Chiefs, what they are : a criticism of some aspects of archeological reconstructions ot the Pacific Islands' past.

This essay has been prompted by reading an archeological monograph on Kosroe:

Cordy, Ross, *The Lelu Stone Remains (Kosrae; Micronesia, 1971-1081* Historical and Archeological Research,. Asian and Pacific Archeology Series, n° 10, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu 1993.

This excellent piece of archeological research is welcome, as it fits in a slowly growing corpus of knowledge about the maritime towns in Pohnpei state, Federated States of Micronesia, of which the better known are the *Nan Madol* remains in Ponape. It is unhappily marred by a tentative reconstruction of the old Kosroean society. The author makes use as method of a critical assesment of the published information, mostly written by authors having been through the island a few days or a few weeks in the course of last century, at a time where people still dwelt in the *Lelu* township proper, today abandoned to researchers and conservationists.

The conclusions of the author thus make use of all the ideas then in vogue about what was supposed to be a feudal sociéty, each description being based on the different models of the Western landed aristocracies of the time.

This method cannot be seen as valid. Navy men, missionaries and merchants of last century had no critical capacity towards the tenets of their own culture. They believed they were meeting them, in a way or another, everywhere, if in what they considered as being a more primitive and pristine state. Rare were those wo asked even some of the quite relevant questions Captain James Cook did manage to note down in his logbooks. They had no capacity to understand or speak the vernacular language. Communications were in the beginnings of the pidgin which would reign later over the whole region.

The Kosreans knew the signification of the words they used. The white men did not. Taking such visitors word for the factual signification of the concepts they thought they could propose brings one straight into extraordinary simplifications. These authors made a few good observations, but they were constantly mixing fact with fancy, and offering their own interpretatins as if these were fully fledged facts

Authors are not entirely to blame. At the same period, those persons which were deemed to be «high chiefs», or «kings», have consistently tried to impress their European visitors with their God handed function as the fundamental owners of the land. If the western views were in great part illusory, this attempt by the island aristocracies to be recognised by the white man as the sole masters of the land was an attempt, as pragmatic as it was general, to manipulate the western world and thus gain great economic advantage for themselves. This thesis will be later be translated into fact in the very words of the Tongan Royal Constitution.

Another aspect is today's reluctance by the Pacific Islanders to correct the white men's false assumptions about their society and their culture. They seem not to mind, and even to encourage them at times, as if they found this great fun. There are a few other reasons for this smiling passivity. Being brought to the level of 16 th century aristocratic societies in Europe has been a matter

of growing prestige with Europeans, who tend to have romantic views of this past and often find their own modern society uninteresting. This romantic appeal, best shown over the years by the behaviour of Scottish officers of the Crown's, has long in effect been a protection for the islands' people. It takes over today a new aspect. The less the white men know what is really happening inside the islands's societies, the less they are prone to interfere. And if they do, they miss the point entirely and obtain no results, which is what the people want. Hiding behind all the imaginary ideas about the Pacific, they thus can act exactly as they please.

The description of the Kosroe feudal society moves me to oppose to Cordy's the analysis of a well alive Pacific islands society having been classified in the same category and parallel to it in so many ways that it also boasts of the existence of a «chiefly language» : *Qene Miny,* as opposed to *Qene Drehu*, the common language of the island of Lifu, as shown first by the British pioneer linguist Sidney H. Ray in 1992.

I have been studying for the last half of a century the Loyalty Islands' societies and cultures; the more on the island of Lifu (in French Lifou : this name having been given to the island by *London Missionary Society* Samoan evangelists who apparently had it from their own tradition of canoe voyages), the largest one and the more populated. My wife comes from it, belonging on her mother's side to the Wahnyamala chiefly lineage, Kejany village, in the Lösi district, being linked by marriage to the Haeweng chieftainship in Jozip (and through them to the Aju chieftainship in Nimaha, Fayawe district, Ouvéa island), to the Waehnya line of chiefs in Xepenehe, Wetr district, plus to the Bula chiefs in Mu and the Naisselines in Nece (Mare island) through the more modern marriage links of the Wright family of island traders of British descent. On her father's side, she is linked to the Api Zeula of Drueulu, Gaica district, and on Ouvéa island, to the Wanakamwe chieftainship in Gei, Fayawe district. From these points in space her classificatory kin branches over the sea in any number of additional directions as well in the islands as in New Caledonia proper.

This has allowed me, over the last fifty years, to check effective behaviour against declarations about what this behaviour should have been, and to obtain precise information that nobody had previously got, for the very simple reason that nobody had been in such favourable circumstances, with such a training, and for such a long time. Time gives the capacity to check on any information obtained and verify in the live, so to speak, interpretations about facts obtained, through putting them in relation to the mass of data built up over the years.

This particular island society has been described by Europeans, navigators, traders, British *London Missionary Society* missionaries, French pastors of the *Société des Missions de Paris*, in the same terms as being made use of by all authors, talking of an aristocratic and feudal society based on a tribute being annually brought by the so-called subjects to the men caracterized as being their overlords.

This idea that people owed a tribute to their chiefs permeates the literature so much that Marshall Sahlins, in a badly researched study, imagined a redistributive role for the Polynesian chiefs, expanding on the idea that such tributes were heavy enough to play a truly economic function.

Experience in the field and careful questioning (one should never ask a leading question)

goes contrary to more than a century of playing in the paramount chiefs' hands. No utterance should ever be taken at face value if it is contradicted by the interested parties' observed behaviour.

Starting with the crux of the matter, the so-called tribute, it just does not exist as such. Each couple, man and wife, will put aside some baskets of yams which the husband will go and offer to the husband's father or to his eldest brother (*haetra*) if the father is dead (there will be some yams too for the wife's parents, but curiously nobody has imagined to speak of a tribute in this particular case). If the husband is the eldest brother in a group of true brothers (born of the same father and mother), he will bring his yams to the reigning head of the named lineage to which he belongs, *wenecil* or *tixe*. This offering is called *hotr*. Each recipient of baskets full of yams will put part of them aside and add to the rest some of his own crop and bring the lot to the person above him, the authority of whom he recognises as befits the tradition learnt from his own father. This simple and yearly repeated behaviour is what has been construed by us for so long as being a tribute. It does play an essential function inside the social control and political structure , but it bears no economic weight.

It has never done so, for a number of very good reasons. The amount of yams handed is small. Any lineage headman (*tixe*), any recognized chief (*joxu*) and even those few persons of rank whom we are in the habit of designating as being the paramount chiefs (*angajoxu*) : Bula (Lösi), Zeula (Gaica) and Sihaze (Wetr), cannot imagine that they could manage to feed their family and retinue for a whole year with what they receive at the *yölekeu*, the annual yam first fruit festival where they receive baskets of yams from about a third of those people classified as being their «subjects», that is from those called *ange jin*. Chiefs must work their own gardens so as to feed their own family and be able to hand back in exchange on that very day a smaller amount of baskets of yams to thank the people who came and brought them yams as a confirmation of their old alliance. This link stems in principle from a theoretical classificatory elder / younger brother (*haetra* /*cipa*) relationship towards their so called subjects. These yams given by the chiefs are cooked and eaten on the spot.

The *angaisola*, the *angaajoxu* 's first and legitimate wife, always a first born girl from a high ranking lineage, must be very careful in remembering the origin of each basket of yams. She is helped in this by a specific servant of the chief, called *hnalapa*, and described as identical to another of the chief's wives. Only he can sleep in the special chief's granary where yams are kept — this the chief's wife cannot do — and has the privilege of eating the bananas of the tree at the foot of which the chief relieves himself at night, which explains partly the word *idohmëci*, dry banana leaves, which equally applies to them. The rule is simple. No man may ever be given to eat any of the yams brought by him to the chief. This would be a gross breach of etiquette.

The reason is never obtained as an answer to a theoretical and general question, but by the long lasting observation of pragmatic behaviour and by only then putting up questions on this basis. Any person having brought yams to a superior ranking person, true or classificatory elder brother, chief or no chief, will be careful to visit the interested person, or the chief's court, with or without his wife and children according to distance and opportunity, as many times as will allow him to eat approximately the amount of food he gave as first fruits. This means that the logic we put behind the word tribute is not present. This word has no ring of truth. The real logic is here the same one as brought by Mrs Thatcher in Europe.

The crux of the matter is «eating», which has become an eminently pragmatic social orga-

nizational concept. When a chief eats in another man's house, he will not only eat alone in front of respectful dependanrs, but all what has touched his food or his hands was to be discarded and burnt (later, china plates in which the chief had eaten were to be broken and thrown away). In the same way, chiefs are said to «eat» all that comes around their yard, be it goods or money. The chiefs of the colonial period «ate» any sum of money entering their *hag*., such as what public funds could be obtained for such or such purpose, in the same way as they often «ate» the money of the defunct poll-tax. Politicians of today are described as «eating» public money, straight for their own benefit or more indirectly by investing it into extrordinarily costly and unpracticable projects theoretically meant to further development, but with the sole aim of gains in prestige — plus some sophisticated forms of pork-barelling.

Another aspect of what has been deemed to be a tribute is made of man hours, that is work done directly for the chief's benefit. Working physically inside the chief's court does happen, but this asssertion must be balanced by certain caveats. When people work in the chiefs yam gardens, they are all found to be classified as his younger brothers. They will work in a specific garden, in a specific location, and not in the other gardens of the said chief. The yams of this garden will be used to make up the counter-offering at the time of the first fruit ceremony.

Work inside the chiefly yard is a somewhat more complex institution. Each type of work, dealing with the cooking of food, the repair or the building of houses, the making and the launching of canoes, dealing also with the chief's everyday needs, is the responsibility of a given person, termed *sinelapa* in a general way. These good people would never imagine to do themselves the work they are entrusted with, which would be demeaning and would entail for them the recognition of a surbordinate status towards the chieftainship. They delegate a younger brother to carry the job in their name. If they live at a distance (of *angajoxu*), this will be the reason for a junior line to stay near the chief's court so as to do the work of the senior line (the junior lineage head in effect delegating anew himself a junior brother to do the real thing). Thus the cook never cooks, the builders never build, but they will each bring the necessary people to do the work, always at some leisure, the feeding of the workers being the chief's wife's responsability. Nevertheless the orator will make a speech at will himself, speaking when he thinks fit and saying what his father taught him as being what should be said in public, never obliged to question first the chief about what he should say and how he should proceed in his presence. It would be bad manners for the chief to comment on what his orator has been saying

An interesting instance of what surprises one can dig out of the for so long superficial information about chiefly courts is the case of the *ju ne tro hnyin*, the lineage meant to be obliged to hand on demand a human victim to satisfy the paramount chief's cannibal appetites. In fact there is no human victim, no ritual murder, no poor man cooked and eaten. But there may be the necessity of filling a gap in the structure and designating a candidate to take over a lineage without descendants if there is no agreement around the interested parties, or if the *angajoxu* has the design to put in somebody which will entirely depend on him, or so he may hope. Then here is now the victim, obliged to go through a kind of social death, by changing names, social status and land tenure, and to assume willy nilly this new role imposed upon him. He has been «eaten» by *angajoxu*. Nobody comes up to explain that there has in effect been no dead corpse and no feast on human flesh. If the white man cares to believe so, that is his problem.

So-called servants, *sinelapa*, and subjects, *ange jin*, thus seem to vie with one another in aiming to escape from what we imagine be their logical duties towards their chief. There is nothing they hate more than being considered as servants or subjects. In the flourish of public speeches, which are monuments of epic poetry and not pieces of pragmatic politics, unless one learns to read between the lines, they will nevertheless say that they are the servants of the chief, but also that they are because their forbears have received him as a stranger and have put him in his present place. The lesson is clear. They dearly love their chief, but if they put him in, they could put him out.

Such a tragedy for our views about chieftainship has happened any number of times in the course of their known history. Paramount chiefs have been demoted or murdered. Their descendants can be found in or out of the district, under another name, under obligation to relinquish any further ambitions. The first paramount chief I met on Ouvéa, Cyrile Qenegei, had just been beaten by the servant of his court who held this privilege, because he was drinking too much and mostly beginning to make a nuisance of himself in attempting to order people around as he had learnt to do in the army where he was a corporal. The Hnaücën lineage, which is meant to have been cursed because their ancestor killed one *angajoxu* of Wetr in Lifou, is quietly living in the nearby Hnanemuhaetra village under another name.

A different way of qualifying the theoretical *joxu / jin* relationship is the number of people who do not bring their yams on the appointed day. There are different categories among the people who are considered to be part of a chief's theoretical following, *la hnanyijoxu*, but insisting at the same time that they are not his subjects and not really his servants :

— the few men who own the land they till from the chief's goodwill bring baskets of yams yearly, at another date than the one of the *yölekeu*. But this is equally true for the relation of any man to anybody who lends him a plot, or more than one, inside a given year ; in effect more or less than a third of the plots used each year have been lent by other persons to the ones who work them. The latter recognize publicly in this way that they hold the land by the pleasure of the chief, or the one of anybody else ; they are for this reason also called *sinelapa*, in a more general sense than in the first instance. This offering is termed *xeninedro*, *xeninehlapa*, *xenine hoho* and more simply *xenin* ;

— the men who can be close to the chief (such as the one called the *neng*, the fly, that is the man who can enter at will into the chief's house, eat with him without having been invited and talk openly to him) but only give him some yams and other fruit when they please and insist that this be not the proof of any sort of domination by the chief on them and their lineage. This offering is called *honesil*, *sithingen, wenehmitre* or *thithinedro* on Lifou, *tang sahac* in the *Qen Iai* language of Ouvéa

— the *tren adro*, or *angete hunei hnadro*, or *alalu* (this last name in the district of Wetr where they are always referred to by pairs). These lineages benefit from a direct link with the afterworld, they furnish from inside their ranks the only priests allowed to talk to the gods, *haze*. They are said to represent the oldest lineages established on the land and hold the *men* (*mana*) delving from their function and link with the parallel universe of the gods and of the dead. This *men* is so strong that their contact is deemed to be dangerous : they cannot enter the physical limits of the paramount

chiefly court, *hag*. Ordinary *joxu* have much more flexible relations with them.

These *tren adro* cannot bring their first fruits to the *angajoxu*, who might die if he touched them. In the Wetr district, they bring them to special persons called *angatresi*, whose job is to protect the *angajoxu* as much from this category of his own people as from the dangers lurking outside the district. *Angatresi* are thought to yield magical powers, but when this is checked out, the powers are found to be those of the *alalu* under them, each time through a specific *haze* (*haze* are, in Codrington's terms, gods who have never been human, in opposition to the constant case of deified dead).

In Lösi the effective status of the *tren adro* towards the *joxu* they are said to have chosen and installed on the land, vary from case to case. Some *tren adro* bring to the *joxu* their first fruits, some do not and are satisfied with bringing when they wish a non formalized offering. Many have died out, having been carefully never been given a replacement by a chief preferring to govern land matters alone, without being obliged to ask for their assent and without their at times heavy handed interference.

Turtles have often been considered as *the* privilege of chiefs. Truth is that if a turtle caught must be brought to the chiefly yard, inside the *hag*, because it can only be killed there, and if the meat is cooked there too, the captors are present with their families and partake of the meal with the chief's kin and retinue. The symbol links the turtle to the chiefly institution, and not to the chief as a person. This goes with the importance of the enclosed space, the *hag*, which is the real institution — instead of the chief as a individual — into which everything is to happen : meetings and eventual decisions (meetings can end without a decision having been taken), chiefly marriages or death ceremonies, the *yölekeu*, the eating of the turtle.

The horn carrying large fish, generally known as *dawa,* must also be brought and cooked at the chief's court. He is the only one to eat the head of the fish, the rest of the fish's meat being by obligation given to the pigs.

This explains why chiefly yards were constituted of monumental posts, each made of a single hardwood tree. The space inclosed between the quadrangular line of posts was of prime importance to the workings of the social structure and to the effective translation of all the shades of meaning, symbolic and pragmatic, of the real relations betseen the so-called chief and the rest of the society.

Early authors have stressed the importance of the ways of showing respect towards chiefs as a way of enhancing chiefly status. Having people crouch in front of them showed how tyrannical a chief's regime could be.

The principle which applies everywhere is unfailing. One's head cannot be at a higher level than the chief's at close level. This works as well in favour of the father, the elder brother or any elderly person around on the part of their younger kin. The result is that one crouches or stoops part of the time according to the distance, thus walking inside a kind of inverted cone, allowing one to stand only at a safe distance from one's elders. This has nothing to do with chieftainship as such. The same principle plays inside societies devoid of hereditary chiefs. The description of the chief or of an elderly person of high rank appearing in the middle of a circle or semi-circle of people automatically sitting down, at the moment he appears standing on the scene, is valid everywhere in the

islands.

It is the same with the so-called chiefly language. It may well be practised at the rajah's court in Indonesia. But on Lifou, it is the language of respect used by juniors towards seniors, and first and foremost, towards one's father and mother's elder brother or first born sister. Calling it a chiefly language is a gross simplification.

The words *joxu* and *isola*, which are used to designate respectively the chief and his sons on one side, his wife and his daughters on the other, have never been meant to mean chief. *Isola* and j*oxu* are respectively the specific words for «woman» and for «man» in the *Qene Miny*, the language of respect. This has been constantly overlooked. The chief is not the only man to whom this term of respect is applied, father, elder brother, elderly person, and so on can be adressed as *joxu*. Thus this word presents an evident ambiguity, as do so many other words the function of which is to enhance the flexilibity of the social fabric. One can then understand why the men and women belonging to the superor strata of this aristocratic society are so difficult to pin point, if called nobles they should be. Where should they be found ?

There is no perceptible limit between aristocratic people and common men and women. Positions are always relative and the only ones whose status is clear are the *angajoxu* and *angaisola* on one side, the junior brothers being tyrannized by their true elder brothers on the other, which happily does not even always happen. The bottom layer of the hierarchy is the most difficult to pin point. Every middle-aged man or woman is in one instance standing as a junior person, obliged to respect towards his seniors, and in another in the very reverse position, receiving respect from his juniors.

The chiefly claim to be *the* landowners has never been expressed out of the presence of a white man. This concept, as it has been described, is only for the benefit of European ear, missionaries', district officers', traders', etc. It would never be mentioned in a speech made by a chief in front of those very people whom he describes at other times as working the land at his pleasure. If he did, he might be playing with his life.

People would only react to the fact when driven out of their land at the chief's will, usually to the benefit of a white trader or businessman. They are not aware of the chief's claim to be the master of all lands, or, if they are, they wait until trouble comes and may exile or murder the chief for what he did. One should check carefully the reasons why so many Pacific Islanders go, or have gone, for two centuries, into exile, in so many cases settling inside the towns the white men built for themselves. The reasons are not always economic. They have often to do with conflicts about land, behind each of which a white man may stand in the shadows. Treason to the benefit of Europeans in the matter of land is still today sanctioned by the exile of the responsible persons.

It nevertheless happens the *angajoxu* does deal in land matters, when a land problem has been brought to him because no agreement has been found between the local people. This he can settle by sending into exile, at the other end of the district, one of the parties, and obliging there a landowner to give him land to till. But he will never take over land for himself in such a case, the exiled person will be deemed to have become his *sinelapa*, and will owe the chief a *xeninedro,* as well as to the true landowner.

This in fact is the principal function of those men *we* designate as being chiefs. They exist

less to act than to be present and in a way motionless. Their presence is the one of a potential arbiter in land matters creating unbearable tensions. The chief's role is to be at the top of the system and to be a living garantee that it will not be misused by anybody belonging to the complex structure he is meant to dominate.

Another case in point is when a lineage dies out, which happened often in the course of the last century. The chief takes over provisionally the land, but does this only on trust. He is under an obligation to bring about a meeting of the interested parties so as to decide who will be put in charge of the land and take over at the same time, for himself and his descendants, all the traditional names which go with it, at the same time relinquishing all those from which he benefitted until then. This is not an easy decision to be made if the people are still numerous. If they aren't, they will act in desperation, and have thus for long poured more than one set of names on the head of each newborn child.

What is landownership ? A man holds to the land which goes with the name he has received at birth, because the man who held that name before him also held that land. A not very kind reviewer once asked in *Oceania* why on earth was I listing so many names. The answer is there. Because individual names mean land, and land tenure must be recorded, plot by plot, inasmuch as it always fits with the relevant names. Chiefs can never break of their own will any man's relation with the land and social status received at birth, except for the very few *sinelapa* who really hold land at their pleasure. This they rarely attempt, going contrarywise to considerable lengths so as to recruit more of these people from elsewhere, going into exile of their own will, seeking in this way the aggrandizement of their chieftainship. There is no lack of men ready to change location and social status to go into exile in another chieftainship, another district, another island, or Nouméa, because of a local quarrel in which they did not gain the upperhand, or because their elder brother's wife has been trying to take their own wife as servant. There still are new candidates at each generation. Many of the cases of overtly uxorilocal marriages can be explained in this way. The easiest way out of a dilemna is to go and settle in one's wife's village. This is nothing new to the anthropologists specialising in the area.

We might add, what is power ? As individuals, chiefs yield no power as such. A young chief who starts playing with married women can be run out of the place and obliged to go go into exile, until he repents, if he ever does. Meetings of the chiefly court, the *hna nyi joxu*, are interesting to listen to. The men who stand and talk aloud as they fit are never chiefs, who cannot speak in loud tones, but express themselves as little as possible and in a low voice. They may, and do, manipulate the meeting to their own ends, but need then to be first class strategists. This would mean they have silently built an intricate scheme over months, or years, if they are not simply advancing a few stages further inside a strategy which was already charted by their father. The chief cannot conclude the meeting himself. One of the men holding a privileged rank inside his court will do it for him, on his own, describing the different points put up in the discussion and to what conclusion the meeting has arrived to, if there has been a conclusion, viable or not. If not another meeting will have to be called for some other time.

Some problems are never solved in the course of a generation, because an individual has had the courage to stand out and resist and the will not to move from his stated position. The chief is

then powerless, unless the man be one of his closest *angejin* and holds his land directly from him, or from one of his forefathers. Even then, the chief needs courage to make a decision, which can only be the exile of the interested person. If public opinion is not with the chief, there will be no physical translation of the chief's decision and he will have lost face. Happily for chiefs, in the war of nerves, some men cringe from a public confrontation and take to the road of their own decision. If they do not, then the matter might take more than one generation before being solved and the man sets himself outside the chieftainship.

The only seat of power is to be found in the *haetra* / *cipa* unequal relationship. If the chief cannot order about his *ange jin* nor his *sinelapa*, but in effect must constantly negociate with them, he can do so with his true younger brothers, send them to work in town and oblige him to bring the money earned, prevent them from attempting to satisfy what ambition they can have. The younger brothers are powerless in front of their elder brother's whims, unless they marry a headstrong wife who takes matters in her hand and organizes their departure to happier pastures.

These indications are given here to suggest what is coming up more and more in recent studies, that if the words chief and chieftainship are easy and convenient to use, they never correspond to the real thing and do not mean what we have thought for so long they did, as well in Polynesia, as in Micronesia and Eastern Melanesia. These words can go on being used with the caveats expressed here. Pacific islands' institutions have little to do with the concepts about society built elsewhere by western historians and legal minded colonial civil officers.

The description of the Kosraean society given by Cordy does not hold water. Western models hiding behind western words are no scientific short cut to a healthy view of the islands and can only block our understanding of the innumerable shades of Pacific islands' social behaviour.

I would suggest that it might be scientifically useful if archeologists ceased to think that they can describe and interpret, or reconstruct, alone, actual or past social institutions in the area. We badly need working together at all times, inasmuch as we too need the work of archeologists so as to extend the time span in which we can safely analyse our material.

Any field in social sciences has the limits that its methods entail. The interpretations rendered feasible on the basis of the limited facts one can bring up from excavations come in a finite number. Going further and breaking like Alice in the looking-glass land is dangerous for everybody concerned.

I might add that, in the present matter, one should think of the fix we would put the new independant states if we insisted for instance that the chiefs be the rightful owners of the land. As in a recent past, this would ease the way to poaching by foreign fishing ships as well as by foreign forestry firms, and could only go on provoking the violent, and at times armed, reaction by landowners which we find coming up more and more all over the place (hotels burnt down on the Isle of Pines and Ouvéa ; houses destroyed and burnt down, the manhandling and exile of municipal officers in Lifou ; the growing resistance towards the projects put up by Asian businessmen in Vanuatu ; the running out of their islands by Solomon Islands people of Asian poachers ; the armed attacks of western industrial firms by landowners in Bougainville and Papua-New Guinea). Careful governments in the area should never try such a short cut, so long made use of to cheat the island people of their land. It unhappily happens and we should shy away from moral responsability in such an

area. Wrong theoretical ideas about the islands can at times be translated into unsavoury developments.

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