

**SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN THE SOUTHERN GILBERT ISLANDS**

**(Ph.D. dissertation prospectus)**

**by**

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## SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN THE SOUTHERN GILBERT ISLANDS

### I.

The purpose of the proposed research is to (a) describe and analyze the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of Gilbertese culture during the period of 1964 and 1965, (b) incorporate descriptive ethnographic data within contemporary anthropological theory related to the problems of cultural stability and change, processes of innovation and ecological adaptation, and the extension of linguistic models to broader cultural phenomena, (c) serve as an ethnographic baseline for a restudy of the same population in a transplanted community situation.

The available sources on Gilbertese culture will be briefly summarized to illustrate the context of research as well as the attainable contributions to knowledge which may result from such a study.

The Gilbert Islands are located in the Central Pacific between 172°E and 177°E longitude and ranging from 3°N to 3°S latitude. The entire island group includes sixteen atolls composed of coral reefs which vary in size from a few hundred yards to ten miles in length and one or two hundred yards to one mile in width. The atolls are characterized by their low elevation above sea level (ca. 12 feet maximum height) and by their infertile soils (12,52,66) which support three primary subsistence crops -- coconut, pandanus, and breadfruit. There is no native fauna, excepting birds and innumerable insects, but the surrounding sea provides an abundance of marine life for human consumption.

The only product which has economic value derives from the coconut crop and food production is directed towards the harvesting, preparation and sale of surplus copra.

The yield from coconut palms is directly related to the amount of annual rainfall which may vary from zero to one hundred and twenty inches. The population census for 1958 has been recorded as 32,652 Gilbertese (17) who are unevenly distributed on the various atolls. Tarawa, for example, is reported to have a density of nearly 1000 natives per square mile (17) and this, in times of the frequent droughts when both crops and drinking water becomes of utmost scarcity, has often brought the population to conditions approaching famine.

Contact with Europeans dates back to the 16th century, but the physical isolation of the Gilbert Islands and their lack of economic resources has contributed to a minimum amount of interference from outside agents. The islands are today incorporated as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony administered by the British Colonial Office under the jurisdiction of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific.

The British government has consistently adopted a broad policy of minimum interference in matters related to native life while, simultaneously, engaging in much appreciated training programs for Gilbertese natives. The educational program has contributed directly to the high degree of literacy in the Gilbertese language.

The most readily available popularizations of Gilbertese life may be found in the works of R. L. Stevenson (58) and Sir Arthur Gribble (32). General bibliographic references have been summarized by Taylor (62) and Cammack (11).

Professional or semi-professional accounts of Gilbertese culture may briefly be discussed by topics:

- 1- Ethnology in general: There is presently no single source which even attempts to encompass the basic ethnography of Gilbertese culture.

Papers by Loumala (42,43), Maude (48,49,50,51) and Grimble (31,32) discuss in detail selected aspects of Gilbertese culture.

2- Culture contacts: The only available report which addresses the topic of culture contacts is an unpublished manuscript by H. E. Maude (50). Gribble's work (32), however, offers an excellent index to the history and nature of British administrative policy in the colony. Present comparative studies in the relocated Gilbertese communities in the Solomon Islands (4) are directed toward various aspects of cultural change.

1861<sup>3</sup>  
Salter the best  
dictionary

3- Language: Matthew was translated into Gilbertese as early as 1816 (Mataio ao Ioane ao I-Ebeto) and subsequent translations of the entire Bible are available in several additions. Dictionaries compiled by Bingham (5) and Eastman (18) are available for language study. A detailed grammatical description of Gilbertese has not been carried out. The available linguistic studies by Cowell (15), Bingham (6), and fieldworkers on Gizo and Kioa (37,63) will prove helpful in further linguistic analysis.

4- Social structure: The brief articles by Grimble (31), Maude (48,49,51), Goodenough (26,29), and Murdock (53) provide the major cues to problem oriented research on the topics of kinship and social structure. Unpublished fieldnotes from Gizo and Kioa are available for consultation. Both sources have emphasized the urgent need to investigate the indigenous social structure in the Gilbert Islands proper since the 'transplanted' communities have experienced some marked changes in basic social and economic institutions. This investigation will complement the recent study of rank and ramage in the northern islands by Dr. Lambert (39). Coordination and cooperation with other students of Gilbertese culture

has already commenced; e.g., the extensive collection of unpublished materials on Gilbertese culture by Maude, Grimble, and others have kindly been offered for inspection by Mr. H. E. Maude at The Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

Despite the present lack of comprehensive ethnographic data for the Gilbert Islands it is still possible to outline a number of specific problem areas suggested by the exceptional collection of comparative materials available for the Caroline, Marshall, Ellice, Tokelau, and Samoa Islands. Stillfried's study (59) provides a general survey of Micronesian social organization.

Specific studies, dealing with similar culture problems, suggest a number of profitable research approaches. The extensive interdisciplinary studies on Ifalik and Truk, for example, have clearly illustrated the need to see problems in an ecological context. Goodenough's (25) outstanding account of Trukese social organization complemented by Gladwin and Sarason (24) also emphasize the importance placed on matters related to kinship, inheritance, land ownership, legal structure, native attitudes and values.

Various publications in the Atoll Research Bulletin and recent surveys of atoll ecology by Fosberg (21) and Wiens (66) provide detailed accounts of the ecological variables which are clearly obtrusive in the coral atoll habitat. In addition, published reports by the Pacific Science Board, with specific reference to the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology studies, provide one of the most intensive sources of ethnographic and comparative transcultural reference. Keesing (33,35) and Elkin (19) have summarized the present needs of extensive social anthropological research in Oceania.

## II.

The descriptive classification of cultural phenomena can simultaneously address two levels of social reality which may be termed (2) ideal or intellectual culture and (b) real or social culture.

The central problem of the proposed research is to describe the relationships between these two aspects of Gilbertese culture, as evidenced in social organization, and attempt to relate the cognitive universe (consisting of values, ideals, attitudes, beliefs, and general conceptualizations about human experience) to actual behavior; i.e., to derive, by way of testable hypotheses generated from the accumulative field data, a theoretical framework which will account for any such correlations and, in particular, to account for the conscious or unconscious violation of cultural ideals (cognitive perceptions) by members of the society.

Few anthropological studies have paid much attention to this aspect of ethnographic analysis since traditional field procedures have simply not been able to establish any such correlations on an empirical basis. It is readily evident, however, that this problem is pivotal to any theory which hopes to deal with cultural dynamics beyond the citation of an inventory of historical events, institutional developments, or documentation of legal decisions. It has been repeatedly illustrated in part of the anthropological literature dealing with culture change (Cf. 2, 20, 34, 38, 60) that the decisive variables in any situation of cultural dynamics are the social participants' ideas, beliefs, and attitudes toward such change.

Culture can be defined as the abstracted set of conceptual guides to behavior shared by the social participants of any given society.

Any change (whether social, ecological, ideological, or technological) must consequently either be incorporated into the matrix of existing traditions or the traditions must be modified to accommodate the new -- this is felt to be the impetus to the evident transcultural discrepancies between intellectual and social culture.

A study of this kind, as perhaps opposed to the traditional approach to ethnography, will have to be directed towards the aspects of the social organization which appear to be unstable or in conflict with expressed cultural ideals.

The problems raised by this view of culture call for a methodological and theoretical approach which also departs somewhat from tradition. Contemporary linguistic and ethnological theory has, fortunately, augmented the possibilities of such analyses. The paragraphs which follow will be devoted to a discussion of the analytic techniques of the 'New Ethnology' (61) which will be taken as the theoretical departure for the collection and analysis of field data.

The central problem of any scientific theory is to 'translate' masses of empirical data into principles which will account for the occurrence of individual events and their interrelations. Internal contradiction is excluded and any given theory must be capable of generating a set of predictions which must be compatible with other such theories founded on additional or related data (cf. 40).

A theory of Gilbertese social organization must, consequently, be evaluated on the basis of its ability to isolate the principles of cognition which every social member in the culture must possess in order to operate as a participant member of his society (28).

General principles can be isolated from a detailed analysis of lexical sets related to intellectual culture, but these must be subjected to further empirical tests of applicability by carefully noting how cognition influences acts of social behavior.

To bridge the gap between theory and data one must initially concern oneself with two very elementary aspects of scientific inquiry; i.e., isolation of taxonomic and/or conceptual categories. The isolation of such 'categories' of significance parallel procedures followed by field linguists engaged in phonemic, morphemic, and syntactic analysis. Analysis of the relative arrangement of cognitive categories, as linguistic phenomenon, is the subject matter of structural semantics or semology. Ethnolinguistic studies have probed the possible relationships between language and culture. The level of generalization reached by such studies, however, is not primary to this investigation. In fact, data analysis will involve the isolation of semantic fields and lexical sets which, in turn, can be hierarchically arranged in accordance with the semantic contrasts employed by the participants in Gilbertese culture. This analysis involved coordination of the empirical classification imposed by the investigator with the folk taxonomy employed by the native; i.e., a classification of any aspect of culture is directly related to the process of grouping data under common labels introduced by the observer (e.g., marriage, descent, religion, economy, law, technology, etc.) and a folk taxonomy is a hierarchical grouping of semantic elements which (to the cultural participants) are perceived as being related.

The conventional approach to ethnographic phenomena has been to categorize and catalogue observed phenomena by standard units which may, at the best, approximate the classification systems employed by cultural

participants. Generalization founded on this biased ordering of data have invaded the ethnological literature where, more often than admitted, anthropologists have advanced theories about culture and society on the basis of 'labelled categories' which, in fact, may not comprise equatable typological units in cross cultural contexts. This point has been forcefully advanced by Pospisil's outstanding study of Kapauku law (54).

The 'ethnoscientific' approach (61) is somewhat more modest than traditional ethnography in scope since it is explicitly directed towards (a) the discovery of the taxonomic categories employed by the members of a particular culture and (b) the analysis of semantic fields from which the principles, derived from testable hypotheses, of native cognition may be induced.

The taxonomic approach immediately suggests a reliance on data from terminological systems or lexical sets. What is intended in this research is to explore the applicability of terminological analysis to its counterparts in behavioral phenomena. It is realized, of course, that it is naive to assume a 1:1 correlation between the two systems. It is, however, precisely in the area where the conceptual system conflicts with the behavioral system that we are likely to penetrate to the level of theoretical understanding of the culture.

The isolation of relevant folk systems cannot be outlined before confrontation with Gilbertese culture and, in particular, not before the rudiments of the language have been mastered. A knowledge of Gilbertese is paramount to any further investigation at these levels of abstraction, but it should be emphasized that fluency in the language does not have to be attained before data collection and analysis can proceed.

Conklin (16) has defined a folk taxonomy as "...a system of

monolexically-labelled folk segregates related by a hierarchic inclusion ... The requirements of ... taxonomic systems are: (1) at the highest level, there is only one maximal (largest, unique) taxon which includes all other taxa in the system; (2) the number of levels is finite and uniform throughout the system; (3) each taxon belongs to only one level; (4) there is no overlap (i.e., taxa at the same level are always mutually exclusive)."

Analyses of folk taxonomies have successfully dealt with the semantic fields of kinship terminology (27,44,45,47,46,63,10,64), color terminology (9,14,41,55,56), pronominal usage (1,8), social status (23,30), disease categories (22), botanical nomenclature (13), and values (36).

These studies mark the beginning of some new trends in ethnology. One should, however, not assume that the analysis of folk taxonomies is limited to these specific topics. Conversely, these studies have merely pointed to a problem area which can be explored with intensive research. With respect to Gilbertese culture it is difficult to outline which taxonomic systems (beyond that of kinship terminology) will receive focal attention since such a decision can only be made once in the field.

Goodenough's study on Truk (25) can serve as a comparative theoretical and procedural model to be followed in the early stages of fieldwork. When genealogical recording and preliminary analysis of kinship terminology is well under way it will be possible to begin intensive analysis of related semantic systems.

The ecological situation, combined with the recent major resettlements outside of the Gilbert Islands, suggest that major attention should be devoted to analysis of native juridical decisions pertaining to land inheritance, property rights, and community leadership (Gilbertese juris-prudence, for example, may possibly be subjected to semantic analysis).

Juridical activities can be monitored in the maneaba, or central community meeting house, where most public issues are settled by the Gilbertese people. Matters related to descent, kin group affiliation, and functional non-kin groups, can equally well be studied in the context of community decisions. It is precisely in this context that it will become possible to observe the relationship between the use of kinship terminology (one particular folk taxonomy) and behavioral correlates. Few ethnographic accounts of social structure have ever attempted to record extensive behavioral incidents between kinsmen (Cf. 34) since this is, surely, one of the most tedious and demanding tasks which can be delegated to a fieldworker. One exemplary attempt at this enterprise is illustrated by the work of Professor Firth's studies in Tikopia. Dr. Firth clearly illustrates that kinsmen do not behave toward each other as they may indicate in an oral interview or public discussion of Tikopian customs. Similarly, one suspects that individuals everywhere have different commitments to the issues at hand and that they will be guided by idiosyncratic whims of self-interest, altruism, or indifference to the ideals of their culture. Professor Goodenough (30) has clarified some of these relationships and illustrated the possibilities of precise investigation of reciprocal status behavior; i.e., duties vs. rights.

The present internal community disputes among the Gilbertese (particularly evident in the overpopulated areas) relate one additional important aspect of behavioral phenomena which must be investigated; i.e., the ecological pressures exerted by the unpredictable productivity of the habitat and the ever increasing population pressure. In this domain it will be possible to test directly some of the hypotheses advanced by Sahlins (57) and indirectly test some of the current notions related to the internal development of political and social institutions developed by

other anthropologists working in different areas of the world.

The external influences from British officials and foreign missionaries must necessarily also be considered as important variables in influencing Gilbertese attitudes toward their native customs and toward the somewhat uncertain economic developments in the future.

### III.

Specific data collection procedures will be outlined to illustrate the application of the loosely constructed theoretical framework to concrete phenomena.

It is anticipated that all of the southern Gilbert Islands will be visited during the period of research. It is considered most rewarding, however, to reside for at least nine consecutive months on Nonouti before comparisons are made with conditions on Tabiteuea, Onotoa, Beru, Nukunau, Arorae, Tamana. Visit to these atolls will depend on the availability of local transportation. Cooperation with Martin G. Silverman, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of Chicago who will spend a year on Beru, should greatly enhance the final survey of local variations in social structure among the southern atolls. This will permit a more accurate comparison with the data accumulating for relocated Gilbertese communities. These data may thus serve as an ethnographic control for other workers who are primarily concerned with the specific changes in Gilbertese culture attributed to new variables encountered in altered social-ecological environs.

Although the discussion of 'discovery procedures' has become irksome to some scientists it is desirable to outline some data collecting procedures which can be followed. This is preferred to the ambiguous and

evasive "...standard field techniques will be employed."

A facility in Gilbertese is prerequisite to much of the proposed research and two to three months will be exclusively devoted to linguistic investigation. Due to the geographic isolation of the Gilbert Islands, and the three to four weeks which it may take to get to Nonouti from Australia, it will be possible to work with linguistic informants while travelling by boat to the Gilberts or while waiting for transportation on Ocean Island and Tarawa (Gilbertese men are frequently employed by the copra carrying cargo ships which shuttle between the atolls at one to two month intervals). This approach, using natives as linguistic informants while en route will permit (a) some facility in the language before entering the community of residence, (b) ethnological investigation to commence shortly after arrival, and (c) avoidance of a number of innocent mistakes which one is bound to commit before fully understanding local customs related to manners and etiquette (which, incidentally, are reported to be exceedingly elaborate and formalized when compared to ours). A 'prearrival' facility in the language will enhance social acceptance in the community, and more important, hasten the possible incorporation as an adopted kinsman in one of the larger social groups.

Demographic aspects can be covered during the initial weeks of adjustment and language learning. It will involve a house-to-house census taking which, at a later date, will be employed to collect extensive genealogies.

Once language learning is well under way (probably after two months residence) it should be possible to begin intensive investigation of social organization.

The December 1958 census (17) estimates the population of Nonouti at 2140. Statistical sampling procedures may at first glance seem appropriate with a population of this size, but these are not entirely applicable to the phenomena outlined for investigation. It is, of course, realized that 'statistics' must be collected whenever possible and relevant; e.g., frequency data on face-to-face interaction between reciprocal pairs of relative categories, post-marital residence patterns, incidents of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, adoption of infants, etc.

Social phenomena in this context, however, lends itself to a different kind of empirical evaluation procedure; i.e., model analysis. Procedures of this variety have been demonstrated by both linguists and ethnologists to hold considerable scientific merit as analytic and evaluative tools.

This leads directly to a brief discussion of componential analysis which will be employed to crystalize the principles of the various taxonomic systems to be investigated (Cf. 45, 47). Kinship terminology, as a well defined semantic field, serves to illustrate the rudimentary procedures of componential analysis:

1- A genealogical matrix of consanguineal, affinal, and incorporated kinsmen is constructed for as many individual informants as time permits.

2- Informants are requested to describe the reciprocal set of terms between any two polar relatives in the genealogy; e.g., father vs. son, brother vs. sister, elder brother vs. younger sister, etc.

3- Criteria of terminological equivalence are isolated. For example, all terms which are to be used in any given paradigmatic set must be collected so as to assure that they share features (components) which will permit assignment to the same class. This calls for a careful collection of terms which are grammatically equivalent; i.e., vocative, referential,

singular, plural.

4- When a complete set of terms have been collected these are stated in terms of componential features which specify complementarity with respect to other terms. Coordinates of a paradigm are so constructed that each kin term can be defined by reference to its semantic constituents.

5- The kin terms, now rewritten in componential formulae, can be analyzed for similar and dissimilar features and grouped into classes ('bundles'). The process is analogous to a phonemic analysis of linguistic data. We thereafter begin to test hypotheses which will account for the principles of classification that underlie this particular folk taxonomy -- thus reaching the level of algebraic parsimony and generalization.

6- When rules have been discovered these can be tested in two ways: (1) by hypothetical examples which can be suggested to community residents; e.g., if your brother married so and so what would his wife call your father?, and (2) by entering the role of kinsman and testing the accuracy of the principles by achieving social validation for this role. Goodenough (29) has summarized this particular aspect of analysis as follows:

"We test the adequacy of ... a theory by our ability to interpret and predict what goes on in a community as measured by how its members, or informants, do so. A further test is our ability ourselves to behave in ways which lead to the kind of responses from the community's members which our theory would lead us to expect. Thus tested, the theory is a valid statement of what you have to know in order to operate as a member of the society and is as such, a valid description of its culture."

The isolation of the semantic principles and structural rules which account for the classification of relatives has been illustrated in Professor Lounsbury's analysis of Crow and Omaha kinship terminologies (46).

Procedures from this point are directed toward the isolation of evidence which will elucidate how these principles are applied to social discourse.

In summary, it must be emphasized that the data on social organization will be collected with two specific goals in mind. First, to serve the theoretical goals of the dissertation and second to be presented in such a form that the data will be of use to scholars working on different problems concerning Gilbertese culture (4).

#### IV.

Two theoretical contributions to scholarship are envisioned: (1) A contribution to general anthropological theory related to the topics of social structure, ecological adaptation, and cultural dynamics, (2) Formulation of a number of hypotheses concerning the relationships between cognitive structure and social participation, language and culture, cultural and universal determinants of behavior.

The primary scientific obligation is to describe in detail the culture of the Gilbert Islanders in terms of their present historical role in the unwritten records of Pacific Island peoples. All data will be deposited in the accumulative files for research on Pacific populations at the Australian National University and at the University of Oregon. It is anticipated that the complete analysis of the data will be presented to a wider scholarly audience through customary anthropological publication media.

#### V.

A research proposal of this kind should include some notes on the specific field conditions under which the work will be carried out since it

involves considerable psychological and physical adjustments on the part of the investigator.

The Gilbert Islands are exceedingly isolated, in geographic distance as well as in degree of communication, from the rest of the world. The economic conditions of the atolls have attracted no foreign interests (Ocean Island and Nauru excepted), the government has prevented any influx of non-native settlers, and transportation to and from the islands is irregular and by small commercial vessels.

The Gilbertese people are presently under considerable strain to adjust to population pressures. Tensions may be projected to the colonial government, native leaders, or meddling outsiders in general (Cf. 3). Disputes over land holdings is an important issue which often has resulted in community factions. The prospects of relieving overpopulation problems by community transplants is presently a central issue among the residents of the southern Gilbert Islands (that this situation provides one of the most ideal 'laboratory' settings for anthropological study is quite a different matter).

The perils which constantly face the Gilbertese are well illustrated by the recent drought conditions which have forced the colonial government to transport the entire community settled on Gardner Island to the Solomon Islands Protectorate. Without sufficient rainfall the atoll environment will simply not support the crucial coconut palms -- not to mention the problems of obtaining enough drinking water for the people.

Twelve to fourteen month residence in the islands is considered minimal. This short period, at first glance, may hardly seem sufficient time to describe in detail the cognitive and behavioral correlates found in a relatively strange society where linguistic and ethnocentric barriers

must be overcome.

The problem focus, as outlined in this proposal, should greatly compensate for the brief period of residence by narrowing the area of investigation and by employing the more productive 'ethnoscientific' techniques of data analysis.

Expenses for transportation are necessarily large since they involve both sheer distance in miles and overlays in various locations while waiting for the irregularily scheduled sea transportation. Expenses for equipment are minimal -- a typewriter, camera, and taperecorder are the only apparatus which must be carried to the field. The people on Nonouti would undoubtedly be more than willing to supply the investigator with food and necessities, but this (in view of pressing ecological problems) would represent an imposition. Arrangements will be made with commercial agents in Suva to ship supplies to Nonouti whenever possible.

Similarly, a visitor who receives the hospitality of a people whom he continuously bombards with what may often seem as trivial questions must not expect to receive such privileges without in some way reciprocating and relating to his informants. The process of data collection in cultural anthropology is a give and take situation between human beings. A visitor who does not show his appreciation and understanding of local customs by inviting people for occasional feasts, or otherwise return the extended tolerance and hospitality, will quickly sink to a social status which will close potential sources of vital data to him (35).

The Gilbert Islands are not affected by malaria and other common tropical diseases, but (according to Dr. Lambert who recently spent two years on the northern atolls) amoebic dysentary and skin infections from coral is an inevitable companion to the visitor. Most medical supplies can

be brought from the United States and, in case of emergency, the British government station at Tarawa operates a small hospital.

The role of teacher is respected and this provides a ready made explanation for the presence of the investigator. One should probably refrain as much as possible from attempting to explain what one is attempting to do (it is difficult enough to convey to the undergraduate university student what an anthropologist actually does for a living) but it is usually enough to indicate that one has come to learn about Gilbertese customs, to record these for posterity, and to make their way of life known to other people in the world.

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