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“THE LAND BELONGS TO EVERYONE”: THE UNSTABLE DYNAMIC OF UNRESTRICTED COGNATIC DESCENT IN RAPA, FRENCH POLYNESIA

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Certain social structures can be understood as governed by internal forces that cause them to change along a certain path regardless of external forces. This has been analysed at the macro-level in Hegel’s and Marx’s dialectical views of history, and in his theory of immanent change Pitirim Sorokin (1941) carefully delineated the mechanisms involved. Rapa, the southernmost island in French Polynesia, provides a glimpse of an internal structural dynamic at a micro-level that allows fine-grained analysis. Land tenure in Rapa is governed by the most fully-fledged system of unrestricted cognatic descent and inheritance recorded in the anthropological literature. This system contains an intrinsic dynamic (one might call it an internal instability) that generates highly significant change in the course of about a century. Three periods of anthropological field research—by John F. G. Stokes in 1921, Hanson in 1964 and Ghasarian beginning in 2001—make it possible to trace the historical development of the system in some detail from pre-European times to the present.¹ This article is an account of how the system has evolved over that period, with special attention to its relation to the challenges that Rapans face today.

Rapa is the only remaining island in French Polynesia where land is neither divided among heirs nor bought or sold, but is held by cognatic descent groups, or ramages, called *köpü*. For the most part, ramages are named for their founding ancestors. Membership in ramages passes from parents of both sexes to all of their children, all of whom pass it to their children in the next generation. Thus all individuals belong to several different ramages, some from their fathers and others from their mothers. A detailed account of the system as it existed in 1964 may be found in Hanson (1970:49-55).

This system of descent is inherently unstable, both with reference to the ramage memberships of individuals and to the size of ramages. If, for example, a woman who belongs to three ramages marries a man who belongs to two, their children belong to five. If one of those children marries a spouse who belongs to four, their children belong to nine. A ramage typically grows in size over time, and its membership increasingly overlaps that of other ramages, because its membership consists of all the
children of the founder, all of their children, and so on to include all of the founder’s
cognatic descendants reckoned by any combination of male and female links. Hanson
(1970:53) used the term “augmentation” to describe this process by which, with the
passage of time, individuals belong to an increasing number of overlapping ramages
and each ramage encompasses a larger proportion of the population. In a population as
small as Rapa’s (about 360 in 1964 and about 500 today), the effects of augmentation
are quite apparent in as little as three or four generations.

At the time of first European contact by Vancouver in 1791, Rapa’s population of
1500 to 2000 was divided into several different ramages residing in and controlling
various territories on the island. As the primary residential, economic and political
units on the island, the ramages then were probably residentially restricted cognatic
descent groups of the sort widespread in pre-contact Polynesia (Firth 1957,
Historical evidence indicates that the transformation from residentially restricted to
unrestricted cognatic descent took place around the middle of the 19th century. One
important factor was introduced disease that carried away some 90 percent of Rapa’s
population, transforming demographic conditions from heavy population pressure on
limited territorial resources to more than enough land to satisfy the needs of everyone
(Hanson 1970:29-31). Another important factor, closely related to the first, was the
concentration of the remaining population in a few villages. Since that time, the
ramages have lost their political as well as their residential significance, and their
sole function has been to own property (Hanson 1970:183-200). In 1889, much of
the land of Rapa was redistributed among seven individual owners whose cognatic
descendants belong to the contemporary ramages bearing their names.

Land and Created Property

An important aspect of the Rapan system is that forms of created property such as
houses, gardens (the most important being irrigated taro plots), and groves of coffee,
orange and certain timber trees are owned separately from the land on which they are
located. All these are initially the individual property of the person who either planted
the trees, or made the garden or built the house. They may be willed to individual
heirs, but more generally they pass jointly to the makers’ cognatic descendants, who
then form groups defined by their joint ownership of the created property. Rapans
use the term köpü for ramages that either own only land or own both land and created
property, but they do not use it for the ones that own only created property. Sometimes
they call them feti’i (Tahitian for relatives) or the French famille. Because they are
nonexclusive cognatic descent groups, structurally identical to the land-owning groups,
here we refer to them as ramages.

While no new land-owning ramages have been founded since 1889,3 new ramages
that own exclusively created property are formed regularly as people plant trees, make
gardens or build houses which they leave jointly to their cognatic descendants. In 1964
some ramages owned both land awarded to the founder in the 1889 distribution and
other property created by that same founder, but the estates of many other ramages
consisted exclusively either of land, or of one or more kinds of created property. In
1964 an informant told Hanson that the separate ownership of created property and
land originated when, after the 1889 land distribution, many taro gardens that people had been cultivating for years now sat on land owned by someone else. To avoid problems of rent-paying or a massive exchange of taro gardens, it was decided that all taro gardens would remain the property of their cultivators, regardless of who owned the land on which they were located. This decision was perpetuated when people were recognised as the individual owners of new gardens or groves of trees that they planted or houses that they built (Hanson 1970:199). Land-owning ramages exercise some control over the created property located on their land, but very little. This has changed to some degree over the last 40 years, as will be made clear below.

Certain limitations constrain the augmentation of ramages that own only groves, houses and gardens. These things do not last forever, and should all the property owned by a ramage cease to exist, that ramage, having no other function than the joint ownership of property, goes out of existence as well. Moreover, Rapans sometimes divided created property between two or more segments of a ramage. When the property is divided, the ramage itself partitioned, each branch becoming a separate, independent ramage. Because of these two factors, the finite duration of improvements and their occasional partition, in 1964 no ramage that owned houses, gardens or trees had more than 40 or 50 members or included adults whose common ancestor was more remote than a great-grandparent. Augmentation is thus controlled, and a kind of equilibrium is achieved for these ramages.

Neither of these limits operates with reference to land-owning ramages, because land does not cease to exist and Rapans have not divided land since 1889. Hence augmentation in this case proceeds unchecked, and immanent change in the structure of land-owning ramages follows a trajectory beginning with individual ownership of land (at the point of division in 1889) and reaching a logical end point where each ramage consists of the entire population and, therefore, everyone belongs to all the ramages and has ownership rights in all land. Of course, even with a population as small as Rapa’s, it would take at least a century for a dynamic structure such as this to complete this full augmentation trajectory. In most cases, over 100 years the events of history would change conditions sufficiently to obscure the process or transform it entirely. But Rapa has been sufficiently undisturbed by external forces that it is possible to trace the entire trajectory of the system’s development. The rules of unrestricted cognatic descent operate today as they did a century ago. While there has been a good deal of emigration, there has been very little immigration, and Rapa still has abundant territorial resources to support its population. Moreover, the island remains relatively isolated (two or three months might still pass without the visit of a ship). In sum, neither internal nor external disruptions of sufficient magnitude have occurred to prevent the process of augmentation of land-owning ramages from approaching its logical conclusion. That is happening now, at the beginning of the 21st century. Thus Rapa offers a unique opportunity to observe the relatively unimpeded dynamics of immanent change. The fascinating question is, what will happen next, as the system approaches the final state of everyone belonging to all of the land-owning ramages? Will there be another division of land among individuals, thus starting another cycle? Or will the system change in some fundamental way? Contemporary fieldwork allows an answer to these questions to be framed.
Historical changes and rules of ownership

Before framing it, however, it is necessary to be clear that Rapan society and culture have not been static, like a fly locked in amber, for 40 years. Rapa today has electricity, television, computers, refrigerators and freezers, hot water, a road that accommodates a few motorbikes, pickup trucks and even a school bus—all introduced since the 1960s. None of these innovations, however, has made much of an impact on the system of descent and inheritance. Closer to the issues we have been discussing, the status of certain forms of created property has changed. In 1964, the most important were taro gardens (which produced the staple food), coffee groves (the primary source of cash) and houses. Today the importance of the first two of these has been greatly diminished. Rapans rely much more now on imported food than previously, there are many fewer taro gardens than in 1964, and the production of coffee has virtually ceased.

Still, these changes may not be pertinent to the development of the dynamic structure, because by 1964 the process of augmentation seemed to have reached a point of equilibrium for ramages that owned only created property, and proceeded unchecked only for ramages that owned land. At this point, however, it will be helpful to provide more information regarding what control land owners have over created property on their territory. These rules have not changed between 1964 and the present, but in some instances their application has.

As far as taro gardens are concerned, anyone may make a new taro garden on unused land anywhere, with no necessity to seek the permission of the land-owning ramage. The garden belongs to its maker and to the ramage consisting of his or her cognatic descendents. The ramage that owns the land on which the garden is located has no control over it. This is a point of pride with Rapans; because taro is the staple crop (more so in 1964 than at present), they say that anyone has the right to produce food for their families. It must be stressed that in 1964, there was no shortage of land suitable for growing taro. Everyone had access to taro gardens sufficient for their needs and could renovate fallow gardens or make new ones if they wished. Even after a garden has been allowed to lie fallow for several years, it is still considered to be ramage property and can be renovated for cultivation by any member of that ramage. Only after the surrounding curbs have been completely eroded away does the garden cease to exist and revert to the status of unused land. Today, making a new taro garden on unused land virtually never happens. People always choose to renovate an existing garden rather than to make a new one, in order to avoid the heavy labour of levelling the land and digging new irrigation ditches.

In 1964, Hanson was told that someone who wished to plant a new coffee grove needed to secure the permission of the land-owning ramage. The issue never actually came up at that time, because no new coffee groves had been planted for years. It is even more irrelevant today, for coffee production has almost disappeared. Forty years ago, disputes over coffee groves were important catalysts for the partition of grove-owning ramages, because coffee was the major source of cash income. Today this is no longer the case. Generally, older people still know more or less who owns the abandoned coffee groves. Some people still cultivate coffee for their own consumption, but most of the population today drinks (the much inferior) imported instant coffee.
The system of property creation and the formation of new ramages continues today as formerly. Rapans occasionally plant orange or other fruit trees on unused land. They should secure the permission of the land owners to do so, and this is almost invariably granted. The trees are the individual property of those who planted them, and if they leave them jointly to their descendants, they constitute a new ramage that owns the trees. Of course, they acquire no ownership rights in the land where the trees are located.

The most interesting difference concerns houses. In 1964, houses were built almost exclusively in the two villages, ‘Area and Ha’urei, with populations of about 100 and 260 respectively. All of the land in ‘Area was owned by one, relatively small ramage, while much of the land in Ha’urei was owned by the very large Okopou ramage that already included a majority of the island’s population, and the rest by a smaller ramage known as Nāri’i. The builders of new houses need not be members of the ramage that owns the land on which they sit, but it was necessary to secure the permission of that ramage to build on its land. Such permission was regularly given. The owner of a house was its builder, who might will it to an individual heir, but more usually left it in the joint possession of his cognatic descendants.

An important development is that today, instead of being concentrated in the two villages, new houses are being built at various places around Ha’urei Bay (the island’s large, central bay, the crater of the ancient volcano). Some of these are located to the east of Ha’urei, between the village proper and the new quai (wharf), and in recent years more and more are being built on the other side of the village, towards Tukou, the area at the head of Ha’urei Bay. These houses are located on the lands of a number of different ramages.

It is still necessary to gain the permission of the land-owning ramage when building a new house. Each land-owning ramage has a formal manager, known as the ti’a’au (also called in French le gardien des terres). The manager is charged with overseeing the limited affairs of the ramage. For example, the manager is the person to whom requests to build a house on the ramage’s territory should be directed. The manager is a respected, elder, male member of the ramage who is elected by the adult members of the ramage who live in Rapa. Today it is also necessary for house-builders, who are generally (but not uniquely) young couples, to gain the permission of another organisation known as the To’ohitu ‘Council of Seven’ (in French, the Conseil des Sages ‘Council of the Wise’). This group was officially established by the Municipal Council (the island’s locally elected governing body) in 1984 with the purpose of representing the interests of the entire island community in matters pertaining to land ownership. After verifying that no one from the ramage that owns the land had a prior desire to live on the site in question, the Council generally approves the request. From 1984 to 2003 the Council consisted of the managers of the seven oldest land-owning ramages, but in 2003 the membership was increased from seven to fourteen (without, however, changing its name), in order to add representatives of the more recent land-owning ramages. Each ramage also elects a substitute to attend meetings of the Council when the manager cannot do so.

Finally, in 1964, if a truly irreconcilable dispute surrounded the ownership of a garden, grove or house, as a last resort the land-owning ramage could step in and confiscate the garden, grove or house for itself. This rule seems to have been applied
only very rarely and then only after the dispute among claimants to the improvement had gone on fruitlessly for years.

With land itself being such an economically unproductive form of property in Rapa and landowners having so little control over the improvements located on their land, one might expect that land ownership is of little importance to the Rapans. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hanson was convinced in 1964 that land was the most important form of property in the Rapan worldview; Ghasarian observes the same today. Boundaries between tracts of land are marked by vertical stones and any effort to move them is considered to be a dangerous rupture of a powerful ancestral tapu ‘prohibition’. Ghasarian was told of two men who, in the 1920s, wanted to move a boundary stone and were struck down by a giant suddenly appearing behind them on the path. This giant was thought to be the fatu fenua tupuna ‘ancestral owner of the land’. Hanson heard similar stories 40 years earlier (1970:44).

The great value Rapans place on land is largely symbolic. Having a world view that emphasises place over time, Rapans organise events—both of the mundane variety and important mythical and historical ones—according to where they occurred. It is through the ownership of land that they tie themselves to such events and to the ancestors, both of which are pertinent to their status in society. Land is central to their identity, to their sense of belonging. Because they have ownership rights in land, they have a place in the world. It is important to keep this in mind as we examine the economically insignificant but culturally and emotionally charged issues that revolve around land ownership today.

Land and the Problem of Unlimited Ramage Augmentation

To return now to our main questions: Is the process of ramage augmentation approaching its logical conclusion today, and, if so, what is likely to happen next? The Council of Seven, in our view, is a highly significant development because it constitutes a tacit recognition by the Rapans that the process of augmentation inherent in their unrestricted system of cognatic descent has indeed now reached the point where virtually everyone belongs to every land-owning ramage and shares in a claim to all of the land on the island. In these circumstances, matters pertaining to the ownership of any land are of concern to the entire population, and the Council of Seven is the body that represents their collective interests. More evidence for this conclusion is found in a semi-official document from 2000, designed to prevent any confusion between the rights of usage and the rights of ownership and to avoid any private claims to land. One part of the document reads: “les terres de Rapa et de Morotiri resteront la propriété inaliénable de la communauté des descendants de Rapa” (‘the lands of Rapa and Morotiri will remain the inalienable property of the community of people of Rapan descent’). This too suggests that the point in the cycle at which virtually all Rapans have ownership rights in virtually all lands has indeed been reached (Bambridge and Ghasarian 2000:176).

It would not be surprising if, in the latter stages of the process of augmentation, there were some confusion among Rapans about who belongs to what ramaages. This is indeed the case. Already in 1964 a number of Rapans told Hanson that they
did not know who owned the land on which some of their taro gardens and coffee
groves were located, and some even said they were unsure as to the lands in which
they themselves held ownership rights. Forty years later Ghasarian noted that the
younger people are, the less they know about their diverse ancestry. The transmission
of cultural lore is ineffective. The Polynesian pastor who served the island from 2001
to 2005 said that he did not know another island in French Polynesia where cultural
memory and knowledge are transmitted as poorly as in Rapa. Nor do parents teach
genealogy to their children. According to the pastor, knowledge of the origins of place
names is disappearing, and even the elders are starting to lose knowledge of ramage
genealogies, the territorial boundaries, and seem unclear as to the various ramages to
which they themselves belong. It is possible that these lapses represent some form of
collective amnesia that accompanies the exhaustion of the system of different land-
owning ramages brought about by the culmination of augmentation.

And yet, many Rapans persist in the notion that, even if everyone belongs to all
ramages, there still exist several different land-owning ramages with their separate
domains. The Council of Seven is currently trying to clarify and establish, once for
all, an “official” geography of the various ramage lands and borders, and an important
reason why its membership was expanded was to involve more people and more
knowledge in this task. The Council of Seven has also asked the Municipal Council
(the seat of local government) to develop an extensive genealogy of all Rapans derived
from the personal records maintained by the government since 1887. Clearly, matters
related to ramages and their lands are still very important in Rapa, as is also attested
by the dire consequences of attempts to move boundary stones.

The situation is fraught with ambiguities and ambivalences. Rapans are not
knowledgeable about their genealogies and are lax in teaching them to their children,
yet they are undertaking a concerted effort to generate a massive genealogy for the
entire island. Many are not aware of their own ramage membership, and it makes little
difference because nearly all of them belong to nearly all of the ramages anyway, but
they try to maintain the system of different yet overlapping ramages, and tinkering
with boundaries between ramage-owned lands is a deadly serious business that brings
down supernatural sanctions. Why are they anxious to maintain this ramage system
when the process of augmentation has rendered ramage membership essentially
meaningless? Why do they not just drop the notion of different ramages and different
named tracts of land entirely and simplify the system by saying that all of Rapa is
a single tract of land that belongs to all Rapans? Or, alternatively, why do they not
start a new cycle by doing again what their ancestors did in 1889, and distribute the
land among individual owners?

A new land distribution among individual owners is the least likely option to be
implemented. Indeed, we have never heard any Rapan so much as suggest it, and we
are quite convinced that if the idea were advanced, it would be summarily rejected
and those who proposed it ostracised. The islanders are proud of the fact that Rapa
is the only island in French Polynesia where land is not divided among heirs. The
connotations of generosity and equality are pleasing to them, in no small part because
it gives them a sense of superiority over the inhabitants of other islands. But probably
more important, they do not trust each other sufficiently to countenance the possibility of a new land distribution. Some unscrupulous compatriots, they fear, would manage to get the lion’s share for themselves and leave others with little or nothing. It is safer to leave things as they are.\textsuperscript{11}

Mistrust of the government of French Polynesia and of metropolitan France is another motivating factor. In 1964, before French Polynesia had obtained internal autonomy from France, the people expressed concern that the French would make a formal survey of the lands of Rapa and officially record the owners. At that time, Rapa was the only island in French Polynesia where this had not been done. There was widespread anxiety that, were it to happen, the French would not understand the Rapan system of land being held by large, overlapping ramages and might not accept what documentation of land ownership Rapans have.\textsuperscript{12} Today jurisdiction over land matters has devolved to the Government of French Polynesia, but the French Code civil remains the supreme law of French Polynesia and the Code strongly supports the concept of private property.\textsuperscript{13} The concern mentioned above operates here as well: if the government were to press to identify individual owners, unscrupulous Rapans, especially those who understand French law and know how to ingratiate themselves with government officials, might take advantage of the situation and enrich themselves at the expense of their less cosmopolitan neighbours.

The likelihood of an official survey diminished when, in 1984, the Mayor of Rapa secured the support of the French High Commissioner to French Polynesia for the establishment of the Council of Seven and the maintenance of the system of indivision in Rapa. The administration of French Polynesia in Tahiti bestowed the status of a “customary institution” on the Council. However, customary institutions have no basis in French law. This is why, with the help of an association of emigrant Rapans based in Tahiti known as the \textit{Oparo Paruru ia Rapa} (roughly, the ‘Rapan Protection Society’), the Council of Seven tries to get an official acknowledgement of its existence each time a representative of France or of the Government of French Polynesia comes to visit the island. Some Rapans even consider the possibility of taking their custom of joint inheritance of land to the United Nations, whose authority regarding indigenous issues is, they think, above the French laws.

A related concern is the possibility that an airport will be built in Rapa. A few years ago, the Council of Seven, with the support of most of the population, opposed the proposal. In addition to concerns that the influx of outside visitors would disrupt the island’s tranquility, the land for the airport and its runway would be owned by the Government of French Polynesia. People worried that this could open the door to outsiders buying other lands in Rapa, which would threaten the system of ramage ownership of land, and which, again, might be exploited by certain Rapans for their private advantage.

With so much opposition to any step towards private ownership of land, one other option is to declare that all of Rapa is a single tract of land that belongs jointly to all Rapans. This was already being said 40 years ago, but in the sense that people could cultivate gardens anywhere, whether they had ownership rights to the land or not. In other contexts, however, it was clear that the land most definitely did not belong to everyone and that for symbolic and social rather than economic reasons, rights
in land were the most important ownership rights a Rapan could have. The attitude persists today that different tracts of land belong to different ramages. But today the process of augmentation inherent in their system of unrestricted cognatic descent has reached the point that, via one ancestral path or another, virtually everyone belongs to all the land-owning ramages. In effect, then, the land really does belong to all Rapans. Precisely what this means is unclear, however, because of uncertainty about exactly whom the category “all Rapans” includes and whom it excludes. The issue turns on those Rapans who live elsewhere, primarily in Tahiti.

Who is “a Rapan”? or Who Belongs to a Ramage?

Many members of the previously mentioned association of Rapans living in Tahiti want to abrogate the ownership of tracts of land by different ramages in favour of a simple declaration that the entire land belongs collectively to everyone of “Rapan descent”. The phrase, *descendants de Rapa*, appears in the document regarding land ownership quoted above, which was drawn up by leaders of this association. Their rationale is that certain lands high in the mountains were not included in the 1889 distribution. Their ownership status is not clear, and this could provoke divisive claims to these lands that might threaten the whole land tenure system. Doing away with the different ramages in favour of a simple declaration of communal ownership of the entire island by everyone of Rapan descent would, they argue, head off this threat.

People living in Rapa regard this solution with a jaundiced eye. Elders discount the rationale, insisting that all lands on the island are owned by one or another ramage. They regard it as a strategy of those who do not live in Rapa but want to protect their rights against the time when they, their children or more remote descendants might want to come back to live on the island. The Rapan association in Tahiti has proposed the creation of a “Rapa identity card”, presumably as a means of validating the status of emigrant Rapans. This project is considered as quite useless by the Council of Seven, who point out that, through genealogy, everybody born of at least one Rapan parent and living on the island has rights to work and live on a piece of land. Therefore, according to them, “the land already belongs to all Rapans”. A climax in this conflict was reached in 2003 when, during a meeting, the members of the Council of Seven asked the representative of the association to stop trying to decide for the Council and to stop speaking in the name of the Council in Tahiti, but rather to support the Council decisions taken in Rapa.

The distinction between insiders and semi-outsiders is important, for residents often resent emigrant Rapans whom they regard as having interests in the islands different from their own. According to the Council of Seven, only those who live in Rapa can ask for a site on which to build a house. Yet, there is no formal way to verify the seriousness or validity of someone’s request. In a few cases, expatriate Rapans returned with plans to live on the island, made a request for a house site and built a house on it, but left again for personal reasons, leaving their uninhabited mark on the island and failing to join the local life. The short visits of Rapans from Tahiti during the Christmas season are not much appreciated by some residents. The visitors join the annual one-day collective fishing event but do not really become part of community activities. Ghasarian was even told that some residents secretly wished
for poor weather during these semi-outsiders’ visits, to discourage them from coming back the next year. The upshot is that many residents feel the phrase “the land belongs to all Rapans” should be restricted to all those Rapans who live in Rapa.

The Future of the System

The tensions between residents and emigrants may provide an indication of where the Rapan system of descent and land tenure appears to be headed. Though the steps towards it are tentative and the outcome remains unclear, we suggest that it is in the process of returning to a residentially restricted system of cognatic descent, structurally similar to that which existed in pre-European Rapa and in many other places in the Pacific. This type of system rests on the distinction between cognatic descendants of a ramage founder who reside in the ramage’s territory and have active or usage rights and those who live elsewhere and have latent or potential rights. In Rapa, residence on ramage land is irrelevant because the various ramages have not been residential units since the 1830s (Hanson 1970:191-200). But a new form of residential restriction is emerging as those who participate in ramage activities such as the election of a manager are limited to ramage members who reside on the island, while those who trace descent in the ramage but live in Tahiti or elsewhere do not participate. One might conclude from this that the several different land-owning ramages are showing signs of becoming residually restricted descent groups, with the distinction between those with active and latent rights depending on residence on or off the island. Moreover, the distinction between the different land-owning ramages is becoming less meaningful, because the result of augmentation is that everyone belongs to virtually all of them. This makes it possible to envision a next step wherein the Council of Seven acts as the governing body for a single “super-ramage” which is composed of the entire community of people of Rapan descent, and which owns the entire island. Again, active membership would be limited to those Rapans who live on the island, with Rapans who live elsewhere being latent members.

Residentially restricted cognatic systems have been studied and analysed elsewhere in Polynesia, for example in the Tuamotu Islands by Paul Ottino in Rangiroa (1972). In that archipelago, a time factor limited latent rights so that a person could not decently claim rights to land after three generations of absence. Rapans living in Rapa consider those who have gone to live away from Rapa as different (and consequently as having different interests in the island) from those who have stayed. Nevertheless, there seems to be no question that a person born in Rapa, who moved to Tahiti and subsequently returned to Rapa, would upon returning enjoy all the rights in land someone who had lived their entire lives on the island. But what if a child, born in Tahiti of a Rapan parent, wishes to move to Rapa in adulthood, or a grandchild of Rapan-born grandparents, whose own children had never lived in Rapa? The significance of these matters extends well beyond the possibility of being able to build a house and subsist in Rapa. As we have stressed, the most important value of land ownership is symbolic. It gives an individual a sense of identity and belonging, of having a place in the world. We suggest this is a major reason why Rapans who have left the island desire to maintain their land rights there, even if they never intend to return. Further we think that they want their children and grandchildren to have that same symbolic place in the world, even
if they never intend to live in Rapa. The question is whether, after something like the three generations Ottino noted for Rangiroa, that notion will retain any meaning for the absent descendants, or if the community that remains in Rapa will recognize them as some of their own. Our anticipation, grounded in the typical operation of residentially restricted cognatic descent systems, is that they will not. But the definitive answer will depend on what actually happens, and documentation of these processes will have to await future studies of the system, perhaps in another 40 years.

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Hanson concluded his book on Rapa with a discussion of the applicability of Sorokin’s principle of immanent change: that external forces may accelerate or retard the unfolding of the basic structure (Sorokin called it the “immanent destiny”) of a social system, but not fundamentally alter its form (Sorokin 1941:602). European contact produced massive changes in Rapan society—severe depopulation, changes in residential patterns, conversion to Christianity and participation in inter-island trade. As a result, ramages changed from internally stratified, residentially restricted cognatic descent groups that exercised full control over their territories and were the primary players in Rapan politics to egalitarian, unrestricted cognatic descent groups with little control over their territories and no political significance. Yet Hanson attempted to show how the immanent principles of cognatic descent persisted as the ramage adapted to take on its modern form (Hanson 1970:200-6).

The principle of immanent change is even more apt for the analysis of the Rapan system today. If the 19th century changes to the system of descent and land tenure resulted mainly from external forces, those in the 20th century have been largely internal. The instability inherent in an unrestricted system of cognatic descent discussed here as “augmentation”, has worked itself out for over a century largely unruffled by external influences. From Sorokin’s perspective, the immanent destiny of the unrestricted phase of the system has reached its end point, where everyone owns all the land. From the perspective that Lévi-Strauss exemplified in his discussion of the myth of Asdiwal (1967:16), the machinery has ground to a halt and starts up again in reverse. In other words, after having exhausted its unrestricted phase, the immanent structure of cognatic descent is now beginning to assert itself in a new yet old form. The earlier pattern of residential restriction is emerging again, but this time it is taking the form of one large ramage encompassing the entire island instead of a set of distinct ones. It is still the same system, maintaining its underlying structure as its immanent destiny unfolds.

NOTES

1. The historian A-C. Eugène Caillot visited Rapa in 1912 and wrote a small book about the island (Caillot 1932). Unfortunately he says nothing about land tenure at the time of his visit.
2. Each page of the Stokes manuscript has several numbers. References here refer to the circled numbers.
3. For more details see note 7.
4. This is not strictly accurate because it may be that in 1889 some land was not given to individuals but remained in the hands of ramages that owned it previously. The exact history is murky (see note 10), but its vagaries do not seem to affect the overall working of the structure.
5. The term for this position, as Hanson understood it in 1964, was ha’apa’o (Hanson 1970:51-52), a verb meaning, among other things, to look after or take care of. Ti’a’au is a noun, so that would refer to the person who looks after the affairs of the ramage. His position could theoretically be challenged if he does not act in the interests of the entire ramage. Although certain ramage members may grumble about the manager showing bias, we are not aware of any manager actually having been replaced for malfeasance.
6. Bambridge and Ghasarian (2002:170) use the term “re-establish”, for some informants say a group with similar functions previously existed. Known to some by the same term, to’ohitu, and to others as to’opae (Council of Five), apparently it became defunct in the 1950s; at least, Hanson found no evidence of it in 1964.
7. The history of these ramages is one of several areas where the situation is unclear. Ghasarian’s informants today state that the seven older ramages (Kaienu, Kopongoiki, Ngate Mato, Okopou, Takatakatata, Tipi and Pupuna) stem from the land distribution of 1889, while the seven newer ones were founded by individuals who acquired land at some point after that time. Contemporary informants are by no means unanimous on the names of these more recent ramages. The total number of ramages (well over 14) that one or another of Ghasarian’s informants mentioned—without always agreeing on the number and the names—are Ahuore (also named Teia or Venga), Näri‘i, Tinomoe, Tipi, Ipara’a, Maiaho, Pohe Piti Vahine, Tuanoa, Tupuna, Tane Pohe, Mai houri, Venga, Natiki, Patira, Ri’ari’a, Pare Vahine, Ngatepere Teki, Ngate vai Puta and Mairi). Hanson’s informants in 1964 said that there had been no division or distribution of land (beyond a few cases where childless recipients from the 1889 distribution passed their tracts to collateral relatives), and hence no new land-owning ramages founded, since 1889. Given that five of the seven older ramages are listed by Stokes (1930:678-79, 681-98) as names of pre-European ramages, Hanson’s interpretation is that land was given to (or continued to be held by) these groups in 1889, while the newer ramages stem from individuals who received land at that time. This would explain why, in 1964, certain ramages (Hanson’s data identify especially Okopou and Ngate Mato) were much larger than others (Hanson 1970:54-55, 210-11). Ghasarian raised this possibility with several of his informants but they did not confirm this interpretation.
9. Morotiri or Marotiri (also known as the Bass Islets) is a group of tiny uninhabited islets southeast of Rapa.
The document, purporting to express the views of the representatives of custom, the Council of Seven and the leaders of the various land-owning ramages, was signed on 5 January 2000 and registered with the territorial government of French Polynesia (Bambridge and Ghasarian 2000:176).

History may support them in this suspicion. Stokes, who was in Rapa about 30 years after the event, wrote that the distributing group worked in secret and its members were often beneficiaries of grants, leading him to gain the impression that “the land distributing board was a ‘land-grabbing’ board” (Stokes 1930:728).

The grants in the land division of 1889 were recorded. There may have been a master book with all the records, but it seems not to have survived. However, some people have retained the records of grants to their ancestors. In 1921 Stokes saw the records of five such grants, dated between 1 July 1889 and 29 July 1889 (Stokes 1930:728). Hanson in 1964 saw three pages recording the grants of 12 tracts of land to various individuals (notably Tupuna, Tupuna Vahine, and Teta’ata’airiki). The 12 records were all dated in July 1889 and each one bore four or five signatures from a total of seven signatories (Ma’iri, Tuanua, Ri’ari’a, Ma’ihuri, Tinomo’e, Teumurau, and Faraire). Stokes states that the board adjourned before its work was completed (1930:729). That might support Hanson’s hypothesis that some tracts were not included in the 1889 distribution and remained the property of the group that owned them then. It might also be taken as evidence for the notion that a number of tracts have no owners, although Rapans who hold that view usually say those lands did have owners, but who they are has been forgotten.

The French Civil Code, which mandates inheritance by all children, parallels the Rapan system to the extent that inheritance should be cognatic, but diverges from it in the expectation that heirs inherit individually rather than jointly. The provisions of the Code have never been applied with any strictness to Rapa, largely owing to the remoteness of the island and the infrequency and brevity of visits by French officials. Hence the strong predilection of Rapans to leave land ownership undivided has not been disturbed by French law. Indeed, in French Polynesia generally, the inheritance provisions of the Code have not been applied systematically but evoked occasionally by people to promote their personal interests.

Some informants in 1964 told Hanson that the owners of as many as 40 named tracts of land were not known, while others insisted that the owners of all lands on the island were known.

Spear fishing in Ha‘urei Bay and the three bays on either side of it is prohibited (rahui, which has the value of a strong tapu) except for precisely eight hours one day between Christmas and New Year’s Eve. On that day all the men join in collective fishing. That day is a festive occasion when everyone participates in catching huge numbers of fish and distributing them to all families on the island.
REFERENCES


