



Forward

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Forward

by

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In the beginning, according to the people of Kiribati, there was a container which Naareau broke open, wishing to animate the void. Reciting in song the identity of the occupants of this box, Naareau permitted them to take form, to become animate, to stand up and separate the heavens from the sand. The island of Nikunau was born. Naareau then took some grains of sand and threw them to the North, the South, the West and the East. The archipelago was created.

As we understand this cosmological myth, in the beginning everything was undifferentiated (in the container) which, broken open by language — the song — allowed things to be named, classified and to take life. Many myths postulate an original undifferentiation and tell how man, by classification, introduced differences as well as relations into a confused and chaotic mass. They also express how people define the geographic limits of their world. The first island, Nikunau, is not isolated, it is emblematic of the interface with the other, the archipelago.

One might think that when Dumont d'Urville proposed, to the Société de Géographie on December 27, 1831, the division of Oceania into four principal regions : occidental Oceania or Malasia, meridonial Oceania or Melanesia, oriental Oceania or Polynesia and finally boreal Oceania or Micronesia, he did nothing other than introduce discontinuities, entities, maybe even unities, into a previously undifferentiated Oceania. There is a fundamental difference between the creative act of Naareau and that undertaken by Dumont d'Urville. The latter did not in fact give birth to Micronesia, these 2,500 islets which he united under a single name

already existed, as did their peoples. Is it surprising by the way, if these (re)created islanders do not have a vernacular term to designate this same geographic assemblage ? Certainly today, the inhabitants of these different islands designate themselves as Micronesians, in other words they accept this foreign division applied from outside. But by thus calling themselves, don't they seek, through the name, to feed a discourse that strengthen « the bringing together, the similarity which no longer allows tribal oppositions, but greater distinctions » (Lory, 1983 :746) ? If this was not the case, what collective cultural identity could extend throughout this geographic entity ?

To respond to this question, let us first turn to the archaeological perspective and the likelihood of a common origin which would support the thesis of unity. The first research in this field was carried out from 1949-1950. It was in the Marianas islands, more particularly on Saipan, Tinian and Rota that Alexander Spoehr brought to light a red-slipped ceramic ware with impressed decorations from a level dating to 1527 ± 200 BC. The presence of this same type of ceramics in the Philippine Islands indicates that this was the homeland of the western Micronesians. The pre-history of central and eastern Micronesia is much more recent, only 2,000 years. This discontinuity between, on the one hand western Micronesia and on the other central and eastern Micronesia seems to reflect the distribution of two of the main sub-groups of the Austronesian language family. Linguists have distinguished « Western Malayo-Polynesian » which includes the Chamorro language of the Marianas as well as Palauan from « Nuclear Micronesian » which

* I would like to dedicate this forward to Jean-Paul Latouche who directed my steps toward Micronesia and who shared the richness of gilbertese culture and many thanks to Erik Pearthree for the American translation.

comprises the languages of the Marshalls, Kiribati, Kosrae, the Ponapean sub-group and the dialect chain of Chuukese. All of these perhaps originate from northern Vanuatu.

Turning now to the ethnological perspective. An analysis of the social structures of the diverse societies already studied reveals the preeminence of the matrilineal descent system and the predominance of the hawaiian type of kinship terminology. However, as preponderant as they are, these social structures do not allow generalization to all these societies. For example, the peoples of the Gilberts, the Polynesian enclaves of Kapingamarangi and Nukuoro as well as the islands of Sonsorol and Tobi have a cognatic system. Yap, Ulithi, Chuuk, and Pohnpei have the crow type, while the Marshalls and Nauru have the iroquois type. Another widespread cultural trait in this region is the organization of society into districts, indicated by the existence of communal meeting houses. The resemblance stops there, since such houses are hexagonal in Yap, rectangular in the Carolines, open to the entire population in the Gilberts and restricted to the men in the Carolines. Turning to political structures, they too are diverse and varied. The gerontocracies of the southern Gilberts are found alongside systems of ranks and titles based on more or less lineal rights of descent and primogeniture, which may even extend beyond a single island as in the Marshalls and Yap.

We need to recognize that the term « Micronesia » covers a reality made equivocal by the plurality of these islands and their societies, and does not carry the meaning usually presumed. The geographic unit « Micronesia » has become a myth, and using this label reifies the myth. Simply saying the word — Micronesia — « creates the image, produces the myth and at the same time makes it function » (Augé, 1992).

In this special edition of the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, we will discover « Micronesia » in a new light: a plural Micronesia; as plural as its geographical reality : a myriad of islands, a myriad of societies, a myriad of conceptualisations of the world. All of the articles united here, come from the first European Colloquium on “Micronesia” organized by Beatriz Moral and myself. They show, through ethnographic and archaeological research, the singularity of each island society, illuminating the immense cultural diversity offered by these islands. Islands, which in the end, share only a common insularity and its underlying principle, each having constructed their own world.

If the application of the label “micronesian” to all the inhabitants of this region constitutes an

abusive generalization, **Paul Rainbird** shows us that this generalization-projection is not the only one which comes from the western world and is applied erroneously to the islanders. Another is their integration into the grand classification of modes of thinking established by Deleuze and Guattari, who have ordered societies into two modes of thought : ‘tree’ thinking found in western societies as opposed to ‘rhizome’ thinking observed in oceanic societies. Paul clearly shows how the Palau islanders use the metaphor of turmeric and therefore a rhizome to order their world. However, the characteristics of their mode of thought are ones which Deleuze and Guattari associate with tree thinking, that is to say : hierarchical, geneological, linear ! This paper participates in the debate of the illusion of the metaphor. It also demonstrates the value of ethnographic research, in confirming the inventiveness of the islanders and highlighting their particularity.

The two articles by **Carmen Petrosian-Husa** and **Beatriz Moral** focus on the ways the societies of Chuuk and outer island Yap manage the treatment of women’s sexuality within the framework of a matrilineal system without contradicting the particularity of each island. Certainly the two societies exhibit similar ambivalence concerning a woman’s sexual identity, and beyond that, the relationship she has with her brother, the social father of her children, and with her husband, the biological father, who is constrained to abase himself before the fraternal figure of his spouse. A woman of Chuuk and outer island Yap is in fact double : woman-sister, and spouse-reproducer, rendering her sexuality central because its management depends on the principle of matrilinearity, and therefore the maintenance of social order. The interplay of these roles is therefore immense and hasn’t escaped the islanders, who have made women’s vaginas the unique emblem of sexuality, without a doubt a possession difficult to alienate (Weiner, 1992).

Carmen shows us how the societies of outer island Yap invest the body of the woman and her clothing to control her identity and sexuality. Carmen is particularly interested in the famous woven tissue or *lavalava* presented to young women at the time of their first menstruation and how the wearing of these *lavalava* signifies their place in their cycle of life as well as their relations with two masculine figures : avoidance of her brother and sexual abstinence with her spouse while she is nursing. It is this same duality between the sexual woman (spouse) and the asexual woman (sister) which is exalted in the

erotic legends and adventures of the cultural heroes of Chuuk that are described by Beatriz. Her article shows how this society masters this ambivalence through the management of sexual space, actual and imaginary. They divide their world into the home, a consanguineal space where asexuality reigns, and the outside to which sexuality is confined. An outside incorporating clandestinity and which extends beyond the limits designated by the shores of their island : the spirits of the sea as well as those of the heavens participate in sexuality with humans.

We can see that both these treatments of feminine sexuality and social order, as different as they are from one another, are nonetheless complementary. They both proceed from the control of space, that of the body, that of the island, which may both be enclosed as well as open to the outside.

It is precisely to this double spatial phenomenon of openness as well as closedness, which are not contradictory states to the islanders, that the next three articles investigate. They evoke how islands have served as both safe havens and points of departure for long voyages. The article of **Jean-Christophe Galipaud** introduces us to the phenomenon of rootedness and its mode of application. His archaeological excavations carried out on Ahnd atoll, testify that people had settled on these little islands lying off the coast of Pohnpei, instead of the interior. His data indicate that the oldest settlement was around 2,000 BP. My own article, written in collaboration with **Erik Pearthree**, is resolutely centered on the sea. It recounts and details the outrigger sailing canoes of the Caroline Islands and shows how these canoes are everyday tools and participate in the economy of the common people. It establishes, through a computer simulation, that coral islanders have enough timber to support the cost of voyaging. This banalization of voyaging allows one to think of the sea as an ally, to

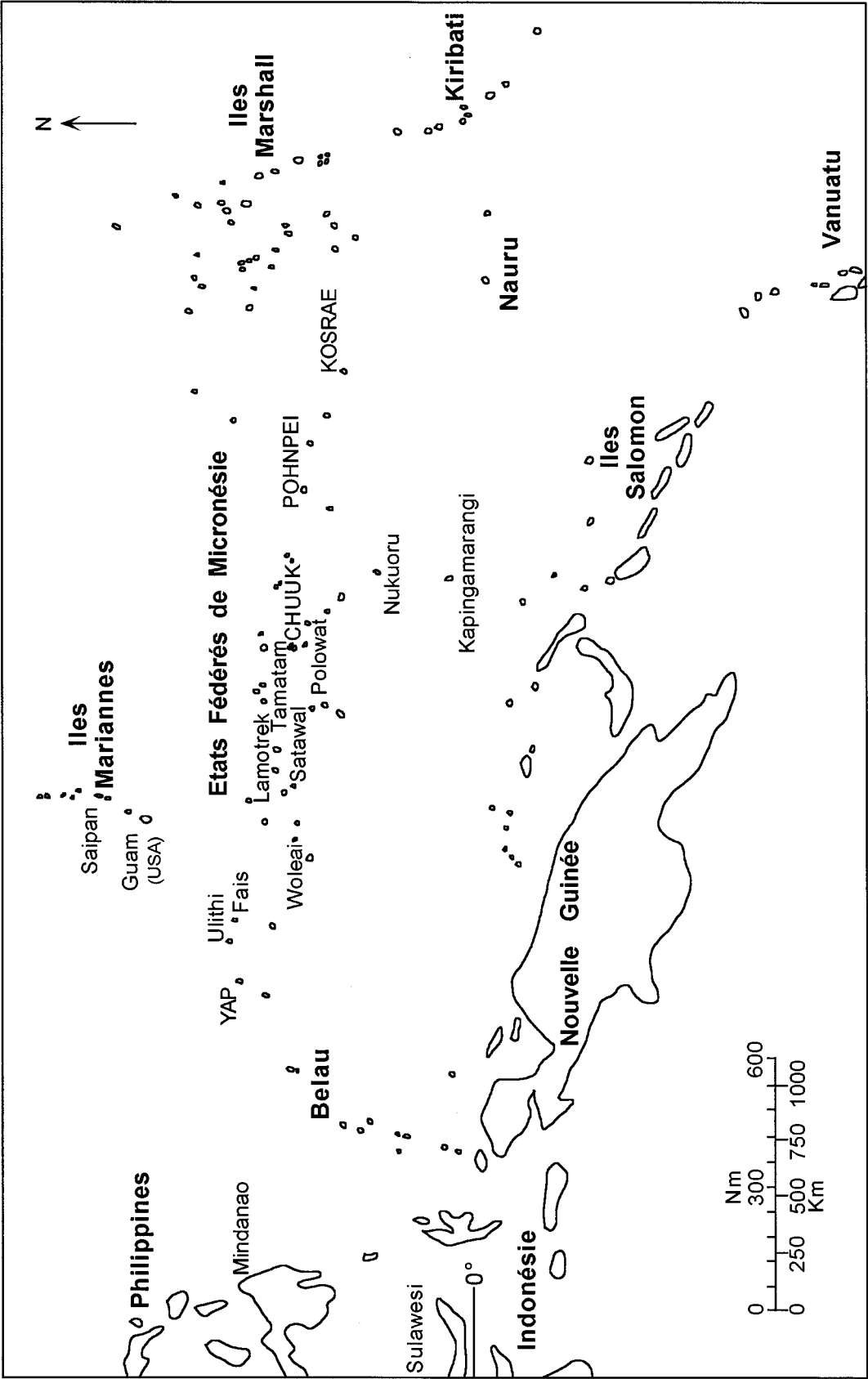
organize a world which extends beyond ones own island, and to satisfy the navigator's desires for the external world. This openness of the islanders to the world of the sea favors, perhaps more than elsewhere, communication in the direct as well as in the figurative sense. **Elizabeth Keating** describes for us the abilities of the inhabitants of Pohnpei to enrich their expression by linguistic borrowing from the other. She demonstrates how the appropriation of a foreign concept is transformed and accommodated.

We conclude this glimpse at Micronesian societies with the work of **Teresa del Valle**, a pioneer of micronesian anthropology in Spain. By now, I hope the reader is convinced of the diversity of these islands and the value of restoring this plurality rather than constructing uniformity. Instead of being trapped by the label "micronesian", Teresa through her personal voyage, engages us to reflect on the role of our scientific institutions in structuring our viewpoints vis à vis the other.

This special edition should contribute to re-seeing how the other, labeled Micronesian, is a multiple other, and how by imposing too much cultural unity of them, we limit the extraordinary capacity of these peoples to cultivate their differences.

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