

DEMAND AND INCENTIVES TO PRODUCE  
IN A TRADITIONAL SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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This paper will attempt to evaluate the impact of an "ascriptive" pattern of recruitment in social class membership on production performance in a traditional Micronesian society. This problem relates to a wider one in the literature on economic development, namely the impact of sociocultural institutions, norms, beliefs, and values, on economic progress. It also relates to an even wider assumption in the social sciences which has profoundly influenced the quality of research on the relationship between "society" and "economy."

This assumption is that societies may be classified into two types which differ from each other not only in degree but in kind as well. In sociology, Tonnies was one of the first to make explicit this assumption. He distinguished between "community" (*gemeinschaft*) and "society" (*gesellschaft*); sentimental and humanistic values characterizing social relationships in the former and purpose and rationalism the latter (Tonnies 1887). The two "giants" of sociology, Durkheim (1966) and Weber (1965), followed Tonnies on this matter, Durkheim distinguishing between "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity, and Weber between "traditional" and "rational-legal" bases of authority. More recently, Talcott Parsons' "pattern variables" were put forth, in part, as an aid in understanding the two kinds of societies (Parsons 1951, 1962). Most of the members of the school of Economic Sociology also subscribe to this view (e.g., Smelser 1963; Smelser and Lipset 1966; Parsons and Smelser 1956; Moore 1961).

It might be thought that anthropology, with its emphasis on the relativity of social institutions and values, would not subscribe to the view that "traditional" societies are different in kind from our own "modern" form. But Diamond (1963) has shown that anthropology probably began as a "search for the primitive," a search for an historical contrast to our own dehumanized society, and most anthropologists would therefore probably accept these two classifications. In economic anthropology, the school of substantivism maintains that traditional societies ("primitives" and "peasants") are fundamentally different from our own. The postulates of the non-scarcity of means, the limitation of wants, the embeddedness of economic organizations, the primacy of reciprocity and redistributions as modes of exchange

(Sahlins 1965), and the absence of the profit motive, all serve to distinguish traditional socio-economic forms from our own capitalist form (Polanyi 1944, 1968; Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957; Dalton 1968, 1969; Sahlins 1971). So different are economic processes in traditional societies that formal economic analysis cannot be applied to the workings of these economies (Polanyi 1968; Dalton 1968).

Many economists concerned with development have accepted the notion that there is something very different about "traditional" societies (Meir 1964:44-45; Jaspán 1967; Hagen 1962; Hoselits 1960; Lewis 1955). In part, this acceptance is due to their own experience that people in underdeveloped economies do not respond in ways that their analytic models predict they should (see, e.g., Berg 1961 on the "backward-sloping labor supply curve"). In addition, economic organization in traditional societies comprises certain specific features: economic units are usually multi-functional rather than specialized like an economic firm; material profit may suffer in the pursuit of personal prestige and gain; economic relationships may be subordinate to kinship, political, village, and friendship ties, the obligation of which make many business enterprises unprofitable (Bauer and Yamen 1957:66). These examples could be multiplied. The readings in Novack and Lekachman (1964) give more examples of sociocultural obstacles to economic progress. The point is that the notion that the institutions in primitive and peasant societies are fundamentally different from our own has "spilled over" into economics and has influenced economists' theoretical models of development and the policies to which these models point (Hagen 1962, 1968).

Whatever the reason for this dichotomous thinking, it is perhaps the best explanation for the notion that social institutions in traditional societies inhibit the development of their economies (Pitt 1970; Salisbury 1970). One set of traditional social institutions is found in underdeveloped economies, whereas a modern set exists in developed, capitalist economies. Each set is functionally related to its respective economy, and thus the traditional one, being tied functionally to an underdeveloped economy, is an obstacle to the transformation of that economy towards a modern form. I shall call the notion that the sociocultural institutions, norms, beliefs, and values in traditional societies inhibit the modernization of their economies the "Impediments view."

Scott Cook was one of the first economic anthropologists to realize that this position rests on an "idealization of the 'primitive'" (1968:209) rather than on a careful analysis of behavior in traditional societies. Following Cook's lead, "formalist" economic anthropologists like Salisbury (1962, 1970),

Belshaw (1964, 1965), Barth (1966), and Schneider (1974) have emphasized the universality of the utilitarian mode of action in different social institutional contexts. The position of these scholars seems to be that if we strip away our own biased notions (Salisbury 1970:2-6) and ideas of "help" and "generosity" which often accompany analyses of economic processes in "traditional" societies, we will discover that many of the alleged impediments are derived logically, rather than discovered empirically, from a stereotyped and often romantic view of behavior and institutions in traditional societies. In Oceania in particular, Belshaw (1964), Pitt (1970), Finney (1973), and Salisbury (1970) are noted for their repudiation of the Impediments view and their formulations of alternative models which indicate that social, political, ceremonial, and cultural values and organizations are important dynamic factors in the expansion of economic activities in the presence of new opportunities.

Quite clearly the issue is not one of "either-or." In a single society, some social factors may impede development, while others may be neutral or facilitative. In a comparative perspective, we may be able to state that some kinds of institutions, where they exist, will act as impediments. Others however, especially cultural values, will often be found to be dynamic factors, while others will be neutral. In any case, the ideal, typical, and stereotyped model of primitive and peasant societies which has prevailed for so long in social science must be abandoned along with the uncritical view that "communal" institutions and values are impediments to development. The issue is an empirical one, and can only be answered by examining how non-economic institutions and values influence economic processes of production, consumption, and exchange.

#### THE CHAYANOV MODEL OF DOMESTIC LABOR INTENSITY

Marshall Sahlins' important model (1971) provides a theory of how different kinds of social systems influence the level of output in agricultural production systems. The Russian agricultural economist A. V. Chayanov (1966) proposed a model to account for the variations in household agricultural labor intensity among Russian Middle Peasantry. The assumptions of this model are that since there are no inter-household exchanges in foodstuffs or agricultural labor and since each household is self-sufficient, the level of agricultural output in each household is determined wholly by the level of demand of the production/consumption unit, i.e., the household itself. Given these assumptions, Chayanov's model states that the intensity of labor within each household (measured in hours of labor per worker per annum) is directly proportional to the ratio of

consumers to workers in the household. This implies that the greater the relative working capacity of the household production/consumption unit, the fewer agricultural goods each laborer will produce and the less hours he will work.

Due to the universality of exchange, this model probably does not apply to any empirical economy. Sahlins, however, has shown its usefulness in evaluating the impact of various social systems on the performance of a system of agricultural production. He believes that primitive agricultural production is nearly always "underproductive" because the group's technology fails to fully exploit the environment. Both land and labor are under-utilized due to the organization of the production system, in which production units are co-terminous with consumption units (the "domestic mode of production," or "DMP") and with the "norm of livelihood" which overrides the profit motive as a motivation for production. That is, production in the DMP is for livelihood, not profit, for "use-value" rather than "exchange-value."

Due to the existence of exchange, which Sahlins (1965) elsewhere sees as the result of the sociological requirement of solidarity, the Chayanov model of domestic labor intensity will fail to apply to any empirical economy. However, the model seems to account for the level of labor intensity between households in a "society-less" economy, where each household produces exclusively for its own subsistence needs. But the presence of a social organization, i.e., of relationships between productive units, has an impact on the production system: "the nexus of kinship, alliance and politics materialize as a characteristic deviation from the Chayanov slope of domestic intensity" (Sahlins 1971:34). Sahlins does not use the word "demand" to refer to the increase of production among some of the households in the societies he discusses, but his argument may be reduced to the belief that sociocultural values, organizations, and strategies are independent variables which affect production by serving as incentives for some households to produce above their own domestic requirements. He is really arguing that society increases the demand for products: some of the variation between households in quantities of land and labor available, productive knowledge, ambition, power, etc., will be realized in an increase in production because society provide rewards, such as status, to those units which produce the greatest surplus over their own domestic requirements. Society, then, creates a demand which would not exist in an independent domestic economy.

For our purposes, the important conclusion to which Sahlins' work points is that different type of sociopolitical organization

and cultural values can be demonstrated empirically to have differential impact on the intensity of agricultural labor. Hence it would appear that we have some hope of evaluating the sociocultural factors which inhibit or promote agricultural production in specific cases. If most households in an empirical economy do not depart radically from the Chayanov norm, but a few are found to work much longer hours than the model predicts they need to work from their composition, then these few households can be examined for their sociological characteristics which motivate their increased labor intensity. The flow of the products of this labor into other households can be charted along with the social events, the ceremonies, the hospitality, the everyday exchanges which are the occasions for the transactions discovered. The derived model will depict the differential production performance of social units and will relate this performance to the variations between households in transactional strategies which are used for achieving their culturally-defined goals. The impact of these transactions and goals on the system of production can thus be evaluated.

#### THE KUSAIE CASE<sup>2</sup>

The models identified above as anti-impediment in orientation were all derived from "open" societies in which status and power must be acquired by one's own political and economic activities. Even the most hard-line Impediments theorist would be hard-put to find evidence that the norms of status recruitment in Melanesian societies have a negative impact on production performance. But the traditional, pre-contact sociopolitical organization of Kusaie island in the Eastern Caroline Islands offers an example of an institutional structure which seems to fit the Impediments model well. For reasons of space, the discussion will be limited to an examination of the ascribed<sup>3</sup> nature of social status and political power in aboriginal Kusaie. I hope to demonstrate that, while status and power were normatively ascribed, or determined by birth, elements of "achievement" with economic consequences also existed.

Kusaie is the easternmost of the group of islands called the Carolines, now part of the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, known popularly as Micronesia. The United States acquired the area, excluding the Gilbert Islands, as a strategic mandate from the United Nations following World War II. Micronesian islands geologically fall into one of two basic types. "Low" islands, including coral atolls, are the result of millenia-long limestone deposition atop

submerged, basaltic volcanoes; the inhabitants of these subsist on land masses usually less than one square mile in area. In contrast, the dwellers of the "high" islands live in a relatively abundant environment. Kusaie is a high island; and like the people of other high islands in the Carolines, Kusaiens subsisted on a variety of low labor intensive crops like breadfruit, taro, bananas, yams, sugar cane, and citrus.

Despite the contrast between the environments in which they lived, the aboriginal populations of the Eastern Carolines and the neighboring Marshall Islands exhibited many sociopolitical similarities. Among these was a cultural emphasis on rank, usually elaborated into a class structure. Typically, the noble class was composed of the families of titled chiefs who nominally held ultimate rights to land. Their commoner subordinates were obliged to render labor services and tribute to the titled chief of the district in which they resided. Another similarity between most of the people of the area was political rivalry between chiefs and districts, which often took the form of outright warfare over power and land rights (Alkire 1972). Also wide-spread was an arrangement of ranked matri-clans which regulated accession to titles and occasionally marriage choice.

Ethnographic information on pre-contact Kusaien social institutions must come exclusively from documentary sources, since there are few if any remnants of the old system existing today and even the oldest informants remember little of the "dark times" before Christianity gained its now powerful foothold. The French scientists and explorers, Duperrey, Lesson (1839), and Dumont D'Urville (1839) were the first white men to visit Kusaie in 1824. They were followed in 1827 by Lutke, the Russian navigator (1971; original, 1836). The first missionary, Benjamin Snow, arrived in Kusaie in 1852; and his letters about pagan practices on the island are another important source of information. A German ethnographer of the early twentieth century, Sarfert (1919-20), is the final source of first-hand information. Lewis (1949) and the late Walter Scott Wilson (1968) are other sources, but their statements about pre-contact conditions rely on the sources already mentioned.

Kusaie has been called the most centralized of all Micronesian polities (Alkire 1972:36). The island supported between 2000 and 5000 persons (Lewis 1949) on its 42 square miles. This population was divided into two distinct social classes, the nobility, lem, and the commoners, mwet srisrik. Like most Micronesian societies, Kusaien society had clans, nominally matrilineal, which were linked to the class structure. The clans were ranked in terms of their status and power: the freshwater eel, ton, clan having the highest status and the nias clan the

lowest. The king, tokosra, came from one subclan, the ton yewal, of the ton clan. He appointed the holders of eighteen titles, nine high and nine low, from among his relatives and supporters. The authority of the title-holding chiefs extended to the whole population, not just to their commoner clanmates.

The island was divided politically into about 57 districts (Lewis 1949:5-6), each with a name and a surrounding area of garden land and reef which its inhabitants exploited for their subsistence. In addition to appointing the chiefs, the king also allocated these districts among the nine high titles. Each district was a local group of a specific clan, sruf (Sarfert 1919-20:333), so it may be assumed that each district was some kind of a local descent group; from evidence from other areas of Micronesia, it was probably composed of a group of brothers and their families, with their father and mother if these were still alive. Each district was probably in fact a household or group of a few related households (Peoples, ms.). The land-holdings of each coastal district extended from the coast to the interior (Wilson 1968:159), so that each local group had at its disposal territories of each vertical eco-zone, plus access to an area of reef.

From each district, the high chief in control appointed a commoner overseer, mwet suksuk, which literally means "person who looks for." As his name implies, this individual's main responsibility was the collection of tribute from the residents of the district, all or many of whom were his kinsmen and affines. The population of the district had to cultivate, in addition to their own gardens, both the gardens of their mwet suksuk and of the high chief assigned to their district. Every few days, the mwet suksuk of each district had to send a canoe load of fresh fruit, fish, and prepared food to his chief in Lelu. Since each chief had several districts under his control, he and his family were provided daily with fresh food (Sarfert 1919-20:364). It appears that chiefs and their households did no agricultural labor; the servants of chiefs who lived on the small island of Lelu, and perhaps the district overseer, apparently did little agricultural labor (Lewis 1949:13).

Some indication of the high degree of stratification in aboriginal Kusaie is given from the reports of the early explorers (Lesson 1839; D'Urville 1839; Lutke 1971, orig. 1836), who were very impressed by the privileges of the chiefly class and the considerable respect paid to them. The following quotations demonstrate this fact:

The population of Kusaie is, as I have already said, gentle, timid, and fearful; only the chiefs have arrogance, which gives them the

habit of power; accustomed from their childhood to a servile submission, the common people respect each superior class, and venerate them. They possess nothing of their own, all belongs, themselves, their families, and the objects of their industry, to the chiefs in the district in which they are born...it seems that the chiefs have an absolute right on the properties of men of common origin, which are born in their respective districts. We saw chiefs immediately appropriate axes or nails from natives who had exchanged for them [to the French] objects which belonged to themselves. They turned toward us in showing us this action, and seemed not at all affected, so natural did it seem to them. But this passive obeisance is equally imposed on the chiefs in regard to the king, and we saw that all the presents which they received were immediately delivered to him (Lesson 1839:488-490).

The benevolent and amiable disposition are not found at all among the uros [chiefs]; whether a mixture of pride, of vanity or avarice, or whether they thought that our presents were their due, they were avid, insatiable, and without nobility or generosity of character (Ibid. 1839:500).

...before the uros-ton [king] all foreheads should rest against the earth. At his aspect, all the assistants and most powerful chiefs were humbly inclined...(Dumont D'Urville 1839:459).

In addition to these external signs of obeisance, which also included a special form of respect language which was used when addressing a chief or senior, among the privileges of chiefs was the right to collect tribute from their commoner subordinates. The mwet suksuk, or district overseer, would collect tribute from his district and take it to the chief of the district. The latter would then render about one-half of these goods to the king. How the king disposed of the excess after providing for himself and his many retainers is uncertain, but there is good evidence that much of it went into entertaining other chiefs and into feasts, activities which the other titled chiefs also sponsored (Lutke 1971:363; Lewis 1949:9, 12-14, 19-20). Some of



this tribute, then, was redistributed among the other chiefs and commoners.

Since we are dealing with ascribed status in aboriginal Kusaie, a word must be said about the inheritability of titles and noble status. There is general agreement that an individual born of commoner parents could not acquire noble status (Lewis 1949:4). Indeed, given the high degree of respect paid to the nobility, we would be surprised if mobility between the classes were possible, for such extremes of behavior are rarely found in open societies. The best a commoner could hope for was to become a mwet suksuk; but this did not provide him with privileges relative to the nobility, who still viewed him as a commoner (Lewis 1949:5). Upward mobility between the two classes seems, therefore, to have been proscribed.

However, it does seem to have been possible, according to Sarfert (1919-20:335-6), for a noble family to lose its status. This is because a prerequisite for noble status was for a family to have had a member who was appointed to a title by the king in the recent past. Thus after a few generations without a title-appointee, a lineage or family group could lose the privileges of nobility. This means, of course, that within the structural system of status ascription by birth, a countervailing play of family interests existed in which members of the nobility competed with each other, often violently (Lewis, ms.), for titles to ensure the continued privileges accruing to their noble status. Furthermore, the king allocated positions of power in the form of titles among the nobility. Since these titles were ranked and different degrees of power and privilege attached to them (Peoples, ms.), the nobility also competed among themselves for the king's favors in order to acquire the highest titles. Thus, within the norm of ascribed status were important elements of achieved status.

Commoners apparently could not, by their achievements, become nobles. However, they could improve their status vis-a-vis other commoners by various means. Finally, within the nobility, in addition to the competition resulting from the value placed on acquiring a title, families competed with one another for the highest titles and, at the death of a king, for succession to the kingship. Competition, both among commoners and the nobility, had important consequences for the production system, because the primary strategies employed to acquire status and power involved the use of material means, i.e., increased production of agricultural commodities and the distribution of these and other goods. The remainder of this section will discuss the strategies used by nobled and commoners to increase their status within the "between class" norm of ascription.

The king appointed individuals from among the nobility to various ranked titles to which he allocated districts and their populations. It is clear that these structural "rules" allowed considerable room for conflict and competition, and such was empirically the case (Lewis 1949:18; Lewis, ms.; Sarfert 1919-20:334). Probably one way in which chiefs competed for the highest titles, which carried with them differential rights to the control of land and commoners and hence economic and political power as well as prestige (Peoples, ms.), was through the payment of inordinate amounts of tribute to the king to win his favor. This must have been accomplished by pressing the district overseers under the chiefs' control to force their subordinates to increase production of agricultural goods and provide more fish to present to the king. Payment of larger amounts of tribute than one's peers could be exchanged for future favorable consideration in title appointments by the king.

There is also evidence that another means by which titled chiefs could increase their prestige and win favor with the king and populace was by the sponsoring of public feasts (Lewis 1949:17). Little is known of the magnitude of these public events or their frequency. However, it seems certain that they served to increase prestige and one's chances of acquiring a title (Lewis, ms.). The missionary Snow attempted to persuade church members and the nobility not to give feasts as a part of renouncing their heathen customs, but he was pessimistic about the possibilities:

Still I shall be greatly surprised if strong opposition and even persecution shall not arise when the king and chiefs shall see what an important source of gain and distinction is interfered with by such an arrangement (Snow, letter dated March 25, 1858).

Data are of course lacking which would enable an estimate to be made of the effect of these public feasts sponsored by ambitious nobles on agricultural production and labor intensity. That the effect was to increase production over what it would otherwise have been seems indisputable. Lewis (1949:19-20) reports, for example, that chiefs ordered special gardens planted on the occasion of the epang festival, which lasted several months and occurred every three to six years, whenever they felt they could organize the resources needed to sponsor one. Even in present-day Kusaie, a major incentive for planting Colocasia taro is the expectation of an upcoming feast.

Among commoners, the competition centered around being appointed by the district chief to the position of overseer.

However, competition also occurred for "informal" status in the eyes of one's peers (Lewis, ms.). I have been able to abstract three ways in which the goal of increasing one's status could be attained.

First, the provision of hospitality was a means by which one could acquire renown. Wilson (1968:38, 136) reports that in aboriginal times a surplus of food was prepared in anticipation of guests. Lewis (1949:12) writes that the success of a visit was measured by the quantity and quality of food served, and that guests were usually provided with food to take home to their households. Early French accounts outline the unexpectedly lavish hospitality of the commoners of Kusaie which seemed to the explorers to be the most impressive aspect of the culture. As might be expected, this hospitality was not just a social obligation which weighed heavily upon households, but also a means to increase status (Lewis 1949:17). It encouraged the production of the more valued kinds of foodstuffs, especially of fahfah, a food made of Colocasia mixed with bananas or coconut cream, and of fish.

Surprisingly enough, a kind of potlatch, afokai, also existed in aboriginal Kusaie. It would begin with a gift of a basket of food to a rival, who would then reciprocate with a return gift of great proportions. Like the potlatch among the Northwest Coast American Indians, these presentations would snowball, and shell money<sup>4</sup> might be added as the contributions increased in quantity. When one individual could no longer continue on his own resources, his friends and relatives would aid him. Again, we do not know how many individuals might participate or how much food might have been involved in the presentations. Lewis (1949:19-20) says only that the distributions took on "greater dimensions" when chiefs participated. Again, this means of acquiring status must have provided an incentive for households, and perhaps whole districts, to outproduce one another and thus increase the intensity of labor.

The third way in which a commoner could increase his status was by his contributions to feasts and tribute payment. Commoners competed in growing large crops and having large harvests, which were used in the payment of tribute. Apparently, an especially conscientious commoner might bypass the usual genealogical requirements and be selected as a district overseer by his titled chief (Lewis 1949:17). If a titled chief was planning a public feast to further his own interests, or was trying to increase his favor with the king by paying a large tribute, a commoner apparently could also take advantage of this situation by making a large contribution to the enterprise of his superior. For any donations above the customary requirements

of tribute, chiefs would reciprocate with a payment of shell money and other gifts (Sarfert 1919-20:364; Lewis 1949:17). This too must have provided an incentive for households to produce more agricultural goods for their "exchange value."

#### CONCLUSION

The foregoing has attempted to demonstrate that although aboriginal Kusaian society appears to exemplify well the postulates of the Impediments view with respect to the ascribed patterns of its class structure, in fact there were considerable elements of achievement which allowed people of both classes to improve their social position vis-a-vis others in their own class. The strategies employed by both noble and commoner individuals and groups to attain increased power and status included the use of material means, and therefore had economic consequences. These consequences included a significant increase in agricultural production over the level predicted by the only existing model of a domestic economy, that of Chayanov and Sahlins.

I do not suggest that the Kusaian sociopolitical organization provided the impetus for development or that the Kusaian economy was "developing" at the time of contact. "Development" implies an increase not only in production but in productivity, and in Kusaie the level of productivity was limited by the low level of technology. I do suggest that at the time of contact, the ascribed nature of membership in social classes did not adversely affect incentives to produce. It is probably correct to say that wherever some statuses are ascribed, there will exist alongside them other statuses for which relevant recruitment mechanisms will emphasize achievement. In evaluating the impact of patterns of status acquisition on development, it is more fruitful to consider whether the strategies employed by individuals and groups to achieve higher status have an impact on economic growth, rather than contrasting ascription with achievement and maintaining that the former implies a "closed" society in which the desire for social mobility cannot motivate economic activity. For mobility exists in all societies, within classes if not between them, so that what must be investigated is the influence of the means by which mobility is achieved.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Fieldwork in Kusaie was carried out from March, 1975 to February 1976 with the aid of a National Science Foundation Grant for the Improvement of Doctoral Dissertation Research in Social Sciences SOC74-21426. Documentary research occurred in Hawaii, Guam, and neighboring Ponape island, for a period of two months.

<sup>3</sup>"Ascription" in status acquisition is used in Parsons' sense to refer to "the normative pattern which prescribes that an actor in a given type of situation should, in his selections for differential treatment of social objects, give priority to certain attributes that they possess (including collectivity memberships and possessions) over any specific performances (past, present, or prospective) of the objects" (1951:82). It is thus distinguished from its opposite, "achievement," in which the actor's actions and performances are more relevant for how people interact with him.

<sup>4</sup>Little is known about the usages and functions of this shell money, other than that it was somehow used for the payment of certain kinds of goods and services. It was, however, certainly necessary for the acquisition of prestige (Sarfert 1919-20).

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