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Indigenous Island Empires: Yap and Tonga Considered

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COLONIALISM AND EMPIRE, HOWEVER WE DEFINE THEM, ARE COMMONLY THOUGHT OF as phenomena entirely imposed upon Pacific Island peoples. Two exceptions are occasionally acknowledged, the so-called 'empires' of Tonga and Yap. In this essay I seek to compare the Tonga and Yap empires. I do so in order to elucidate underlying similarities and differences, and to consider the question of whether they are appropriately — for purposes of comparative historical and social studies — deemed empires. Because empire and all the many terms and concepts related to it are historically imprecise, however, I seek to fit these Pacific cases into a broader comparative framework, rather than to define them rigorously.

In each of these cases, we encounter the same questions regarding the extent to which island societies peripheral to some central or core place were integrated into an ongoing complex of interrelationships that not only involved the movement of goods — that is, economic exchange — but also entailed a range of social, cultural, and religious or ritual values that portrayed the population, or at least the leaders, of the central place as in some manner superordinate to the more remote island societies. In the case of Yap, this supposed dominion was over the long chain of low islands running east almost to Chuuk (Truk); in Tonga, it included parts of Fiji and Samoa and a number of adjacent smaller islands. Both cases, however, exhibit much that is common to most societies in the islands of the remote Pacific.

The Remote Pacific

The Fiji–Western Polynesia area (at the heart of which lies Tonga) is widely reckoned to be the region where the range of shared linguistic, social, and cultural phenomena known in aggregate as 'Polynesian' evolved.[1] At some period, probably in the second millennium BC, the ancestral population known to scholars as the Lapita peoples, continuing their eastward movement across the islands now called Melanesia, began occupying Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa. Perhaps a thousand years or so later, other peoples headed north out of eastern Melanesia (whether Vanuatu, the Solomons, or the Bismarck Archipelago remains unclear) and settled (in an order that likewise remains uncertain) in what linguists and archaeologists refer to as Nuclear Micronesia: Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands), the Marshall Islands, and the Eastern and Central Caroline Islands. People moving westward through the

[1] In this discussion I employ the current political names of the relevant islands and island groups. This is in some sense anachronistic, since they are defined as much by the modern cultural and political affiliations of their populations as they are by the physical landscape. But these are the names that appear on maps and will therefore prove convenient for anyone unfamiliar with the region who attempts to locate them.

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Carolines eventually encountered already settled populations in Palau and Yap and in the Marianas (peoples who had earlier migrated out of, respectively, Indonesia and the Philippines).

As a consequence of their shared origins, several factors are relevant to comparisons between Yap and Tonga, or, for that matter, of most Pacific Islands societies. I shall briefly consider four of these: the importance of inter-island relations to survival on any individual island; the existence of well-established and culturally freighted inter-island trade networks in many parts of the region; the presence of certain common themes in the political organisations of both Polynesia and Micronesia (as well as parts of Melanesia); and aspects of the relationships between patterns of social activity and political ideologies. Before I begin considering these themes with direct reference to Tonga and Yap, however, I want to note their relevance to more general problems in the comparative study of colonisation and empire themselves.

In the Pacific the term 'colonisation' has at least two quite distinct (if not entirely different) references. The Pacific east of the Solomon Islands appears to have been without human inhabitants perhaps as recently as 5,000 years ago. Movements of early populations eastward into Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa (and thence onward into Eastern Polynesia) and northward into Nuclear Micronesia are spoken of as voyages of colonisation. These were farming, fishing, and trading peoples, and they located and settled on what all available evidence indicates were at the time uninhabited islands. The work of making these islands habitable is certainly faithful to the sorts of activities connoted by the root of the word colony, which derives from the Latin verb *colere*, 'to cultivate, inhabit'.

As Geoffrey Irwin has pointed out, it is well nigh impossible for most island populations to stand alone. The numerous islands that had been settled and then abandoned before the arrival of the Europeans (so-called 'mystery islands') were located too far from likely sea lanes and were thus too isolated to survive. With a few notable exceptions (for example, Easter Island), survival depended upon a network of settlements: inter-island accessibility and thus mutual influence among island populations was the rule, not the exception.[2] People who had settled one newly discovered island soon occupied any others in the area.

These peoples were not only literally colonising new islands, but moving back and forth among them. Natural disasters such as typhoons and recurring droughts of the sort caused by the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (as we are now beginning to comprehend), along with sociological phenomena such as population growth, political competition, and perhaps human-induced environmental devastation, resulted in occasional large-scale movements of people among already inhabited islands; there were also the continual small-scale movements that were part of trade, marriage, and recreation. It appears that upon occasion there was also colonisation of the sort now more familiar to us, that is, occupation of an already inhabited island or locale by another population seeking to displace or dominate the original inhabitants. In writing of Polynesian outliers in Melanesia, for instance, Ian Hogbin

[2] Geoffrey Irwin, *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific* (New York 1992), 179–201.

referred to them as Polynesian 'colonies' (1941). The term 'colonisation' thus has a wider range of connotations in this region than it does in many other parts of the world, where populations who encountered conquering Europeans were without traditions of having themselves once colonised the area.

Indeed, in discussing colonisation in the Pacific, it is not only quite necessary to specify which time period one is talking about, in order to avoid the confusion inherent in the multiple referents of the term, but also to keep in mind that the problem at hand — the matter of political expansion on the part of the indigenous peoples — reflects a logical outgrowth of, or part of a continuum of activities rooted in, the original settlement acts by these same peoples. The notion that one local (as opposed to class) group dominated another local group does not necessarily carry the same sorts of charged sentiment regarding relations within the Pacific region as it does concerning penetration and domination from outside the region.

It is, moreover, important to keep in mind the distinction between behaviour and ideology in this context. It is not at all unusual to find several different groups putting forward claims to resources or places on the basis of putative former occupation, and these claims must be examined without mistaking them for relatively reliable historical accounts.[3] Furthermore, throughout the region political ideologies proclaim that authority in general stems from seniority and that in territorial matters, priority of settlement incontrovertibly establishes seniority (even while issues of whose claims to priority are legitimate remain matters for continual dispute).

The extensive and ongoing interaction among the islands in the Tonga and Yap spheres, then, were by no means peculiar. Douglas Oliver has reviewed a great many of the better-known exchange networks of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia, including the Tongan and Yapese cases. The best known of these include the Santa Cruz islands, between the Solomons and Vanuatu, the famous 'kula ring' in the Massim islands off the southeast coast of New Guinea, and the Vitiaz Straits–Huon Gulf trading routes off northeast New Guinea. As he wryly observes, 'The most obvious — and correspondingly banal — statement that can be made about Oceania's external exchanges is that they served both economic and social-relational ends'.[4] For the most part they promoted peaceful relations among the communities participating in them, and they certainly responded to disparities in the distribution of resources, but it is difficult to generate any overarching conclusions about them in terms of European sociological categories, because of the participants' very different sorts of taxonomies concerning English-language dichotomies such as utilitarian versus prestige values. But it is equally the case that much of the significance to be found in these exchange networks derived not from the goods and objects that were moved about, but from the very act of long-distance travel among the islands.[5]

[3] I am not suggesting that such claims cannot be reliable, but only that they are as subject to dispute as any other forms of historical knowledge.

[4] Douglas Oliver, *Oceania: Native Cultures of Australia and the Pacific Islands*, vol. 1 (Honolulu 1989), 521–89, 584.

[5] Hage and Harary have tried to move the analysis of island exchange networks beyond the stage that Oliver termed banal. Pointing to precedents in Schwartz's essay on 'systems of areal integration' and Friedman's suggestion that

Navigational prowess, astute entrepreneurial skills, magical powers, and intrepid demeanours, among other characteristics, were cultivated by the men and women who engaged in the voyaging, and they in turn reaped respect and renown for their exploits and accomplishments. As William Alkire points out, in the Central Carolines, where access to chiefly titles was nominally tied to birth (as it was in most of this broader region), any man who desired to be an accepted and effective leader was likely to undertake the long and rigorous schooling necessary to become a navigator (*pelu*) in order to enhance his status; birth alone was by no means destiny and voyaging played a central role in the building of personal reputations.[6]

Tonga and the Tongan Empire

To read Tongan history, as both Tongans and foreign scholars recount it, is to confront the ambiguities of empire. For my purposes here, at issue is the question of Tonga's status as an imperial power. Attribution of this status is widespread. Jared Diamond has recently referred to Tonga's 'inter-archipelagal empire', where 'chiefs of the largest Tongan island (Tongatapu) united the whole archipelago, and eventually they conquered islands outside the archipelago up to 500 miles distant'.[7] Many scholars more directly familiar with the area accept the existence of this empire. Cathy Small, for example, asserts without qualification that 'the Tongan empire was extended to Samoa and Fiji, and to the smaller outliers of Western Polynesia'.[8] 'Okusitino Māhina refers to the 'Tu'i Tonga Empire'.[9] David Luders discusses the influence of 'sailors of "imperial" Tonga' and 'the Tongan empire'.[10] According to Christine Gailey, 'Tongans occupied and exercised tributary hegemony over parts of Samoa, Fiji, and other islands'.[11] Edward Gifford asserts that Tongans 'had established their sovereignty in Samoa, Futuna, Rotuma, and Uvea' and describes Niue, Tuvalu (the Ellice Islands) and Fiji as experiencing 'Tongan tyranny'.[12]

Archaeologists, largely interpreting ethnohistorical materials but trying to map them onto prehistory, concur. Patrick Kirch writes repeatedly of the 'Tongan

Footnote continued

'Micronesia, especially western and central, shows clear resemblances to Western Polynesia', including 'large scale regional exchange systems (the Yap 'empire')', they analyse aspects of Yap's network in terms comparable with the Tongan case. Theodore Schwartz, 'Systems of areal integration', *Anthropological Forum*, 2 (1963), 56–97; Jonathan Friedman, 'Notes on structure and history in Oceania', *Folk*, 23 (1981), 275–95. They also cite Gifford's Tongan work, in which he drew attention to 'obvious parallels' with Micronesia. Per Hage and Frank Harary, *Island Networks* (New York 1996), 125; Edward Gifford, *Tongan Society* (Honolulu 1929), 350.

[6] William Alkire, *Lamotrek Atoll and Inter-island Socioeconomic Ties* (Prospect Heights 1989), 127.

[7] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York 1997), 64.

[8] Cathy Small, *Voyages* (Ithaca 1997), 14.

[9] 'Okusitino Māhina, 'Myths and History: some Aspects of the Tu'i Tonga Myths', in P. Herda, J. Terrell, and N. Gunson (eds), *Tongan Culture and History* (Canberra 1990), 30–45.

[10] David Luders, 'Legend and history: did the Vanuatu-Tonga kava trade cease in AD 1447?', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 105 (1996), 303.

[11] Christine Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship* (Austin 1987), 67.

[12] Gifford, *Tongan Society*, 14–15; Gunson subjects Gifford's work to careful scrutiny and casts considerable doubt on its reliability in this regard. Niel Gunson, 'The *hau* concept of leadership in western Polynesia', *Journal of Pacific History*, 14 (1979), 37.

maritime chiefdom', which 'dominated and integrated' all the adjacent island groups, the 'Tongan maritime empire', refers to 'Tongan political hegemony', and cites Jean Guiart's 'un empire insulaire'.[13] Irwin refers to the 'expanding hegemony of the Tongan maritime chiefdom', while Peter Bellwood makes the more moderate claim that a Tongan aristocracy 'in times past extended its influence over a large part of western Polynesia'.[14] Jens Poulsen maintains that Tongans established 'sovereignty over other island groups, for example, East 'Uvea, Rotuma, Futuna, Samoa, and Niue, mainly for purposes of tribute'.[15]

Niel Gunson largely dismisses the notion that Tongan sociopolitical relations with Samoa, which were substantial, could in any comparatively useful manner be termed imperial, but nonetheless refers to the 'Tongan imperium', thereby compounding the quandary.[16]

This ambiguity runs through David Burley's work, as well. On the one hand, he points to 'the extension of political dominion over a large segment of Fiji and Samoa between the 11th and 13th centuries' and 'Tongan hegemonic expansion throughout western Polynesia'.[17] On the other, he acknowledges that 'many problems exist in determining the timing, duration and extent of Tongan influence' and that even though it is 'commonplace, the use of the term "empire" must be considered controversial'.[18]

In his history of Tonga Ian Campbell directly challenges the conception of Tongan empire. There was Tongan political influence abroad, but

> The term 'empire', however, is ill-chosen, for it implies absolute power and direct government, probably from Tonga itself. This is unlikely because communication would likely have been sporadic and control could therefore scarcely have been maintained without actually colonizing.[19]

While acknowledging that some form of colonisation might have taken place, he argues (quite appropriately, I believe) that Tongan authority could not have been maintained abroad. Even within the Tongan archipelago itself, control from the seat of the paramount chief (the Tu'i Tonga) at Tongatapu was often tentative and frequently challenged by popular local leaders.[20] Edwin Ferdon likewise insists that despite Tongan familiarity with all the adjacent island groups, none of them was ever under Tongan rule, at least in prehistoric times: they 'were far from being dominated by Tongans'.[21]

Adrienne Kaeppler points out that in the Tongan case relations between Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa entailed not only exchange of material goods and ritual objects, but a complex set of marital alliances without which ritual aspects of the Tongan

[13] Patrick Kirch, *Niuatoputapu: The Prehistory of a Polynesian Chiefdom* (Seattle 1988), 8–12, 24, 257–8.

[14] Irwin, *Prehistoric Exploration*, 202; Peter Bellwood, *The Polynesians* (London 1978), 69.

[15] Jens Poulsen, *Early Tongan Prehistory*, vol. 1, *Terra Australis*, 12 (1987), 24.

[16] Niel Gunson, 'The Tonga–Samoa connection 1777–1845', *Journal of Pacific History*, 25 (1990), 177, 187.

[17] David Burley, 'Settlement pattern and Tongan prehistory', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 103 (1994), 403; 'Mata'uvave and 15th century Ha'apai', *Journal of Pacific History*, 30 (1995), 169.

[18] Burley, 'Mata'uvave', 154n.

[19] Ian Campbell, *Island Kingdom: Tonga Ancient and Modern* (Christchurch 1992), 10–13.

[20] Ibid., 13.

[21] Edwin Ferdon, *Early Tonga: As the Explorers Saw It* (Tucson 1987), 253–6.

sociopolitical hierarchy could not have operated as they were meant to do. Fiji supplied wooden bowls, wooden neck rests, slit gongs, sandalwood, and (most notably) large sea-going canoes; Tonga contributed bark cloth (*tapa*), large sleeping mats, and red feathers; Samoa provided fine mats and kava bowls. Kaeppler concludes that as a consequence of this ongoing and intricate three-cornered exchange network, 'Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa form a larger social system, while each is culturally distinct'.[22] She places Tonga at the apex of this network; given the leading role Tongan voyaging played in weaving together relations among the islands, this seems to be an apposite judgement.

In examining the intricacies of sociopolitical relations, as opposed to material goods and marriage relations, Gunson argues that what appeared to early European visitors as Tongan imperialism, economic exploitation, and political expansion 'was simply the extension of a system operating throughout most of Polynesia which allowed a powerful chief, [called] a *toa* or *hau*, to obtain paramountcy or checkmate power until successfully challenged'. Thus 'there would have been times when the Samoan allies of Tongan chiefs had the upper hand in Tonga, particularly Vava'u, and contributed to the defeat of a Tongan *hau*. No one claims this to have been Samoan imperialism.'[23] In his comparative analysis of *hau* leadership, Gunson extends this conclusion further, observing that in Polynesia in general, hereditary kingship rarely extended to entire islands; on those occasions when it did, as in Hawaii, it was limited to a single island, and did not extend to an entire island group.[24]

While the political character of these inter-island relations is open to debate, there can be little doubt about the significant array of evidence, derived from archaeological research, oral traditions, and ethnohistorical sources, that substantiates the existence of a large, thriving, and complex network of exchange activities and relations among the island groups of Western Polynesia and Fiji, with Tonga playing a central role. There is real substance in this web of connections linking the peoples of these islands, and no more than minor controversy regarding particulars and details. On the other hand, there are, as I have indicated, both widespread assumptions that these connections constituted an empire and well-argued counterpositions that they were not essentially imperial in character. Gunson's point bears reiteration: Samoan interference in Tongan affairs was not termed Samoan imperialism.

It is not simply the nature of the activities, then, but also the ideologies of political dominance that are at issue here. Aspects of Tongan political ideology have traditionally promoted a high degree of centralisation when compared with other Polynesian societies, such as Samoa, where decentralisation has been a celebrated ideal. There is a long history (well-established in oral traditions as well as in the early documentary sources) for the ritual pre-eminence of the Tu'i Tonga (nominally chief of all Tonga), as well as for the attempts by Tongatapu to establish its

[22] Adrienne Kaeppler, 'Exchange patterns in goods and spouses: Fiji, Tonga and Samoa', *Mankind*, 11 (1978), 248–51, 246.

[23] Gunson, 'The Tonga–Samoa connection', 187.

[24] Gunson, 'The *hau* concept of leadership', 29.

ascendancy if not dominance over the northern clusters of islands. As a consequence, the notion of a centralised Tongan state, capable of projecting itself overseas to reign over not only the northern islands but abroad to rule over many of the adjacent islands, is neither an anachronism nor an anachorism. But these claims of political hegemony must not be confused with the actual movement of goods. The status of goods deemed 'tribute' is often in the mind of the beholder.

Ferdon questions whether 'conquest' is the appropriate term for what Tongans were engaged in, suggesting that it may have been no more than a European interpretation of what was being described to them. He suggests that it was, rather, more a matter of battles won, or of tribute assessed, than of conquest and government or dominion.[25] Elizabeth Bott, whose work is based on extensive interviews with the late Queen Sālote (at whose behest the work was undertaken), acknowledges that in spite of the ideology of total centralisation, local chiefs exercised autonomy; they were, she writes, 'supreme in their own territory'. Paramount chiefs, their own rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, could not compel obedience to the subordinates they sent out to represent them; these newcomers had to win over the compliance of the local populations.[26]

Campbell concludes that within Tonga itself the degree of control exercised from the capital at Tongatapu was often tentative and frequently challenged by popular local leaders. Indeed, he argues that even if Tongan leaders chose to construe exchange items as tribute, Tongan traditions do not assert that there was any sort of direct government or supervision over local areas; there is, rather, significant evidence that the higher chiefs could accomplish nothing without the acquiescence of local leaders. And while at times there were agreed-upon ritual and secular figures reigning over all Tonga there was at other times a clearly articulated notion that there should be no Tu'i Tonga and that each of the three major island clusters should rule themselves.[27]

Kirch, who relies heavily upon the notion of a centralised maritime chiefdom, nevertheless acknowledges that any flow of tribute to the centre was balanced by redistribution of goods to the periphery.[28] Elsewhere, he cites an epigram from Niuatoputapu, an island directly to the north of the Vava'u cluster (and now a part of the modern Kingdom of Tonga): 'I am Niua which resists vessels. Tell Tonga the sea is forbidden to her.'[29]

In fact, the Tongan polity was much like others in the area, continually driven by tensions between pulls toward the strengths of centralised government and the countervailing freedoms of local rule. As I noted earlier, Gunson describes Tongan politics as an 'extension of a system operating throughout most of Polynesia which allowed a powerful chief, [called] a *toa* or *hau*, to obtain paramountcy or checkmate power until successfully challenged'. But he goes on to note that 'It would seem that

[25] Ferdon, *Early Tonga*, 255–6.

[26] Elizabeth Bott, 'Power and rank in the Kingdom of Tonga', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 90 (1982), 37, 160, 158.

[27] Campbell, *Island Kingdom*, 10, 68–70, 49.

[28] Patrick Kirch, *The Evolution of the Polynesian Chiefdoms* (New York 1984), 240.

[29] Kirch, *Niuatoputapu*, i.

each system had its inbuilt controls to maintain the balance of power once the *hau* died or was replaced'.[30] The division of central authority in Tonga — the tripartite reign of Tu'i Tonga, Tu'i Ha'atakalaua, and Tu'i Kanokupolu that so thoroughly confused Captain Cook — illustrates clearly this balance of power.[31] In Tonga, as in the rest of the Pacific Islands, ideas about and movements toward centralisation were continually balanced by notions and practices that correspond closely to what we now call the separation of powers and federalism.

Yap and the Yap Empire

If fewer writers have contributed to the literature concerning the nature and existence of the so-called Yap empire, its status is nevertheless much the same as Tonga's: many uncritically accept the empire's existence, even as close analysis makes it clear that there is a serious discrepancy between claims about its nature and the historical record of its operations.

Even setting aside for the moment the question of whether it was indeed an empire, 'Yap empire' is something of a misnomer. The main island of Yap (as opposed to the Federated States of Micronesia's Yap State, which includes most of the atolls to its east) is in fact a complex of densely clustered high islands, forming what is virtually a single, large (at least by local standards) island of approximately 100 square kilometres. Only a small portion of Yap's population — essentially Gatchepar village in the Gagil region or district — was directly involved in the so-called empire. Gatchepar's leaders traditionally used the goods they received from adjacent atolls in their political and economic relations with the rest of Yap proper. The empire *per se* included the peoples of all the inhabited atolls between Yap and Chuuk (Truk), extending across approximately 1,300 kilometres of the western Pacific. These were organised in a ranked hierarchy that descended in a general manner from west to east, with Ulithi, lying relatively close to Yap, serving as a majordomo of sorts. Alkire lists the constituent islands as Ulithi, Fais, Sorol, Woleai, Eauripik, Ifaluk, Faraulep, Elato, Lamotrek, Satawal, Puluwat, Pulusuk, Pulap, and Namonuito.[32] Yap lies in the northwest at 9.30°N, 138°E; Eauripik, the southernmost island, is at 6.42°N; Namonuito in the east is at 8.46°N, 150°E. There were occasional minor inflections in the geography of rank, with smaller atolls recognising the superior status of larger, nearby atolls that actually lie to their east, as in the case of Elato's lower rank than Lamotrek. At intervals, expeditions originating in the east would sail toward Yap, stopping sequentially at each island along the way, gathering canoes, voyagers, and goods (frequently termed 'tribute'), with Ulithi as the final rendezvous point before the final leg into Yap.

Several different strands of relationships linked the atolls with the main island of Yap.

> All of the outer islands, at specified intervals, were obliged to send objects of tribute (*pitigil tamol*) to the chief of Gagil District on Yap. In addition, outer island representatives presented religious gifts (*mepel*) to the head religious functionary of Gagil, and *sawei*

[30] Gunson, 'The Tonga–Samoa connection', 187.

[31] Bott, 'Power and rank', 11–55.

[32] Alkire, *Lamotrek*, 4.

> exchange occurred between the peoples of the outer islands and specific Yapese 'overlords'.[33]

For comparative purposes, these can all be subsumed into the *sawei*, inaccurately called tribute (see below). According to Sherwood Lingenfelter,

> This tribute is generally in the form of woven cloth called *bagiy* (lavalava), coconut rope, coconut oil and candy, coconut syrup, mats from pandanus, and shells of various types. In return these people receive canoes from the Yapese, turmeric, food, flint stone, and other Yapese resources.[34]

Informed general accounts, like Kenneth Brower's *A Song for Satawal*, explain that 'Dozens of tiny coral satellites once paid tribute to Yap's volcanic central cluster'.[35] In his work on Micronesian politics Norman Meller explains that parts of Yap 'exercised suzerainty over the low islands of the old Yap empire'.[36] Leonard Mason's summary of Micronesian ethnology describes the economic, political, and religious bonds established between Yap and atolls as far east as Puluwat: 'Ulithi acts as intermediary in this "empire" relationship by passing along orders from Yap and assisting the eastern islands in forwarding lineage gifts, tribute, and spirit offerings to Yap'.[37] In his history of the Pacific Islands, Kerry Howe writes that 'Yap was at the center of what is sometimes referred to as its "Empire" ... Leaders on Yap controlled and extracted tribute from their tiny far-flung colonial outposts'. The rulers of Yap 'maintained a form of sovereignty over, and extracted tribute from a widely scattered "empire" in the western Carolines'.[38]

Oliver writes that in view of the tribute paid to Yap and the deferential behaviour of the outer islanders,

> the atoll communities that participated in this large affair have come to be known as parts of the 'Yap Empire.' And so they were, but in a very peculiar and attenuated way. No one knows how the 'empire' originated — certainly not as the outcome of military conquest. Perhaps it was invented by the atoll dwellers.
>
> As a result of its mutual economic advantages the fiction of 'empire' was mutually sustained, even including a commonly held belief that spirits would punish any 'colonial' community that failed to pay tribute and rent.[39]

Elsewhere he refers to 'this bizarre "Empire"' and the 'so-called Yap Empire'.[40]

The premier source for descriptions of the Yap empire is William Lessa's work, which terms the network of relationships variously 'the Yap Empire', the 'Yap sphere of authority', and 'the political dominance ... exercised by the people of Yap ... over certain subject islands to the east'.[41] Terms such as 'tribute', 'rent',

[33] Ibid.

[34] Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Yap: Political Leadership and Culture Change in an Island Society* (Honolulu 1975), 147.

[35] Kenneth Brower, *A Song for Satawal* (New York 1983), 25.

[36] Norman Meller, *The Congress of Micronesia* (Honolulu 1969), 147.

[37] Leonard Mason, 'Suprafamilial Authority and Economic Process in Micronesian Atolls', in A.P. Vayda (ed.), *Peoples and Cultures of the Pacific* (Garden City 1968), 296.

[38] Kerry Howe, *Where the Waves Fall* (Honolulu 1984), 52, 63.

[39] Douglas Oliver, *Native Cultures of the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu 1989), 84–5.

[40] Oliver, *Oceania: Native Cultures of Australia and the Pacific Islands*, 580–1.

[41] William Lessa, 'The place of Ulithi in the Yap Empire', *Human Organization*, 9 (1950), 16–18; William Lessa, 'Ulithi and the outer native world', *American Anthropologist*, 52 (1950), 29; William Lessa, 'Myth and blackmail in the Western Carolines', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 65 (1956), 67.

'landlord–serf systems', and 'caste' run throughout his accounts. Lessa asserted these conclusions with considerable assurance, but it is important to understand that his descriptions of inter-island relations were in fact speculative reconstructions of patterns that had not been in operation for perhaps half a century and which largely reflected the outlook and experience of one population, the Ulithians, rather than the perspectives of the many peoples inhabiting atolls to the east of them.

Lessa suggested that the so-called empire was established through conquest and maintained that the atolls were 'blackmailed' through sorcery and economics. 'When the tributary islands show signs of weakening in their obeisance to their overlords, they are visited by magicians from Yap who perform rituals designed to bring on pests, disease, drought, and typhoons'.[42]

Lessa does, however, qualify a good many of his judgements. While Lingenfelter reports that the Yapese claim ownership of atoll lands, for instance, Lessa recognised that this was not the way the people of Ulithi viewed the matter: 'we should not define ownership of land in the *sawei* sense too literally'. The people he worked with, in fact, spoke of the relationship as meaning 'friend', and 'never referred to it as implying land ownership'.[43]

He explained, too, that

> *Sawei* is not tribute. It is hard to even justify calling it 'rent', for if the term were to be used in this manner we would be presented with the ludicrous situation of the landlord giving his serf more 'rent' than he receives; for, if anything, the 'child', in this case Ulithi, gets the better of the bargain, or, at least, comes out even.[44]

Lessa stressed, moreover, that Ulithi and the other atolls were not exploited by Yap, 'for what is received from Yap is considered more than ample repayment'. He concludes, 'In fact, taking the greater size and richness of Yap into account, it would seem that the balance is really in favor of the tributary islands'. According to elders who had participated in some of the last *sawei* voyages, 'their relations with Yap used to be felicitous. They did not come out second-best as far as their material wants were concerned.'[45] And although Yap claims suzerainty, he concludes, it 'has almost nothing to do with internal events' on the outer islands.[46]

Lingenfelter, who writes of Yap proper, rather than of the atolls, agrees. The Yapese leaders at the apex of this system 'gained and maintained political obligations and power, particularly through demonstrations of generosity and the concomitant obligations of reciprocity'. As a consequence, 'Carolinians invariably received greater economic benefits from the exchange than the Yapese'.[47]

It must be emphasised that although these 'tribute relations were a primary source of political capital' for the Yapese involved with them, there is an apparent anomaly. 'Ultimate authority' over the *sawei* system is given to 'a minor titled estate', not to a high-ranking chief. This makes sense, Lingenfelter says, only 'in the

[42] Ibid., 70–1.
[43] Lingenfelter, *Yap*, 147; Lessa, 'Ulithi and the outer', 41.
[44] Lessa, 'Ulithi and the outer', 32.
[45] Ibid., 43, 52.
[46] William Lessa, *Ulithi: A Micronesian Design for Living* (New York 1986), 35.
[47] Lingenfelter, *Yap*, 147.

context of the Yapese fear of too much centralized power'. Careful control over any wealth generated through participation in the *sawei* 'places an effective curb on the personal power of any high chief'.[48]

Alkire, whose outlook derives from his work among the peoples living on Lamotrek and other islands near the eastern terminus of the network, stresses that from their perspective *sawei* relations with Yap are only one of a nested series of exchange relations.

> Traditionally there are several levels of supra-island alliance in the central atolls — basically systems of interisland exchange. Three examples are the intra-atoll exchange system (*chulifeimag*) of Woleai atoll, the interisland 'hook' (*hu*) centered on Lamotrek, and the overseas system (*sawei*), which involved all of the inhabited islands of the region plus Yap.[49]

According to Alkire, the Carolinians saw two distinct aspects of their *sawei* relations with Yap. On the one hand, they believed that tribute payments were necessary; if they failed to make them, Yapese sorcery would devastate their islands with storms and typhoons. On the other, they recognised their islands' extreme vulnerability and viewed their relations with Yap in terms of environmental realities. Yap could provide them with needed respite and shelter, among other things, and a range of resources they would otherwise lack: 'The system was an insurance policy for survival'.[50]

It is worth noting that while most of the data describing the Tongan system come from Tonga proper and particularly from Tongatapu, the bulk of the Yap material comes from the reputedly subordinate outer islands. This key difference in the provenance of the Yapese material does not seem, however, to have consistent effects on the ways in which the network is portrayed. Lessa's accounts of the Ulithian perspective would appear to magnify the system's potency, while Alkire's perspective from Lamotrek emphasises the practical economic and ecological aspects of the relationship.

As Alkire noted, Lessa's work is 'primarily concerned with Ulithian–Yapese relationships' and thus 'deals with the political center of the network'. Alkire has described the disadvantages he encountered working on an island so near the outer perimeter of the system while employing a Ulithian interpreter. 'Because of the traditional status distinctions between islands of the Western Carolines, Lamotrekans were often reluctant to speak, frankly or at length, about political or religious concerns in the presence of a Ulithian'. After sending his interpreter home, Alkire was able to 'compare observations of political and religious beliefs as professed to a higher-status authority (the Ulithian) with those actually practiced'.[51]

At the traditional pivot-point of this network, the chief of Mogmog, on Ulithi, served as head of the entire *sawei* expedition when it arrived on Yap. His 'superior status' meant that 'any political or religious directives' sent from Yap to any of the atolls 'were always relayed through this Ulithian chief'. As a consequence, Ulithi

[48] Ibid., 152.
[49] William Alkire, *An Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Micronesia*, 2nd edn (Menlo Park 1977), 48–9.
[50] Ibid., 52.
[51] Alkire, *Lamotrek*, 4, 8–9.

continues to have the greatest investment in preserving the system. Because outer islanders dealt with Yap through Ulithi, and because in the current bureaucratic system much of the tone of this relationship remains in effect, Ulithi can, Alkire says, 'continue to influence the outer islands to its own advantage — if it so desires'.[52]

There are obvious tensions here. Outer islanders in the presence of Yapese or Ulithians are entirely prepared to perform in the subordinate ways expected of them; in their absence they act and speak somewhat differently. No matter what their personal viewpoints *vis-à-vis* the peoples of the superordinate islands, however, they recognise that resources, and authority over them, continue to flow to them from Yap via Ulithi. Whatever cultural and symbolic factors shape the more manifest qualities of these relationships, underlying material factors — issues of survival in a highly uncertain environment — are at bottom the determining factors.

Alkire is inclined to emphasise the interweaving of religious, political, and economic threads in the organisation of this network, but his account also stresses the overreaching importance of environmental factors in holding it together. Yap's superior position 'is not the result of mere conquest ... but rather of the greater abundance and reliability of its resources, which have given it prominence in a reciprocal system'.[53]

> Lamotrek, like most other small islands of the area, is reasonably fertile under normal conditions and its resources have often supported a fairly dense population and relatively complex local kinship, political, and religious systems. But destruction of resources has been sufficiently frequent for survival to have required that Lamotrek and other islands be linked by systems of mutual economic aid, which, in turn, have involved kinship and other ties.[54]

Lingenfelter makes much the same point: inhabitants of the atolls are 'bound to the people of Gacpar and Wonyan by ties of kinship, tribute, and economic trade and interdependence'.[55]

If the *sawei* were an empire in an ideological sense, Alkire reasons, the introduction of Christianity and the replacement of Yapese authority by colonial bureaucracies should have led to the disintegration of inter-island ties. But, he argues, the ties linking the islands together were not wholly religious or political; rather, they were based on economic interdependence. The continuing vitality of inter-island relations provides clear evidence that the 'basis of the system was not Yapese domination'. The system did not disintegrate when 'supernatural sanctions' were ended, and it must be, therefore, that 'the true binding forces of inter-island organisation, including the sanctions, would seem to lie outside the field of religion'; they are 'most important in the area of economic interdependence'.[56]

The impact of colonial rule on these inter-island relations has been mixed, as indeed colonial administration has had contradictory effects on most sorts of

[52] Ibid., 6, 174.
[53] Ibid., 2.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Lingenfelter, *Yap*, 147.
[56] Alkire, *Lamotrek*, 6, 145, 168–9.

Micronesian social relations. Some Yapese have explicitly argued that colonial governments' provision of economic aid to the outer islands served to undermine their former pre-eminence, tracing the beginnings of this decline back at least to German times.[57] Nevertheless, 'recognized channels of exchange and communication ... permitted, as far as the outer islands were concerned, a smooth transition and integration of foreign powers into the system'. Therefore, 'The colonial powers, for all practical purposes, have been substituted for the authority of Yap, especially on the level of economic exchange'.[58]

It would seem to be clear in the Carolines case, then, that there are at least two different orders of phenomena entailed in this so-called empire. Alkire stresses the intertwining of political, economic, and religious elements, and I have no reason to disagree with his analysis. For my purposes, however, it is equally important to consider the linkages between the material factors that keep the islands bound together despite every sort of religious and political change and the ideology of domination that accompanied these ties.

In concluding this examination of the *sawei*, it must be emphasised that its origins are rarely attributed to conquest. Alkire casts doubt on any notion that it could have been established by force, given the impossibility of marshalling forces strong enough to conquer and then bind together 20 islands spread across so vast an expanse of ocean, and its imbalances in favour of the atoll dwellers. He suggests that Yapese traded high island resources in return for access to the Carolinians' navigational skills, which enabled the Yapese to travel to Palau, where they quarried the stone used to manufacture Yap's famed 'stone money'.[59] Rosalind Hunter-Anderson and Yigal Zan dispute Alkire's premises and reasoning, but their own alternative explication of the *sawei*'s origins agrees with him in so far as it explains the outer islanders' participation without recourse to any notion of Yapese domination over them.[60] And Oliver comments that 'the Yapese may have had enough political strife at home to have discouraged them from wasting their energies on overseas adventures. (Although that rationale did not discourage the Tongans from doing so.)'[61]

Yap and Tonga Compared

It should be noted at the outset that accounts of the Yap sphere tend to come from anthropologists, while treatments of Tonga have more often been undertaken by historians.[62] At least one consequence of this difference is that in Yap we hear a

[57] Ibid., 151.

[58] Ibid., 173–4.

[59] William Alkire, 'Technical knowledge and the evolution of political systems in the central and western Caroline Islands of Micronesia', *Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, 1 (1980), 229–37.

[60] Rosalind Hunter-Anderson and Yigal Zan, 'Demystifying the *sawei*, a traditional interisland exchange system', *Isla*, 4 (1996), 1–45. The approaches of Alkire and Hunter-Anderson and Zan are compared at length in Glenn Petersen, 'On rank and conical clans in the Caroline Islands', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 108 (1999), 367–410.

[61] Oliver, *Oceania: Native Cultures of Australia and the Pacific Islands*, 583.

[62] The only historiography to examine in detail pre-colonial Micronesian sociopolitical organisation and indigenous political activities under colonial regimes is Hanlon's, which deals almost exclusively with Pohnpei, in the Eastern Carolines. David Hanlon, *Upon a Stone Altar* (Honolulu 1984).

good deal more from peoples occupying the lower end of the hierarchy. Thus, comparison of the two may not only add to our understanding of empire as a general phenomenon, but also enables us to grasp better some of the complexities of acquiescence and calculations of benefit that motivate participation in these seemingly asymmetrical relations. (Anthropologists have been forced to view the *sawei* through the lens of contemporary political dynamics — where the superordinate power has been the colonial regime, rather than Yap — and it might well be that the work of a competent historian, focused on earlier patterns of interaction, could substantially alter the picture we now have of relations among these islands.)

The differences. There are some very basic and substantive differences between the Tonga and Yap situations. Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa, though by no means identical, are all complex island groups with an array of resources that overlap extensively in type and extent. As a high island, Yap's resources are significantly different than those of the atolls. Tonga is situated between and virtually equidistant from Fiji and Samoa. Yap lies at the extreme end of the chain of islands incorporated in its sphere. Tongans played major, and in some cases pre-eminent, roles in navigation among the islands. The Yapese did little or none of the voyaging entailed in the *sawei* system.[63] Within the Tongan archipelago proper there was not only a well-developed system of social stratification but also a well-established ideology of centralisation. Although this ideology could by no means always be mapped onto observable social life, it seems to have been widely acknowledged in the abstract. Yapese social stratification, which in its ritual dimensions, at least, was strikingly complex, was, on the other hand, accompanied by strong resistance to any notion of centralisation. Gatchepar village, which lay at the apex of the *sawei* system, exercised no central authority with respect to the rest of Yap proper.

These considerable differences notwithstanding, the two cases otherwise share some striking similarities.

The similarities. We find in both instances ongoing exchange relations that appear in many but by no means all cases to be fairly equitable. These are overladen with webs of political ideology that simultaneously acknowledge and deny this state of affairs. This seemingly paradoxical exalting and diminishing of inequalities is in fact intrinsic to political culture in both regions, and, I believe, to the political cultures of most Pacific Islands societies.

In both cases there are well-established and wide-ranging linkages among the populations of the encompassed islands. These include ritual and political aspects, but I wish initially to stress the significance of economic relationships. These are voyaging peoples, descended from intrepid navigators who entered and settled vast expanses of uninhabited territory; they have continued to celebrate this heritage in both song and deed. Movement of goods and peoples in response to local and

[63] This is notable in that they did sail to Palau; cf. Alkire, 'Technical knowledge', and Hunter-Anderson and Zan, 'Demystifying', regarding Yapese navigational skills and their relevance to the origins of the *sawei*.

regional variations in resources and environmental exigencies has always been essential to survival in the region. The specific kinds of goods and their meanings and importance differ, to be sure, but it is necessary to understand that in some cases exchange of goods can serve primarily to maintain interpersonal connections, while in other cases interpersonal relations serve to keep exchange routes open; in some cases both alternatives may be in effect. And of course the character of these relations varies through time and circumstance.

These sorts of networks are distributed widely, if not ubiquitously, throughout the Pacific Islands region. In the Tonga and Yap cases, however, fully developed cultural, political, social, and ritual or religious ideologies *overlay* the economic exchange networks. Aspects of these are found, to be sure, in other instances, the Massim's *kula* ring being the most obvious example. But in Tonga and Yap, we confront layer upon layer of social action and ideology aligned in apparently parallel strata, so that the various sorts of linkages appear to reinforce and magnify, rather than mitigate or cancel out, one another.

In part, this phenomenon is a product of selective reporting.[64] As Alkire points out, the Carolinian atolls have been known throughout the colonial period through the mediating lens of Yap.[65] Outer islanders' attitudes toward higher-ranking members of the network shift markedly according to the presence or absence of those supposed superiors. Where we encounter expressions of subordination, their content and meaning are not at all as the more dominant partners are wont to believe, or at least claim, them to be. Likewise, Tongan leaders' claims that the flow of goods into Tonga was 'tribute' must be considered in light of 'the apparent tendency for Tongan traditions to have been elaborated to bolster the prestige of aristocratic rulers'.[66]

In both cases much of the manifest content of the imperial ideology is asserted by the superordinate party and although it may be publicly acquiesced in, ignored, or only mildly protested against by the subordinates, it is not at all necessarily believed by them nor integrated into their own self-images.

With a few possible exceptions, political ideologies in both of these regions (and in the Pacific Islands in general) tend to be organised around not only concepts of spiritual authority and military efficacy, but around a key economic practice, specifically, redistribution of material wealth. As a consequence, the movement of material goods, including both daily necessities and ritual or luxury items, is continual. At any given moment, leaders *may* find themselves in — or seek to be in — possession of more or better goods than their confreres, but it is also the case that these same individuals are likely to produce and give away as much if not more than others in their communities. Leaders in these societies are by definition supposed to be generous. They are unequal, that is, superior, in that they have more to give, but they are likely to be equal in what they actually manage to consume. In the Yapese case in particular, there seems to be near unanimous

[64] This is a point Bronwen Douglas has made regarding ethnological distinctions between Polynesia and Melanesia: 'Traditional leadership in South Pacific societies', *Journal of Pacific History*, 14 (1979), 2–27.

[65] Alkire, *Lamotrek*, 3.

[66] David Lewis, *We the Navigators* (Honolulu 1973), 282.

agreement, among both the participants and the ethnographers, that the politically subordinate outer islanders receive more from the superordinate Yapese than they give to them; this balance is repeated throughout the system (e.g. lower-ranked Satawalese carry away more than they bring with them to Lamotrek).

Long-standing notions of sociopolitical rank, widespread in the Pacific Islands, especially in Micronesia and Polynesia, play a very large part in this dynamic. While these notions operate *within* communities and societies in many or most parts of the Pacific, in these particular cases they are applied to inter-island relations as well. A theme fundamental to social relations in these societies is seniority. Within kin groups it is a matter of birth order; between groups it tends to be phrased in terms of priority of settlement. But it is equally the case that seniority is highly, if not entirely, malleable. The highest-ranking local group is much more likely to explain or assert the legitimacy of its pre-eminent position in terms of its priority of settlement than in terms of its material or numerical dominance.[67] Likewise, the leader of a kin group is likely to assert (or to be the beneficiary of others' assertions) that his position is his by seniority of descent and right of birth and therefore attended by spiritual legitimacy, rather than achieved via more mundane leadership skills.

We find that territorial expansion across an island, to other islets on an atoll, or to other islands in an island group or chain is almost always explained and legitimised in this fashion. In the Yap and Tonga cases, this process is simply expanded upon. Claims to suzerainty over adjacent islands are made in essentially the same ideological or rhetorical framework employed at home. This is most apparent in Tonga, where the political primacy of Tongatapu is invariably asserted, and sometimes established, over the island clusters to the north in almost exactly the same fashion as it is asserted outside Tonga. Indeed, the ethnohistorical literature does not make it at all clear whether claims over Fiji, Samoa, and other islands are advanced by 'Tonga' or by the dynasty now ensconced in Tongatapu.[68] In Yap the situation is even less clear. There, continual status competition and military rivalry among the communities of Yap proper seem to have resulted in the well-developed principle that no single community or alliance of communities should be able to dominate the others; nevertheless, the society's complex ideology of sociopolitical status was employed to explain Gatchepar's dominance over the atolls. That which was explicitly rejected at home was embraced abroad. This perhaps parallels the seemingly paradoxical republican imperialism of Athens, Rome, and the United States. Indeed, attempts to consolidate or shore up domestic strength via imperial ventures abroad are well-known political strategies.

To the extent that the successful leader and the successful lineage are seen or

[67] In the *Discourses*, dealing with ancient Rome, Machiavelli comments on 'how useful religion was in controlling the armies, in giving courage to the plebeians, in keeping men good, and in shaming the wicked'. Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Oxford 1997), 51 (Book 1, ch. 11).

[68] Compare this with Machiavelli's argument that a tyrant who conquers foreign territory must keep it subject to himself rather than to his own city. To make it subject to his city would only strengthen it in its resistance to him. The tyrant's advantage lies in promoting disunity by keeping possessions directly subject to him. Ibid., 114 (Book 2, ch. 2).

thought to be drawing in part upon supernatural acquiescence and/or support, they are recognised to have *mana*. This is of course a common, shared precept in the Pacific, but it is hardly unknown or unusual in the rest of the world. A considerable amount of anthropological theory notwithstanding, I do not interpret the sacred character of Pacific Islands chiefs as being of a different order than the Chinese emperor's Mandate of Heaven or Western European notions of kingship, both of which depend upon adequate, if not excellent, performance as manifestations of supernatural support and thus legitimacy.[69] There is nothing unusual, then, in the role supernatural sanctions play in underpinning either the rule of Tongan chiefs or Gatchepar's claims to suzerainty over the atolls. I am not debating the spiritual efficacy of these claims upon the supernatural, nor their cultural import. They play a central role in sociopolitical life in these communities, to be sure. Nevertheless, the deterioration or disappearance of significant elements of these supernatural underpinnings does not seem to have brought about the downfall of either the Tongan or Yap systems.

Expansionism remained a major concern, if not necessarily a historical reality, in both Tonga and neighbouring island groups well after the end of any claims to quasi-divinity or supernatural authority on the part of Tonga's ruling Tupou dynasty. Indeed, some of the evidence for claims to Tonga's alleged imperial status derives from the placement of Tongan Christian missionaries in adjacent islands.[70] Alkire emphasises that the *sawei* system did not disintegrate when 'supernatural sanctions' were ended, and that 'the true binding forces of inter-island organisation, including the sanctions, would seem to lie outside the field of religion'.[71]

Moreover, significant cultural elements of these systems continue to organise important aspects of social life in both regions. Kaeppler describes the continuing importance of these linkages in Tongan ceremonial practices: 'At high-ranking Tongan weddings today Fijian and Samoan objects are conspicuous even though neither party is Fijian or Samoan'.[72] In the Carolines, the underlying ecological and sociopolitical characters of these ties 'still prevail'; they 'still govern most present-day inter-island political behavior'.[73] Alkire attributes the 1950s conversion to Christianity of most of the Lamotrek–Elato–Satawal population to the influence of the *sawei* system: 'Since the channels of traditional political organisation are still active and imperialist, the attempt at conversion succeeded as soon as the effort was directed at them'.[74]

In short, we find a substantial range of fundamental similarities in the Tongan and Yapese cases. In both, a well-developed exchange network of considerable antiquity is overlain by political and cultural practices and ideologies. There is little

[69] 'The *baraka*, *mana*, or *charisma* (to use terms from other cultures) of the successful actor thus consisted both in the quality of personality that commanded good fortune and in the quality that dealt effectively and nobly with whatever fortune might send; and the Roman term for this complex characteristic was *virtus*'. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton 1975), 37.

[70] Campbell, *Island Kingdom*; Gunson, 'The Tonga–Samoa connection'.

[71] Alkire, *Lamotrek*, 169.

[72] Kaeppler, 'Exchange patterns', 251.

[73] Alkire, *Lamotrek*, 145.

[74] Ibid., 168–9.

or nothing in either the exchange relations or the ideological framework that is unique or even peculiar to these cases. What is remarkable is the integration of the two realms. This appears in both cases to be the result of fairly commonplace political relations being expanded in new ways. That is, political programmes that are ordinarily found operating only within islands or at most extended only to adjacent islands have in these instances been extended far overseas. It is not in the existence of the exchange relations nor in the political relations themselves that the roots of these so-called empires are to be found but in their unusual juxtaposition.

In their analysis of island exchange networks Per Hage and Frank Harary are over-reliant on accounts that emphasise the rhetoric of political domination, taking at face value, for instance, claims that the *sawei* is tribute and that Yap dominates the other islands. They not only directly equate the Carolines with Western Polynesia and suggest that such an approach 'demystifies the Yapese Empire', but suggest there were empires in the Marshalls and Kiribati as well.[75] This sort of embellishment and overstatement is paralleled by Judith Huntsman and Antony Hooper's references to a Tokelau 'empire'.[76] Obviously, the concept has its limitations.

I am not prepared to hypothesise, at this juncture, about the circumstances which led to the unusual developments in Yap and Tonga.[77] Rather, I wish to consider them now in a broader comparative perspective. There is, it seems, little in these cases that lies outside the normal range of political developments in world history.

The Yap and Tonga Empires Considered

Were the Tongan and Yapese spheres empires? Any answer to this question is contingent upon what one means by 'empire'. In simple fact, there is no way to render the term precisely. It necessarily means different things in different eras, geographical settings, and intellectual arenas. Some of the greatest political thinkers in the European tradition have grappled with these issues, including Thucydides and Machiavelli — imperial expansion is, after all, hardly peculiar to modern history.[78] Nor has it been limited to Eurasian powers, as Philip Mason amply demonstrates.[79] This is hardly the place to undertake any substantial analysis of the

[75] Hage and Harary, *Island Networks*, 124, 137.

[76] Judith Huntsman and Antony Hooper, *Tokelau: A Historical Ethnography* (Honolulu 1996), 180.

[77] I would note that the high frequency with which typhoons strike the Caroline atolls has forced their peoples to seek at least occasional assistance from a high island, that political disorganisation of Chuuk Lagoon communities probably made them a less attractive destination, and that the prevailing winds blow toward Yap, making the more highly organised inward voyage less strenuous.

[78] In *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues: 'When a state accustomed to live in freedom under its own laws is acquired, there are three ways of keeping it: the first is to destroy it; the second is to go live there in person; the third is to let it continue to live under its own laws, taking tribute from it, and setting up a government composed of a few men who will keep it friendly to you. Such a government, being the creature of the prince, will be aware that it cannot survive without his friendship and support, and it will do everything to maintain his authority. A city which is used to freedom is more easily controlled by means of its own citizens than by any other, provided one chooses not to destroy it.' Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York 1981), 24 (ch. 5).

[79] Philip Mason, *Patterns of Dominance* (London 1970), 66–80.

concept's possible meanings. I direct the interested reader to Michael Doyle's *Empire*, whence I draw the following useful summary.

Doyle observes that societies in an empire are characterised by 'less-than-full integration of social interaction and cultural values — the imperial government is a sovereignty that lacks a community'.

> The formal control of the effective sovereignty of a subordinate society involves controlling its political decision-making, a complex process with many points of influence. The social, economic, and cultural environments of the metropole penetrate those of the periphery through metropolitan forces and actors.[80]

Effective control of a subordinated community need not, Doyle maintains, require an official presence nor all the trappings of formal imperialism. 'Informal imperialism', as it is often called, can achieve the same results as formal imperialism; 'the difference lies in the process of control, which informal imperialism achieves through the collaboration of a legally independent (but actually subordinate) government in the periphery'. Between formal and informal there lie degrees and varieties of domination and subordination that must be considered. And then there is what I consider to be the most telling aspect:

> Differing weights of power distinguish imperial control from suzerainty and dependence. Having already encountered the form with the reality (in formal empires) and the reality without the form (in informal empires), we should not be surprised to find the form without the reality.[81]

'Suzerainty' is what Doyle calls those cases in which the form of imperial control is belied by a reality that is something less substantial. To these he adds the matter of duration. Is the periphery's acquiescence 'a temporary tactic adopted by an independent polity or a surrender, however reluctant, to foreign control?' Empire, Doyle concludes, is a relationship 'in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society'. This can be accomplished 'by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence'.[82]

Two of Doyle's points are of particular relevance in the Tonga and Yap cases. First, there are the multiple strands of relations that shape imperial connections. Secondly, the tension between form and reality: might these be cases of what Doyle calls suzerainties?

It is precisely this composite web of social, cultural, economic, and political ties that makes analysis of any empire inherently contingent. Even in the most highly organised empires these threads do not run on consistently parallel courses, building neatly upon and reinforcing one another. Upon close inspection we find them to be cross-grained, sporadic, and often contradictory. In what I would consider to be a common case under conditions that shape what are called maritime trading empires — whether those of ancient Greece, Victorian Britain, or perhaps Tonga and Yap — any given colony may serve primarily as an outpost,

[80] Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca 1986), 36, 37.
[81] Ibid., 38, 42.
[82] Ibid., 42–3, 45.

or, as Micronesia's islands are so frequently termed, a 'stepping stone'. Such an outpost might well prove to be an economic drain on the metropole, even while contributing substantially to political successes that provide the metropole with ultimate economic gains. Or we might take the case of contemporary France, which maintains an informal empire of sorts over its former colonies, as well as retaining a number of outright colonial possessions. It does so largely to promote itself as a world power, especially as a major cultural force to be reckoned with.[83]

To the extent that these many sorts of strands existed — in whatever variants they were found — in the relations between Tonga and Yap and the other islands in their spheres, it is probably fair to say that these cases resemble many of the other entities we call empires. That is, it can be argued that the kinds of sophisticated social, political, and economic webs that characterise what have been called empires down through the ages also existed in the Pacific Island world.

I am, however, more concerned with the second point I have drawn from Doyle's synthesis. This inclines me to hesitate before terming these cases empires. Acknowledging that tensions between form and reality are essential and nearly ubiquitous aspects of the human social condition, we might ask if these specific contradictions are of a sort that is characteristic of empires — or are they more like something else? In fact, the latter interpretation is at first face the more likely one. While the rhetoric of hierarchically organised power and authority is essential to nearly all the polities of Polynesia and Micronesia, the reality is something else entirely.

It is not clear that chiefs in *most* of these island societies could by the authority of office, as opposed to the force of specific personalities or the demands of particular circumstances, actually impose their wills upon their peoples. But this in no way reflects upon the readiness of either the chiefs or the people to insist upon the chiefs' rights and abilities to do so. That is, it is in nearly everyone's interest to celebrate a chief's power and authority, but may be in the interests of very few to comply with them.

If these sorts of political relations are utterly contingent within the core territories of these societies, then they must have been — given the distances, available technologies, and cultural predispositions — even less certain in their peripheries. Peculiarly enough, the limited capacity of the centre to actually do that which it asserts it is able to do may in fact provoke people in the periphery to enlarge the claims they make about what the centre can do for — and thus to — them. What is the point, after all, of laying claim to an ally who is incapable of providing adequate support? And so, whether the dominant-subordinate relationship is truly as it is portrayed or not, it would appear to be in everyone's interests to praise it, to proclaim its efficacy, and to celebrate its *mana*.

Finally, we must acknowledge that there is little or nothing peculiar about these cases. We see in both Tonga and Yap relatively distinct spheres, which I have been describing as economic and ideological, that overlay one another. Hugh Elton's

[83] Steven Hook, 'Self-interest and foreign economic policy: a cross-national perspective', *International Studies Notes*, 19:1 (1994), 26–36.

discussion of Rome's imperial frontiers stresses the numerous sorts of spheres that overlapped.

> In the Roman world there were a number of overlapping frontier zones. These frontier zones might be defined by four groups of people: Roman soldiers, Roman civilians, local natives and barbarians. Each group had their own *boundaries of different types: political, social, ethnic, religious, linguistic, economic and military*. These could, but did not have to coincide with those of other groups. It was this mixture of boundaries which together made the frontier.[84]

Like other imperial powers, the Romans made use of local networks of authority whenever possible. Imposition of imperial rule did not necessarily disrupt pre-existing social patterns nor did everyone in a society undergoing incorporation into the empire necessarily live within the realm of Roman authority. This conclusion prompts Elton to pose a question: 'If one were dropped by parachute in the first century AD into what is now Czechoslovakia, would one be able to tell if one was in the Roman Empire or not?' His answer is no.[85] The implication is fairly clear: 'When the Romans took over barbarian territory, the archaeology could show little change in character'.[86] I am not suggesting that the existence of empires is an entirely subjective matter, but our interpretation of the evidence undoubtedly tends to be. The simple fact is that the closer we look, the more difficult it may be to identify an empire.

IN HIS STUDY of Rome's imperial expansion into the Hellenistic world, Erich Gruen argues persuasively that the Romans of the Republic consistently resisted imposing their own political institutions in the course of their early relations with the Hellenes. But as Greeks opportunistically drew Rome steadily into their own local disputes, an empire was forged out of both Greek and Roman practices.[87] In a similar vein, Jack Greene observes that the notion that empires are for the most part built outward from the centre is an artifact of historical perceptions that treat the late 19th-century imperial expansion of powerful national states with vast administrative resources as typical of all empire building.[88] But, he argues, these late modern coercive models are inappropriate to the understanding of early modern empires, where 'authority structures have been created not strictly by imposition from the top down or the center out but through an elaborate process of negotiation among the parties involved'.[89] It can be difficult, if not impossible, to sort out what has been inflicted upon a 'colonised' or 'dominated' people from what grows at the intersection of two (or more) political cultures.

If we recognise the contingent and negotiated character of imperial processes,

[84] Hugh Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Bloomington 1996), 5 (emphasis added).

[85] Ibid., 8, 2. Elton notes that he first pondered this question at an earlier time — that is, the reference to the combined Czech and Slovak nation-state is not an anachronism.

[86] Ibid., 9.

[87] Erich Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley 1984).

[88] Jack Greene, *Negotiated Authorities* (Charlottesville 1994), 1–2.

[89] Ibid., 4.

then we can, perhaps, come to terms with the simultaneous existence of the imperial claims being put forward by central authorities in places like Yap and Tonga and the continued autonomy of the communities over which these claims are, or were, asserted. The rhetoric of empire, the importance of economic interactions, and the facts of government are not — indeed, I would argue, cannot be — identical. There are many claims to, and about, empire put forward both by participants and by scholars. It may prove more instructive, however, to view empire as an only marginally definable but very widespread phenomenon.

Moreover, in the island Pacific this perspective can help us appreciate the ways in which indigenous processes of political expansion and contraction shaped the contexts in which these societies adapted to the 19th-century imposition of colonial rule. That is, the range of collaboration, co-operation, and resistance we see in the region's colonial history derives in significant measure from aspects of local political theory and practice developed in the course of ongoing political processes indigenous to the islands. When Europeans arrived on the scene, with their histories of imperial expansion, their technologies of domination, and their lusts for superordination, they did not encounter peoples who were unfamiliar with the possibilities of empire. Rather, they found populations who were not only committed traders but already possessed fairly sophisticated concepts concerning the possibilities of overlordship, well-developed commitments to making use of it, and skills and tactics for resisting it.

The Tonga and Yap spheres are cases in point. It is clear that astute political actors were already seeking effective alliances and all the benefits that accompany them. European dominance was brought about in many ways, but the active participation of the local populations involved was certainly first among them. In pursuing alliances, they knew what they were doing. They drew upon a long history of indigenous political theory. If they did not always succeed, it was for lack of neither effort nor insight.[90] Machiavelli, after all, spelled out strategies for effective resistance to foreign rule for all in Europe to study. His own beloved Florence and Italy, in whose interests he crafted *The Prince*, suffered foreign domination long after he elucidated the steps necessary to cast it off. Perhaps indigenous political theory in the Pacific Islands should be more closely studied and appreciated, and accorded some of the respect ordinarily reserved by Europeans to Europeans.

I am led finally to conclude that for comparative purposes it is fair to describe the frameworks of relationships spreading outward from Yap and Tonga as species of empire. Although they resemble such modern empires as those of the Habsburgs, Romanovs, and Ottoman Turks in only the most marginal ways, and bear even less resemblance to the late 19th-century European overseas empires, they nevertheless appear to fall within a range of world historical political processes that establish 'empire' as something considerably more than what it has come to mean in most contemporary usage. Here, where the mutual seeking of alliances intersects with the ambiguous rhetoric of superordinance, we find something more than just complex

[90] These varieties of indigenous political theory were by no means restricted to Tonga and Yap; they are merely made more fully manifest in the ideologies of empire.

and long-standing exchange or trade relations. I refer to this rhetoric as ambiguous because it is possible for claims of superiority to be asserted on cultural grounds (while political ascendance is explicitly denied) in such a manner that imperial relations are simultaneously asserted and denied, thereby enabling interested parties to marshal evidence in support of almost any imaginable position regarding the existence or nonexistence of an empire.

This is certainly what we encounter in the cases at hand. To speak of either Yap or Tonga as empires, without specifying that the term does not imply much that characterises modern empires, may serve more to confuse than to clarify. But to deny that these complexes of economic, political, and cultural relations bore some salient similarities to other world historical empires, whether in the Americas, Africa, Asia, or Europe, would be to suggest — quite erroneously — that the indigenous societies of Oceania existed outside the realm of world historical experience.

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ABSTRACT

The indigenous social–political–economic spheres whose nexuses were located, respectively, in Yap and Tonga, and which included adjacent islands and archipelagoes, are frequently referred to as 'empires'. This work summarises and examines historical and ethnographic data on these two cases, and then compares them both with one another and with more general concepts of empire. While stressing that these instances only remotely resemble modern empires, it concludes that for broader comparative purposes the Yap and Tonga spheres can usefully be termed empires.