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SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS ARCHAEOLOGY, ORAL HISTORY, AND SEQUENCE OF OCCUPATION ON ANUTA ISLAND

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In the June 1975 issue of the Journal, Janet Davidson reviews the Pacific Anthropological Records' recent volume on Anuta. ¹ The overall tenor of her evaluation is extremely generous and sympathetic, but she does take issue with interpretations put forth by Kirch and Rosendahl concerning the sequence of the island's habitation.

On the basis of their archaeological findings, Kirch and Rosendahl argue for a period of continuous occupation from approximately 1000 B.C. until sometime around A.D. 500 by a pre-Polynesian population. This was followed, they suggest, by a 1000-year period during which the island was uninhabited, and around A.D. 1500 it finally was settled by its present Polynesian occupants. This sequence is supported, they assert, by oral traditions which note the presence of aboriginal inhabitants, the *apukere*, ² who are said to have become extinct before the Polynesian influx.

Despite the archaeological data cited by Rosendahl and Kirch, and the evidence of Anutan oral history, Davidson expresses skepticism at the proposition that there was a 1000-year hiatus in the island's occupation, suggesting that: "if any credence is to be given to the traditional *afukere* [sic.], surely it is more likely that they were in occupation when Polynesians arrived, than that they vanished 1000 years previously?" ³

I do not propose, here, to evaluate the two interpretations on the merits of the archaeological data, nor do I pretend to have a definite solution to the problem of what the "true" sequence may have been. Given the point of contention, however, it may be worth while to examine what the oral traditions actually do say, and to ask whether, in fact, these traditions are consistent with either of these two hypotheses, and if so, to what degree this might be the case.

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Firth's account of the *apukere*, their demise, and eventual replacement ⁴ differs from my findings in some details, but in most of their essentials the two renditions are in substantive agreement. Anuta's first inhabitants were known as the *apukere* or "earthsprung," implying that they were autochthonous in origin. ⁵ The autochthones were ruled by a senior and a junior chief, each with his own constituency, yielding a political structure which resembled closely that of present day Anuta. No statement is made as to when the *apukere* first emerged, but they dwelled on the island until a Tikopian chief named Pu Ariki (also known as Pu Lasi, the founder of the contemporary Taumako "lineage" on Tikopia) visited Anuta. He contested with the *apukere* chiefs, and when he returned to Tikopia he used his efficacy to bring disaster to his erstwhile hosts. Anuta was ravaged by a drought and famine, and the population died of thirst and hunger. Pu Ariki returned to Anuta to bury his dead victims, and then he travelled home once more to dwell on Tikopia.

Some time later two canoes arrived, manned by people from West Polynesia. The voyagers found the island uninhabited, so they stayed on. Pu Ariki soon returned again, but after establishing his temporal and ritual supremacy on the island he departed, permitting the newcomers to remain. The current population is said to have descended from these immigrants who, according to Anutan genealogies, arrived about 14 generations ago.

If as a working hypothesis one assumes these traditions to be accurate historical accounts, what would be the implications for the Kirch and Rosendahl and for the Davidson interpretations?

While they say nothing as to when the *apukere* first appeared, the encounter with Pu Ariki clearly indicates that the “autochthonous” inhabitants were present well after Tikopia had been settled by its current Polynesian population. Since there is no indication that this population has been on Tikopia for anything approaching 1500 years ⁶ this strongly indicates that the *apukere* were present on Anuta well after A.D. 500. The same Pu Ariki who brought the destruction of the *apukere* also visited the island after the new immigrants' arrival, suggesting that the hiatus between the demise of the “autochthones” and the landing of the present population's ancestors was less than a single generation. A political structure resembling that of modern-day Anuta indicates at least a strong possibility that the *apukere* were culturally Polynesian, and the ease with which the Tikopian chief appears to have communicated with his victims suggests that the “autochthones” spoke a Polynesian language. ⁷ In short, if the traditions are taken at all literally, while they do not deny the possibility that Anuta was populated by pre-Polynesian inhabitants from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 500, these inhabitants most probably were not the *apukere*. If a 1000-year hiatus did exist, traditions would suggest the *apukere* arrived after the hiatus. They may well have been Polynesian, and if the culture of the *apukere* resembled that of their successors who arrived less than a generation after their demise, the short interim

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between the two occupations would not be likely to show up in the archaeological record.

In conclusion, I concur with Davidson that the *apukere* of Anutan lore are far more recent than believed by Kirch and Rosendahl. However, this does not eliminate the possibility of a pre-*apukere* population followed by a long hiatus; on this point Anutan oral history is wholly silent. The one proposition that traditions clearly contradict is Davidson's suggestion that pre-Polynesians were still in residence when the present Polynesians first arrived.

My point is not that oral traditions are an accurate reflection of Anutan history; they may or may not be. I am not arguing that they are more reliable than archaeology; they probably are not. Nor am I arguing that either Kirch and Rosendahl or Davidson is either right or wrong. However, since the issue of traditions has been raised in an attempt to lend support to differing interpretations of culture history, I have attempted to clarify just what Anutan oral history has to say about the points in question. I have attempted to examine the traditions and to ask to what degree they are consistent with either one or both of the interpretations. Synthesis of the divergent strands of data should best be left to specialists in culture history.

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¹ Yen and Gordon 1973.

² Following Firth (1954), Yen, Kirch and Rosendahl render this as the Tikopian *afukere*. On Anuta, however, the Tikopian ‘f’ shifts to a ‘p,’ making *apukere* the proper Anutan pronunciation. A second minor error to appear in Davidson's review is the date of the Yen, Kirch and Rosendahl investigation, which took place in 1971, not 1970.

³ Davidson 1975:253.

⁴ Firth 1954:121-2.

⁵ The *apukere* are also known by the term *tinopenua*, which translates literally as “body in land,” and probably carries similar implications of autochthony.

⁶ This must be seen as tentative since an archaeological investigation of Tikopia has yet to be conducted, but I know of nothing in the oral history or linguistic data to suggest that the Tikopians were inhabiting their island in A.D. 500.

⁷ This evidence is suggestive, but only mildly so, since ranked chiefs are not unique to Polynesia, and Pu Ariki and the *apukere* may not have actually communicated quite so well as they imagined. Nevertheless, one would expect that if the *apukere* differed greatly from the Tikopians in either racial or linguistic features, some mention of this fact would have been preserved in the traditions. Yet, I found no such indication, nor is one suggested by Firth.