

RAROTONGA FIELDNOTES

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I have had a heatrash for the last few days, and not feeling very well since it is so hot. So I took off a few days to relax, go swimming at Black Rock, and in the evening borrowed a bicycle to explore this area some more. I also caught up on correspondence and wrote some book reviews for journals and a couple of essays on doing fieldwork research.

On Friday I visited the Cook Islands Cultural Village, a place for tourists to learn about Rarotongan culture. It was quite informative, and ethnographically accurate. I wrote the owners with suggestions for how to improve it even more, drawing on my experience with Museum of the Cherokees and the Georgia Historical Commission museum-historic site development.

From talking with people I learned that, before the coming of the Christian missionaries, the shamans were both men and women. And there were women and men chiefs. Even today on Rarotonga, four out of five of the traditional chiefs are women. Families valued having daughters, and the ideal family had approximately equal numbers of daughters and sons. No infanticide known of. Families are large, even today. I often meet kids who have nine, ten or more siblings.

I've learned that the coming of the missionaries was not all bad, because they brought peace to the islands for the first time. The Cook Islands, like other parts of Polynesia, was infested with local rivalries and fighting between different villages. There was no unity. That warfare and conflict, historically, is probably what encouraged certain groups to splinter off and leave to explore other islands to settle. Also, overpopulation of an island and famine, which promoted more conflict and warfare and migration. That is how Polynesia was settled. In about 350 A.D. eight large canoes left Rarotonga to go settle New Zealand, and the Maoris there are descended from the Rarotongans here. I'm told they displaced a previous people who lived in New Zealand, by eating or enslaving them.

The missionaries who were first here were the London Missionary Society in the 1820s. They were a combined Anglican-Presbyterian- Methodist group. The religion they brought does not seem to have been of the awful fundamentalist sort, but a fairly innocuous

ideology emphasizing a beneficent god who cares for people and helps them in their time of need.

Today I went to Cook Islands Christian Church in Arorangi village where I'm living, and the sermon (at least the few parts of it in English which summarized the main sermon in Maori) emphasized not to crave money or covet your neighbor's things, but to be satisfied with the love of god, who will provide what you need in life.

I also went to church to hear the singing in Maori language. It was almost like chanting. The women would sing a verse, then the men would sing, then both would join together for a melodious harmony. Then the preacher would read a Bible verse in Maori, then the women and men in the middle section of the congregation would sing, then some more preaching, then the women and men on the right side of the church would sing, then more preaching, then the women and men on the left side of the church would sing. I don't know this, but it almost seemed like a competitive display of different groups. Maybe families or communities sit together, and this competitive singing replaces the warrior fighting-aggression of pre-Christian eras?

I am amazed at the comfortableness of males in casually touching each other. At a restaurant or bar, at home, or in church, it is common to see two boys or young men, or even mature men, with their arm around their friend's neck, or in close body contact. At church one young man (ca. age 20) fell asleep leaning on the back of his male same-age friend sitting forward beside him. He slept this way for much of the service. The young man who sat next to me in the pew seemed to have no problem about the sides of our bodies touching from knee right up to shoulder. He was very good looking, so it was of course exciting for me, but I'm sure it was not a sexual thing at all for him (at least there was no indication it was, even though he was the one who kept pushing his body up next to mine). It was, rather, just a reflection of the comfortableness of body contact which Polynesian males feel with each other. It shows how starved for body contact we males are in America. I think one reason the gay community has been so attractive for American males is that many think the only way they can get such contact is through sex. In Rarotongan culture, males are allowed the comfortableness of close intimate body contact in non-sexual contexts, so there is not as much need for becoming homosexual. I wonder if this means the American reaction against male-male intimacy has itself helped to

produce a gay subculture in reaction against those homosocial prohibitions.

Yet there also seems to be a rather comfortable curiosity about homosexuality. Today I met a young man J., who told me that when he was fourteen he became friends with an American tourist. After a while they started talking about sex. J. had had sex only with girls to that point, but he got excited. The tourist offered to show J. his penis, and J. said he would like to see it. J. asked the tourist how he got it to be so big and was fascinated by its size. Then the tourist offered to perform oral sex on him. At first he refused, but then later he decided to try it and see what it felt like, and he enjoyed it. He was impressed with the large size of the American's penis, and he tried sucking it. He said he had a powerful orgasm. He said he felt a bit guilty afterwards, because he had heard some negative comments about gays from friends, but he got over that too. He is definitely more attracted to girls, and seems in all ways to be heterosexual, but was ready to try something different.