XIV. Change, Stability, and the Dependent Society

The continuing strength of a culture pattern is exemplified by the post-war Chamorros and Carolinians of Saipan. In the invasion battle for the island, the entire assemblage of their artifacts was swept away and their pre-war economy destroyed. During the six years following the invasion, the Chamorros and Carolinians have reconstituted their island society, utilizing the culture patterns with which they were familiar. Regardless of discussion as to the nature of culture, post-war Saipan is an excellent example of the enduring vitality of culture as a traditional way of thought and action that organizes social relationships and provides means of adaptation to the social and natural environment.

Nevertheless, since the war numerous changes have taken place among Chamorros and Carolinians. Today they drink Coca-Cola and beer; they repair and drive jeeps; the men wear sport shirts and the women lacquer their finger nails. These changes lie on the surface, however; it is the more fundamental aspects of life that demand attention. In the context of post-war change on Saipan, what parts of the social organization are stable, what unstable? It is true that “stability” is a difficult concept to apply to the ethnographer’s data. Change of itself need not imply instability. Change is always present in greater or lesser degree in every culture and society. Stability is not. Stability lies in orderly change and finds expression in a continuing successful adaptation to habitat and in non-violent shifts in the patterns of social organization.

The various aspects of Saipan’s social organization show varying degrees of stability.

(1) Local organization. The settlement pattern is in flux. Since the war there has been a movement out of Chalan Kanoa, the main village, to a number of recently established satellite villages whose number appears to be growing. Some of the satellite villages may be abandoned in the future because of poor geographic location. The post-war distribution of population in the various villages has
not yet become fixed. The local organization is at present unstable in the sense that it reflects a lack of adaptation to local habitat and resources. The village-farm pattern of Chamorro life, however, is a long-established element that shows little disposition to change. To the extent that it impedes efficient farming because of the many hours spent by the farmers in traveling between village and farm, it can perhaps be considered maladaptive; to the extent that it strengthens the integration of village life, it may be considered adaptive and stabilizing.

(2) Economic organization. This aspect of Saipanese life is least stable of all. In view of the devastation caused by the war, the instability of economic organization is not surprising. Much has been done to remove the Chamorros and Carolinians from a state of complete dependence on the administration to one of partial self-support. Nevertheless, the economic organization remains unstable, largely because the society is not in adjustment with the resources of its habitat. An equilibrium adaptation to the island environment has not been achieved. Furthermore, within the economy there are many contradictions. Wage-work and the acquisition of clerical and mechanical skills are much more attractive to the Chamorros than farming, to which they are urged to devote themselves. Traditional methods of farming are not adapted to the steep slopes of the less fertile land the people now cultivate. Chamorro food preferences are adjusted to imported foods rather than to those that can be raised locally. A major part of the difficulty is that Chamorros and to a lesser degree Carolinians had become adjusted in Japanese times to a highly developed pre-war colonial economy, in which, however, they played a role of minor importance. The colonial economy became a casualty of the war.

(3) Political organization. The machinery of government in many ways does not work well. The present formal political organization tends to be unstable in that it is an innovation for which there must be a period of establishment; Saipan is in this period.

(4) Religious organization. This exhibits little fundamental change. New lay societies may be introduced, or the attitudes of American Capuchins may vary from those of Spanish Jesuits, but the basic framework of Catholic organization, ritual, and dogma remains the same. Nevertheless, these seemingly minor changes reveal the church's ability to adapt itself to changing circumstances, and this adaptability contributes to the stability of the church as an element of social structure. Religious organization on Saipan is
very stable, in part because it is the business of priests and nuns to keep it so, and in part because Catholicism is long established among the Chamorros, and if less long established, at least fully accepted, by the Carolinians.

(5) Familial and kinship organization. These parts of Saipanese social organization are given separate treatment in the following two parts of this monograph. On the whole, although changes are occurring in both Chamorro and Carolinian kinship organization, neither can be said to exhibit marked instability.

What is called instability in the facets of Saipanese social organization noted above is primarily a matter either of innovation, as in the case of the machinery of municipal government, or of maladjustment, as in the case of economic organization. On Saipan, the latter is perhaps more complex.

The maladjustment of Saipan's economy involves a complex set of relations among Saipan as an island society, Saipan as a habitat, and Saipan as a dependent on a larger society of which American administrators are the immediate representatives. Each of these entities, taken in relation to the others, contains elements of maladjustment.

As an island society, the Chamorros and Carolinians were before the war a minor and subordinate segment in a highly developed Japanese colonial outpost. Since the war, the Chamorros and Carolinians have formed the major segment of the population but at the same time have lost their economic underpinning with the destruction of the Japanese-built economy. Furthermore, Saipan as a habitat has deteriorated. Much fertile farm land has been lost through military construction. Although sufficient land remains for the present population, slash-and-burn agriculture and the Chamorro cultivation techniques reduce soil fertility, though these features of agricultural technology are extremely resistant to change. For subsistence agriculture, rather than the intensive cultivation of the island for sugar cane, there is also a dearth of economically important food and timber trees. These features of habitat and technology will become more significant as the increasing island population exerts greater pressure on resources.

The relation between the Saipanese and their habitat is further complicated by problems of land ownership and tenure. Here the larger society enters the picture, for the former Japanese holdings and the pre-war system of control of land resources as well as the present American administration are involved. The solution of the
land tenure and ownership problems is directly dependent on the action taken by the American administration. Furthermore, the development of off-island markets for agricultural and fish products—Saipan's only possible off-island exports—is dependent on the larger society, including the people of Guam, the American administration, and probably also Japan. Lastly, such wage-work as will be available will also depend on the administration. The picture is therefore complex, but until the economy becomes more nearly adapted to the resources of the habitat the society will always contain a serious element of instability.

These features of change and instability on Saipan provide a partial answer to the question: What is a dependent society? Saipan is a dependent society, not in the sense that a measure of interdependence is characteristic of most societies in the world today, but in a one-sided dependence on a larger society. This is true, economically speaking. It is also true politically, not merely because the Chamorros and Carolinians do not possess political autonomy, but because in attempting to make the machinery of local government work, continuous, intelligent coaching on the part of the administration is necessary. Instabilities introduced by incompletely established innovations and by maladaptation to a social and natural environment lie at the roots of Saipan's dependence. It is probable that these are components of dependence among most dependent societies.

A final comment deals with concomitants of Saipan's dependence in the area of personality structure. In their study of the Chamorros and Carolinians, Joseph and Murray (1951) include as characteristics of Saipanese personality "strong but vague aspirations" and "marked anxiety, based largely on feelings of inadequacy . . . ." They note that precarious economic conditions and sudden change of status after the war are important factors contributing to the feeling of insecurity. I feel that incompletely established innovations (as in the case of the municipality government) and maladaptation (as in the case of the economy) have led to uncertainty among Chamorros and Carolinians, and this in turn has contributed to anxiety as a characteristic of personality structure. From an administration point of view this result does not mean that innovation per se is bad. It does mean that it enters the complex of social dependence, which the administration must strive to reduce.