An Ethnopsychological Perspective on Migration: A Small Island Example.

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Introduction

In this paper I consider changes in the cultural understandings of the self associated with the process of migration. I draw on ethnographic research in the Western Pacific to suggest that such changes are an important, if subtle, consequence of migration and, further, that they help to explain the shape of the migrant's subsequent experience. In tracing out this picture I use a model of social life and history loosely drawn from chaos theory. In particular, I focus on socio-cultural phenomena as complex, non-linear, and self-organized systems which exhibit extreme sensitivity to initial conditions and, at times, fractal replication.[1]

"Ethnopsychology" refers to both a field of study and that which it studies. The field of study mostly lies within cultural anthropology; the object of study is the domain of local knowledge containing the ideas, beliefs, values, and assumptions that make up culturally constituted knowledge of the self. Sometimes this domain is referred to as folk psychology. As a cultural domain it is shared in more or less greater degree by members of a social group. In a well worn cliché, which as a metaphor is highly revealing of the intense focus of our own culture on the human/machine interface, it is often said that folk psychology is a people's ideas about what makes people tick.

The field of ethnopsychology is not to be confused with the study of actual psychological states and processes. Indeed, the question of how best to understand the relationship between culturally constituted ideas about the self (folk psychology) and the subject matter of academic psychological science (i.e., motivation, affect, perception, and cognition) is highly contested, to say the least. What can be said, though, is that among all domains of cultural knowledge, folk psychology is perhaps most deeply involved in the generation and interpretation of behavior. Because people use it to answer that all important question: What is Going On? (i.e., what is happening within themselves and within others as well as between themselves and others), it is an important, if often overlooked, constituent of their behavior and especially of their interpretation of behavior.[2]

Folk psychology, like the contents of all cultural domains, is complexly related to its environment, both social and physical. Briefly, it is a response to the cognized environment as well as being an important influence on how people respond to that environment And, as people move from an old environment to a new, the culturally constituted understandings about the self they carry with them can become less and less convincing. As that occurs, the contents of the domain begin to shift in a kind of adaptive process that is so far poorly understood.

The Pacific as a Site of Migration

Several important patterns are evident in the history of Pacific islanders.[3] All have a deep history of migration, often enshrined in myth and legend. Prehistoric peoples moved out of Southeast and North Asia, and notwithstanding the vast distances between one island group and the next, gradually settled all habitable places in the vast Pacific, the largest single surface feature of our planet. In many ways, then, it makes sense to view the prehistoric Pacific as a kind of "oceanic continent," constantly being crossed and re-crossed by soon to be indigenous voyagers sailing from one island to another. These people can be seen as inhabitants of the ocean almost as much as of their islands.

A more recent pattern emerged at different times in the 20th century in different parts of the Pacific and was well established just about everywhere by two or three decades ago. Many of the smaller, more isolated islands have been progressively abandoned as more and more of their people have moved into urban centers and then on to the cities and nations of the Pacific rim and beyond. The vast majority of the residents of more than one Pacific island nation are living in a single port city, while the majority of its citizens live overseas. This depopulation of "rural" areas, shares much in common with the world wide phenomenon of the emptying out of villages.

Finally, there has been an increasing movement of people into the Pacific region. Beginning with contract plantation labor in the 19th century and continuing today, people have arrived in the insular Pacific for a variety of economic reasons. Mostly from Asia, this process has led to substantial non-

native populations in many Pacific island nations.[4] All these processes can be seen at play in the Republic of Palau and in the lives of the Tobi Islanders of Palau, whose ethnography provides the substance of this paper.

Tobi Islanders

About 600 years ago, in what may very well have been the last stage in the great prehistoric human migration into the unoccupied Pacific, people from islands far to the east arrived at the uninhabited island of Tobi in the southwest corner of what is now the Republic of Palau. There they lived until just a few decades ago, when they moved yet again, this time north to the port town of Koror, former capital of Palau. The vast majority of the residents of the Republic (over half of whom were not born in Palau and do not even have Pacific island ancestry) live in Koror. At the same time, a very high percentage of Palauans live overseas, in places like Guam, Hawaii, California, and Oklahoma. Tobians are no exception.

Sometimes a migration can be as much a movement in time as in space. Tobians moving to Koror, for example, left behind an adaptation which still contained many features characteristic of their neolithic, pre-contact subsistence fishing and gardening way of life–a way of life in which the most complex tools were outrigger canoes, hand carved out of logs. A few days journey by ship north to Palau brought them to a place of wage employment, government bureaucracies, commercial enterprises; a place, unlike Tobi, mechanized, electrified, and plumbed. This was a world that required them to rethink some of their most fundamental assumptions about what it means to be a person, to find new ways of dealing with conflict, and to recast their political life.

The small, remote, and isolated coral island of Tobi was home to about 60 people in the late 1960s. Fishermen and gardeners, they produced a small amount of copra for export, the proceeds from which were used to purchase those few items which could not be made locally. Organized into a remarkably egalitarian kin-based society, their economy was based on only the most elementary division of labor and was characterized by an extreme form of generalized reciprocity. Lacking any formal mechanisms of conflict management,

and practicing an adaptation which required constant island-wide collaboration in important subsistence activities, their culture showed remarkable continuities from their pre-contact past, despite the preceding 50 years of colonial rule and conversion to Christianity.

By 2007 Tobians were living a very different life, one based on wage employment in an urban setting. Unlike their previous isolation, they were now encapsulated within a larger society in which they found themselves increasingly coming to play the role of a disenfranchised minority group. Among the significant changes in their social environment were bureaucracies, schooling in two foreign languages (Palauan and English), and strangers.[5]

Tobian Folk Psychology Then and Now

The following discussion of Tobian ideas about the person at two different times in their history is drawn from the cultural analysis of Tobian discourse, especially statements about action. Speculation about past, current or future actions of the self or the other necessarily draw on assumptions about human psychology. Such assumptions are usually not part of ordinary consciousness and thus not completely accessible to the observer. Yet when the action in question is both problematic and important, those assumptions are more likely to be made explicit. For this reason, case studies of disputes and other troubles of various kinds yield rich evidence of folk psychology. Of course, it goes without saying that all my interpretations of the meaning of such evidence are only tentative and subject to revision.[6]

Prior to their migration to Koror, Tobians seem to have believed that the interior life of others (especially motivation) was essentially unfathomable. Two internal states, shame and fear, were both positively valued, since it was the fear of public shame that was believed to produce compliance with social norms. Intelligence was seen to be multifaceted, with the highest valued intelligence being something we could call “social intelligence,” defined as the ability to generate a good public mood in any gathering. Another kind of intelligence, thought to be the special trait of mature men, was the intelligence necessary to achieve long-term ends without disrupting social relations. But the highest valued

trait, again thought to be the exclusive property of adult men, was the ability to control any direct expression of anger. This ability, in turn, rested on the mature acceptance of the price of public shame, which in extreme cases was suicide. A mature man was smart enough and strong enough not to give vent to anger or rage, since so doing was intensely shaming and thus life threatening. Emotions, or at least the words for emotions, referred much more to the state of relations between people than to internal sensations. Happiness was defined as "when our sister brings us food," for example. Identity was construed largely on family grounds, and could be acquired by taking part in the activities of the family, especially producing and consuming food from land owned by the family. Tobian identity, in this sense, did not require Tobian ancestry, and could be marked by such acquired membership in a Tobian family along with the ability to speak Tobian and, less importantly, residence on the island.

This necessarily abbreviated and simplified sketch of what I call neo-traditional Tobian folk psychology shows a system of ideas about the person which was highly congruent with the sociology of the Tobians when they were living on their remote home island. No political hierarchy to speak of meant no police, no judges, and no formal mechanisms of social control or dispute resolution. The island-wide cooperation and sharing so necessary for their survival, constant and pervasive even between people who despised each other, played out day after day, year after year, in an atmosphere almost always marked by song and laugher, cheerfulness, and jokes. Relationships were all important; the individual was not culturally highlighted at all. And then the Tobians moved to Koror.

In 2007 people seemed much more conscious of themselves as Tobians, while at the same time they were much more focused on the individual and his or her experience than they were on that of the family or the group. Heightened individualism emerges in the kinds of ghosts which people see, in the way they talk about love and family life, and in their talk about emotions in general. The rise of Tobian group identity can be seen in political discussions, especially in their attempt to come to terms with the larger, multicultural community, in which

they are now rather uncomfortably embedded. There is a kind of paradox in all this. While people were much more focused on Tobian-ness as an aspect of identity, they were much less involved in group-wide cooperation.

By 2007 a very dramatic change in the basis for Tobian identity was occurring. No longer was the sharing of food produced from group-owned land a way of “becoming Tobian.” Instead the talk was all of blood and ancestry and whether or not one could trace a matrilineal line back to the ancestress of the island, thus establishing membership in one of the matrilineal clans which made up ancient Tobian society. Other components of identity and thus of social roles were related to various documents produced by church, government, or other authorities, and to a kind of fetish-ization of “custom” and “tradition.” If all this sounds relatively familiar, it may be because it is part of a process which can be called the rise of ethnicity within the context of the state; a process in which shared blood means shared identity and in which custom defines a people.

Of course continuities remained in the ideas Tobians used to talk about themselves and others. Shame and the role of gossip in its production, social intelligence and its high value in any and all circumstances, are two of the most important things they brought with them to Koror and have continued to teach their children. But the connection between rage, shame, and suicide had been largely eliminated, mostly by alcohol, and the children being raised in Koror were talking about people in a remarkably different way than their parents and grandparents were when I first came to know them 40 years ago.[7]

Conclusions

As migration theory shifts from the classical push pull model, in which people are represented as more or less the same as those postulated by neo-classical economics, to models in which human agency is made central to our understanding, it makes sense to turn to the local ideas about human agency, i.e., folk psychology.[8] For it is just those ideas that may form that initial condition, like the famous butterfly in the Amazon, that sets in motion a complexly organized process leading to a dramatic end point, some time and distance away.

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Notes

[1] From its prefiguring in Gregory Bateson's classic experimental ethnography (1936) through the work of such scholars as Marilyn Strathern (1991), Roy Wagner (2001) , Marshall Sahlins (2004), and now Mark Mosko and Fred Damon's recent book (2005), chaos theory has a substantial lineage in the anthropology of the Pacific.

[2] For folk psychology see Hollan (1992), Kusserow (1996), and especially the essays in White and Kirkpatrick (1985).

[3] See McCall 2006.

[4] For an overview of migration in the Pacific see the articles in Ferro and Wallner (2006). For two very revealing case studies see Andrew Arno's work on the Indians of Fiji (1993) and Mac Marshall's Namuluk Beyond the Reef (2004), an ethnography of a Micronesian diaspora.

[5] Tobi is called Hatohobei in its native language. I use the English name for the island and its people when writing in English. For more on Tobian culture and history see Friends of Tobi Island website http://www.friendsoftobi.org/. For a capsule description of important social and cultural changes associated with the migration to Koror, see Black (2000).

[6] Tobian ethnopsychology and methods for its study are described in several of my papers, especially Black (1978, 1982, 1983, and 1985).

[7] Briefly, alcohol has come to be a defense against shaming. People say and do things while drunk which ordinarily would bring great shame, but in the context of their new lives in Palau, drunkenness holds them blameless and thus shameless.

[8] On this point see especially Muckkler (2005) and Raghuram (2005) but also Brettell (2000). For migration in general see Castles and Miller (2003).