

Commentary

On “Diffusionists” and Legitimate Aims in Polynesian Prehistory

Received 6 July 1983

PETER BELLWOOD

I RECENTLY had the rather unpleasant experience of reading Alan Howard’s review (AP 22: 221–228) of *The Prehistory of Polynesia*, edited by Jesse Jennings. A number of contributors to this volume, including myself, are described in this review in a seemingly derogatory fashion as “diffusionists,” partly I suspect because our papers have not been centrally concerned with Howard’s “game,” i.e. with the relationships between ecology and cultural adaptation in Polynesian prehistory, or, as Howard phrases it, with “the relative contributions of cultural templates and ecological constraints to various social developments.”

I wish to take issue with Howard’s stance on two accounts; the first concerns the correct use of the emotion-charged term “diffusionist,” and the second concerns Howard’s apparent refusal to consider, as valid fields of concern for prehistorians, any approaches which do not fall within the rules of the above “game,” which he, as a social anthropologist, evidently considers to be “so much damn fun.”

In connection with the first issue, the term “diffusion,” as used in the archaeological literature with which I am familiar, refers to a process of considerable conceptual vagueness by which particular cultural traits or trait-combinations spread from one area to another. Usually in the Polynesian archaeological literature these traits emerge as various items of material culture, such as adze types, art styles, crops, domestic animals, and so forth. Such diffusion, in the few cases where it can actually be demonstrated to have occurred (and where inheritance from a common ancestor or local convergent adaptation can be ruled out as explanations for similarities), may or may not involve human migration, and other nonmigratory processes such as trade or simple voyaging contact between neighboring

islands can serve equally well. No sensible anthropologist who is well-read in the literature of the European-contact period would wish to suggest that diffusion of this type can never take place, and human prehistory without at least some diffusion would surely involve an inchoate pattern of local convergent evolution in perhaps thousands of independent situations; a pattern which the communicative bent of all human cultures makes a little unlikely.

I am not, of course, claiming here that Howard wishes to disclaim the existence of diffusion. But I do feel that he is a little obsessed with a concept of the prime-mover "diffusionist" which he has, quite rightly, perceived in some of the darker corners of the early history of archaeology. The diffusionist of the earlier part of this century was not simply a person who was prepared to admit that diffusion existed, but a person who regarded individual human cultures as static unchanging entities which could only progress under the influence of outside stimuli, with such stimuli often spreading from as far away as the other side of the earth. I do not think it is necessary to give examples of such diffusionism, whether old or recent. But since Howard does not define exactly what he means by the term "diffusionist," I can only assume from his wording (which is dismissive and slightly derogatory to five authors in the volume, including myself) that this is the meaning which he has in mind. I think I therefore have every right to feel offended at being dismissed in this way.

I do not believe that in any of my writings I have ever taken a classical diffusionist view of the above kind towards prehistoric developments anywhere in the world. My view with respect to Polynesian origins, which I have substantiated in detail in several books and articles, is that the Polynesians are an Austronesian-speaking and basically southern Mongoloid population who originally expanded into Oceania from the islands of Southeast Asia. I believe that this expansion was fairly rapid, that it is exemplified archaeologically in the Lapita culture, and that the groups concerned already had a society and material culture with important Polynesian aspects long before they reached Fiji and Tonga. This point of view, it seems to me, hardly makes me a diffusionist.

I should also make it very clear here that I disagree most strongly with the viewpoint espoused by Howard, that Polynesian society originated entirely in a cultural matrix located in eastern Melanesia. According to existing archaeological evidence the island groups concerned (Vanuatu, Fiji, New Caledonia) were probably not settled before the expansion of the Lapita culture, which is precisely when all scholars seem to be agreed that western Polynesia was settled by Polynesians. If Howard wishes to retreat into the Solomons, Bismarcks, or New Guinea he will either have to argue an origin for the Polynesians amongst the Papuan-speaking populations, or prove that there were Austronesian-speaking populations here long before Lapita—to my mind an increasingly unlikely proposition.

So perhaps I should challenge Howard to state just where and how he thinks the Polynesians did develop their distinctive cultural characteristics. Of course Polynesian societies have adapted to environmental conditions in Polynesia, and I am sure no one today would dispute the importance of this obvious and highly significant process. But I think it is necessary for me to point out that the idea of an almost *de novo* evolution of Polynesians in the islands of eastern Melanesia goes not only against the linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence (Howard should think a little more deeply about the real significances of those concepts of the founder effect and genetic drift which he so criticizes Howells for ignoring), but it is also sadly favored by Oceanic specialists whom I suspect tend to ignore

the prehistoric and ethnographic records of the very much larger and more numerous populated archipelagoes of Southeast Asia.

So much for Polynesian origins and diffusionists. It still remains for me to state that my impression from reading Howard's review is that he considers as valid *only* those aspects of prehistoric research which deal with localized ecological impacts on social evolution, partly because, as a social anthropologist, he can play "the game." Of course, this type of research is highly valuable and interesting—there are several excellent papers along these lines in the Jennings book, as Howard makes clear, and I feel obliged to point out that I have done and still do this type of research myself, even if Howard does not agree with some of my approaches. But I feel that if Polynesian prehistorians and anthropologists (a family from which I departed around 1972) emphasize only this kind of research, and damn everything else as diffusionist, then the truly dramatic prehistory of these archipelagoes may be in danger of becoming little more than a list of small-scale parochial adaptations.