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WOMEN OF TIKOPIA

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology, University of Auckland, 1991.

To Victoria and Sarah Macdonald

ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on 18 months fieldwork in 1979-80 in the Solomon Islands. The study was carried out among the Tikopia people both on their home island and in the settlement of Nukukaisi in Makira.

The central focus of this study is an analysis of the women of Tikopia from several perspectives. First they are examined in time: the women of Professor Raymond Firth's study of 1929 are contrasted with women 50 years on. Next they are described in different geographical settings - the home island and the settlement.

Special attention is paid to two categories of women: the *fafine taka* 'unmarried women' and the *fafine avanga* 'married women'. These two groups stand in strong contrast with one another. The unmarried women have considerable social and sexual freedom. However, their structural position in society is undergoing some redefinition as they are required to replace in the domestic workforce their brothers who have migrated as wage labourers to other parts of the Solomons. The departure of the young men has caused some demographic imbalance among the young and their absence decreases opportunities of marriage for the young women. No other career is available to young women as they do not leave Tikopia for schooling or work as their brothers do.

By contrast, the married women, to whom marriage ostensibly brings social maturity, are the most tightly controlled section of the population, being responsible to the patriline into which they have married. The social and symbolic elements of gender relations in Tikopia are therefore examined through the lives of these two groups of women.

A further concern which underlies this work are the developments in theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of gender by anthropologists, with special reference to their application in the Pacific area.



TAMARIKI

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the Ariki of Tikopia I give my most grateful acknowledgement and thanks for their permission to work with the people of Tikopia. The premier chief, Ariki Kafika, gave me a name and a house and made my path clear. Ariki Tafua, Ariki Taumako and Ariki Fangarere also helped me with great kindness. With the chiefs of Tikopia I include Professor Sir Raymond Firth whose work on Tikopia inspired me to become an anthropologist. I am grateful to Professor Firth for his pertinent comments on my work and his hospitality to me in England.

I am most grateful to the Tikopia families with whom I lived: Pamae Nukutureki, Pamae Rangiaco and Pamae Vairiki. They were put to considerable inconvenience by my presence but they helped and supported me in many ways. I must also thank the Tikopia people with whom I worked – their courtesy to an intrusive stranger was considerable. Many people deserve special mention but the love and support of three special Tikopia women stands out: Christina, my sister, Susannah, my daughter, and Rose, an outsider like myself.

I should also like to thank the staff of the Solomon Islands National Museum for their assistance in loaning me equipment and helping with storage and transport.

To my colleagues and friends in the Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, much thanks for the support, help and encouragement over the many years this thesis has been gestating. Special thanks to the Women in Anthropology group for their encouragement, to Professor Roger Green

whose knowledge of the Solomon Islands proved invaluable, and to Dr Nancy Bowers who accompanied me in my first week of fieldwork.

I am also grateful to my anthropologist colleagues at the University of Waikato where I taught while writing this thesis. Drs Michael Goldsmith and Wendy Cowling carried more than their fair share in the courses we taught jointly, Keith Barber made useful comments on my analysis and I am especially grateful to Tom Ryan who read and commented on part of my work.

To my family who made it possible for me to go to Tikopia I am eternally grateful. I especially thank my sister Wendy Forgie, and Marcus and Christine Macdonald for their help when I was in the field, and my son Dr Mark Fisher for his friendship while I was writing this. My daughters Victoria and Sarah carried the heaviest load and I can never thank them sufficiently.

I also specially thank Brian Latham for all he did to help me while I was in the field and for the considerable amount of work he has done on processing, storing and helping me with my field photographs.

Others who have contributed to this work and to whom I am most grateful are Mick Pendergrast for his knowledge of Tikopia material culture and Dr Ward Friesen for census material.

My research has been funded by the University Grants Committee and Post-graduate Scholarships. I am very grateful to the New Zealand Federation of University Women for awarding me a fellowship which enabled me to work with Professor Firth in London.

Finally I want to thank the three people who read full drafts of my thesis. Dr Tony Hooper, who was one of my supervisors, made useful comments based on his considerable knowledge of the Tikopia corpus. Dr Maureen Molloy read my work out of friendship and provided most helpful comments especially on theoretical issues. My main supervisor, Dr Judith Huntsman, brought both her editing skills and her encyclopaedic knowledge of Pacific ethnography to bear on my work. I thank her most warmly for her patience, encouragement and friendship over many years.

Toku arofa e mātea ki a koutou.

PREFACE

There are two main concerns in this thesis: the central one is the women of Tikopia. The other is women in anthropology. The ambiguity of that phrase is deliberate because it is intended to cover a constellation of meanings. The women in anthropology are those who have been left out of the ethnographic record and those about whom anthropologists have written. As well, they are the female anthropologists who have gone to the field and who, later, have argued about, defined and refined new theoretical approaches in anthropology.

This work is based on field research carried out in 1979 and 1980 in a Tikopia settlement and on the home island itself. I was, of course, following Sir Raymond Firth whose fieldwork with the Tikopia fifty years before has made them famous in ethnography. Because, as I go on to demonstrate, it is anthropology that has changed to a greater degree than the Tikopia themselves, I have not written the classical ethnography. To detail the kinship terminology, the lineages of the chiefs, the disputes over land would be an attempt to repeat *We, the Tikopia* in slightly modern dress. Rather, I have referred to the elements of social organisation as they were particularly relevant to the discourse on women. A description of the island, its land forms and history have been given in an appendix.

I have followed Firth's convention of referring to the people as "the Tikopia", not as Tikopians. A Tikopia man who had read some of Firth's works approved strongly of the convention saying "We are the island". In writing Tikopia I have used a double vowel rather than macron and included a gloss of any words used in the text.

The real names of people have been used. Again Firth followed that practice and the people have been interested to read about their named forebears. Attempts to disguise identity would not be possible on a small island and, furthermore, in this thesis I am giving the requisite account of my fieldwork which would be garbled by an attempt to disguise identity. In any further work which is intended for wider publication I must address the dilemma of whether to name people who have high responsibility (Commissioners of Police and Bishops) in the Solomon Islands and reveal details of their private lives. This is an issue I will discuss further with the people involved who are aware of the dilemma.

In the body of the work it will be seen that I have appeared to set up "Melanesian" as a contrast with "Polynesian" or "Tikopia". This follows the Tikopia practice of referring to their neighbours as "black men" who^m they see as having very different customs and beliefs from themselves. The division of Solomon Islanders by this nomenclature comes from the Tikopia perception of the world.

Finally, I have used many approaches to illuminate the many voices of women in Tikopia and the paradoxes I see in their lives. No unitary scheme of explanation can do justice to human complexity. Neither is there any attempt to pretend to a definitive exegesis of the paradoxes: reality has its loose ends and contradictions which ethnography must acknowledge.

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