Chapter 5
Who Benefits from Complexity? A View from Futuna

Brian Hayden and Suzanne Villeneuve

> *The reason that I expended all this effort on the Northwest Coast is that people have been saying that exploitation may exist elsewhere, but not on the Northwest Coast. I suggest that the ethnoenergetic model be applied elsewhere, especially to Polynesia.*
>
> (Ruyle 1973:627)

Introduction

Who benefits from complexity? Is it the general populace as systems theorists and functionalists would have it, or is it the elites as Marxists would have it? And if the latter, is it the warriors? the priests? the political big men or chiefs? This issue is critical for understanding the origins of socioeconomic inequality, one of the most important theoretical issues in archaeology being discussed today. There is a major rift among archaeological theorists as to whether political complexity and socio-economic inequality emerged to serve the common good especially in enhancing defense, production, and distribution (Diehl 2000, Johnson 1982, Pebbles and Kus 1977, Saitta and Keene 1990:213–214, Saitta 1999, Suttles 1968), whether they emerged as a means of promoting elite self-interests or even exploitation by leaders (Diehl 2000, Earle 1977, 1978, 1997, Gilman 1981, Roscoe 2000), or whether they emerged from religious beliefs or other cultural values (as argued in Chapter 4 by Aldenderfer 1993, this volume, Cauvin 2000, Hollimon 2004:60, Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:165–167, 248, 288, Pauketat and Emerson 1997, Potter 2000:301, Rousseau 2001:119, Van Dyke 2004). Similarly, explanations for the collapse of complexity (as exemplified by the Olmec, Mississippian, Mayan, and Chacoan cases) vary from economic or environmental causes to social revolts, to loss of

B. Hayden (✉)
Archaeology Department, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada
e-mail: bhayden@sfu.ca

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faith in chiefly ideologies (the latter views being expressed by Chazan 2007:353, Drennan 1976:360–364, Heizer [*Excavations at La Venta*] 1963, Smith [*Myths and the Moundbuilders*] 1995, Van Dyke 2004). The exchange of prestige objects is also sometimes viewed as the result of ideological factors (rather than materialist factors), for example in order to move artifacts of power from craftsmen who had spiritual powers to those who sought such power (Brookes 2004:112, Goldman 1970:496, Rousseau 2001:119).

In all of these models, the role of chiefs occupies a central position; and it will be important to determine whether chiefs were obeyed primarily because people believed in their claims of ancestral sacredness and mana, because they served the common good, or because of more political or practical reasons–supported or justified, to be sure, by ideological claims. While we are mainly concerned with the general nature of chiefdoms and their dynamics, we use a specific case study from the island of Futuna to exemplify many points since some colleagues maintained that power in Polynesian chiefdoms was based far more on ideological beliefs than in simpler transegalitarian societies. We explore these issues from a political ecology perspective in which the ultimate motivation for developing chiefly roles and ideologies is the benefit that can be conferred on those in power.

Using this political ecological approach, we investigated the feasting and corporate kinship groups that Futunan chiefs rely on to create relatively complex sociopolitical systems. By political ecology, we specifically refer to the study of the way in which resources (in particular surplus resources) are used by certain members of pre-industrial communities to acquire practical, political, and economic benefits. Our approach is distinct from traditional cultural ecology, which has focused on subsistence resources, foraging strategies, and nutritional requirements (Campbell 1983, Vayda 1969, Winterhalder and Smith 1981). Our approach is also distinct from modern political ecology that studies contemporary national elites and the ways that they exploit national resources for political and economic gain (e.g. Anderson 1994, Greenberg and Park 1994, Kottak 1999, Stott and Sullivan 2001, Wolf 1972,). Similar approaches to the one we employ here have been long advocated by Earle (1978, 1997) who described the "political economy" of chiefdoms, and more recently by Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) who explain many of the practices we address in terms of "signaling theory." We differ from Bleige-Bird and Smith, however, in viewing such practices as feasting not only as signaling behavior (which it is), but behavior that also entails real reciprocal contracts and debts that are used to create sociopolitical structures.

Some of the main points that we wish to make are (1) that feasting played a critical role in creating political complexity and achieving practical goals; (2) that creating political hierarchies requires considerable supplemental resources beyond subsistence needs (Rambo 1991), especially for the feasts and prestige goods required to make these systems function; (3) that it is unrealistic to try to base enduring and costly institutional leadership roles on practices or values that do not confer any practical advantages on leadership; and (4) that the possibility of controlling some portion of community surpluses provided great potential for