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Chapter 1, Another Perspective, in Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

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CHAPTER I

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

For 33 months, from October 1980 until July 1983, and again for seven months from March 1987 until September 1987, and for several weeks in 1993, I lived among the Sikaiana, a Polynesian people in the Solomon Islands. Part of the time, I lived with them on their coral atoll; the rest of the time was spent living with Sikaiana emigrants, mostly in and around Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. In 1980, I went to the Solomon Islands to do research on Sikaiana culture, society, and language for my doctoral thesis in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. I returned in 1987 to do more research on social change. I want to be very clear that this book is about Sikaiana life during the period from 1980 to 1993. There have been many changes since then. I write in the "ethnographic present" to relate my experiences at that time, not to claim that nothing has changed.

This book describes some of the results of this research. Sikaiana was settled by Polynesian argonauts who journeyed across hundreds of miles of open ocean to settle a small, isolated atoll. But for many years before my arrival in 1980, the Sikaiana had not gone on any long-distance sailing voyages. They no longer construct the seaworthy outrigger canoes necessary for such trips. Since the 1920's, they have travelled away from the atoll only on the steamships sent by traders, government administrators, and religious organizations. The Sikaiana, like so many other people in the world, participated in intensive culture change in the 20th century. Christianity, salaried labor, formal education, government bureaucracies, and the international media are part of their daily lives. In this book, I will describe how the Sikaiana, during my stays, participate in these institutions, while they also continue some of their distinctive cultural traditions and maintain themselves as a separate community within a larger social system.

For me, the most striking feature of Sikaiana life is what I call, for lack of a better term, its "intimacy." Life on the atoll is public and enveloping. One wakes to the calls of people going about their chores. A foolish act provides material for the next day's banter and gossip. Individuals are known for their delights, dislikes, individualities, peculiarities and these provide a source for a continuous commentary in daily life. People encounter one another at the morning and afternoon church services, walking along the paths to the gardens, at public meetings, community work projects, and the frequent drinking bouts. There is an on-going discussion about individuals and involvement in their daily lives. Intimacy in my own society is structured around a few private relationships of extreme intensity and isolation, most apparent in marriage and nuclear families. In sociology textbooks, the term intimacy almost invariably refers to sexual intimacy. I am not referring to sexual intimacy rather what to me was a general interpersonal closeness. Compared to the close relations I experienced in my own society, Sikaiana intimacy is less focused on a few very close relatives, and less isolated between different groups. It is more public, more generalized and in that sense more communal and enveloping. In this book I will try to explain the organization of this intimacy in everyday relations, as I also explain how I came to participate in the

intimacy of these relations.

As a study of intimacy in a small community and culture change, this book addresses one of the important issues in social theory and modern life: the organization of social relations in small, personal communities and how these relations change as the result of the introduction of complex technology and the incorporation of these small communities into larger, complex social systems. These changes are sometimes labelled as "modernization," and its accompanying ideology sometimes is called "modernity," and often described as a related series of processes: the breakdown of communal relations, values and interests; an increased emphasis, described as both liberating and isolating, on privacy and individuality; the rise of specialized occupations, bureaucracies and expertise; an industrialized economy and some form of large scale production usually associated with capital investments; and a compulsion for knowledge and self-reflection. These changes have been taking place in Western societies for the last few centuries and were central issues for the 19th century founders of social theory, a diverse group which included Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Tonnies, Simmel, Cooley, and Park, among others. As the result of the development of a global economic and social system, similar changes have been taking place more recently in smaller non-Western communities, such as Sikaiana. Even in the present period of post-industrialization, globalization, and neocolonialism, scholars continue to debate what is happening to small communities and personal relations, and there is considerable disagreement concerning both the overall trends in these processes and what has been lost and what has been gained.

Sikaiana offers an opportunity to examine these processes. Its very small population was enclosed by hundreds of miles of ocean and until recently isolated and self-sufficient. But over the past 150 years, the Sikaiana people have greatly intensified their contacts with the outside world and as a result participated in the processes associated with Westernization and modernization including the introduction of a market economy, labor-for-wages, and highly specialized occupations and institutions. I will discuss these changes in terms of how they affect the organization of interpersonal relations on Sikaiana: how people establish relations with one another; how these relations coalesce in various groups and activities; and how these groups and activities are integrated into larger social systems in the region and world. Although constantly affected by world-wide forces which act to incorporate or integrate them into larger regional social systems and at the same time distance or differentiate them from one another, the Sikaiana have maintained a communal sphere of personal relations. These issues concerning the integration and differentiation of social relationships are relevant not only for understanding the residents of a remote atoll, but also for providing a perspective for understanding social relations elsewhere.

The Sikaiana Community

In writing about the "Sikaiana people" or their "community" some readers may legitimately want to know about whom I am writing. Who exactly are the Sikaiana and in what sense are they a "community"? My definition of the word "community" is taken

from *The Oxford Dictionary of The English Language* which emphasizes two sources for the meaning of the word: a concrete sense referring to a group of individuals or "a body of fellows"; and a more abstract meaning which is a quality of "fellowship, community of relations." I will describe a group of people and the locality they inhabit. But I will also focus upon the institutions, events and practices which determine a special "fellowship" or "community of relations."

As a group, the Sikaiana people includes most, but not all, of the present descendants of the atoll's 19th century inhabitants, whose cultural traditions these descendants have both perpetuated and revised. Roughly it corresponds with an abstraction some Sikaiana use when referring to themselves, "*taatou i te henua*," "we, from the island." There are some people with Sikaiana ancestors who are minimally or not at all involved with the people I am describing. They have migrated away from Sikaiana and inter-married with other ethnic groups in the Solomon Islands. On the other hand, there are also a few people without Sikaiana ancestry who are involved in Sikaiana activities: for example, a Kiribati woman married to a Sikaiana man, now fluent in the language, and fully involved in Sikaiana events.

In the 1990s, there are about 500-600 Sikaiana people who, although somewhat diverse in personality and life experiences, generally subscribe to similar values, expectations and understandings about life and their behavior. Most of these people can speak the Sikaiana vernacular, although many, especially younger men, may feel more comfortable in Pijin, the English-derived *lingua franca* of the Solomon Islands. They possess rights to use resources on the atoll. They maintain an interest in the affairs of one another and express that interest through participation in shared activities. These are the people who form the community.

Sources

In writing about Sikaiana life, I build upon several sources in social theory. The first source concerns the integration of small communities into a world social system and the accompanying changes in those small communities. The second concerns the ceremonial and symbolic behavior which organizes face-to-face relations. Thirdly, I examine humans as active, not passive, participants in their culture and its changes.

A central issue in social theory since its founding in the 19th century concerns processes associated with industrialization, urbanization and the leveling of villages and small towns as they became integrated into larger social systems. Writing about these issues from the perspective of industrialized nations, social scientists often make a general dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" societies in an attempt to systematically describe these changes. Generally, such dichotomies depict low-population, self-sufficient, personal, communal, ritualistic and conservative "traditional" communities and contrast them with high-population, interdependent, technologically specialized, impersonal, bureaucratic, and cosmopolitan "modern" societies. Much of this writing about social change builds upon themes established by social theorists in the late 19th and early 20th century: Durkheim's discussion of increasing specialization in occupations; Weber's work on the development of expertise

and decision-making administrative institutions; and Tonnie's notions about the shift from personal relations in small communities to impersonal ones in industrialized, urban societies.

This dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" is a simplification of an inter-related series of processes. With the development or introduction of complex technology, occupational roles become specialized and career-oriented. Self-sufficient generalists are contrasted with specialists who are interdependent for survival on others who have mastered complementary skills. In technologically complex societies, for example, carpenters, plumbers, cardiologists, and engineers each possess a professional expertise, which is consciously scrutinized, systematized and updated, and which is so complex that individuals must devote long periods of time to mastering it and must continue to update their knowledge as technology changes. Occupations, moreover, are interdependent. Large populations are necessary to support such specialization in labor, social relationships are often described as becoming more impersonal and include interactions with strangers. Personal relationships are no longer formed primarily through kinship and communally determined expectations, and new kinds of private relations develop which emphasize individual interests and preferences. In Western societies, the result is often described as a separation between impersonal, anonymous public realms and isolated personal ones. There is a breakdown of shared communal values and constraints, including ritual and religious ones. As specialized expertise associated with occupational roles becomes predominant in one's life, there is also more self-consciousness and self-reflection. People rationalize and think about their own behavior, even to the point where some professions, such as the social sciences, specialize and institutionalize the study of society and human behavior (Berreman 1978, Berger, Berger and Kellner 1973, Bellah et al 1985, Eisinstadt 1987, Giddens 1990).

Many anthropologists criticize these views of social change as too simplistic, and even somewhat Eurocentric in delineating a sharp break between traditional and modern, and associating the modern with Euro-American cultures. These processes outline general tendencies, not inevitable outcomes, and they over-emphasize Western experience with industrialization. The Sikaiana are quite different from the Sioux; industrialized Japan from industrialized Sweden. In all societies, there are relations which are more and less personal, more and less specialized, more and less based upon expertise. Before European contact, Sikaiana had ritual experts and specialists, some settings were more private and others more public, some relations were more personal and a few were highly restricted and formal, and there was some self-reflection especially concerning human social relations and motivations. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that every society follows the same course of change as the result of contact with technologically complex ones (see Miner 1952, Geertz 1963, Bender 1978, Berreman 1978).

But I think that classic social theory offers a useful approach to understanding global processes, especially the tension between global and local. Recently anthropologists have recognized the tension between global processes and local identities and the manner in which cultures are blending into a global soup or ecumene. Local lives must be analyzed in terms of their reflection of global processes (see White

1991, Sahlins 1985, Kirch and Sahlins 1992). There are no longer--if there ever were--concrete boundaries as cultures blend and combine in what Appadurai (1990) has termed ethnoscapes. A world system of economics, politics, and media has blended cultural boundaries and recombined cultural elements (see Featherstone 1990, 1991, Appadurai 1990, Foster 1991, Hannerz 1992, Robertson 1992). Culturally, the modern world is melting down. This meltdown includes many of the processes outlined in classic social theory.

Changes in Sikaiana social relations include many of the processes predicted by classic social theory: adoption of specialized occupations; new commitments to careers based upon an expertise which is derived from sources far beyond the atoll; beliefs in some universal religious beliefs; incorporation of western legal procedures; development of specialized bureaucratic administrative institutions; breakdown of some traditional kinship restrictions; increased self-consciousness about their own distinct practices that is a result of rapid change within their own lifetimes and their awareness of the different cultural practices of other people. But these changes have not resulted in the fragmentation of the community as a locus for personal relations. In confronting modernization, the Sikaiana have maintained a sphere of personal and private relations. This personal community is partly the result of Sikaiana's small size and relative isolation, but it is also the result of the manner in which the Sikaiana have maintained and developed communal practices and institutions, including many new ones which are derived from Western contact. Theories of modernization help provide a comparative framework for examining how Sikaiana is both similar to and different from other societies with similar institutions. They define some important changes in Sikaiana social life; but they also recognize some significant ways in which Sikaiana remains a uniquely personal community and has not been assimilated into a standardized global system. Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel lived in times that were closer to the transformation and breakdown of village life in Europe, and therefore offer a perspective, too often overlooked, for understanding similar processes which are occurring elsewhere in the world more recently.

In describing the intimacy and familiarity of Sikaiana life, I build upon approaches which examine human interaction as symbolic communication. Some philosophers claim that the essence of human experience is derived from intellect: "I think therefore I am" as Descartes put it. I have never been impressed by this proposition. As a student of social and cultural behavior, I have a different existential conceit: "I interact therefore I am." This approach is especially relevant for examining changing social relations in a society where everyone knows one another and is often in one another's presence. Writing in the late 19th century, Georg Simmel (1950a) was one of the first sociologists to be concerned with the details of social interaction, topics he labelled "sociation" and "sociability." He wrote about many issues in personal relations: adornment, secrecy, conflict, confidence, and the social role expected of a stranger. Although many sociologists and anthropologists consider such studies to be trivial when compared to the "macro" or "structural" factors shaping entire social systems, I believe that these are at the heart of social life as experienced by individuals. Romance, song composition, secrecy, joking, drinking, and sharing, as I shall explain, are essential elements in present-day Sikaiana life. In a related vein, Schutz (1962-66) argued that

there are many taken-for-granted assumptions in any social interaction or relationship. Social situations are defined or as Goffman (1974) puts it "framed" by cultural expectations and understandings about appropriate behavior and meaning. The locker-room and dining-room require two different sets of expectations for interpersonal behavior and conventions for interpreting that behavior which, although taken-for-granted by the average American, may be quite mysterious to a foreigner. My task as an anthropologist is to learn what the Sikaiana assume would or should happen in a particular situation, interaction or relationship between in-laws, at dances, when drinking toddy, in the courthouse, while composing songs, arranging romantic meetings and so on. In defining Sikaiana expectations and understandings of their relationships, I also build upon anthropological writings which examine how culture determines different concepts about the individual, personality, emotions and relations (Mauss 1938, Hallowell 1955, Levy 1973, Rosaldo 1980, White and Kirkpatrick 1985, Lutz 1988).

Finally, the Sikaiana community is not simply the residue of their past, but something that they construct in their daily interaction, festive occasions, song composition, and toddy drinking. The redefinition of cultural practices becomes apparent when examining the manner in which the Sikaiana have transformed traditional practices and redefined foreign practices to express their present, local interests. Sikaiana relations and activities are not only maintained from their traditional past, they are also constantly reinterpreted and redefined in the present (Hobsbawm and Tanger 1983, Dalby 1983, Handler and Linnekin 1984, Borofsky 1987, Keesing 1989, White 1991, Jolly and Thomas 1992, Lindstrom and White 1993). The Sikaiana people are affected by global processes but maintain and develop activities which are both personal and communal. Whereas they have relatively little direct control over global social, political and economic forces, they do exercise some control over how these forces are manifested in their institutions and daily lives.

Describing the Sikaiana

Sikaiana life, very unlike this book, does not come organized in sentences, paragraphs, subsections and chapters. There is complexity, subtlety, and fullness in Sikaiana life which is impossible to describe with mere words. This book is not the same thing as living among the Sikaiana; it is simply a written description of some selected aspects of their lives.

In writing this book, decisions had to be made about what to put in and what to leave out, what terms and examples to use, and how best to express my understanding of Sikaiana social life. In this endeavor, I am reminded of the advice of a noted Sikaiana song composer. During a composition session, several Sikaiana people had an idea for a song and were searching for the best wording to express that idea. After several lines were proposed and rejected for being inadequate, this composer admonished the others to be patient and keep searching for the best wording. He said, "*ssee hakalaoi, te talatala taulekaleka e moe,*" roughly translated, "search carefully for the best wording, it is there, but we have to find it." In writing and rewriting this book, I have struggled to search for the best wording to explain my understandings of Sikaiana life.

This book is primarily about the Sikaiana, but there are several reasons why I will also talk about myself. My primary research method on Sikaiana was quite literally "participant observation." For over three years, I lived among the Sikaiana and participated in their daily lives. Like all other research methodologies, participant observation has advantages and disadvantages. Very unlike the standardized instruments used in most scientific research, this method is affected by the personal and cultural background of the researcher and the various specific contexts under which it is possible to conduct research. Understanding many human activities requires knowing about many assumptions made by the participants in those activities which are often implicit and not evident in the behavior itself. To take some examples readers might be familiar with, Holy Communion is not simply eating a little bread and wine; football games are not simply head and body bashing events; at least not for those who participate in these activities. I know of no other way to study the meaningful contexts for human activities except by living with people and trying to understand the implicit understandings which they attach to their behavior. Moreover, I know as an empirical matter that subjectively felt experiences, such as feelings and symbolic meanings, are quite important in behavior.

Traditional ethnography--and I consider this book to be in that genre--has come under attack from a group of writers who are referred to as "post-modern" (for example, Clifford 1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986). The post-modern critique argues that coherence in anthropological descriptions is something that anthropologists squeeze out of change, conflict and ambiguity. These critics also charge that in seeking this coherence in abstractions and generalizations, anthropologists simplify and then present distorted descriptions which reflect and serve the needs and interests of their own personal and cultural background. Anthropology becomes a new form of oppression, serving the needs of Western culture to analyze, explain and contain humanity's diversity. I agree with some of these criticisms. But I object when some ethnographers try to resolve these problems in description by writing ethnographies which are simply records of specific and discrete personal experiences. A radical empiricism becomes welded to self-indulgent confessionalism. Abstractions and generalizations, moreover, are unavoidable. The Sikaiana use them in describing and explaining their own behavior and I shall rely upon many of these Sikaiana abstractions in describing their behavior.

I do not write about myself to bare my soul or limit my responsibility for any errors about Sikaiana social life. I write about myself to remind the reader of the circumstances in which data is collected and to give a few examples of how I develop abstractions from specific events. The flat relations and interactions of my first encounters with the Sikaiana should be contrasted with my later knowledge of individual personalities. I describe my confusion during my first months on Sikaiana to explain Sikaiana's combination of Western and indigenous practices. I write about what a lousy fisherman I am to describe Sikaiana fishing techniques. When I talk about myself, it is not to be confessional. It is because I think it is the best way to explain both something about the Sikaiana and how I came to know them.

Anthropologists often begin their ethnographies with a description of their arrival

at a remote village and sense of total loss. Such descriptions have been criticized as worn cliches. But the cliché reflects experience and perhaps tells us something important. I will describe that sense of loss, not on my arrival on Sikaiana, but earlier, at my first arrival at the airport in the Solomon Islands. The airport was familiar but different. I was stranger in an environment which reflected Westernization but still wasn't quite familiar. Far from home, alone in a building which represents the expansions of a powerful global economic and political system, I was about to enter a remote society which, although influenced by the global system, also maintains a high degree of familiarity.

Ethnography, like other kinds of understanding, is a product of the time and culture of its producers. Copernicus, Newton, Darwin and Einstein, as much as Malinowski, were shaped by the historical period in which they lived. Each of them got some things wrong, but they were also profoundly insightful in ways that their contemporaries were not. It seems silly to criticize Copernicus, who in realizing that the earth was not the center of the universe, mistakenly replaced it with the sun. His insights represent a decentering of humanity which was both engendered and limited by his time. Malinowski, by practicing long term fieldwork and taking seriously the statements of his informants, also contributed to an important decentering, in this case an understanding that humanity is expressed in many different forms. Whatever Malinowski got wrong, it is not something that the ordinary scholar of the 1920s would have made right. Annette Weiner, who focused her fieldwork on areas of Trobriand social life which Malinowski overlooked, generally supports his findings (Weiner 1988:5).

The cultural context of the time period when I did research shaped my approach to describing the Sikaiana people, as much as Malinowski's time did his. But this is not necessarily a disadvantage. I cannot describe Sikaiana as some unchanging social system because I lived in a time when there are Sikaiana people who know more than I do about computer programming, United Nations diplomacy, electrical wiring, capital investment, human administration, gasoline engines, and Sylvester Stallone's movies. The most basic circumstances of our research were different. Malinowski's presence in the Trobriands was supported by a colonial government. In my case, the Solomon Islands government, being sovereign and independent, set the official conditions for my research and they consulted with the Sikaiana local council in that process. In this respect and many others, I am accountable to the Sikaiana people in ways that Malinowski was never held accountable to the Trobrianders. Malinowski probably never realized that Trobrianders would someday read his works. I write this book knowing for certain that some Sikaiana will.

Unlike other research methods which use instruments that are standardized across all settings, the methods of participant observation are shaped by the setting under study. Again, this is not necessarily a disadvantage for the method. The very conditions under which it is possible to collect data often reveal much about a social system. I have done field work in a variety of settings in American society including in schools and small towns. Life in these American settings is segmented and it is hard, if not impossible, for a fieldworker to be with people in the variety of different settings

where they live their lives. In American society, homes are usually very private places from which people emerge to participate in different work places, different recreational activities, and different places of worship. In contrast with fieldwork in American institutions and towns, Sikaiana offers the fieldworker a very visible and immediate public life. On the atoll, people see one another every day. They go to church together in the morning and afternoons, and pass one another doing their chores. Almost everyone on the atoll periodically congregates to prepare copra, to work on the church or school, to hold marriage exchanges, and to celebrate the major holidays. Daily, they exchange information and opinions about these events. Although Sikaiana migrants living in Honiara do not have this kind of daily contact, nevertheless, they do maintain contacts with one another in visiting, celebrating wedding exchanges, holding Sikaiana fundraising events, and in other shared activities. Compared with life in American towns and neighborhoods, Sikaiana activities are visible and relatively accessible for participation. This aspect of the conditions of research goes to the core of what I found to be most interesting about Sikaiana social life.

To some degree my focus on intimacy in Sikaiana is a reflection of my own familiarity with the Sikaiana people and I think it is important to explain how I became familiar with Sikaiana individuals and their social life. Moreover, I admit that my fascination with the intimacy of their life is a result of the contrast with my experience of social life in Western societies. Other people describing Sikaiana life would write different books with different emphases. It is very unlikely, for example, that a Sikaiana author would write a book like this. Instead the focus would probably be on specific details, accounts of genealogies, traditional practices and historical events; much less on the present and on processes of change. A Sikaiana author would probably not find the intimacy of Sikaiana social life so outstanding. But most Sikaiana clearly miss this intimacy when they are separated from it. Moreover, although they would not describe their own culture in the same manner, I think they will agree that the book describes important features of their social life (in fact several Sikaiana have read sections of this book). I don't pretend to be able to transcend my own culture or personality in order to attain some standard of detached objectivity. I do claim, however, that with all its shortcomings, participant observation can be a very effective research method for learning about another culture and the basis for communicating useful knowledge about that culture.

This brings me to one very important piece of information which undeniably affected the writing of this book: I liked the Sikaiana people and I enjoyed living with them. I once heard a colleague describe the activities of the village where he did fieldwork as "boring." This colleague was bored by the desires, frustrations, and petty disputes of a few people with simple technology in a remote part of the world. He had to conduct fieldwork to complete his academic requirements for a doctorate and he found intellectual problems in that endeavor to be interesting. But, to him, life in a small village had little to recommend it. Unlike this colleague, I found the daily life of Sikaiana to be exciting. People talked about the latest news on the atoll: who had gotten in a drunken quarrel, who were disagreeing about land rights, who were having romantic affairs and likely to get married. As I came to understand enough of their language and culture, I enjoyed the intimacy and drama of their daily life.

I have written this book from a holistic perspective which examines the various contexts and activities of the Sikaiana people and also how I came to know something about them. The book is partly chronological in describing the conditions under which I came to know Sikaiana people. But, where appropriate, it also generalizes across all three and a half years I lived on Sikaiana and their life in the 1980s. I move from a description of concrete, visible activities in the early chapters to discussions of abstract, social relations in later ones. A series of discrete and awkward interactions in my first encounters develop into a stream of participation in the routines of daily life, which in turn develop into more abstract analyses of Sikaiana meanings and understandings about daily life. Earlier chapters focus more on me, later chapters focus more on the Sikaiana. Chapter II, which follows this one, portrays my arrival on the Solomon Islands, and my initial isolation and bewilderment. Chapter III describes the daily life of Sikaiana. No longer a popular topic in most ethnographies, I feel that it is important to ground the life of the Sikaiana in how they go about making a living. Chapter IV describes my involvement with that daily life, including how the circumstances of my field research taught me about Sikaiana life. Chapter V traces Sikaiana's history, describing the changes which have taken place in this century. At the end of that chapter, I once again raise the issues about social change which were raised earlier in this chapter. Chapter VI is concerned with land tenure, descent, kinship, fosterage: topics no longer fashionable in most current anthropological writing, but I cannot imagine how to describe social relationships on Sikaiana without describing their kinship relationships. Sikaiana intimacy is partly grounded in their cultural meanings associated with kinship. Chapter VII discusses how social relations are channeled through expectations and understandings associated with gender. In Chapter VIII, the lives of five different Sikaiana people are recounted to show both their diversity and uniformity in life experiences. In Chapter IX, I discuss the cultural understandings about personality, interaction, motivation and intention which underpin daily interaction and social relations. These understandings provide the meaningful underpinnings for the intimacy of Sikaiana social life. In Chapter X, I examine the life of Sikaiana migrants in Honiara and their communal ceremonies. In Chapters XI and XII, I describe song performances and festive drinking, showing how these ceremonies maintain a sense of community identity in the changing world.

Another Perspective

There is a proverb, attributed to various sources, that goes something like this, "learn a new language and get another soul." This proverb describes my feelings about learning, not only the Sikaiana language, but also, the social and cultural life described by that language. People who speak more than one language know that experiences are expressed in slightly varying ways in different languages. Learning a new language provides a different way to view the world. Often, what is learned is not entirely new; rather, it is a new perspective on something already experienced. In a similar manner, ethnographic descriptions of other cultures make unfamiliar beliefs, practices and events become understandable by explaining their contexts, purposes and meanings. This anthropological sleight of hand is based on the assumption, not always stated, that

somewhere, somehow, at some level, and despite the uniqueness of every culture's system of meanings, humans are able to understand and communicate about events and experiences across different languages and cultures.

As a result of living with the Sikaiana for over three years, I have a second perspective on human activities and responses to world-wide processes. This perspective not only includes knowledge of another culture, but also a re-evaluation of the nature of social relationships in my own. I have a different view on economic relationships in American society because I have lived in a society where most relationships are organized around reciprocity and economic relations are embedded in social relations. I have a new view on occupational specialization because I lived in a society where most people were not specialized in their daily food gathering and consumption; moreover, all relations are permeated by kinship. I have a new view of the commercialism in American popular culture because I lived in a small society in which people created their own songs and dances. Finally, I have a new view of Western institutions and the general tone of modernity because I lived in a society which had many Western institutions and faced many of the dilemmas associated with modernity, but did so in a manner that preserved intimate social relations. In this book, I hope to communicate these views. Learn about another culture and get, not another soul, but another way of looking at things.