

Den lyckliga ön

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When Danielsson wrote and reported from the South Pacific island Raroia a few years after the war, few people in Sweden had been to exotic beaches. The South Sea was, as everywhere else in the world, immersed in a mystique of paradise. Virgin beaches, emerald seas, abundance of food, sun and warmth, and above all, perhaps, beautiful accommodating women. The islands of the Pacific were discovered in the 18th century (although Magellan on his round the world trip in the early 16th century did sight some of them), and the haunt of intermittent sailors in the 19th (one thinks of Melville). They had by then a more ferocious reputation of cannibalism. Gaugain put it on the map and gave paint and colors to inchoate idyllic phantasies and Stevenson had in vain sought relief and salvation on Samoa before the end of that century. By the late 1940's Tahiti was already spoiled, and the French authorities tried to protect the as yet unsullied outlying islands of the Tuamotu Archipelago, depriving Westerners of visiting and residence privileges. Danielsson, however, was special. He had as the only Swede among five Norwegian¹ served on the Kon-Tiki raft, which had ended its 7000 km long odyssey across the southern seas by crashing on the atoll of Raroia. He was thus a minor celebrity, and also armed with repeated letters of invitations from the chieftain on the island, which made an exception possible. Thus in 1949 he and his French wife settled on the small atoll, which numbered some hundred odd inhabitants, and spent two years living with the people, justifying it by making it into an anthropological study, which would result in a popular book, the one under review, and a few years later a Ph.D. dissertation at Uppsala university.

Life in Raroia is indeed idyllic. It is a primitive society, involving only a handful of people, each of whom know each other personally. There is an abundance of fish to be harvested, the climate is clement (if occasionally subjected to heat spells, which the author finds trying) and thus there is no need to invest in houses of any durability. The economy is primitive, thus there is little incentive for the people to work beyond what is needed to feed themselves. The outside world has made an impact with consumer goods, the acquisition of which requires some production, such as manufacture of copra or diving for mussels and pearls. The modest earnings acquired in this way are invariably spent on partying and alcohol, often in connection to trips to Tahiti the regional center. There is no incentive to gainfully invest or accumulate the windfalls, thus as noticed, in spite of the inroads of consumer society no desire to become enslaved to it. As to family, there is little as to family obligations, offsprings can easily fend for themselves and be more or less adopted by neighbouring families if needs be. Children are thus quickly integrated in the simple economy of the community, and as the author notes, the traditional problems in Western societies of adolescence simply do not occur. Sexual license is endemic, sexual initiation occurring at a very early age, as are of course pregnancies as a consequence. In youth people

¹ A case of pluck, that alone declared him fit for the journey, according to his Norwegian mates.

change their partners continuously and normally with little friction and stabilization of relationships only occurs much later in life. The question of paternity is of no practical consequences. In short, it is a life, in which the here and now is of paramount importance, the past is largely ignored and thus forgotten, and there are few if any worries for the future.

There are of course drawbacks. Health problems, especially dental are legion, and there are no remedies available even for relatively simple afflictions. Either you survive and get stronger or you die, causing little regret. Infant mortality is high, hygiene is low. But if it does not bother you, so what? Nature may be benevolent, but occasionally it turns the other side, and cyclons are not unheard of, causing severe havoc and excruciating high death-tolls, when striking hapless and physically vulnerable communities.

Also for civilized people with bookish interests life eventually becomes very dull, and significantly even if the Danielssons fell in love with Polynesia, they were not able to stay there for ever, but eventually settled in run-down Tahiti. Distractions are few and of rather infantile nature. The people are of course adept at traditional songs, but find most other music, with the exception of cowboys songs (by which I assume that Country Westerns are meant), not congenial. There are dances of course, as in all human cultures, playing a dominant role as in all primitive ones. The average Raroian is not very enterprising, but would normally be considered lazy. There is little of sustained activity, every course of action is likely to be abandoned by the merest distraction. You do what is fun. (As you do in research?²). It does not mean that they do not know any skills. They are adept at fishing and diving and handling their primitive sea-faring vessels. Skills which are acquired early on and perfected by constant application.

Most intriguingly though is the earlier pre-European stage of their history. The time before missionaries and conversions, however formal and superficial, to modern religions³. There were no written language at the time, so the sages of the communities committed it to memory. Missionaries were not those cultural Barbarians they are often made out as, and with the introduction of written codes, the great traditional heritage, in terms of myth and songs, and genealogies were correspondingly encoded. The great treasures of Raroia were destroyed during an early cyclon in 1906, sweeping most of it waya, and what remained was sacrificed to the flames a few decades later. Danielsson is however lucky to meet an old man with a lucid mind, who is still able to recite at length their common heritage. Whenever they are able to check his accounts with fragments of surviving texts, they are able to confirm that his memory is indeed impeccable. One only hopes that the author and his wife faithfully wrote down what he had to say for the benefit of posterity.

Otherwise the book gives accounts of the daily life, which pleasant as it is, is hardly

² The author remarks how a a loaded wheel-barrow for no apparant reason whatsoever is suddenly abandoned on a road, where it is left for weeks undisturbed, even when providing a nuisance. Of course the same is done in research when you may quit a project for no apparent reason and let it stand there for years, maybe to be permanently forgotten, just because you temporarily lost interest.

³ Formal maybe, and superficial, yet not without very palpable consequences. The most prominent building on the entire atoll, is a massive church fashioned out coral cement and finished in 1875. The pride of every inhabitant.

variable⁴. The activity of a typical inhabitant is plenty of leisure and gossiping with friends intermittently interrupted by some work, such as production of copra, which incidentally gives the people plenty of less needed cash. There are accounts of fishing expeditions. There is no game to hunt of course on land, and a rather exhaustive description of the wonders and benefits of the coconut palm, the supplier not only of copra, but of most of their primitive needs. Nothing, be it on the tree or in the nut, needs to be wasted. Danielsson cannot but ruefully remark on the inefficiency of their husbandry so prominently on display. Most nuts falling to the ground are let to rot. Why not clear the ground of its spreading undergrowth and regularly inspect and harvest what has dropped to the ground? But as noted the indigenous people have no need for such measures, they are able to get enough by minimal exertion, why try for more, at the cost of constant application? This may appear strange, on the other hand it is very natural to us humans. When direct rewards are absent, there is little incentive for making a sustained effort. Just think of research done for your pleasure and amusement. If there is no feed-back, surely you do much less than you would be potentially capable of. It is enough to satisfy your curiosity for the time being rather than systematically cultivating it to increase your hunger.

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⁴ The expected arrival of a governor sets the whole community on fire. The entire village is improved, new dances are designed, lengthy speeches formulated. It all comes to nothing, only a lowly administrator is rowed ashore, and the author has to improvise some substitute, and does so beautifully, according to his book.