumu, the profane side of the house. When women and children sit inside, they sit there. When lying in a house, a man must point his head toward mataapare and his feet toward tuaumu. A woman either lies in the same direction, with her head a little further from mataapare than her husband's or lies at right angles to him with her head pointing toward his feet (see Figure 1).

The overall integration of Anuta's symbolic dualism comes into focus if we visualize the island's two churches which, like the dwelling houses, are rectangular and situated in an east-west direction. The catechist, the head of the Anutan church, speaks from the pulpit in the front (the eastern end) of the church, while the congregation sits facing him. The men sit on the right side of the central aisle; the women on the left. Sitting in the congregation, one faces not only the catechist, but matapenua, the front of the island. To the right is mataapare and the ocean, the domain of male activity; to the left is tuaumu, inland, and all that is symbolically female. Figure 2 provides a summary of these pervasive oppositions.

**RANK ON NUKUMANU**

In principle, the same model of hierarchical relations as on Anuta is found on Nukumanu Atoll, a Polynesian outlier in eastern Papua New Guinea. Political authority and ritual honor constitute distinct but parallel ranking systems on Nukumanu. Chiefs are recognized, lay claim to their positions, and are regarded as superior to commoners on the basis of genealogical entitlement. As on Anuta, chiefs wield secular and (in precontact times) ritual authority. As on Anuta, age is superior to youth. Generational seniority confers respect and authority, as does genealogical nearness to a
chiefly line, and in many contexts, male is deemed superior to female. As on Anuta, social relationships are often expressed symbolically in spatial terms, and many of the same symbolic relationships are asserted. Yet, Nukumanu's ranking system appears in many ways attenuated, is less genealogically rigid, and the spatial symbolism is ambiguous in comparison with Anuta. This, I argue, may be understood in part because of the difficulties of thinking in terms of an essentially linear model of sociospatial relations in an atoll environment.

Figure 2. Anutan Sociospatial Oppositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPERIOR</th>
<th>INFERIOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>front</td>
<td>back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>east</td>
<td>west</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seaward</td>
<td>inland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right</td>
<td>left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sacred</td>
<td>profane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all likelihood, Nukumanu's ranking system for many generations has resembled that of Ontong Java, its nearest neighbor, which has been extensively described by Hogbin (1930a, 1930b, 1930c, 1931a, 1931b, 1932, 1961) and Bayliss-Smith (1974, 1975, 1982, n.d.), and reinterpreted by several commentators. Sahlins (1958) placed Ontong Java in his Group III, making it among the least stratified of Polynesian societies. Goldman (1970:408) characterized the atoll as "a simplified form of 'traditional society'"--the latter phrase referring to a system in which political power is based on sanctity deriving from genealogical rank. With the advent of a secular chief about 150 years ago (see below for discussion of a parallel event on Nukumanu), elements of what he called an open society were introduced, "but in a limited and formal sense only, for [the administrative chief] did not open up the avenues of power. . . to his followers" (1970:413).

In precontact times, it appears that Nukumanu men were divided into two major strata, chiefs and commoners. Chiefly titles include na aliki and te tuku. Nukumanu's aliki are analogous to Ontong Javanese ali'i or maakua, which Hogbin (1931a; 1961) glossed as priest. The word is cognate with the usual term for chief throughout Polynesia. In contrast with much of Polynesia, however, the Nukumanu's aliki's political authority appears to have been rather limited, and their primary role was religious. At present, not much is remembered about the aliki, their privileges, and duties. Informants disagree as to how many there were and who are their contemporary descendants. Assuming that they resembled Ontong Java's maakua, they most likely were the heads of important descent groups and presided over major community-wide rituals, performed for purposes of protection from disease, to secure good weather, to promote crop fertility, and ensure successful
fishing and overseas travel. There is no indication that they exercised stewardship over any but their own descent groups' lands, and one contemporary detractor dismissed their role as the equivalent of "doctors."

A second chiefly position is te tuku. This was essentially a secular or administrative chief; and according to at least one version of the atoll's history, the first tuku gained his position by force of arms within the past 150 years. The term tuku is cognate with Ontong Java's ku'u (Hogbin 1931; 1961), which Hogbin renders as king. In precontact times, it is uncertain which office was pre- eminent, if in fact the titles tuku and aliki could be ranked at all. However, with the establishment of the German New Guinea colony and Nukumanu's inclusion in "Queen Emma's" copra empire, a Roman Catholic mission was established on the atoll. Under the church's influence, traditional spirit houses (hale aitu) were destroyed and major collective rites were ended. Simultaneously, the administration, in collaboration with the company and mission, put an end to aliki titles, and the tuku, became the unequivocal paramount chief by default. Accordingly, the present tuku claims to command absolute obedience among his subjects, characterizing himself picturesquely as the atoll's "boss-king."

While aliki are no longer recognized, the office of tuku has been maintained to this day. He has few visible signs of rank. His clothing and dwelling are indistinguishable from those of any other Nukumanu, and he is not particularly wealthier than anyone else. Nor does his title have legal standing according to provincial or national statutes. However, he speaks first to open community- wide ceremonies, and he is expected to exercise moral leadership. For that reason, the present tuku was the first elected chairman of Nukumanu's community government, and when he finally stepped down amid some controversy, his position was taken over by his son.

Despite the tuku's considerable influence, the formal respect accorded Anutan chief's is strikingly absent on Nukumanu. People make little effort to step aside when meeting the tuku on a path, to keep themselves physically lower than the chief, to avoid turning their backs on him, or to speak in hushed tones when he is nearby. He participates in public works and domestic productive activity in essentially the same manner and to the same extent as any other man in his age group. In ordinary social intercourse, it is difficult to distinguish the tuku from anyone else.

The tuku's lack of special privilege was brought home to me rather pointedly when I had been on the atoll for a few weeks. I had been trying to arrange to be included on a fishing expedition, and one evening one of my neighbors approached to ask if I would like to join him for a night at sea. The weather was stormy, and he had been drinking fermented coconut toddy. Still, I agreed. Then, as we were preparing to leave, the tuku approached and asked what we were planning. When we told him, he became insistent that I not go.

The chief was (with some justification) concerned about my going to sea on a windy night with a man whom he described as vare (drunk). Yet, despite the tuku's strenuous protests, my partner went about his business, blithely ignoring his chief. I did not think it wise for me to disobey the chief's directives, and my companion quickly left to go off fishing by himself. I asked the chief about my erstwhile partner's apparent refusal to
obey him, to which he responded that the latter was a pikhet (big-head, arrogant), and vware. From his comments, I sensed that he felt this way about many of the young people.

After coming from Anuta, I was struck by this demonstration of disrespect for the paramount chief. There are, however, several ways in which the incident could be interpreted. 1) Political change resulting from years of European domination and new opportunities for young people to pursue nontraditional avenues of success may have undercut authority that chiefs did exercise during precontact times. 2) Normal rules of respect may have been suspended because both the chief and his subject had been drinking fairly heavily. 3) Personal antagonism between the chief and my companion could have overridden the latter's obligation to respect and obey the former. Or 4) the encounter might indicate a traditional lack of coercive power on the chief's part.

My inclination is to find merit in all but the third of these hypotheses. Clearly, changes have occurred that have undercut the ability of traditional chiefs to exercise coercive power. The first tuku was a warrior (toa), and he was surrounded by executive officers capable of enforcing his decisions. But this was a relatively recent and very short-lived period in Nukumanu history as colonial dominion was established during the reign of perhaps only the second tuku. Furthermore, according to informants, a general consensus emerged that killing was not an appropriate tool for enforcing one's decisions even prior to the advent of the German colony. Under normal circumstances, my companion and the chief were on excellent terms. They were fairly close relatives and mutual allies in the factionalism that has broken out on Nukumanu over recent decades. Still, the chief's coercive power—tenuous under the best of circumstances—was further undermined by the drinking that had transpired immediately prior to this episode.

The issue of toddy-drinking and its relevance for understanding Nukumanu social relations will be described below. Yet even when participants are sober, the chief's influence resembles that of the classical Melanesian Big Man more than the Tahitian, Tongan, or Hawaiian chief. Thus, on one occasion, a video film crew from the provincial Ministry of Cultural Affairs asked to record a dance. The community government, led by the tuku and vice-chairman, called a meeting and scheduled the event, but had to cancel it because of lack of interest. As one informant commented, "You can't tell people not to collect bèche-de-mer and prepare copra when the ship is scheduled to come within a few days."

Equally noteworthy here is the pattern of land disputes which, for some years prior to my study, had been disrupting atoll life. These disputes were either resolved by the parties themselves or taken to court. In most cases, this meant the local island court, but in a few instances matters were carried to the provincial land claims court on Bougainville. In a typical Polynesian high island chiefdom, the chief as paramount adjudicator and steward of all lands, would be unlikely to have to take such claims to court to have his way. Real disrespect toward the tuku is still believed to be punished supernaturally through the intervention of ancestral spirits, but this is true of parents, elders, or anyone else regarded as commanding of respect and is not distinctively a chiefly characteristic.
The egalitarian moment in Nukumanu culture is most readily apparent in toddy-drinking parties. Toddy, the sap of the coconut tree, is collected, used in cooking, and may also be fermented to form a moderately potent alcoholic beverage. The practice of fermenting toddy is said to have been introduced to Nukumanu in the early 1950s by a man from Pelau, Ontong Java, who had learned the art himself on Sikaiana in the Solomons. Kaleve (toddy) drinking quickly became a popular pastime among Nukumanu men, and today its production and consumption are part of the daily routine. Each day, at dawn and dusk, men climb their kaleve trees to collect the toddy and change receptacles. The liquid is placed in glass bottles or large glass fishing floats and allowed to ferment for two to four days. When sufficient quantities have been collected, it is consumed by men in groups ranging from three or four to well over a dozen. These sessions are marked by much singing, joking, and camaraderie. As inhibitions are erased by ethanol consumption, most of the respect and restraint that characterizes certain kin relationships or the relationship between ordinary men and chiefs also evaporates. People readily insult each other, get into arguments, and physical fights occasionally break out. Community leaders, and even appointed local constables become as much caught up in this atmosphere as anyone. Donner (1985) describes a similar pattern of toddy-drinking on another Polynesian outlier atoll; and he also perceives it as a device for maintaining a largely egalitarian system of social relations.

Below chiefs in the social order were pulepule, men who enforced chiefly decisions; today, they are compared to police officers. Unlike the maru of Anuta and Tikopia, matapule of Tonga, or tulafale of Samoa, however, there appear to have been no genealogical requirements for pulepule status; the tuku appointed as many or as few executive officers as he wished, drawing them from among his loyal supporters regardless of genealogical position. Presumably, through the pulepule, chiefs would have been able to exercise a considerable degree of secular power, but details of such power are impossible to reconstruct today.

In theory, age and genealogical seniority confer authority and honor. In practice, however, even this may be attenuated. In many interviews with two or more informants, the younger would disagree with the elder’s response to my questions. In those situations, the younger would not contradict the elder in the latter’s presence, even if the younger was himself well into middle age, married, with many children, and a well-respected member of the community. But as soon as the elder was out of earshot, the younger would give me some variant of the following speech:

I don’t know anything. He is a mature man, and I am just a child. A mere baby. I should not contradict him. He really should know better. I am embarrassed to say this, because it is not right. But neither is it right that you should be misinformed. The real answer to your question is. . . .

Genealogical seniority is more problematic. Sahlins (1958) and Goldman (1970) characterize Ontong Java as paying little or no attention to genealogical seniority as a basis for rank. On Nukumanu it is true that no attempt is made to place everyone into an overarching genealogical structure, as would be required by what Sahlins calls a ramage-type system. Nor is the
eldest son in a descent group always the successor to titles or stewardship of
the descent group’s lands. The present community government chairman,
thus, is the tuku’s second son, and the holder of the number two position is
the second male of his sibling set. Still, there is some feeling that for a
junior sibling to take precedence over a senior is more than slightly
inappropriate; and when this happens, it often produces considerable
resentment on the part of the elder.

Many Nukumanu keep track of their genealogies, often recording them in
notebooks. This is done primarily for use as evidence in land disputes. But
for that reason, different extended family groups and descent lines disagree
about each other’s genealogies. They often go to great lengths to keep their
versions of their genealogies secret from potential rival claimants. Often, an
informant who would readily provide me with his own genealogy refused to
tell me about anyone else’s. In several cases, my informant would assert that
he knew the other people’s genealogies better than they did, but for the sake
of peace, he would not correct his neighbors’ errors. However, if different
descent lines cannot agree on an official version of their respective
genealogies, the utility of genealogical seniority as a mechanism for
determining relative rank is seriously compromised.

The hierarchical character of male/female relations also is ambiguous on
Nukumanu. Male/female relations are more than a little strained (Feinberg
1986b), and men and women rarely have much to do with each other in
public settings. Most political offices are and have been held by males.
Coconut groves are either communally owned or controlled, worked, and
inherited by groups of brothers and their sons. Fishing is done almost
exclusively by males. And men, through their control of coconuts, along
with bèche-de-mer and trochus collecting, have more or less been able to
control the atoll’s cash economy. Still, in the traditional system, women
exercised a good deal of influence over social life, and they continue to be
independent-minded and assertive individuals.

Perhaps women’s most important base of power over the generations has
been their control of the Cyrtosperma ("swamp taro") gardens—along with
cocoanut, Nukumanu’s major source of dietary vegetable. As on Ontong Java,
Nukumanu’s swamps are owned, controlled, worked, and inherited by groups
of sisters, their daughters, and female matrilineal descendants.

The solidarity of this grouping was traditionally underscored by the
residence system. In the old village on the atoll’s main islet, residence was
uxorilocal, a tendency that can still be seen in household demographics.
Furthermore, groups of sisters, their daughters, and their mother used to
share cook-houses and co-operate in food preparation, on which their
husbands and unmarried brothers depended. With the advent of the cash
economy and availability of imported wheat flour and rice, the importance of
the Cyrtosperma swamps has declined, with the consequent reduction in
women’s control over social life. Still, Nukumanu women demonstrate time
and again their willingness to stand up to men. Indeed, the three Christian
churches currently operating on the atoll were introduced by women in the
face of strenuous male opposition (Feinberg 1986b).

Nukumanu life, then is permeated by sexual bifurcation and antagonism,
but without the kind of clear-cut rank distinction that one finds on Anuta.
In this respect, male/female relations perhaps typify the ranking system. As on Anuta, social relations are symbolically expressed in spatial terms, which at one level appear to be organized in terms of a hierarchically ordered set of binary oppositions. Yet, here again one finds ambiguities.

As on Anuta, Nukumanu men are associated with the sea; women with the inland area and gardens. With few exceptions, men have always been responsible for fishing and canoe-building. Interisland voyaging and dealing with outsiders have long been strongly marked as male activities. Women have been exclusively responsible for the Cyrtosperma and taro gardens, for plaiting mats and thatch, and, by and large, for cooking. When women go to sea, they are passengers traveling from one islet to another to work their gardens or to visit kin on Ontong Java. Men paddle, pole, control the sail, or steer.

With some modifications, this state of affairs has continued to the present; if anything, the dichotomy between the male and female worlds has been accentuated. Fishing and canoe-building remain essential tasks and are firmly in the male orbit. At feasts, men provide the fish, sea turtles, and other meat. Women harvest Cyrtosperma and prepare all food. The men then congregate on the lagoon side (tai) of the central corridor (lototonu); women gather on the inland side (tua, back). The tuku, community government leaders, and anyone intimately concerned with the occasion make introductory remarks. The men and women eat separately, from separate but similar piles of food that have been arranged on the respective sides of the central corridor. Young boys may eat on either side. Older boys eat with the men, and all girls with the women. Typically, the meal is eaten quickly and the gathering disbands; the men retire to one of the soa (club houses) to drink, and the women are left to clean up.

Again, in the economic sphere, the two most important income-producing activities--bêche-de-mer and trochus collection--are both performed at sea and are predominantly masculine endeavors. Men spend most of their waking hours on the sea, preparing to go to sea, or talking and singing about ocean voyages. An avoidable faux pas on the ocean is cause for extreme humiliation, and among the surest ways to provoke a fight is to impugn another's seamanship abilities.

In addition to the sea, a second focus has been added to the masculine world-view in the form of toddy-drinking. The importance of kaleve to Nukumanu men may be gauged by the fact that they continue to consume it in large quantities despite a host of dysfunctional consequences. Productive tasks are started late or cut short so that men can climb their trees or change receptacles. It is difficult to leave home for extended visits to the outer islets for purposes of fishing, or of trochus and bêche-de-mer collecting unless one has a trusted assistant to care for his kaleve tree during his absence from the village. Tremendous amounts of time, from the point of view of material production, are wasted during drinking parties. Trees tapped for toddy become unproductive for nuts. Kaleve-drinking is seen as the major cause of fights and of domestic quarrels between husbands and wives. Large numbers of court cases center around disputes involving kaleve, and many Nukumanu men cite toddy as the atoll's single most serious problem. Yet I never heard any male seriously suggest that toddy-drinking be prohibited. In fact, the
most responsible leaders of the community were among the most committed drinkers.

As in other parts of the Pacific (e.g., Marshall 1979), drinking is a masculine activity on Nukumanu. Women only drink at special celebrations like Christmas and New Year, when normal rules are suspended. And drinking usually occurs in places marked as singularly masculine. The most prominent of these are soa ("friend" houses): small, elevated, rectangular platforms, covered by a low roof and no walls. When not otherwise in use, the soa may be utilized by boys and teenaged youths for respite from the sun and as a place to gather to play cards or draughts; but its primary purpose is as a common drinking area for adult males. There are three soa: one at each end of the central corridor between the two main rows of dwelling houses, and one on the lagoon beach, toward the eastern end of the main village. The second characteristic area for drinking kaleve is one that symbolizes masculinity in perhaps its most unadulterated form: the areas where men cut canoes. These are along the lagoon beach to the east and west of the main village, and they are areas of focal symbolic significance. Canoe-cutting (taataa-vaka) is an exclusive male activity, associated with other male activities such as voyaging and fishing, and with the pre-eminently male domain of the sea. The most popular canoe-cutting area is just to the west of Amotu village, an area said to be watched over by an important pagan spirit and to be dangerous for women and children to enter.

From the above discussion, the following oppositions and equivalences are apparent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>male</th>
<th>female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fishing</td>
<td>gardening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sea</td>
<td>inland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tai (seaward)</td>
<td>uta (inland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tai (seaward)</td>
<td>tua (back)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further, as on Anuta, terms like mua (front), muli (rear), luna (upward), and lalo (downward) are used to indicate direction, occasionally with social implications. This system, however, is fraught with ambiguities, and thus used only inconsistently. In the following section, I demonstrate the manner in which these ambiguities are an inevitable consequence of a linear model being plotted onto an atoll's circular space.

LINEAR MODELS AND CIRCULAR SPACE: DUALISM IN AN ATOLL ENVIRONMENT

Although terms like front and back may designate social space on Nukumanu, they do so in a manner that differs from Anuta's system. This is illustrated by the designations of the two soa houses in the village's central corridor. The present village is located on Amotu islet, a narrow strip of coral sand extending two miles east to west. The village itself is about a quarter-mile in length and set on a section of the islet that broadens to a width of about 200 yards. The two main rows of dwelling houses run parallel to the coast on the lagoon side, with a central corridor, approximately
fifteen yards in width, between the two rows. Behind the second row and scattered in a more ragged fashion toward the ocean side are additional dwelling houses, cook-houses, and paamani (copra-drying sheds). The two central soa are located in the corridor, at opposite ends of the village, and are known as te soa i muli nei (the soa back here) and te soa i muli laa (the soa back there). Which soa is back here and which back there depends on where the speaker is standing. If one is at the east end of the village, the more easterly club house is back here and the most westerly back there. If one is standing to the west, this is reversed.

Figure 3. Amotu Village Plan

Similarly, horizontal space may be described as luna (up) and lalo (down), but these directions also vary, again depending on the speaker's location. In particular, the outer islets toward the main passage at the north end of the lagoon are designated as i lalo (below). Thus, when groups of Nukumanu spend several days on one of the outer islets collecting bêche-de-mer and trochus, it is said that they have gone to moe i lalo (sleep below). From Amotu on the atoll's southern rim, downward then is to the north, while from Vaihale, the traditional village site on the eastern perimeter, the downward islets are predominantly to the west.
From Amotu Village, all islets on northern end of atoll are na henua i lalo. Either end of a long narrow islet is te mata. (Based on North Solomons Provincial Government Map)

Such ambiguities in the cultural logic of a ranking system expressed as a set of hierarchically ordered and intricately articulated binary oppositions are intrinsic in atoll geography. This may be illustrated by the identification of men with the sea, which includes both the lagoon and ocean, and with t'ai, the lagoonward side of any islet. Women are associated with land (uta), inland activities (particularly cultivation of Cyrtosperma) and with tua (back), the side of an islet away from the lagoon. Yet, there is no absolute dividing line between t'ai and tua, and if one goes far enough "back" (ki tua), one eventually comes to the ocean, which is even more definitively a male domain than t'ai. And if one goes far enough toward t'ai, one crosses the lagoon, lands on another islet, and continues on toward tua. Thus, in a very real sense, t'ai and tua are interchangeable.

In contrast with Anuta, Nukumanu do not use mua (front) and muli (back) to indicate social precedence. In the same manner as t'ai and tua, mua and muli are interchangeable, so that what is in front in one situation is in back in another, depending on the speaker's point of reference. Thus, both soa
houses are *i muli* (in back), the only difference being that one is here and one is there. Nor, in contrast with Anuta, does the island have a "front" or "back" (cf. ANU: *matapenua* [front of the island, face of the island]; *muri penua* [back of the island]). Nukumanu use the word *mata*, but it means something more like end. Either end of any islet, then, is called *te mata*.

If one considers that Nukumanu consists of a ring of islets surrounding a more or less circular lagoon, this situation makes a great deal of sense. After all, a circle has no beginning or end, no front or back. If one begins at any point on the circumference and walks forward, one eventually returns to the starting point, approaching it from behind. Thus, the position of anything on the perimeter of a circle depends on its relation to the speaker, his position, and his frame of reference. The structural ambiguity imposed by atoll geography is also seen in the contrast between Nukumanu and Anutan house plans and canoe design.

Figure 5. Nukumanu House Plan
Nukumanu houses, like those on Anuta, are more or less rectangular, with a door at each end; but they sit perpendicular rather than parallel to the shore line. There is no door on either of the long sides. As on Anuta, the seaward (actually, this is lagoonward, but termed i tai; cf. ANU: ngatai) portion of a house is termed matahale (cf. ANU: mataapare). The inland or oceanward end, however, is also matahale: matahale i tua as opposed to matahale i tai. If one translates mata, as I have in the Anutan case, as meaning face, these terms mean something like lagoonward face and rear face. Again, the connotation approximates end more closely than front.

Nor do people sleep with heads pointing toward the lagoon. Rather, husband and wife sleep next to each other with their heads about even and pointing toward the center of the house while feet point toward one of the long, doorless walls. As a result, if someone should walk in while one is resting, one's head becomes juxtaposed to the intruder's feet. In Anutan terms such an event would be a ritual insult, utterly demeaning for the person lying on the floor. The Nukumanu, on the other hand, are less concerned about the ritual significance of their positioning and explain it in what they perceive to be practical terms: one sleeps with one's head strategically positioned to ward off nocturnal intruders coming in from either door.

The interchangeability of front and back, and up and down may once again be seen in the surprising lack of sanctity associated with the head. One does not take pains to avoid placing one's self physically above a social superior. Nukumanu deny that the head is tapu, and as if to underscore this point, adults sometimes carry children on their shoulders while the riders hold onto their bearers' hair for support. Standard procedure on Anuta, as in much of Polynesia, is for children to ride on elder's backs, with arms around their bearers' chests or necks in such a way as to avoid placing their own heads higher than the adults' and to avoid physical contact with an adult's head. Similarly, Nukumanu houses are built with plenty of head room, and doors are sufficiently high that people may enter erect or stooping only slightly. Inside the house, people are not expected to crawl, but once again, to walk erect. Nor is it a sign of disrespect to position one's self with one's legs or feet near another person's head.

Finally, the interchangeability of back and front may be seen in canoe design. Anutan canoes, like those in use throughout the "Polynesian Triangle," have fixed bow (mataavaka, canoe face) and stern (taumuri). The outrigger is always to the port side of the vessel regardless of tack; indeed, port is called te paai ama (outrigger side). Nukumanu canoes, on the other hand, like those of Micronesia and the other Polynesian outlier atolls, are built with interchangeable bows and sterns. Both ends are called matavaka. The forward end is te matavaka i mua (canoe face in front or front end), and the rear end te matavaka i muli (canoe face in back). When the canoe is travelling on the opposite tack, these designations are reversed. The outrigger is always kept to windward, with no concern as to whether it is to port or starboard. To change tack, the mast is moved to the opposite end of the canoe. The old stern becomes the new bow; the old bow becomes the new stern; starboard becomes port; and port starboard.
Once I described to the leading Anutan navigators the atoll system of building canoes with interchangeable bow and stern and moveable mast and sail, and I explained the advantage of always being able to keep the outrigger upwind to avoid the danger of submerging the float, should the canoe heel over in a stiff breeze. After a few weak objections, my informants admitted that there were some clear advantages to such a system but insisted that it would never be considered on Anuta. The only reason they advanced was custom. Yet, these very same informants over the past 30 years had introduced a host of radical innovations in canoe design and sailing technique (Feinberg 1988). Thus, the problem was not innovation in and of itself. Rather, resistance appears to be derived from the implicit threat that such a system would compromise the Anutans' clearly articulated, systematic, unambiguous binary world-view. By contrast, the Nukumanu system meshes perfectly with the relativistic orientation that inherently emerges from attempting to impose an Anutan-like model on a circular environment.

CONCLUSION

The notion of relativism in Polynesian social relations has been cited by other observers, as has the binary model into which Polynesian relativism typically is made to fit. Thus in all Polynesian communities, high and low, good and bad, senior and junior, or front and back are relative and context-specific. B may be senior (even chiefly) with respect to A, but junior, commonor, or even relatively worthless in comparison with C. In this sense, Anuta's binary system of social and moral relativism is imposed on a complex reality. But while Nukumanu incorporates the same symbolic oppositions into a relativistic social and moral system, the nature of Nukumanu's relativism is different from Anuta's. By imposing a binary logic onto a circular space, a system of social relations is created in which not only is B superior to A and inferior to C, but depending on one's starting point and orientation, that same B equally may be inferior to A and superior to C. Just as the ends of a house or bow and stern of a canoe are interchangeable, so in a sense are people with respect to one another.

None of what has been said here need conflict with other views of Polynesian rank. Historical accident and cultural diffusion, associated with voyages of exploration and conquest, undoubtedly are salient. Similarly, such factors as productivity, diversity of resources, and the role of chiefs in redistributive processes (Sahlins 1958); the stresses of population pressure and resource depletion (Kirch 1983); or a tendency for aristocratic political systems to evolve from "traditional" to "open" to "stratified" types (Goldman 1970) may all be relevant. To tease apart these many strands and explore their complex interaction is a larger project, well beyond the scope of the present contribution. Here I only hope to call attention to a line of thought that constitutes one fragment of the larger picture.

According to that line of thought, whatever demographic, ecological, or economic pressures bear on a community, people live in a world of cultural significance as well as practical necessity, and social relations are always shaped by a dialectical give-and-take between the two. In this light, I here suggest a common Polynesian structure of symbolic elements and show the
cultural logic by which such a structure may lend itself to highly crystalized, clear-cut ranking systems on volcanic islands while the same symbolic structures lead to an ambiguous ranking system with a strongly egalitarian bent when adapted to the geographical exigencies of atoll life.

NOTES

1. Research on which this article is based was conducted in the Solomon Islands in 1972-73 and 1983, and Papua New Guinea in 1984. Sponsors include the U.S. Public Health Service via an NIMH Graduate Student Training Grant administered by the University of Chicago's Department of Anthropology; and Kent State University's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. Preliminary versions of this article were presented at the 1987 meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania and the American Anthropological Association.

2. Thus, Goldman's (1970) discussion of the importance of status rivalry in shaping Polynesian ranking systems is explicitly put forth as an alternative to Sahlin's ecological hypothesis. Similarly, Kirch (1983), largely on the basis of archaeological evidence, presents an ecological interpretation of the development of Polynesian chiefdoms that differs in many particulars from Sahlin's model but is nonetheless indebted to it. For a suggestion that atoll environments may be far more productive than commonly imagined, see Bayliss-Smith (n.d.).

3. Anutan houses are built low to the ground. Doorways are rarely more than 2-1/2 feet in height, and once inside, one crawls about on hands and knees. To stand in someone else's house is regarded as a sign of disrespect to the owner.

4. In some earlier publications, I misrendered the word for side as pa1; the correct spelling, as indicated here, should be pa1i.

5. Elsewhere (e.g., Feinberg 1986), I have spelled aliki, hale, and a number of other Nukumanu words with an /r/ rather than an /I/. Although Nukumanu pronunciation of these words more closely resembles the English /r/ than /l/, the two sounds in NKM are not phonemically distinct. Therefore, I have followed here the orthographic convention established for most of the Polynesian outlier atolls and represent the phone consistently as /1/ regardless of actual pronunciation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


1930c. Spirits and the Healing of the Sick on Ontong Java. Oceania 1:146-166.


1961. Law and Order in Polynesia. (Original 1934). Hamden, CT.


