Leaky Boundaries: Micronesia and the Myth of Cultural Distinctiveness

The idea that island environments promote diverse patterns of cultural evolution because of the isolating influence of sea gaps between islands is not supported by the historical record. Examination of inter-island contacts between 1500 and 1900 reveals far greater inter-island travel and off-island residence than hitherto accepted, and occasionally extensive knowledge of the world outside Micronesia. Borrowing and adapting features from other cultures was commonplace. In light of this evidence, it may be more appropriate to talk about Carolinian culture or even Micronesian culture than the culture of individual islands such as Ifalik or Fais. Pre-European patterns of cultural interaction and evolution can only be ascertained through much closer collaboration between historians, anthropologists and archaeologists.

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