WORKING SESSION 5

Agency and Identification in Tokelau Institutions

This paper will discuss contemporary patterns of identification, with a particular focus on representation of agency in Polynesian languages, based on empirical material from Tokelau and New Zealand. My larger research project aims at describing the dynamic workings of patterns of identification and social differentiation, akin to what has been described by Fox (1995), but with a focus on contemporary Pacific society. In Tokelau, indigenous knowledge of the past is cast in the form of genealogies, also including features of landscape and the natural world. Such knowledge is a political asset. To mention such pathways in public is at the same time to make claims to statuses and rights, and this kind of talk is conceived of as highly instrumental in shaping the social reality of the present. (Otto 1992:437, Hoëm 1999).

In this paper, the linguistic construction of agency and acts of identification will be discussed in relation to different levels of representation: gender, age, the genealogical relations between kin groups (kaiga) and geographical place. My empirical concern is to describe how these patterns of communicative practice relate to the incipient nation state and concomitant institutions, which seem to demand a certain re-orientation in identity-attachments. That is: A de-attachment of genealogical links to the home atoll and a re-attachment to a new national level (Hoëm 1999). Furthermore, the relationship to place established by the early and later Tokelau migrants to New Zealand seem to follow patterns of social differentiation related to claims of precedence, that leads to a new attachment to the local landscape in New Zealand. In other words, there are indications that the analytical concept of diaspora, with its associations of a continued focus on a return to the homeland, and a temporal and partial attachment to the place of diaspora is ill suited to describe the situation of a Polynesian “migrant”. It may be, as Sahlins (1993) has suggested, that the scale of networks of movement have changed, to become trans-regional, but that the patterns of identification and social differentiation have not. This larger question then, is what I wish to explore in a little way in this paper, through a particular focus on the relationship between representations of agency, acts of identification and the institutions they occur in.

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