ISLANDS IN HISTORY: HISTORICAL, ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ISLAND LANDSCAPES

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Discussant's comments

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OVER 20 YEARS AGO, Jeff Clark and I dipped our oars in the waters of the *Annual Review of Anthropology* and—guided by stars and sea swells—we charted a course to a distant archipelago called "Islands as Laboratories" in a review paper called "Archaeology in Oceania" (Clark and Terrell 1978).

FADS AND FASHIONS COME AND GO. Two decades is a fairly long time. I cannot speak today for Jeff Clark. I can tell you one thing. I have learned much since then. But my canoe is still headed in that same direction (Terrell 1997).

GIVEN HOW CHOPPY THE WATERS of modern post-modernism have recently been —and how obscured the stars—this admission may surprise you. My continued resolve, therefore, needs explanation, although the papers in this symposium have already spoken well for this kind of voyage.

What is an Island?

IT MAY BE TRUE, as the poet says, that "no man is an island entire unto itself." But this begs the issue. What is an island?

WHAT MAKES ISLANDS WHAT THEY ARE is that they are *living spaces* (*habitats) surrounded by radical shifts in habitat*—so radical that (1) few kinds of plants and animals are able to live for long in more than one of these radically different habitats; and (2) therefore, we must pay careful attention not only to what these habitat islands are like at any one moment, but also to *how* and *how often* what is living there (plants, animals, and humans) comes and goes.

THIS IS, of course, basic island biogeography.

But Are Islands Special?

IF WE AGREE that islands are *habitats surrounded by radical shifts in habitat*, then islands offer us much.

1. WE MAY USE THIS PROPERTY that we are calling "a radical shift in habitat" to determine the boundaries of "our places to study" rather than, say, using more artificial parameters such as latitude, longitude, or the dimensions of an arbitrary "sampling grid."

2. "ISLANDNESS" may thus be seen as a *common property of life*—not as a special property of unusual places.

3. SEEN THIS WAY—contrary to what that poet tells us—all men *are* islands. So too, are berry bushes in a cow pasture; cow pastures beside Interstate 90; cornfields great and small; and so on. All are "islands" since the world, as ecologists say, is "patchy." Again, this is basic biogeography.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THIS "PATCHINESS" is one way to "get our arms around" earth's diversity. In sum, islands aren't special because of *what they are*; they are just *neat places to talk about.*

But How Should We Talk about Islands?

THERE ARE MANY WAYS to talk about islands. One way has been often used. As the papers in this symposium make abundantly clear, however, there is another way.

THE POPULAR WAY of talking about islands is to treat them as if they were "isolates." This is a useful simplification since we can thereby treat any island as "a unit of study" in its own right. We can then compare and contrast different islands and island societies to see how different they are.

YET AS JOHN ROBB SAYS, it is likely that the presumed isolation of Malta reflects how archaeologists have been looking at Malta—in isolation from its regional context—more than any quality that the tiny Maltese archipelago itself may be said to possess.

RODRIGUES ADDS the extremely important observation that the notion that people come "packaged" as different bounded cultural entities or units called *tribes*,

societies, *ethnolinguistic groups*, *races*, and the like is not unique to how we think about islands. What Alexander Lesser (1961) called the "myth of the primitive isolate" is alive and kicking, and not just in colorful pamphlets about islands in travel agents' offices.

MANY ANTHROPOLOGISTS ARE QUICK TO SAY "we don't think about people that way anymore." Yeah, sure, maybe.

IN A FAMOUS ESSAY published a number of years ago, the late Sir Edmund Leach (1961) disparaged the kind of anthropology that the islands-as-isolates notion easily leads to as *butterfly collecting*—"the arrangement of things according to their types and subtypes" (1961:2).

IF OUR TASK, as Leach argued, is to understand what is happening in different societies and "how societies work," then calling islands isolates so that we can use them as our units of study can be intellectually hazardous.

THIS WAY OF LOOKING AT ISLANDS may lead us to treat island societies, too, as if they could be explained by the traits that we have used—as Holly discusses—to characterize or classify the islands they are living on. As Leach cautioned, then it's easy to be fooled—to generalize too broadly, to exaggerate the causal or historical significance of the particular traits, features, or "parts" that appear to be prominent ***within*** the "units of study" that we happen to be familiar with.

LEACH ARGUED, FOR INSTANCE, that Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski were both anthropological butterfly collectors who "took as their starting point the notion that a culture or society is an empirical whole made up of a limited number of readily

identifiable parts and that when we compare two societies we are concerned to see whether or not the same kinds of parts are present in both cases" (1961:6).

A "PARTS" APPROACH to islands is not necessarily bad. To use it, we don't even have to treat islands as isolates. By counting traits such as pottery types, for example, we can weigh how much the material culture inventories of different islands, communities, or prehistoric sites is the sum of both local production and foreign import. You can turn this information into matrices with rows for different products—say, pots, bows & arrows, and fish traps—and columns for different units of study. As we have found on the Sepik coast of Papua New Guinea, the results can be very revealing—and controversial (see: Welsch et al. 1992).

BUT AS LEACH WARNED, this classificatory approach to our human diversity may lead us to think that "the explanation" for the differences we find between islands (and societies) should be sought *within* these units of study rather than *between* them. To assume, for example, that some societies must be more "hierarchical" because their islands are bigger, higher, have richer resources, more resource zones, and so on. Which may be true, but not necessarily so.

LUCKILY ANTHROPOLOGICAL BUTTERFLY COLLECTING is not the only approach we can use. We can, for instance, use islands simply as "reference points." And then we can look not only at what's "on them," so to speak, but also at what's happening "between them."

SO RATHER THAN THINKING of islands as little boxes (i.e., units of study) that nature and human artifice have variously filled with differing parts or traits that we may compare and contrast, we can think of them instead as (often quite enduring) reference points on the earth's surface. However much islands surrounded by sea may come and go geologically as sea levels rise and fall, continents drift, and volcanoes erupt, they can often be used *as enduring reference points in human history.*

Social Fields of Interaction

USING THESE REFERENCES POINTS we can "step back" from the details of any one island to consider them not just one by one, but collectively. And then we can try to follow the construction, alteration, and transformation of the broader, wider social fields that people have historically created that include other people "outside" their immediate, face-to-face lives, communities, and islands.

THE RELATIVE STABILITY of these spatially (i.e., geographically) structured fields of islands over time means that we can watch comings & goings, influences & activities, givings & takings between people here, there, and elsewhere down through history in ways that may be difficult to achieve on larger continental landforms (in part because the "habitat islands" comprising continental landscapes may not be as enduring as islands defined by the waters around them).

AS PETER LAPE SAYS, there is no necessary correspondence between the geographical boundaries of islands and the social boundaries of island societies. We should not assume that the defining features of island societies are their remoteness and

isolation from one another rather than their *interconnectedness and resilience* (Terrell 1998; Welsch and Terrell 1998).

I ALSO COULDN'T AGREE MORE with Peter that anthropology currently lacks the language and models we need to deal effectively with these encompassing social fields of interconnectedness. Witness the continuing reliance in human genetics on phylogenetic ("tree") models when no less an expert than Cavalli-Sforza says we need reticulated algorithms instead (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994).

I ALSO THINK ANDREW CROSBY is right when he observes that we lack a decent body of suitable theory. We can talk all we want about the failings of existing ideas about islands. But until we have a more persuasive story to tell, people aren't necessarily going to listen—and, unfortunately, I am not just talking about people *outside* the profession (here, however, I promised myself that I wouldn't say a single word about what some are saying these days about "the 9 base-pair deletion" in the Pacific . . .).

THE PAPERS IN THIS SYMPOSIUM argue strongly for how important it is for us to start off on the right foot when we go looking for better theory. I think Crosby's on to something with his model for Fiji & Western Polynesia. His model, however, sees "contact" more as a kind of Carl Sagan event that in itself can precipitate change—and our "body of suitable theory" will have to cover situations where contact is *not* unusual and shocking; that is, where contact is a more natural feature of life on islands—for example, the kinds of situations we have been exploring on the Sepik coast of New Guinea (Terrell 1998).

BUT AS PETER USTINOV SAYS in that delightful old children's video "Barbar the Elephant"—"It will come, it will come."

So What?

DONALD HOLLY ARGUES that islands are normally seen as places without history because they are seen as isolated, marginal places "that time forgot." And for us, interaction is an essential ingredient of history. "Without interaction with other groups, so the logic goes, history [does] not happen."

I THINK HE IS RIGHT, but not quite for the logic he offers. It is not that we actually think islands are places *without* history. But we think they have *a different kind of history*. As Moyer's paper so graphically explores, we see islands as places where people are less likely to be the agents of their own fate.

I ALSO THINK that we are likely to see islands as not just marginal and isolated places, but also as *more natural* places than continents. We have all heard the story about how Governor Peter Minuit of New Netherland supposedly bought Manhattan Island "from the Indians" in 1626 for beads, cloth, and trinkets worth $24.00. This is a classic tale about "a turning point" in the civilization of America when World History broke through the isolation of "the Indians" and ended the old order of the New World forever—a turning point when Nature began to give way to History.

MY THESIS that there is not just "history" and "ahistory," but different kinds of history brings me to a kind of history that may sound like it is coming in here out of left

field—*Darwinism*. The essence of Charles Darwin's vision of history (or of "evolution," if you prefer that label for Darwin's kind of history) is that he wanted to replace our belief in a single Creative Act by a Divine Agent with rational acceptance of creation instead as an on-going, continuous process (Natural Selection) that does not require even the continuous intervention of a Divine Agent.

SINCE THE 1950s, I think it is this kind of history that has often been the kind of history that anthropologists and archaeologists have sought in the islands of the world.

DARWIN'S KIND OF HISTORY requires neither God nor Man as an agent of change.

THE IRONY OF CURRENT EFFORTS to bring Darwinism yet again into anthropology (e.g., sociobiology, evolutionary psychology) and archaeology (e.g."Evolutionary Theory") is that many of those advocating for the explanatory power of Darwinian Natural Selection as the principle agent of change in world history seem to forget that Darwin drew much of his own inspiration for natural selection from *artificial selection*—i.e., from intentional acts of human intervention in the biology of other species. Some, in fact, see the denial of human intention as the *sine qua non* of "true Darwinism."

I WOULD ARGUE, however, that it is really hard to deny the role of human agency and intention in the history of continents. How Caesar became the undisputed master of the Roman world cannot readily be explained as the blind consequence of Natural Selection.

UNFORTUNATELY, NOT SO WITH ISLANDS. I would argue for a case I know fairly well that it is the denial of human agency—rather than the denial of history—that has been a guiding motif of anthropology and archaeology in the Pacific since World War II.

DARWIN FAVORED the historical linguist's image of the "language family tree" (Alter 1999) as a way of depicting, or encoding, his vision of history as a continuously creative process directed by the blind forces of Nature (and Chance).

PACIFIC EXPERTS DELIGHT in telling you that their discoveries since World War II have given the Pacific Islanders the history they lost because their ancestors did not know how to write it down. But the kind of history experts have been writing for the Pacific Islanders has been "a different kind of history" than the history of Plymouth Rock or Manhattan.

THE HOLY GRAIL OF PACIFIC STUDIES has been the True Origins of the Polynesians, not history as most of us see it for ourselves.

EVEN WITHOUT DIRECTLY INVOKING DARWIN, many see the search for human history in the Pacific before the time of Capt. Cook as a kind of human paleontology—a cultural paleontology—capable of showing us how the history of the islanders is the cumulative record of locally occurring changes, island by island, that have driven these island societies to diverge from one another because of their isolation and because of Nature's demands that people must change to keep up with change itself—or die (Terrell et al. 1997).

THIS VIEW OF HISTORY sees historical change either as a series of random happenings (an explanation many historical linguists favor) or as something the Pacific Islanders have had to "adapted to"—that is, as a process of "conform or die" adaptation to the natural confinement, ecological demands, and resource variability of their "impoverished island ecosystems" (Terrell 1986:177-179).

THIS VIEW OF "ISLANDS IN HISTORY" effectively denies the essence of Darwin's vision of history as *a continuously creative process*. The emphasis on cultural origins that has been so characteristic of much of archaeology, historical linguistics, and physical anthropology in the Pacific since the 1950s is almost Biblical in its insistence that we should see the history of these islanders as an upshot of an *ancient creative event* elsewhere in the world. Not in the Garden of Eden, perhaps. But certainly not in the islands, either. According to many today, the miraculously creative "Big Bang" that ultimately precipitated Pacific Islands prehistory went off somewhere in Asia. And became manifest, many say, through "the development of agriculture" somewhere in China long, long ago.

BUT I STILL CONTEND that the history of the Pacific Islanders is *not* a history of their origins in Asia or anywhere else. And this is why I am still convinced that we can learn much from knowing more about the interconnectedness of islands in history.

LIKE DARWIN, I see history as a continuously creative process. How much of what has happened in history can be attributed to naturally creative processes such as Natural Selection, and how much can be attributed to humanly creative processes such as Artificial Selection is moot, as far as I can see.

BUT HERE'S WHERE ISLANDS and research on islands can make a difference. I sometimes fear that evidence no longer makes any difference. But if it does, then I would argue:

1. SINCE ISLANDS LOOK SO ISOLATED, and

2. SINCE IT IS EASY FOR US TO IMAGINE that people traveling back & forth between islands have been driven by intentions, purposes, goals, and strategies

3. THEREFORE, BASIC RESEARCH ON ISLANDS that documents ***the entanglement of island societies with one another (and with the world beyond) down through history*** may yet help us fulfill both Darwin's vision of world history as a continuously creative process, and also our own sense of history as a story of human activities, artifice, and creativity.