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Archaeological Attempt to Deal with Anthropological Issues: Investigating Societies through the Study of Techno-economic Activities

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Before States, there were kingdoms. Before kingdoms, there were chiefdoms. The organization and characteristics of these societies has been a major topic of anthropological research. The islands of Oceania have always been considered as a favored place for analyzing the establishment, the organization and the variability of chiefdoms in terms of structure and evolution through time.

Archaeological remains: a twisted way to look at human societies

Complex aspects of human societies (institutions, concepts and symbolic values) are always quite difficult to approach through archaeological data, which are material remains (artefacts, architecture, traces, etc.). Nonetheless, through the study of those vestiges – otherwise referred to as “material culture” – it is possible to reconstruct the way past societies used to live, and to identify the practical choices that people made for interacting with their environment and living together.

In order to connect objects and material vestiges with social facts, one must be able to reconstruct a difficult puzzle: more than treasures, archaeological remains must be seen as an account of the activities undertaken within a given society. Those activities can be related to the purchase of raw material and goods, transformation processes for the production of those goods, and the use or consumption of those goods.

Without reducing social life to its material conditions, it seems quite obvious now that the dialectic between material and non-material aspects of cultures is a key to understanding the functioning and the development of human societies. There are two ways of dealing with material culture in order to understand its relationships with socio-economic organization: focusing on the ‘making’ (that is the production processes, and the social organization structure and the relationships embedded in the technical system) or on the ‘doing’ (that is the cultural practices of exchanging and manipulating objects).

Technology as an insight to social patterns

In the course of my PhD, I tried to investigate both making and doing, focusing on archaeological adze production and exchange within traditional communities in Tubuai, a small island (25km in circumference) located in the Australs, the southernmost archipelago of French Polynesia. In Oceania, adzes are a central element of the material culture used in all kinds of activities related to wood working in the every-day life. Because there is generally no usable ore for tool making in Polynesia, adze blades were primarily made of volcanic rock, though shell adzes are also known from the region. These were then lashed to a wooden handle with vegetable fibers. Some adzes represented a symbol of power for chiefs and were exchanged within ceremonial inter-island networks.

The analysis of the Tubuai collections highlighted different ways to shape adze blades and therefore different know-how due to a higher degree of specialization for some knappers. Geochemical characterizations of the rocks used in tool manufacture show that good quality raw material and stone blades produced by experts are unevenly distributed within the island communities. Stone tools coming from distant islands were found within some of the oldest occupation layers in Tubuai. Those different discoveries led to the conclusion that key materials and valued goods were monopolized by a part of the island’s population. In light of previous anthropological work, we know that control over production and exchange systems was conducted by social elites. The centralization of Polynesian traditional economy around political and religious leaders is actually a general trend of historical evolution of Polynesian chiefdoms towards more hierarchical organization.



Stone adze blade from Tubuai.

Societies as systems

Unlike today's mainstream idea, economic activities are not only being led by the laws of supply and demand and rational calculation of costs and benefits. On the contrary, anthropological studies show that economy and techniques are also determined by cultural choices and social organization. Indeed, before the 'Market societies' technical and economic activities were much more embedded with social, political, or else religious institutions. But even though economic actions in our modern industrialized world seem to be fully independent from –and moreover dominating – the cultural context in which they take place, one must see that they are related to socio-cultural patterns (individualism,

hyperspecialization of workers, intensive consumption of goods and services, etc.). Modern globalization is not just the liberalization of markets; it also involves the diffusion of certain practices, concepts and technologies. The choices made in traditional societies regarding production processes and inter-community exchange systems are related to the emergence and development of socio-political structures. In the same way, the future of our globalized world is not determined only by economic perspectives but also by political and cultural choices. The ‘end of History’ is not for tomorrow!

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