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FULLNESS OF TIME

ETHNOHISTORY SELECTIONS FROM THE WRITINGS OF ALAN R. TIPPETT

THE MISSIOLOGY OF ALAN R. TIPPETT SERIES
DOUG PRIEST, SERIES EDITOR
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Fullness of Time: Ethnohistory Selections from the Writings of Alan R. Tippett
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Published by William Carey Library, an imprint of William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Circle
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

Kelley Wolfe, editor
Brad Koenig, copyeditor
Pourio Lee, cover concept
Josie Leung, designer
Wisnu Sasongko, cover art, courtesy of Overseas Ministries Study Center

William Carey Library is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

23 22 21 20 19 Printed for Worldwide Distribution

Cover Photo: "Nativity" by Wisnu Sasongko, 2005.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tippett, Alan R. (Alan Richard), 1911-1988.

[Works. Selections. 2014]

Fullness of time : ethnohistory selections from the writings of Alan R. Tippett / edited by Doug Priest.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-87808-477-7

1. Ethnohistory. 2. Ethnology--Research--Methodology. I. Priest, Doug, 1952-, editor of compilation. II. Title.

GN345.2.T56 2014

909'.04--dc23

2013038480

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ETHNOHISTORY AS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY[1]

"Ethnohistory," said William N. Fenton, "is a way of getting at certain problems in culture history" (1962, 2). Ethnohistory is neither a discipline in itself nor an interdisciplinary field. It is neither an anthropological view of history, nor a historical view of anthropology. It is a synthesis of methodologies but not merely the sum of the two (Dovring 1960, 75), for there is a precise quality in their symbiotic interrelationship, and this can only come into existence in the research experience itself. Perhaps we should begin with a brief presentation of the anthropological theory which lies behind ethnohistorical method.

Theory of Ethnohistorical Method

Ethnohistory is a technique for considering cultural data *spatially* and *sequentially*. The data itself is organised into *traits* or *elements* and these in turn into spatial patterns which we term *complexes*, and maybe into even larger configurations sometimes called *activities* (Linton 1964, 403; Fenton 1962, 6). This frame of reference permits the study of *function* and *meaning* at various levels.

Any of these configurations may be studied as sequences through time. This sequence we call a *cultural continuum* (Linton 1964, 294–96; Barnett 1942, 30), which Linton points out is "not only a continuum but a continuum in a constant state of change." This process of cultural complexes each in dynamic equilibrium within itself yet moving like a gyroscope through time is the subject of ethnohistorical investigation.

The study of a cohesive but dynamic complex may be made over a wide area spatially *at a point of time*, which for ethnohistorical purposes may be a day, or a decade, or a generation, so that it is within the focus and memory of an informant—this we speak of as a *synchronic* analysis. Or it may be researched as the movement of dynamic change within any cohesive process of the cultural continuum, *through time*. This is called *diachronic* research. These notions came to me through S. F. Nadel's study of social processes, in which methodologically he spoke of "synchronic and diachronic enquiry" (1951, 100).

1 Taken from *Aspects of Pacific Ethnohistory* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), 1–13. Used by permission.

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We are struggling with a number of anthropological problems in the study of society, like *continuity* and *change*, and *function* and *meaning*. This is anthropology—the dynamics of cultural change. But, in that change can only be studied through time, it is also history. Ethnohistory is a research methodology for exploring the regions where history phases out into anthropology.

The distinction of diachronic from synchronic research is intended to remind us, as Linton pointed out, that the cultural continuum is never static. Change of some kind is going on all the time. Societies are equipped with mechanisms for stimulating and regulating the speed of change. These changes reflect not only the character and values of a people but also the material culture. To study material culture diachronically is to see the reflection of human development through the generations, just as much as changes in language and customs. Every artifact has meaning only in its context—it relates both to individuals and to society at any given point of time, and if such synchronic analyses are investigated diachronically, we may observe the momentum of culture change throughout a cultural continuum.

There are at least three kinds of cultural reconstruction used in ethnohistorical research. These were defined by Dark as (1) *Cross-sectional* (2) *Institutional* and (3) *Culture Continuum* (1957). In the first type the synthesis is synchronic; in the second it is diachronic and in the third it is both spatial and temporal (synchronic-diachronic).

Each of the patterns of synthesis has been used for effective ethnohistorical reconstructions. Dark takes a number of such research projects or "constellations" and analyses them into subtypes.

In the writer's Fijian research, he has used all three methods of reconstruction. [Some of these studies] are synchronic in that they were the observations in a period of time which could be seen whole in the lifetime of one man. Recently the writer produced a paper for an anthropological society which traced the institution of sorcery from pre-Christian times to the present day with a different body of primary sources for each generation. The book *Fijian Material Culture: A Study in Cultural Context, Function and Change* (Tippett 1968) covers a spatial anthropological study at three or four levels of temporal analysis across Fiji, covering four different institutions—war clubs, canoes and boats, turtle fishing, and house building. This method of synthesis (cultural continuum) brought to light during the research a definite stratum of Tongan influence before the arrival of the white man, and quite independent of the Christian Tongan impact. The existence of this Tongan level in Fiji explains the process of diffusion of Christianity into the Fiji Group. This is a good example of how the study of artifacts may throw light on dynamic and personality factors.

Somehow or other we have to get beyond the merely material artifact. Often when we go to a museum or to some antiquarian's collection we look at meaningless things. They have to have a *context* both in an institution and in a period of history. If we can bring these

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factors together in a synthesis, the *meaning* immediately becomes apparent. Furthermore, even to members of one society and at one point of time the context will be different as, for example, a beautifully made war club will mean one thing to the craftsman, but something quite different to the warrior. Likewise we have to identify the *generation*. To one warrior the same war club (say, a *bowai*) is a well-balanced weapon, his strength and protection for a particular offensive stroke; but after his death, and when because of his war exploits he has been deified, the club may be the religious shrine for his spirit (*waqawaqa*) to his son, who no longer calls it a *bowai*, but oils it reverently and presents an offering before it before he himself goes to war with another war club, which is a *bowai*, or a *cali*, or a *waka*, or whatever kind of club it happens to be. Here the *meaning* and *function* have changed because the generational context has changed.

So we have a *relativity of contemporaries* and a *relativity of generations*, the former in the synchronic sequences and the latter in the diachronic. The last one especially raises a real problem for museum typologies. Barnett calls the latter the *relativity of needs* (1942, 30), a phrase which came to him as he reconstructed ethnohistorically the experiences of certain American Indians under culture contact. His work could be classed as history as he reconstructed from documents, but he drew also from anthropological data and sought valid generalisations about human behaviour.

Another example of the relativity of generations on an international (rather than personal) level comes from Barnett's research on Palau (Micronesia). Palauan religion, for example, may be studied diachronically as changing under the forces of acculturation through periods of Spanish, German, Japanese, and American domination (1949, 227–40; 1960, 82–84). Diachronic studies of this type are a natural method for Western Pacific research.

Another quite imaginative use of the diachronic approach is the fictionalised reconstruction around an artifact. I remember as a schoolboy reading a British public school story *The Adventures of a Ten-guinea Watch*. Was this perhaps the prototype for Wallace Deane's *The Strange Adventures of a Whale's Tooth*? This is a story for young people, the tale of a whale's tooth (*tabua*), the artifact used in Fijian ceremonial life for making requests for assistance in war, for burning a village, for obtaining a favour, for arranging a marriage, for atonement, for mourning the dead, and so on *ad infinitum*. Deane weaves all these different functions of a real *tabua* into an imaginary story running from pagan whaling days into Christian times. It is a diachronic study of the functional role of a whale's tooth in Fijian ceremonial and an accurate synthesis. This is true ethnohistorical fiction (Deane 1919).

Upstreaming

Another form of ethnohistorical reconstruction is known as *upstreaming*. This term was innovated by Fenton, who describes it as restructuring by direct sequence "against the

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tide of history going from the known present to the unknown past" (1962, 12). He used it first in a study of suicide, but has made other uses of it since. I used it myself for a reconstruction of Fijian cannibalism. The pattern has two advantages. First, it is easier to go back step by step reconstructing slowly because of the continuity of many cultural features and interpretations. It is easier for me to interpret my father's experiences than those of my great-great-grandfather. So I proceed from father, to grandfather, to great-grandfather, and so on, and thereby eliminate the long-time jump. This gives us a better *historic sense*. Second, one makes most interesting discoveries as he works back through his source material in the reverse chronology, to suddenly find that some significant culture trait disappears. It is like an archaeologist discovering an older form of pottery, or a cruder design, which can only be explained by the invention of the wheel or brush.

Thus one moves from the point of law and order to the war to suppress the cannibalism in the mountain regions (1870s). As one goes back you can trace the spread of cannibalism, and the distribution of Christian and cannibal villages (back to 1854, the conversion of Cakobau the most famous cannibal of all). Before 1854 you find Christianity a really small thing except in Lau. One by one the little Christian groups disappear until 1835 when the Christian mission is no longer there at all. It is like the flood line in Middle East archaeology. But what this "upstreaming" really brings to light is the period from 1835 back to about 1809, when the Fijian wars were under the control of escaped convicts and deserters from sandalwood and whaling ships. Beyond that you are in the period of precontact ceremonial cannibalism. It was the introduction of Western arms and ammunition and renegade whites to service them as gunsmiths and marksmen that cannibalism underwent its dramatic *secularisation*. The religious taboos and controls broke down, and there was a surplus of bodies for the oven, and women and children indulged as they had not done before, and sometimes bodies were eaten without even presentation at the temple. It was a period of secularisation before the missionary arrived. Cannibalism there was as far back as the myths go, for the Fijian gods were cannibal gods, and they required human sacrifices for scores of purposes.

I very much doubt if this stratification could ever have been observed without "upstreaming" through the source material. This helps researchers to "get into the act" themselves, and they are truly exploring as they upstream from the "estuary" to the "source."

An Ethnohistorical Lexicon

A good ethnohistorian must have a wide knowledge of the language of the documents he is studying. This means that he should be able to recognise and date semantic change, and identify dialect words, especially in oral traditions and chants. In doing my studies of Fijian cannibalism, honourable and dishonourable killing, and sorcery, I found I had to

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Major Sources for the Study of Fijian Cannibalism	
20th Century	No Cannibalism
4th Period of Acculturation Post Cession Period	Government and Mission Records Memoirs of Government Servants – Brewster, Im Thurn, Thomson Missionary Researcher Deane
3rd Period of Acculturation 1854-74. After Cakobau's Conversion	Missionary Writers, Fison, Langham, Carey, Baker Recorders of Fijian Traditions, Tatawaqa, Toganivalu, Sokiveta, Bulu Official Travellers, Smyth, Seemann Australian Missionary Notices, Letters, Circuit Reports British Consular Records. Transactions Fijian Society
2nd Period of Acculturation 1835-54. Mission Contact Period	Missionary Records, Annual Reports of Circuits (especially Bau 1854) *Wesleyan Magazine* Missionary writings of Joseph Waterhouse and Carey Missionary Journals: Hunt, Jaggar, Lyth, Cross, Cargill, Williams, Lawry Sea Captains, Erskine, Endicott Seamen who resided with Fijians, Jackson, Diapea Beche de mer Trader's wife Mrs. Wallis
Period of Culture Contact c1800-1835	Sea Captains, Wrecked Sailors and Sandalwooders: Siddons, Lockerby. Patterson, Dillon Missionary Journals & Letters: Cross, Cargill, Hunt, Lyth, Waterhouse, Williams, Jaggar, Watsford, Hazelwood
Pre-contact Period Before 1800	First analyses of pre-Christian Religious World View. Cargill, Cross, Hunt, Lyth, Williams Myths and Chants: Hunt, Hazelwood, Quain, Carey, *Transactions of Fijian Society*

Major Sources for Vocabulary of Cannibalism – Hazelwood, Cargill, Hunt, Fison. A. R. Tippett, Aspects of Pacific Ethnohistory *(Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), 6.*

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