

SUGGESTIONS FOR INVESTIGATING THE CULTURE  
OF ATOLL PEOPLES

by Leonard Mason

The following suggestions for investigating the culture of an atoll people are based upon work already accomplished at Arno Atoll in the southern Marshalls. They are outlined here as a guide to the kinds of information which have already been collected for one atoll group. It is hoped that in other atoll studies the same kind of information may be collected by other workers in order to provide some common basis for comparison of atoll cultures. It is recognized, of course, that some subject matter suggested here may not be emphasized at all in other cultural situations, and that some subject matter not included here may be important to concentrate upon elsewhere.

I have found it convenient to group my suggestions in the following organization because investigation of man-land relationships focusses the investigator's attention upon economic activities in which material culture, social culture, and land tenure are frequently so interrelated that this kind of division of subject matter is a difficult one to follow. I have chosen to group my suggestions, therefore, into five categories, not all of which have equal importance for an ecological study, but all of which relate directly to it: (1) population inventory, (2) economic activities, (3) land tenure, (4) social and political organization, and (5) movement of people.

1: Population inventory.

An inventory of the population is essential. How intensive or extensive this inventory will be depends upon the time and assistance available to the field investigator. At Arno, I tried to complete a card file for the entire atoll, a population of under 1,000. This was not feasible in the time available, and the populations of only four communities in the atoll were processed, about 450 people. For each individual we sought and received, usually with very little difficulty, certain personal history data which were recorded during the interview upon a 5 x 8 card form previously prepared for that purpose.\* This information included the following: (1) age, (2) sex, (3) residence at the time of the interview (noted by name and location of the land-holding on which the residence was located), (4) ethnic origin (whether all-Marshallese or mixed with Gilbertese, Japanese, or Caucasian), (5) birthplace, (6) identity and birthplace of parents (useful information for determining the degree of immigration), (7) children (with their names, ages, sex, and present residence, plus fact of adoption where pertinent), (8) educational background (number of years and type of school, for evaluation of effect of formal education on the man-land relationship), and (9) specific awareness of the world outside the atoll (visits or residences at other atolls and other Pacific regions, and the reasons and dates of same). A photograph was taken of every individual interviewed for purposes of cross-checking photographic data later in the identification of particular individuals pictured in various economic activities.

Additional information was secured in these interviews as to (1) clan affiliation, (2) social rank or status, (3) change of residence with adoption or marriage, and (4) religious membership. Some of this material has a direct bearing on the economic relationship of man to land, but much of it serves rather to aid the anthropologist in further understanding the composition of the community.

\* See sample card A, p. 115

Analysis of these data provides helpful clues in the determination of trends in the changing relationship between populations and natural resources over a period of years. Shifts in population away, from, or onto the atoll in recent generations, as indicated by individual ancestry records, obviously may have some effect on the actual utilization of an atoll's resources. The longer-term trends in population growth have to be determined with the aid of official records or early estimates by travellers and others, where such written records exist. Factors contributing to changes in the size of population could often be detected in interviews with older islanders, when information was given about infant mortality, diseases, foreign medical aid, immigration or emigration for a number of reasons, and disasters, such as typhoons, drouths, and warfare.

## 2. Economic activities:

The investigation of economic activities was organized along two lines: (1) subsistence, which has to do largely with the direct utilization of atoll resources to meet the demands of daily living, such as the acquisition and preparation of food, the construction of housing and canoes, the preparation of fibers and other materials for handicraft used locally, and (2) commercial, which has to do with introduced economic activities, such as copra and handicraft production for sale to traders, wage labor, and the importation of trade goods to supplement local products. In both cases, studies were made of the kinds and quantities of local resources and imported items that were used, of the techniques and apparatus employed, of the work organization (by individual effort or cooperative labor of a family, a lineage, a household, or a community), of the distribution and use of the products manufactured or prepared or of the money derived from commercial activities. Special attention was given to the amount of work accomplished, the time expended, the individuals involved and their relationship to each other, and the location of the activity.

Following this section is a copy of a project proposal for anthropological investigation of Arnoese economy during the summer of 1951 by Mr. Harry Uyehara (graduate student at the University of Hawaii, under my direction). This project emphasized the collection of certain quantitative data to supplement material gained the previous summer. This project was part of the Coral Atoll Program sponsored by the Pacific Science Board and the Office of Naval Research.

To supplement the notes recorded on economic activities, an extensive photographic record was obtained at Arno, with pictures of food preparation, handicraft production, etc., in black-and-white and color stills, and in color movies for those activities better described by the cinema medium. Such a photographic record proves to be very worthwhile in checking some field notes where for reasons of haste or misunderstanding, notes are incomplete or confused.

In the analysis of economic activities, special interest should be directed toward the relative importance of commercial activities through the years, and the trend today toward greater dependence of island populations on participation in the world economy. Special inquiries were made in the field about the historical development of certain commercial enterprises, with notes about significant changes brought about in the man-land relationship. Estimates were also attempted as to the possible effect of other changes as contemplated by the people or the administration for future years.

### 3. Land tenure:

Closely related to the preceding topic is, of course, land tenure and associated matters, and especially so in atoll regions where scarcity of land frequently heightens anxiety about land ownership and use rights. At Arno, land maps drawn to a scale of about 1:5000 were produced for several islands (all islands in the atoll could not be surveyed in the limited time). For this mapping, hand-compass for directions, and pacing for distances proved to be accurate enough for our purposes. Generally, it was easiest to lay in the single main street first, then tie in both ocean and lagoon beaches which roughly paralleled the street. Paths and trails from the beaches provided convenient traverse lines to the street. All cultural facilities, such as dwellings, cook-huts, copra driers, latrines, pig-pens, wells, boat-houses, cisterns, public buildings, cemeteries, paths and trails were indicated on the map to scale. (A photographic inventory of these facilities provides a convenient check-list for identification and comparison of types.)

Finally, with the aid of community officials and local landowners, the boundaries of each land-holding were traced from ocean to lagoon and tied into the street. In general, where the terrain had been cleared, the actual boundaries were followed (with notes on the type of markers employed). In some cases, however, where brushing of the area required too much time and labor, only the general location of the boundaries was indicated. Notes were made on the names of individual land-holdings, of persons associated with the land as owners, and of persons holding only a use right to the land. Inheritance of land parcels was traced back for several generations, in representative cases, and related to genealogies of the lineages concerned. Disputes about boundaries or about title to land-holdings were recorded during the field mapping, to be followed up later by interviews with interested parties to determine more precisely the present methods of dealing with land problems.

Information was collected in interviews on the rights and obligations of various categories of persons associated with land-holdings, about changes in attitude regarding these rights and obligations, and about the interrelationships of land tenure patterns and other aspects of the economic system. Special attention was devoted to the actual relationship of people to their land in daily practice, the use made of the land, the products derived from the land, and the potential hardship to be suffered if their interests in the land were either reduced or completely voided.

Fishing areas, in the Marshalls, are relatively free and available for use by all Marshallese. In atolls elsewhere in the Pacific where fishing areas are regarded as properties to be owned and safeguarded, a more detailed investigation of this subject would obviously be called for.

### 4. Social and political organization:

In the investigation of social and political organization as it pertains especially to the man-land relationship, attention was given to the data under three general headings: (1) kinship groupings, (2) territorial groupings, and (3) systems of rank. With regard to each of these, land ties were found to be a vital element.

For kinship groupings, data were collected on the nuclear family, the lineage, and the clan, as pertinent social units; for territorial groupings, attention was centered on the household, the hamlet, the island community (village), the district, and the atoll. In both cases, notes were taken on the composition of the groupings (together with significant variations permitted in the culture), the organization of the members, leadership, the relation of each grouping to others of both types (kinship and territorial), and obligations of members to each other (especially those involving exchanges or transfers of property of any kind). Trends were investigated as to the respective positions of each type of grouping within the total community, particularly the increasing importance attached to territorial units as compared with kinship units, and the possible effects of such trends upon the man-land relationship.

In investigating systems of rank, both social and political, data were sought about the respective importance of such factors as birth, wealth, personality, education, etc. Notes were taken on the actual composition and organization of certain rank hierarchies as they existed within the atoll population, on the function and relative importance of each rank, and on the relationship of each rank to the exploitation and distribution of natural resources.

#### 5. Movement of people:

Finally, attention was devoted to the movement of people, within the atoll (from land-holding to land-holding, and from island to island) and between Arno Atoll and other atolls and islands in the Marshalls. Frequency of travel was noted, as were also the purpose, persons involved, type of craft utilized, and various factors affecting time of travel and duration of trips. Through interviews and actual observation, daily, seasonal, and annual patterns of movement were established, especially as these related to the exploitation of natural resources. An attempt was made to note significant differences in such exploitation, since contacts between Arno and other atolls have become more frequent in recent years.

SAMPLE CARD A.

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ARNO ATOLL CENSUS, SUMMER 1951

No. \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Residence \_\_\_\_\_  
Island \_\_\_\_\_ Household \_\_\_\_\_

Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Race \_\_\_\_\_ Clan \_\_\_\_\_ Atoll of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Mother's birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Mother's clan \_\_\_\_\_

Father \_\_\_\_\_ Father's birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Father's clan \_\_\_\_\_

Adopted? \_\_\_\_\_ By whom? \_\_\_\_\_ Change of residence? \_\_\_\_\_

Married? \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse \_\_\_\_\_ Clan \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Place \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse's mother \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse's father \_\_\_\_\_

Change of residence at marriage \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_ Education \_\_\_\_\_ Where? \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Class or social status \_\_\_\_\_

Atolls visited: (German) \_\_\_\_\_ (Japanese) \_\_\_\_\_

(American) \_\_\_\_\_

verso

Children: \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Residence \_\_\_\_\_  
(Living)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Children: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Dead)

\_\_\_\_\_

Spouse deceased? \_\_\_\_\_ When? \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced? \_\_\_\_\_ When? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Remarried? \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Place \_\_\_\_\_ Change of residence? \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse \_\_\_\_\_ Clan \_\_\_\_\_ Residence before marriage \_\_\_\_\_