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FOLDER BIKINI - A Study of the Bikini People

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CHANGES IN DECISION-MAKING IN A DISPLACED MICRONESIAN COMMUNITY

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In 1957, after a decade of studying the changing culture of the ex- Bikini Marshallese, I predicted the democratization of their traditional authority patterns and the fractionation of matrilineal groupings whose corporate holdings of land on Bikini had validated the exercise of power in management of community affairs. I also detected at that time certain trends in education, agricultural production, mission activity, and outmarriage which appeared likely to support such changes in the power structure on Kili Island, the residence then and now of this displaced community.

This past summer, six years later, I was quite unprepared to discover that although living standards have improved markedly and although a notable broadening of world view has been achieved, the power structure in actual operation reflects spectacularly those authoritarian, lineage-based traditions formerly operative on Bikini. The main purpose of this paper will be to suggest in a tentative analysis of my 1963 field data some explanation for this unexpected development. Particular attention will be paid to the process by which decisions affecting the whole community are reached.

The authority system functioning on Bikini in 1946 prior to resettlement of the community was founded upon land ownership by ten ranked corporate groups organized as matrilineages. The heads of these ten lineages, each come to office in hereditary succession as younger brother or eldest sister's son, were known as alabs. The highest of them was also the atoll chief, or iroij. Tribute in goods and services flowed upward from land users to their alabs and from alabs to the iroij. The atoll supported a considerably isolated and

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inbred society whose members had only limited experience of foreign trade, administration, and mission activity. The following hypothesis is advanced for comparison with modifications in the power structure at later dates: In a state of relatively little change, the traditional authority represents an approximate solution to the leadership requirements of economic, social, and political interaction within the community.

At the suggestion of American administrators the ten alabs organized as a Council, headed by a Magistrate, to which post the Bikinians elected their iroij. Resettlement on Rongerik Atoll brought no attempt to subdivide the new land among the several lineages because all believed their stay on Rongerik was only temporary. Two years of subsistence exploitation of the atoll's food resources proved the new site to be entirely inadequate. In the crisis that loomed, the Council emerged as a truly collective authority serving the community at large. Special interests of alabs and lineages were for the time being set aside. This change may be accounted for in the following hypothesis: Under conditions of extreme deprivation threatening group survival, the traditional authority at the community level will assume the normal functions of customary subgroups in the interest of maximizing collective action for the welfare of the community as a whole.

Ex-Bikinians, resettled on Kili Island in late 1948, set about making an adjustment to what is now their permanent home. In 1954 they finally partitioned the island Owing to the small size and different topography of Kili Island they could not replicate the landholdings on Bikini Atoll. Instead the Council devised a plan by which it allocated Kili acreage according to the number of persons in each of the twenty households on the island. All former heads of Bikini landowning lineages were included among the Kili land alabs, but now they represented bilateral households in respect to land. Upon demand,

an equal number of new alabs were granted independent holdings which would not have been recognized earlier on Bikini. Most of these new alabs were younger brothers or eldest sisters' sons who in effect were not willing to wait until their traditional predecessors had vacated office.

The Council, however, failed to modify its membership to admit the new alabs. Political authority now drew no sustenance from land titles on Kili but continued to express the traditional power derived from lineage landholdings on Bikini that were no longer accessible except in dimming memory. A non-traditional elite, composed of schoolteacher, health aid, and storekeeper, was allowed to attend Council meetings as resource persons in the occupational areas represented.

It was this latter development, along with an evident frustration among the new alabs in being excluded from Council deliberations, that led me to predict a decline in traditional Bikini authority. I assumed the probability of change as expressed in the following hypothesis: <u>Under conditions of rapid change, accompanied by manifold opportunities for improving the standards of living, an emergent leadership founded on new skills or other achieved status may successfully challenge the traditional authority, especially if the latter interposes cultural or social obstacles to realization of those opportunities</u>.

Now, in 1963, the Council still consists of ten alabs, all in the Bikini tradition. Five are replacements in positions vacated by death, two being younger brothers and three the sons of the deceased. (These instances of father-son succession are in accord with Bikini custom since each of the deceased was the sole survivor of his matrilineage.) The Council meets on the first Monday of every month, convened by the Magistrate (who is still iroij) to discuss community issues and reach decisions by consensus or, failing that, by majority vote. Opinions of other adult males and of women are not sought

except when the Council asks the non-traditional elite for advice in the area of their specialities.

On the surface the scene looks very much like that which I had observed in 1957. But I had been on Kili less than a week this year when I began to hear that not uncommonly the decisions arrived at reasonably in council were later overruled unilaterally either by the Magistrate, acting very much the iroij, or by his "executive officer" who holds the public office of Policeman and stands next in line to succeed the iroij. The Kili community is a village in two sections; the Magistrate (iroij) is top man in the eastern section and the Policeman (heir apparent) is top man in the western section, deferring only to the iroij in matters involving the entire community.

Before proceeding to an explanation of this apparent revival of a system of traditional authority, let us examine briefly a few community activities and look at the way in which decisions are being made.

(1) Large marine fishes like the tuna are still brought to the iroij. One of his lieutenants divides the fish into two parts which are further divided within the two sections of the village and their constituent households. The authority of distribution continues in the Bikini tradition. My parting gift to the community in September, a sizeable assortment of soap, cigarettes, and chewing gum, was divided in the same manner.

(2) Twice each year since 1957 ex-Bikinians have received nearly $5,000 from the Trust Territory administration, this being the interest on a $300,000 trust fund established in partial payment for their land rights at Bikini. This amount is now divided among some 450 persons, about of 150 of whom live elsewhere in the Marshalls, largely the result of out-marriage. All claim some kin tie with the Bikini landholding lineages. The Council determines policy and supervises distribution of the money, but in several test cases

this summer, it became evident that the Magistrate is the real authority. When I suggested that all Kili men debate the possibility of restricting the payment to Kili residents in order to reserve a larger per capita sum for those attempting to make a suitable adjustment to Kili, they spent several long nights in discussion and finally decided to continue payment to all Bikini heirs regardless of present residence. This was a spectacular validation of the authority of iroij and lineage alabs; the authority system represented by the land at Bikini still prevails in this activity.

(3) As previously described, Kili land was partitioned in 1954--all except the land in the village where the residences are concentrated. My questioning this summer about rights to village land uncovered disputes about ownership of trees newly planted near the houses. I was told that the Council had authority to settle these disputes but had taken no action. My inquiry prompted the Magistrate (as iroij?) to lay out boundaries among the houses in his section of the village; the Policeman did the same in the other section, and I mapped the results. The Council as a decision-making group never once entered into the matter. Although landowning groups are no longer lineage-oriented, several cases of succession are in dispute between younger brother or sister's son and the children of the deceased alab. In at least two cases the Magistrate stated that a younger brother should succeed, but he took no action to enforce his opinion.

(4) Payment to the land alab (both old and new) of a share of the copra produced on a landholding continues at Kili in 1963 as it had at Bikini. But the alab is no longer obligated to share his land receipts with the iroij. In sharp, contrast, the interest payment is subject to levy by the ten alabs, and part of this is passed on to the iroij. Handicraft made for export is a curious compromise; no regular levy is made although the coconut leaves

employed come from the [illegible]. Each woman on her own initiative may share her profit with her alab, and he may pass some of this on to his superior, but he is under no obligation to do so.

(5) A community store, established in 1953 as part of a community development project, had by 1957 amassed a working capital of almost $5,000. It is now practically bankrupt, due in part to losses over which the community had no control, but also because the limited store funds have been used at times as a Council treasury. The Council is supposed to supervise the store operation, but in fact the Magistrate or the Policeman tell the storekeeper what to do. In 1957 several small groups and individuals sought to establish retail operations, buying their inventories at wholesale rate from the Council store. This appeared at the time to be the start of small business enterprise divorced from community authority, but it has turned out to be a loosely organized ration system utilized by the Council when a distribution of scarce trade imports is required. All of the villagers are assigned to one or another of eleven retails; when food is scarce the people buy only from their assigned retail. The Magistrate makes this decision in times of scarcity, and the Council storekeeper helps to enforce it. Only one retailer has held out for an independent operation, and has been so aggressive that he has got away with it thus far, although he and the Magistrate are reported to have come close to physical conflict in the past year.

(6) The Kili church lies outside the jurisdiction of the Council or Magistrate. For years it has been organized along lines laid down by the Association of Marshallese Churches (Protestant) with a pastor, three deacons, a Committee of Seven, and auxiliary groups according to sex or degree of church commitment. In matters of smoking, drinking, dancing, and extramarital sex relations, the congregation and its officers enforce the church tabus rigorously

(even the Magistrate has been expelled from the Church for smoking). The pastor and one of the deacons are on the Council, but these roles seemed to be completely separate.

Where did I go wrong in my 1957 prediction? Or what has happened since then to alter the expected course of events? One obvious possibility is that I failed to assess the situation correctly in 1957. You will have to take my word for it that the old authority system was not then as effective as it is now. However, let's see what the general situation of Kilians was in 1957 and again in 1963, and see if there is any explanation in the differences.

In 1957 the Trust Territory's community development project on Kili was coming to a close after three profitable years in material improvement of the island. The project manager, a trained Marshallese, was still on the island. Kilians had two-way radio communication with district headquarters, and a small ship was assigned specifically to servicing the island's trade needs. Both of these services were part of the development program. Plantings of taro, breadfruit, pandanus, and bananas were coming into production, and the Council store was in good shape. The interest payment from the trust fund had just begun. The new land alabs were flexing their muscles in their new-found independence, and the non-traditional elite, especially the schoolteacher and health aid, had outside support from the Trust Territory. The first graduates of the local elementary school were gaining further education at district headquarters. I judged then that this displaced community was no worse off than any other Marshallese population.

Now we come to 1963. On the more favorable side, returned students have contributed to a more sophisticated way of island living. The local plantings are in good production and offset to some extent the present shortage of imported foods. The really bright light is the regular interest payment which is now the

only certain source of monetary income. On the darker side, the development project was terminated in 1958, the ship was lost in a typhoon about the same time, and Kilians were badly scared by the wave which washed over large parts of the island. The radio has not been in operation for over a year and the community is without radio contact except by means of a privately owned transistor receiver. The store, as already noted, is nearly bankrupt. Owing to a general economic depression in the Marshalls, especially in interisland transport, the Kilians have tons of copra rotting in the warehouse and are critically short of the trade goods they have come to depend on. Disputes have begun over use rights and succession in the Kili land system because of uncertainties about how the new system should work. There has been an alarming natural increase in the Kili population which causes the people to view the island as much too small. The per capita receipts from the interest payment are for the same reason getting smaller and smaller each year.

In this changed situation the following hypothesis is proposed to explain what has happened: Under conditions of rapid change, accompanied by marked stress in economic affairs, the emergent leadership may suffer a setback through a revival of traditional authority, especially if the emergent leaders are not sufficiently organized or skilled to cope with the new problems.

An undercurrent of opposition to the traditional authority persists but is powerless to act. Although the Magistrate is very much concerned about increasing criticism of his rule, he and the traditional system he represents are the only means to security for the time being. Perhaps the largest single factor contributing to this revivalism is the complete dependence of the community on the interest payment which in its legal basis recalls the past vividly.

What of the future? I make bold to predict that as the general economic situation in the Marshalls improves, with assured ship contact between Kili and the rest of the archipelago, and as the new land system on Kili is freed of the "bugs" which presently plague its operation, the formerly emergent leadership will be in position once more to challenge the traditional authority. Certainly with the death of the present leaders (the two Big Men are now in their sixties) the old system will be considerably weakened. The younger generation no longer remembers the ties of allegiance which applied on Bikini between lineages and alabs, and are now guided in this only by the memories of the oldsters.

One lesson I have learned from this continuing study of a community undergoing change is the necessity to undertake field study at periodic intervals in order to learn how changing conditions affect the predictions of change from an earlier investigation. It is about as close to a laboratory situation as we can come in the study of this kind of problem.

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