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Moments of Hierarchy: Constructing Social Stratification by Means of Language, Food, Space, and the Body in Pohnpei, Micronesia

In this paper I examine relationships between multiple semiotic modes used to construct hierarchy, and I show the importance of going beyond our traditional notion of language to look at how social actors employ a range of semiotic resources in organizing and interpreting social relations. Using examples from Pohnpei, Micronesia, I show how notions of superior and inferior are compounded through several sign systems—spatial relations, food sharing, the body, and language. These systems act oppositionally as well as cooperatively to produce situated ideas of social inequality, ideas built out of disequilibrium of bodies in space, of referents in language, and distribution of resources, as well as contradictions in the interactions of these signs. The compounding of signs not only recruits multiple sensory modes and perspectives in the exposition of hierarchical relations, but entails a notion of the contradictory nature of status relations. Using examples from a Pohnpeian feast, I explore the creative interplay of sign systems in the construction of “moments” of hierarchy in a large, public setting and discuss how through the practice of title-giving, which virtually every adult member of the society participates in, a particular idea of social inequality, built out of multiple sign systems, is mapped onto each body. [*language, interaction, politics, Oceania, social stratification, hierarchy*]

Pohnpeians formulate the abstract idea of social inequality with tools from their physical world, including relationships among bodies, topographical relations of sea level and mountain heights, the built environment, cyclical relations of production, and mediated sensory experiences, such as the sounds of spoken language. In this article I investigate a complex of semiotically charged resources that co-incidentally, co-oppositionally, and co-operatively construct relationships of hierarchy in Pohnpei. Language, space, food, and the body work to activate the past as simultaneous within the present and to construct social stratification within a scheme of recurrent but also incipient ideas. Moments of hierarchy in Pohnpei are built not only out of the disparate notions of superior and inferior that are compounded through several sign systems, but out of another sort of disparity—momentary contradictions between those sign systems. Although the latter (contradictions) might seem inconsistent within the conventional practice and reproduction of hierarchy, the contradictions or inversions not only serve as sites for the creative interplay of semiotic systems, but, I argue, build and sustain a poetics of hierarchy as deeply inimical and irregular. Both of these aspects will be addressed here.

A discussion about the use of material reality in the production of signs¹ engages the problem of making a questionable distinction between sign and “reality,” whether, for example, to formulate, as Sapir does, a “concrete world

of sense”² (1921:93) to which propositions in language are related. Kant distinguishes between objects and events as they are (noumena) and objects and events as they appear in our experience (phenomena) (Kant 1929:257–275). Volosinov addresses this issue via multiple realities: an entity expressed in language does not cease to be part of material reality but “to some degree reflects and refracts another reality” (Volosinov 1973:9); signs arise on “interindividual territory” (1973:12), and language and other expressive systems organize our experience in particular ways. The notion that language is different from or separate from reality has been critiqued (e.g., Williams 1977:23). It is hard to imagine being-in-the-world unmediated by cultural meanings conveyed through human activities such as language and body comportment. Vygotsky points out how a child’s grasping movement is made meaningful as an indicatory gesture by others: “the child [is] the last person who consciously apprehends the meaning of his own gesture” (Vygotsky 1986:xxvii). Ethnomethodologists have shown that members regularly interpret others’ verbal activities within a particular but general context of previous actions (as appropriate next actions) (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 1968, 1984). Underlying patterns of interpretation are built up intersubjectively from a “temporally qualified succession of appearances” (Heritage 1984:86). Sensate experiences are

socially produced, and it is this production I will discuss here as it pertains to the "reality" of social stratification.

Work on the production of meaning through signs in linguistic anthropology has already revealed the richness and complexity evident in speakers' employment of vocal resources. Irvine has shown how Wolof praise singers in Senegal use voice as "a complex semiotic gesture" uniting iconic, indexical, and symbolic properties in the construction of social value (Irvine 1989:261). Urban has shown how ritual wailers in Amerindian Brazil use conventionalized expressions of particular affective states to communicate not only loss but also "the desire for sociability that is the inverse side of loss" (1988:393). Even in societies without highly developed "honorifics" or ways to indicate differential status through grammar, language is an important tool in the achievement of particular social positions. Bloch describes speeches in meetings of Merina councils "less as occasions for making decisions about matters at hand than for making decisions about ranking in the community" (1971:55). While it is not surprising that linguistic anthropologists have focused primarily on language, Duranti (1992a) has shown the importance of looking at multiple "codes" and "channels" in the production of meaning in "a cultural space that is never neutral" (1992a:657). Samoan ceremonial greetings depend on a rich system of "interconnected semiotic resources" of which language is only one aspect, and not always the central one in "defin[ing] the setting, the situation, and the participants" (Duranti 1992a:657-658). Understanding ceremonial greetings is contingent on nonverbal acts that precede the utterance of formulaic phrases, and space can be pivotal rather than language (see also Toren 1990 for a discussion of the role of the above/below axis in the "modulated construction" of the notion of hierarchy in Fiji). The role of nonverbal ritual in conveying and making explicit ideas about social structure is well attested (Leach 1965:15-16), particularly the role of the body in not only expression but interpretation (Hanks 1990; Merleau-Ponty 1964), in displaying and assessing social meanings as well as in organizing and interpreting frameworks of participation (Bourdieu 1977; Duranti 1992b, 1994; Firth 1970; Goffman 1967; M. Goodwin 1990; Hanks 1990; Kendon 1990; Mauss 1979). Although not always central, language is an important tool in shaping habits of interpretation of experience. C. Goodwin has discussed, for example, the importance of talk in the interpretation and construction of particular "architectures for perception" (1995:254) as a collaborative enterprise through turns at talk. Speakers recurrently contextualize and recontextualize (Bauman 1983; Bauman and Briggs 1990) their own or others' language and other activities. The hierarchical ranking in social value of various aspects of communicative practice or the linguistic repertoire of a community happens through talk about language use (Bourdieu 1991; Hill and Hill 1978; Irvine 1992, 1998; Schieffelin 1990; Schieffelin et

al. 1998), although clearly aspects of the speaker's societal positioning (e.g., ethnicity, class, gender) are also salient in judgments about language and value. Speakers are more aware of some aspects of their language use than others (Silverstein 1981). Tongan speakers' ideas of how they use honorifics in daily speech are different from actual use (Philips 1991; see also Keating 1998a, 1998b for Pohnpei); this not only shows the importance of looking at actual interactions but can elucidate important aspects of the roles of both ideology and practice. Variation in ideologies across speakers (Gal 1992) and between ideology and practice (Irvine 1992; Philips 1991; Smith-Hefner 1988; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994) only makes us intensely interested in how some models acquire more power than others, for example, through ritual performances at public and "formal" events (see for example Duranti 1981; Irvine 1979; Silverstein 1998) that emphasize and showcase particular relationships as salient. Indexical elements in language, which depend for their meaning on relationships that are transient and of-the-moment (for example, who "I" refers to or what "now" means), are extremely important in constructing particular perspectives, as well as building authority in specific contexts (Bloch 1975; Silverstein 1976; see also Urban 1989). Through indexicality a current set of relations can be linked to a past set of relationships, for example, recontextualizing an authority from past contexts (see, for example, Duranti 1997).

In this paper I look at the multiple ways Pohnpeians construct hierarchical relations and suggest that looking at multiple sign systems and the relations among them can increase our understanding of the complex and paradoxical processes of constructing and legitimating social inequality. I discuss contiguous relations and relations of difference, relations of signs to each other, and how signs of various types combine both oppositionally and cooperatively, as well as how compound signs are built in the formation of a particular instantiation of the notion of social difference. Language, gesture, spatial relations, and food sharing are all used as resources to construct hierarchical relations in the immanent creation of rank in Pohnpei. Language both co-indexes and mediates multiple semiotic modes. Benveniste has noted that language is central among signs in its ability to interpret all other signs (1985), but in Pohnpei, the body and space can also take a central role in mediating contradictions between semiotic modes and in providing a central interpretive frame (see also Duranti 1992a). Through language, however, specifically through the vehicle of the Pohnpeian title, the sum of all the practical actions through which ideas of hierarchy are instantiated at feasts can be singularly actualized. The Pohnpeian individual title (a unique formulation for address and reference), bestowed at a title-giving feast, emerges as a highly portable symbol of composite relations. It stands for the total creative result of environmental tools of status marking, multiply indexing past and present,

food apportionment, language use, and spatial location. A title points to and emerges from the embodied site of socially performed status negotiations.

To show the complex relationship among multiple indexes of status that are simultaneously and sequentially produced, I focus on Pohnpeian feasting practice and use examples from the feast house, including activities of food distribution and oratory. Video frames are used from a particular feast in a series of feasts that I recorded in the Madolenihmw chiefdom in 1992. Feasts (*kamadipw*) are held at least every week in Madolenihmw. The pervasiveness of feasting practice in Pohnpei can be seen in the comment by Riesenbergh that to an outsider feasting appears to be "hypertrophied" or extensively developed "in comparison with the rest of the culture" (1968:83). To Pohnpeians feasts are extremely important, and each family carefully manages its resources so as to be able to produce tribute goods for feasts (Bascom 1948). When the German colonial government tried to abolish feasting and the title system, this succeeded only in "galvanizing a common response to the threat" that resulted in "permanently demarcating the colonial system and the traditional social order" (Leiber 1990:94). The traditional title system today exists concurrently with a postcolonial, locally adapted democratic system of election to public office.

There are many types of feasts: funeral feasts, departing feasts, welcoming home feasts, harvest feasts, title-giving feasts, feasts to dedicate new structures, feasts for newborn babies, feasts for fishing, and more (see also Kihleng 1996; Mauricio 1993; Shimizu 1987 for discussions of feasting practices).⁴ Although feasts vary in size and community inclusiveness, Shimizu describes how a feast held within only the family can cause a host to feel "embarrassed" because of an implication of "closed sociability"; consequently, when holding a "minor" feast the section head (or local community chief) will often be invited, "no matter how trifling the occasion may be and how small-scale the feast" (Shimizu 1987:173). At funeral feasts someone of high rank is always present, often the Nahnmwarki (paramount chief) and/or Nahnken (secondary or "talking chief") (Kihleng 1996:136); important feasts are always held "in the presence of chiefs" (Riesenbergh 1968:84). Pohnpeians are simultaneously copresent to one another at a feast, and this copresence is mediated by historical associations established and reinforced by oratory and sanctioned by religious and bureaucratic ideology, creating both a local and global coherence to the idea of inequality.

Ethnographic Background

Pohnpei is an island in Micronesia, part of the Federated States of Micronesia, with a population of around 35,000. The island is organized politically into two coexisting systems: a traditional polity of five independent but hierarchically ranked chiefdoms,⁵ and a more recent democratic

system, the establishment of which was encouraged when Micronesia was part of the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific (1947 to 1983).⁶ Throughout the Pacific, islander-colonialist power relations have resulted in the introduction of new forms of leadership and elites to augment or in some cases replace traditional "chiefdom" polities. However, following the withdrawal of colonial rule, in some Pacific nations, the number of "traditional" chiefs "has multiplied considerably in recent years" (White and Lindstrom 1997:8). The indigenous political system in Pohnpei is still extremely important,⁷ particularly the "title complex" (Poyer 1990:144; see also Falgout 1992; Fischer 1974; Hughes 1969; Petersen 1982); this traditional system of ranks "regulates the social life of Pohnpei" (Shimizu 1987:173). Pohnpeian chiefs still have "tremendous influence, of various types and springing from multiple sources" (Petersen 1997:193), and a "considerable reverence" is accorded the island's traditional rulers (Hanlon 1988:199). Though very different ideologically, the two political systems, the indigenous and the imported, constitute models of hierarchical organization, one through election, the other through birth and ascription. The systems interact in complex and complementary ways (see Falgout 1992; Hughes 1969; Peterson 1982; Pinsker 1997).⁸ A recent proposal to introduce a "chamber" of traditional chiefs as part of the democratic governmental practices in Pohnpei was defeated because of the power and status of the chiefs: "[d]elegates from every state⁹ insisted that no one in Micronesia—neither the Congress, nor the ConCon, nor the people—could tell the chiefs what to do" (Petersen 1997:188; Pinsker 1997).

In most of my fieldwork on Pohnpei I have lived in the chiefdom of Madolenihmw, on the opposite side of the island from the port town Kolonia (where most of the activities influenced by the American model of government take place). I have lived with chiefly families whose range of daily activities center around traditional practices, as well as some adopted practices associated with becoming Catholic and Protestant and with elementary schools modeled on the American system, though realized within Pohnpeian values.

In addition to the indigenous and Western-style polities, two sets of complementary hierarchies *within* the five chiefdoms, one headed by a Paramount Chief (Nahnmwarki) of each chiefdom and another by a lesser chief (Nahnken), encompass nearly every adult on the island. The Nahnken does not succeed the Nahnmwarki, although they are in a symbolic (and sometimes real) father-son relationship (Mauricio 1993); rather, each chief belongs to a different clan in this matrilineal system. The Nahnken "stands at the head of the second line of titles" (Kihleng 1996:127) in each chiefdom with a role sometimes likened to the "talking chief" in other Pacific societies (Mauricio 1993).¹⁰ *Kousapw*, or local communities within each chiefdom,

parallel on a smaller scale the dual, hierarchical organization of the Nanmwarki and Nahnken lines (Riesenberg 1968:21). Traditionally all the land belonged ultimately to the Nanmwarki or Nahnken; however, in 1907 the German colonial government reorganized land tenure practices and introduced private land ownership.

The majority of "mature" men "must possess tribal [chiefdom] titles" (Riesenberg 1968:76), and since colonial times when land ownership principles changed, "titles have become increasingly important" (Petersen 1982:23). Men's titles are related to where they hold lands or work lands for others (Riesenberg 1968:31). Many of the titles were originally priestly titles (Mauricio 1993), and titles have proliferated as they have been secularized. In a survey taken by Martha Ward of 1,200 Pohnpeians, 95% of those in the sample eligible held titles (Hughes 1982). All members of the society are eligible to achieve chiefdom titles (Mauricio 1993:66). Each person has a particular position in the hierarchy (instantiated by a particular title). Because the chiefdoms themselves are ranked, the same title held by members of two different chiefdoms are not equal¹¹ (Riesenberg 1968):

Within the sub-clan every man is graded according to seniority of descent, and titles are distributed roughly according to the same standard. Actually, then, no two men have the same rank. Even two men holding the same title in different tribes [chiefdoms] are not equal, for the tribes are likewise graded. . . . Nor are heads of sections on the same level, for various sections have superior status. [Riesenberg 1968:15]

Women hold important positions throughout the hierarchy, though their title is in most cases dependent on their spouse's (Kihleng 1996). The titles are gender marked; a woman's title is the feminine counterpart of her husband's. If the husband dies, the wife usually doesn't retain the title.¹² Every title holder has "specific responsibilities to the chiefdom as dictated by the title bestowed on him or her" (Mauricio 1993:68), including fulfillment of tribute contributions at feasts.

Stratification in Pacific societies¹³ as well as elsewhere has been the focus of numerous anthropological investigations. The traditional distinction made by anthropologists classifying Pacific groups as egalitarian or hierarchical or between leadership systems called "big men" societies vs. chiefdom societies has been extensively critiqued (e.g., Douglas 1979; Keesing 1978; Lutkehaus 1996; White and Lindstrom 1997), as well as the related "cultural" distinction between Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia.¹⁴ Revisiting Pacific polities has resulted in reexamining the "convenient rhetorical contrast" between hierarchy and egalitarianism for particular local or cultural meanings (Poyer 1993:111). This has meant acknowledging not only the existence of "well-developed hierarchies" (Petersen 1995:121), but what Petersen has called (for Pohnpei) "individual autonomy" (Petersen 1989:25, 1982) and Toren

has called (for Fiji) "competitive equality" (1990; see also Flanagan 1989). These discussions have made apparent the pervasiveness of hierarchical relations. For example, Brenneis and Myers point out that "many egalitarian societies turn out to be egalitarian only for certain categories of social actors, such as 'senior men'" (1984:5), and Sahlins argues that truly egalitarian societies do not exist (1958). Egalitarian ideologies have been shown to mask inequalities or "insidious hierarchies" (Flanagan 1989:262; see also Kuipers 1986). The idea of a person as an autonomous agent existing apart from society has also been critiqued as a Western formulation. At the same time, discussions that enrich our understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of so-called hierarchical societies have shown how hierarchy is not a status quo but must be constantly achieved.

Equality is often idealized in the ethnographic record (Dumont 1980; Flanagan 1989) as an achievement, whereas hierarchy is idealized elsewhere, for example, on the local level in particular societies (Abu-Lughod 1986; Dumont 1980; Irvine 1989; Keating 1998a). Hierarchical relationships in Pohnpei construct not only differences in power and status but also relations of dependence that can be highly valued (see also Duranti 1992b; Goody 1972; Irvine 1974; Wetzel 1993). Those of higher status have obligations to care for those of lower status. In Pacific chiefdoms the highest ranking person might have to be the hardest working in order to fulfill obligations to show generosity (Firth 1939; Fried 1967). As Marcus observes for Tonga, the nobles' "value" is made possible by those who are their dependents (Marcus 1984; see also Matsu-moto 1989 for Japan; Wolfowitz 1991).

Not all Pacific societies value hierarchy. Micronesians from the island of Sapwuahfik¹⁵ (200 km southwest of Pohnpei), who share a common language with Pohnpei (but not the honorific register), see Pohnpei as the hierarchical model they reject:

On Sapwuahfik, local social organization, shared expectations about interpersonal behavior, and an ideology of egalitarianism combine to maintain relationships of equality, even though an alternative—in the form of the chiefly system of nearby Pohnpei Island—is readily available. Sapwuahfik people consciously maintain egalitarianism in the face of hierarchy. [Poyer 1991:361, 1993:113]

Sapwuahfik's indigenous social system was destroyed in 1837 when the adult men were killed by a party of European and Pohnpeian men. The current population is made up of descendants of surviving women and children as well as immigrants (Poyer 1991). The Pohnpeian practice of unequal redistribution of feast goods is one of the most salient markers of hierarchy in Pohnpei for the Sapwuahfik community, although hierarchy is built in multiple ways in Pohnpei, for example, through spatial relationships, language, and the relative positions of bodies in space.

Looking closely at social relationships through compoundings of sign modalities I discuss below a range of practices for producing and negotiating hierarchy, as well as relationships among various semiotic modalities.

Land and the Built Environment as Tools in the Construction of Social Stratification

Land and the built environment are important tools in the construction of social stratification in Pohnpei and elsewhere.¹⁶ Feasts in Pohnpei typically take place inside a structure known as a *nahs* or feast house (see Figures 1–4). The status of the occupant of a *nahs* (Pohnpeians frequently use the *nahs* as living quarters) can be inferred from the size of the structure (Mauricio 1993:325). The structure is composed of a U-shaped platform that surrounds an earthen floor on three sides. One side is completely open to the outside, while the other three sides have walls extending partially or all the way to the roof. The varying degree of openness to the outside constrains entry to the structure. Most individuals enter the structure from the lowest point physically and symbolically, ground level on the open side (see Figure 1)¹⁷ and gradually walk upwards and inwards to greet the two chiefs and chieftesses of Madolenihmw on the platform at the opposite end of the feast house (see Figure 2) from the opening, before taking up a particular spatial position somewhere between the chiefly personages and the common entryway.

On the side platforms (visible in Figure 1) sit those referred to as *tohn kapar* (lit. “members of the entourage”) (Shimizu 1987:136). There is a “tendency for the people who sit on the side platforms to arrange themselves by



Figure 2. The chiefs are vertically highest on metal chairs (see top right—the secondary chief is on the right and the paramount chief next to him), while the paramount chieftess (see top left) sits on the floor (the current secondary chieftess was not in attendance). In the background are stairs to the level above the chiefs and chieftess, where the ancestor spirits of the chiefs are located during feasts. Sitting directly in front of the chiefs and the chieftess, facing sideways, are their kava servers.

rank, those with higher titles sitting toward the rear” [further inward] (Riesenberg 1968:98).

The very act of entering the space of the feast house indexes status. Chiefs and chieftesses come into the feast house from specific doorways that enter onto the raised platform itself, whereas lower status people come in through the common entryway (see Figure 1). The platform space is gendered in some contexts, for example, at feasts; high ranking women and chieftesses sit on one side, high ranking men and chiefs on the other (see Figure 2)¹⁸ (this pattern is often replicated in church settings). Places are “designated for the paramount chiefs and the gods they represent, the attendants of the chiefs, individuals with high ranking titles, and the common people” (Mauricio 1993:124).¹⁹ The term *common people* must be understood in the context that “the majority of Pohnpeians are potentially eligible to attain a high leadership position” (Mauricio 1993:69). As others have noted for other Pacific societies, it is difficult to find a Pohnpeian who will identify himself or herself as a commoner.

Pohnpeians utilize both vertical and horizontal space as resources in signifying social difference. This is similar to what has been described by Toren for Fiji where there is “an all-pervasive concern with the disposition of people within any given space—indoors or outdoors” (Toren 1988b:228). In day-to-day village life in Fiji “hierarchy finds its clearest physical manifestation in people’s relation to one another on this spatial axis [above and below] and is most evident in the context of meals, kava-drinking and



Figure 1. People entering the feast house on their way to ascend the platform.

worship" (Toren 1988a:701).²⁰ Similarly, in Samoa people seat themselves inside the house "according to an ideal plan structured on the basis of statuses (chiefs vs. orators), ranks (high vs. low ranking titles), and extent of participation in the event" (Duranti 1984:220). In Pohnpei, spatial relationships are contiguous; one person's horizontal space shares a meaningful, proximate relationship to the surrounding space. As members of the community arrive at feasts, shifting of horizontal seating position occurs in order to organize seating according to rank, particularly on the main, centermost platform. At the same time a more polarized sense of difference is constructed in vertical space. Chiefs often sit vertically higher in metal folding chairs (see Figure 2) while others sit on the floor (one of the common reference terms for a chief is *Wasa Lapalap*, lit. "place high-ranking"). There are strong prescriptions against having one's head vertically higher than a chief (an exception to this is the master of ceremonies or anyone bearing a cup of *sakau*, or *kava*, the ceremonial beverage made from the pounded roots of the pepper plant *Piper methysticum*). Because of the numerous jobs entailed in the production of a feast, including pounding *sakau*, many members of the community work continuously and thus are not seated on the platform; they work outside the feast house, or otherwise in the periphery. Pohnpeians can sometimes resist participating in the *spatial* construction of rank by participating in work (managing *uhmw* or earth ovens, slaughtering pigs, preparing and carrying food, etc., or engaging in conversational activities outside the structure). I attended one community feast (with neither the paramount chief or secondary chief in attendance) where the highest titled participant, the Soumas (leader of the local community), resisted taking the appropriate, high position on the feast-house platform. This is on the one hand congruent with Pohnpeian prescriptions against self-raising, but also was the subject of criticism by community members, some of whom saw this act as inappropriate to the demeanor of a such a title-holder. However, even in the absence of seating position, size of food share, sequence of food and *kava* serving, title, entry to the structure, language, and facing relations still construct rank differences among participants.

Through visible vertical and horizontal space in the feast house, the rank of invisible beings is also materialized. In the paramount chief's feast house in Madolenihmw (shown in Figures 1–4), deities and ancestor spirits are located in space behind the chief and chieftess, highest and furthest inward, according to Pohnpeians. Here space is a signifier for time, as the past (ancestors) is simultaneously located within the present. There is a sanction against anyone passing through this space of spirits behind the chiefs; transgression is linked to future misfortune or punishment (*riahla*).²¹ In language, the presence of ancestors is also constructed but in a different way than spatially: the paramount chief and chieftess are addressed in the third person

plural. This address form is used because the paramount chief and chieftess embody, speak for, and are authorized by these ancestral entities. Pluralization can create what Bakhtin calls "the authoritative word (religious, political, moral; the word of a father, of adults and of teachers, etc.)" (1981:342). Interestingly, in the visual perceptual field (i.e., spatially), the Pohnpeian deities have separate locations behind and higher than the chief and chieftess, whereas in the auditory perceptual field (language) the deities and the chiefs are constructed in a corporate unity of images and referents (addressing the chief and chieftess in the third person plural encompassing both chiefs and deities). This is one way that the multiple signs of hierarchy act oppositionally. This contributes, I believe, to a particular notion of hierarchy as encompassing simultaneously ideas of similarity within constructions of difference.

The physical environment of the island outside the feast house is also utilized in the production of status relations. The island, itself considered sacred (Mauricio 1993),²² is linked to particular aspects of the paramount chief's body, internal states and expressions through language. His summons is *ediniei* (smoke), his tears are *tehnhr* (waterfalls), his breath *melimel* (a typhoon). Physical manifestations of the high status chiefly body (e.g., tears, breath) are expressed as writ large on the total environment, as the chief's body itself expresses water and air across the land. This builds a steeper hierarchy between the chiefs and others than between members of society below the chiefs.²³ Yet bodies of all Pohnpeians are important sites for the naturalization of social relations.

The Body as a Resource for Signaling Social Difference

The body is an instrument of status differentiation during feasts, not only in that it occupies a certain spatial location that signifies a particular status (made up of horizontal and vertical quadrants), and through the distributions of food to each person according to rank, but also through the position or attitude of the body and through gestures. Graham notes a similar use of the body among the Xavante (Central Brazil) where at public meetings mature men may lie down, whereas pre-initiates and novitiates sit up (1995:263, n.39). Standing in Pohnpei is making a claim to superior status, as to "stand beside seated people without asking their permission is an act of enhancing one's position over that of the seated people" (Shimizu 1987:143). Bowing or lowering oneself in Pohnpei is also used to communicate a differential status relation. When moving to a place on the feast-house platform during a feast among seated participants, some Pohnpeians, especially women, walk on their knees. Arms are tools for status indexing also; when handing some item to a high status person a certain gesture is used, one arm is held perpendicular to the other, the right hand extending toward the other and over

the left arm (this gesture can also be used more generally as a marked indication of great respect).²⁴

Directionality of the body also conveys social difference in Pohnpei in that chiefs and chieftesses face downward in the feast house, while others face upward. The use of gaze direction to indicate status is reprised in the term for high status people, *sohpeidi*, literally “those who face downwards.” Outside the feast house Pohnpeians talk about the *sohpeidi*, invoking for this class of people the local spatial semiosis of the feast house in a more global way through language in other contexts outside the feast house. The difference in facing direction of the body is also constructed by the different entry points into the building—chiefly persons enter already on the built platform, whereas lower status persons enter from ground level (earth floor) and face upward.

Status Marking in Language

The Pohnpeian language²⁵ is another important tool in the construction of status as an organizing feature of Pohnpeian life. Through vocabulary choices²⁶ Pohnpeians can indicate relative social status (Fischer 1969; Garvin and Riesenberg 1952), in a similar but much more elaborate way than the well-known pronoun contrast (*tu/vous, du/Sie*) in some European languages (see Keating 1998a for a fuller description of Pohnpeian status marking through language). In Java, another society where language marks social status (Geertz 1960), Errington describes how whenever two people meet they should ask themselves “Who is this person? Who am I? What is this person to me?” (1988:11) and discusses the complexities of expressing this calculation linguistically. The language of Samoan greetings has been similarly shown to both “assume and reconstitute particular views of a hierarchical social order” (Duranti 1992a:657). The use of status-marked language forms can contextualize certain interactions as having properties of formality (Fischer 1972; Haviland 1979; Irvine 1979:782) and can indicate “what can be focused on publicly and so can connote the publicly recognized and legitimate social order” (Irvine 1979:782).²⁷

Status-marked language is appropriate in Pohnpei for interactions involving chiefs or other high status persons. The Bible is written in status-marked register, and church services are also conducted in status-marked speech (see Philips 1991 for a discussion of a similar extension of Tongan honorifics to these newer contexts). All radio announcements are in status-marked speech because, as informants report, the chiefs, chieftesses, or other high status persons might be in the audience. The radio is one of the most important sources of “news” in Pohnpei, penetrating the domestic sphere on a daily basis. It is often left on for long periods, and everyone listens closely in the morning for funeral announcements. In this way the radio has served as a vehicle for the expansion of honorific speech

into a wide range of not only chiefly but familial spaces. Status-marked speech, except for forms of address and reference, is not usually used in face-to-face interactions not involving high ranking people or the clergy.

Perhaps the most frequent site of Pohnpeian status marking is in expressing commonplace verbs of motion and stasis, that is, a person’s relative position or path to a position in space. Choice of verbs, possessive constructions, and a limited number of nouns and pronouns indicates relative status. For example, the idea of movement in space (e.g., *go, move*) regularly has three different forms: one for high status, one for low status, and one form that is unmarked for status. To express the act of movement for a low status person, the verb stem *pato* is used (with directional suffixes), while the same action for a high status person such as a chief is expressed by the verb stem *ket* (with directional suffixes). The chief, then, moves in space or occupies space with an elevated status both visually and through language, whereas the people occupy a space symbolically lower, visually and through language. In the following examples *pato* (“move”) and *patohsang* (“move-from”) index low status for the movement of an ice chest, and *ketla* (“move-there”) indexes high status for the movement of the chief.

(1)

- 01 W: S ((man’s title)) S, *pwe ma ice boxo pato-*
S ((man’s title)) S, if the ice box moves (it of low status)—
- 02 *ice ches’ en patohsang mwo*
move the ice chest (it of low status) from over there
- 03 *eri Mwohnsapw ketla mwo*
so the paramount chief²⁸ can move (he of high status) there

The metacommunicative reference to the activity of speaking itself as well as knowledge claims and mental states are also status marked through language. Studies of shifts into different speech “levels” have revealed the flexibility of these resources in actual interactions and the complexities of shifts within a single interaction and even utterance (Duranti 1994; Errington 1988; Keating 1998a).

Forms of address and reference are also linguistic indexes of status in daily life in Pohnpei; each adult’s title indicates his or her relative position within the social hierarchy. People are called by their titles; in fact it has been described to me that it is disrespectful to use someone’s name rather than their title (although when Pohnpeians interact with American bureaucracies, the introduced form of first and last names is often used). In precolonial Pohnpei names were not used in public and were only known within the family. Children were given substitute names to be used until they were old enough to receive a title; after that they were referred to and addressed by the title (Leiber 1990:92). Titles are “all-encompassing personal identities” (Leiber 1990: 92) and one of the most important ways hierarchy is recurrently built in Pohnpei. As a form of punishment, an individual’s title, “thus essentially, his honor,

status, and self-respect," can be taken away by the paramount chief and junior or secondary²⁹ chief for failure to fulfill tribute and honor obligations (Mauricio 1993:67). The term *Nahnmwarki* (paramount chief) literally means "the one who controls titles."³⁰

Food Share and Status

Food is an additional aggregate resource for constructing status relations. Pohnpeians construct specific simultaneous and sequential hierarchical relations embedded within and reified through cyclic relations of food distribution during feasts (*kamadipw*). First, there are distributions of already cooked food, some of which will be consumed at the feast. There are then distributions of unprepared, just-harvested food, for example, separate distributions of *sakau* plants, yams, fish, and sugar cane. Pigs are slightly cooked and butchered in a formalized manner and distributed in segments. Each of the food distributions proceeds by calling out individual titles in rank order and presenting a portion of food to an individual. Titles serve as a guide for distribution by rank. The amount of food one receives and the order of serving both encode status; the highest ranking person is always served first and receives the choicest portions. A portion of food is also given to each chieftom. Each chieftom has a rank in relation to the others, and this rank order is observed during distributions. By its size and quality each share is a recurrent sensory symbol of status. Who got what is a frequent topic of discussion on the journey home from the feast and in subsequent conversations.

In the cooked or prepared food distribution, relations of inequality are expressed by the form of the container as well as the amount and sequence of distribution. Containers range from small foil packets to paper plates about ten inches in diameter, to plastic basins about 20 or 30 inches in diameter with a much greater volume or capacity. Another visible indicator of status is the ratio of meat to starch. Typically foil packets are mainly rice, whereas plastic basins contain more generous amounts of fish and chicken. If food runs out, the lower status members of the community don't participate. The successive variations of differential food share including cooked food and raw produce effect social inequality by an additive process, which amplifies asymmetries.

The system of unequal food sharing is also indexed in status-marked speech by the use of special terms for high status food and for high status "leftovers" as well as by a direct synonymous link between the humiliating (low status) expression for eating (*tungoal*) and the humiliating expression for all possession (*tungoal*).³¹ The Pohnpeian chief's food and act of eating is referred to as *koanoat*, the paramount chieftess's *pwenieu*. The secondary chief and chieftess's food is referred to as *sak*. Some holders of high

titles in the paramount chief's line are also entitled to call their food *koanoat* and their titles are referred to as *koanoat* titles, directly linking type of food to type of status. Chiefs and chieftesses often formally share some of their food at feasts; this food is called *kepin koanoat* for paramount chiefs and *kepin pwenieu* for paramount chieftesses. *Kepin* is from *kapi*, meaning "bottom." At one feast I recorded, the master of ceremonies called out "*Elisabet! Kepin pwenieu!*" at which point the chieftess redistributed a share of her food ("the bottom of the paramount chieftess food") to me. Since quantity and quality of food is linked to status, the physical appearance of the body in terms of size and state of health is also an indicator of status. Modjeska (1982) observes for the Duna of New Guinea that in a public sharing of pork, the apportionment of shares was to be "straight" and equal, not based on any system of inequality. A Duna consultant described such a distribution as "that of the mother, exactly dividing morsels" (1982:85). This suggests that food sharing is highly symbolic of underlying principles of equality or inequality in Pacific societies. It may further suggest that hierarchy is based on a repudiation or reversal of the model of the mother.

Another important way food is used to construct hierarchy is through the practice of preparing and consuming Pohnpeian *sakau* (the verb *eat* is used in relation to *sakau*, the ceremonial drink that is called *kava* in many Pacific societies). *Sakau* accompanies events where high status people are present, and many other events; *sakau* can be found being prepared every evening at some location in most communities. The importance of *kava* drinking is often mentioned in Pacific islands literature (Bascom 1965; Firth 1940; Kirch 1984; Marshall 1979; Oliver 1951), particularly the relationship between *kava* practices and local hierarchies (e.g., Bott 1972; Duranti 1981, 1994). The order of distribution of prepared *sakau* in coconut shell cups communicates hierarchy in Pohnpei (Keating 1998a; Petersen 1977; Riesenbergs 1968; Shimizu 1987) and situates gender with that hierarchy. A new context for drinking *sakau*, commercial *sakau* bars, still preserves the importance of rank, as lower ranking participants often wait until the highest ranking participant drinks first (Petersen 1977:156). When *sakau* is being prepared, there is a point in the preparation when all *sakau* pounders perform a synchronized rhythmic pounding display. The sound is loud and continues for several minutes. It is aesthetically pleasing, urging the simultaneous attention of the community to the process of preparing this type of food and its distribution by rank. The sound begins as dissonant—pounding stones hit the larger *sakau* stone randomly as pounders begin to pulverize the root. Gradually the sound becomes consonant as pounders pound in unison, then this phase ends and individuals pound in dissonance once again.

Feasting Practice and Moments of Hierarchy: The Interrelations of Semiotic Modes

Thus far I have talked about compound signals of hierarchy. This particular community renders the knowledge of and experience of hierarchy accessible in a communicative form in a compounding of successive variations of asymmetry. Language constitutes at least two status levels or planes of movement or location, one high and one low. Verbally constructed levels work in concert with nonverbal, visual structuring of space, in which the concepts of high and low (vertical) are imposed or mapped in even finer gradations onto a horizontal plane (the floor or ground). Spatial relationships are reiterated in language when gaze direction is used as a term for high status people, *sohpeidi*, literally “those who face downwards.” Titles are called out as different food shares are distributed to people who are sitting in a structure where seating position indexes social rank and who are listening to and producing status marked language—a compounding of abstract individual status-sign relations and their material effects.

However, the idea of social difference in Pohnpei is built not only out of additive sign systems but also out of contradictory signals or subtractive signs. Participants negotiate the meaning of often oppositional images to create a local idea of inequality. In the following section I discuss some of these oppositions as well as nonoppositional and compound relations to understand more fully the Pohnpeian notion of hierarchical relations and how the notion of hierarchy is organized through signs that simultaneously and sequentially oppose as well as support certain relations of difference. Multiple signs convey a complex poetics of hierarchy, thinning and thickening relations, negotiating consonance and dissonance.

The various semiotic modes (hearing, sight, taste, smell, and touch) used as tools in the construction of social stratification have very different potentials for expressing hierarchy. For example, the visual maps of the social hierarchy made on the feast-house platform can reproduce finer gradations in status than, for example, choices between two status-marked verbs of movement are able to do (although in the use of titles, another linguistic index of status, positions are more finely constructed). All non-chiefly social actors (women, men, and children) are grouped into one class by status-marked verbs (like *pato*), when in fact their seating position on the feast-house platform indicates they inhabit positions in a complex hierarchy, where no two positions are equal. Here is a contraposition between contiguous relations of spatially realized *difference* and unifying lexically realized relations of *similarity* (all low status actors referred to by the same verb). Visual and auditory fields simultaneously construct what are at once seamed and seamless “realities.” In the visual perceptual field of the feast-house platform difference is built out of “behind” or “in front of” relations or “higher than/lower than” rela-

tions. The deities and ancestors are behind, higher, and separate from the paramount chief and chieftess. In the auditory field (language), however, the chief and chieftess are addressed in the plural form to signify their embodiment of the ancestors, and all those who are not chiefs are referred to with the same low status verb regardless of their position in the hierarchy. The taste, smell, and touch of food during multiple distributions contribute to an aesthetic experience of social inequality.

Signs, however, also oppose each other in the creation of hierarchy during feasts. Lower status people find themselves physically higher in space than chiefs, for example, when they ascend the platform where the chiefs and chieftesses sit, in order to greet them. (In Figure 3 a man has just climbed up on the platform to greet the chiefs and chieftess; in Figure 4 the same man bows as he greets the paramount chieftess.)



Figure 3. A man ascends the platform to greet the chiefs and chieftess. More participants have arrived and are seated on the platform.



Figure 4. The same man bows to the paramount chieftess.

Even in cases in smaller feast houses, or where the feast-house platform is too crowded to ascend, the heads of people greeting the chiefs are often higher than the chiefs', since many feast-house platforms are only a few feet high and greeters remain standing while the chiefs are sitting. Vertical relations and gaze relations oppose horizontal relations; the relations of bodies in space inverts the genealogical hierarchy during greetings. The chiefs and chieftesses are not only vertically *lower* but are gazing *upwards* toward lower status people during the greeting (see Figure 4). Yet at the same time they are sitting in a horizontally more superior position; the horizontal sign is in opposition to the vertical signs.

The *language* of greeting³² also acts in opposition to the vertical sign in the case of greeting. Low status people index the chief lexically and phonologically (with an elongation of certain vowel sounds) as superior. The chief is greeted as first of the land, in the plural form (*kaselehli Mwohnsapwko*). A bow to the waist by the low status person while greeting also opposes the standing vs. seated relation. In fact, body relations act both co-oppositionally and cooperatively in this case. Oppositionally the low status body is higher than the chief, non-oppositionally the low status greeter gesturally lowers the upper portion of the body. While two signals (relative vertical height and gaze direction) indicate high status for the greeter and low status for the chief, three other signals—(1) the position of the greeter in horizontal space in the feast house; (2) the attitude, that is, bowing of the low status body; and (3) language (which elevates the chief)—indicate the reverse relation.

This same phenomenon is shown particularly well in leave-taking practices. If one has to leave the feast-house platform before the chief retires, there is a formulaic phrase *komw ketda*, which is uttered to the chief. This is literally a directive (in high status vocabulary) to the chief to “stand (you of high status) up.” The chief does not actually stand, nor is he expected to. The language explicitly contradicts the actual vertical spatial index (where the chief is sitting and another lower status person has risen to leave). Language (a relation expressed in sound) reverses the visual instantiation of status roles.

The visual field can act co-oppositionally with language in another way. For example, when the paramount chieftess in oratory at a feast uses low status vocabulary for herself, but stands in a high status location as she does so, she signals contradictory statuses. She signals high status because (1) she is standing while everyone else is seated (vertical relation), (2) she is standing in a space of very high status (horizontal relation), and (3) she is gazing downwards toward those of low status (gaze relation). She signals low status through language. In this case, as in the case above, more modes index high status—horizontal and vertical spatial relations, including gaze direction—while fewer (language in this case, vertical space in the previous

example) index low status. This particular compounding of signs not only marshals multiple sensory modes and perspectives in the exposition of hierarchical relations, but creates a notion of the contradictions of the semiotics of status relations. The body proves to be a flexible figuration through which discordances are negotiated and meanings subverted and inverted.

It should be noted in the case of the chieftess using a low status verb for her own actions that, as is common for other culturally specific systems of grammatical status marking, in Pohnpei to elevate oneself is considered inappropriate, and one can build legitimacy through humbling oneself³³ (see Urban 1989 for an interesting discussion of the multiple uses of self-reference in discourse contexts) and waiting for others to do the status-raising. Graham calls this form of obligatory denial of one's own status the “principle of anonymity” (1995:143; see also Warner's [1990] “principle of negativity”). Self-effacement or negation of self in public discourse has been described as a strategy not only to elevate the status of another, for example, an addressee, as is usually discussed, but also to index the “culturedness” and positionality [high] of the speaker (Silverstein 1992: 318, n.6; see also Ide 1989; Keeler 1987), that is, their “refinement” (Errington 1988:35). Speakers show their understanding of appropriate comportment or demeanor (Beeman 1986; Ide 1989; Wolfowitz 1991).

In example 2 the Paramount Chieftess does not lower herself, but someone else. Language and space act oppositionally in this instance of other-lowering that shows how a low status person can occupy a high position in the visual sphere but be simultaneously lowered in status by verbal means. The Paramount Chieftess invites her adopted daughter to share her space using the low status verb *pato* for the daughter's act of moving into the space.

(2)

- 01 Chieftess: *ke pahn iang pato pohn*
you will join me and sit (you of low status) on
02 *dewei sehro*
my chair over there

In another example, just as in the case where chiefs and deities are seamlessly joined in one pronoun, high *and* low status community members are often joined by one high status possessive pronoun in oratory. A recurrent phenomenon in video-recorded interactions of oratory is the use of high status possessive pronouns for high and low status people together, as a collective. Silverstein (2000) discusses how the “ritually emblemized trope of ‘we-ness’” can authorize and shape particular views of reality (p. 129). The “self-referring we” can also position someone as representing more than their own authority (Drew and Heritage 1993:30; see also Bakhtin 1981), and members of institutions regularly use *we* to create solidarity and reciprocity (Mehan 1986:147–149).³⁴ In line 01 of example 3, the speechmaker uses the high status, plural, inclusive

possessive form of *our* (*sapwellimatail*), thereby including all the participants meeting together and raising the status of all (including himself) to chiefly status. This is suggestive of the conception by Dumont (1980) of the way high status can be formulated to “encompass” low status but not the reverse, where “at the superior level there is unity; at the inferior level there is distinction” (Dumont 1980:242).³⁵

- (3)
 01 *kumwail meleilei sapwellimatail tupenehn*
 you all be peaceful so that our (we of high status) meeting
 02 *rahmet pahn tepdahr*
 today can begin

At the same moment these words constructing a “high status we” are uttered, however, the very people referred to as “chiefly” sit in a structure where seating position denotes a unique status in a dense series of hierarchical veins. And at least one food distribution has already instantiated relative status through food share. In this case one sign (language) indicates chiefly status and two others (food and spatial relations) indicate non-chiefly status.

Status can also be construed in oppositional ways within the same semiotic mode. In language a person can be simultaneously two statuses (high and low). The following example shows a person addressed at the same time with a high status pronoun but low status possessive classifier. The pronoun *omwi* denotes high status while the classifier *tungoal* denotes low status. (Note: the low status marking is not related to properties of “cigarette” but rather to the owner of the cigarette, as choice of high or low status possessive classifier, *tungoal* or *sapwellim-*, does not pertain to the item possessed but to the possessor.)

- (4)
 01 S: *N ((man's title)) omwi tungoal sikah*
 N ((man's title)) your (of high status) (of low status) cigarette

In a similar way to the previous example, two speakers can contradict each other's construal of their status relations (see also Smith-Hefner 1988:552 for how “status may be judged differently from different perspectives and by different individuals within the same speech community” in Java). The two interactants below construe the status of one of them in two different extremes, one high and one low. Speaker L uses a high status pronoun (*komw*) for speaker S; however, speaker S in contrast chooses a low status verb (the addition of *patohwen* before the verb *sansal* makes *sansal* into a low status verb) for the same proposition expressed in language (i.e., whether or not he is visible in the video). Speaker L construes S as high status, while S construes himself as low status. This is not possible in spatial status marking or food status marking.

- (5)
 01 L: *komw sohte sansal*
 you (of high status) are not clearly showing
 02 S: *ahka ngehi me keiehu patohwen sansal*
 of course I'm the one who shows up (I of low status) the best

Signs vary in their malleability to express gradations of difference and to simultaneously express difference and similarity. Multiple signs of inequalities are themselves sometimes asymmetrical or discrepant. Discrepancies are negotiated through a shifting encumbrance of signs, where multiple signs forge and reforge the sensory expression of social inequality as a complex play of similarity and difference, where difference is quantitatively more manifest. Space and the body can take a central role in interpreting other signs.

The Title: A Portable Sign

As entities in the world (bodies, food, space) are manipulated, remodeled, represented, and made moments of hierarchical relations at feasts by active sign makers, there is a singular linguistic index, one established during a particular feast (a title-giving feast), which proves to be enduring rather than momentary. When each feast is over, the food consumed, and the feast house again used for daily activities such as sleeping or drying laundry, the title remains as one sign that substantiates the total creative result of all the Pohnpeian environmental tools of status marking, multiply indexing past and present, food share, land,³⁶ language use, and spatial location as well as social relations. Used in virtually every interaction both inside and outside the feast house, it “means” in a particular way, that is, it is a value lying at a particular point within a range of figures or typology of ranks. The title is a composite, highly portable insignia used in everyday interactions between people across contexts.

The giving of titles is an important moment of hierarchy in Pohnpei, but the title also transcends this moment. Community attention is focused on the entire process. Those to receive titles and their spouses come before the chiefs and are anointed with oil and given headwreaths, and ritual words enact their new status. They are henceforth referred to and addressed with the new titles. The word for title-giving, *lengileng* or *lengilengih*, is a reduplicated form of the word for heaven (*leng* means heaven). A title is “important” and comes from long ago (literally “the other side of yesterday”). Title-giving itself “recalls past history,” as the following excerpt from the paramount chief's oratory shows.

- (6)
 01 Chief: *koarosien pil mwangih lengileng*
 all people here also know (you of high status) what a
 title (it of high status) is
 02 *lengileng mehkot me kesempwal*
 a title (it of high status) is something that's important
 03 *e pil kohdo te ni keilahn aio*
 it also comes from long ago
 04 *kitail pil ketin kadakdaudote*
 also we all recall (we all of high status) past history

This one act, hierarchical positioning through naming, is constructed out of a number of conventional indicators of meaning at a particular title-giving feast. It emerges out of and continually indexes a particular space, body position, and gaze direction on the feast-house platform as well as a particular relationship to how food is shared out.

Conclusion

In the immediate context of the community feast house, utilizing the sensory experience of that environment—sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, and the experience of cyclicity—concepts of inequality are formed through practical actions. Hierarchy is built out of polyphony—additive signs as well as inversions and conflicting relations. The idea of hierarchy is built out of disequilibrium of bodies in space, of referents in language, and of food share, as well as disequilibrium in the interaction of these signs. Moments of hierarchy in Pohnpei include not only notions of sovereign and subordinate that are compounded through several sign systems, but are also built out of momentary contradictions between those sign systems. This compounding of signs not only recruits multiple sensory modes and perspectives in the exposition of hierarchical relations, but creates a notion of the paradoxes of status relations, where those who are high can be low and those who are low can be simultaneously high, or elevated in another modality. A close attention to these simultaneous portraits or relationships between differentially produced interpersonal relations reveals that high or low status emerges in a process of amplification through multiple sign systems, while at the same time not without dissonance or inversion. A human agent can creatively engage in manipulating the semiotic fields of difference in interesting ways that confound a simple reading of the production of unequal relations.

The body proves to be a flexible form through which discordances can be negotiated and meanings subverted and inverted, and yet through title-giving a particular idea of the authenticity and corporeality of hierarchical relations, built out of multiple sign systems, is mapped onto each body. The Pohnpeian title, bestowed at a title-giving *feast*, and thereafter used in address and reference for a single individual, emerges from the very site of production of the multiple sign modalities discussed here (sequential serving of food, size of food portion, sequential serving of kava, the position of the body, gaze direction, horizontal and vertical space, language use). It is a composite sign of hierarchy that recurrently transcends contexts, since speech is not always in status-marked or honorific register, and space does not always construct hierarchical meaning, for example, when the feast house is being used to dry laundry and for other household uses. A Pohnpeian title not only refers differentially to each individual in a status-relational way but serves as an indexical marker for a host of

correlated, complex, shifting, regularly recurring sensory experiences of inequality.

Looking closely at social relationships built through compoundings of sign modalities shows the complexities and range of practices for producing and negotiating hierarchies, as well as the complex relationships among various semiotic resources used in organizing experience.

Notes

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1. In talking about signs, I take Peirce’s definition of a sign as something that stands to someone for something in some respect or capacity (1940:99). The “someone” is an active maker of other signs, and the “something” is an idea. In Peirce’s framework, a sign can be an icon, index, or symbol (p. 102), or some combination of these. I use the term *semiotics* as a general term for patterned communication in all its sensory modes, for example, hearing, sight, taste, touch, and smell.

2. “No proposition, however abstract its intent, is humanly possible without a tying on at one or more points to the concrete world of sense” (Sapir 1921:93).

3. Duranti shows the importance of these two relations (simultaneity and sequentiality) in the linkage of gestures and speech, which are given meaning by the presence of a “space that is never neutral” (1992a:684).

4. For more on Pohnpei see Bascom (1948); Falgout (1984); Garvin and Riesenber (1952); Hanlon (1988); Keating (1998a); Kihleng (1996); Mauricio (1993); Petersen (1982); Pinsker (1997); Riesenber (1968); Shimizu (1987).

5. The Madolenihmw chiefdom is ranked at the top of this hierarchy.

6. Kirch (1984) notes that archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests the founding settlement groups of Pacific Island societies likely brought with them pyramidal social

structures, the tradition of first fruits and tribute, and the notion of chiefs as representatives of deities (1984:281). This indicates that a system of hereditary rank was found in the society whose language was ancestral to all the Austronesian languages of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Nuclear Micronesia (Pawley and Ross 1993:444). The organizational basis of these early societies was the conical clan, that is, distinctions among clan members were made on the basis of genealogical distance from the founding ancestor:

The conical clan is, at every level, a ranked structure. Older and younger siblings, chiefs and commoners, higher and lesser ramares . . . all are positioned on a continuous scale with the fundamental criterion of seniority of descent. This principle of genealogical seniority may be viewed as a set of structural equivalents: father:son::older brother:younger brother::chief:commoner. [Kirch 1984:34]

7. The "culturally defined notion of hierarchy . . . ramified throughout the entire fabric of social life in Pohnpei" and "in very large part determined the very nature of self and the conduct of everyday social interactions, including the transmission of knowledge" (Falgout 1992:33-34).

8. Petersen claims that Pohnpei's political life is marked both by well-developed hierarchies and by an ethos of decentralization and that "neither pole is supreme: there is endless tension between them" (1995:121). Mauricio (1993) also speaks of "decentralization" processes, writing: "The structure of the existing traditional political system on Pohnpei is well suited to accommodate and perpetuate internal and external decentralization processes" but he links this to "creation of social status positions in title systems and creation of political territories at the section and chiefdom levels of political integration" that allows for the "regular creation and recycling of enough social status positions . . . to accommodate . . . the participation of a large number of Pohnpeians in one form of leadership capacity or another" (Mauricio 1993:69). Hence he does not formulate decentralization as the absence of hierarchy. Shimizu writes: Pohnpeians "interact with each other always as ones with specific statuses" (Shimizu 1985:41).

9. Voting on whether to create a Chamber of Chiefs was part of the democratic government structure.

10. In some societies, a "talking chief" interfaces with the community in a way that for the more sacred Paramount Chief would be inappropriate. However, Riesenbergs observes that sometimes the roles are reversed in Pohnpei and the Nahmwarki approaches the Nahnken to intercede with him on behalf of the people (1968:48).

11. Fischer (1957) writes that, in the case of the lesser titles, they are not "all ranked in strict order but they *do differ* in prestige" (1957:174, italics added), supporting the importance of titles in constructing unique social positions in Pohnpei. Prestige, though synonymous with standing or estimation in the eyes of others, is a slightly different notion than rank, but nonetheless an important tool in the creation of social difference.

12. There are several women who have their own titles, for example, the oldest daughter of the now deceased Nahnken (secondary or junior chief) of the Madolenihmw chiefdom has her own title for life.

13. See, for example, Brenneis and Myers (1984); Douglas (1979); Earle (1987); Gailey (1987); Godelier and Strathern (1991); Goldman (1970); Goodenough (1957); Keesing (1978); Kirch (1984); Lindstrom (1981); Petersen (1982); Sahlins (1958, 1963); White and Lindstrom (1997).

14. Polynesia was often characterized by "ranked and stratified classes or social levels, with power concentrated in the hands of men of title, and with chiefs or kings exercising authority over sometimes large areas" while Melanesia was "classless, lacking in hereditary rank and position, democratic, egalitarian, and segmented," and Micronesia was "usually placed by students of the subject with Polynesia" (Riesenbergs 1968:111).

15. Formerly called Ngatik.

16. The social organization of space has been recognized as crucial in interpretation processes (e.g., Firth 1970, 1972; Frake 1975; Goffman 1974; C. Goodwin 1995; Hanks 1990; Kendon 1990) and in communicating social relationships (Bourdieu 1973; Cunningham 1973; Duranti 1994; Fox 1993; Hoem 1993; Lawrence and Low 1990; Massey 1994; Toren 1990), particularly in the Pacific.

17. Note that there is some corrugated tin covering the lower part of the opening on the left side of the picture. This was used to keep pigs from roaming into the feast house.

18. Seated beside the paramount chieftess (to our left) is the former secondary chieftess.

19. Petersen, who studied the community of Awak in the chiefdom of Uh, says of the Awak community: "their unceremonious behavior is also legendary, and 'sitting Awak-style' (*mwomwohden Awak*) is an epithet describing the unwillingness of the people and their chiefs to take ritually prescribed positions during feasts. . . . William McGarry, S. J., an American missionary who knows the island well, has spoken of the Awak people as being 'traditionally untraditional,' a judgement they would probably accept" (Petersen 1982:25).

20. Toren, however, argues that Fijian social relations are not fundamentally hierarchical (1994).

21. The former chieftess of the second line of titles (my hostess during my long-term field stay), who lost her title when her husband, the Nahnken, died, was invited to use the chieftess' entrance to the paramount chief's *nahs* in Madolenihmw by the paramount chieftess one day when we attended a feast. The former chieftess refused, by saying *riahla*, referring to the consequences that might result from this action (using a door reserved for a chieftess).

22. The name *Pohnpei* means "upon a stone altar."

23. The word *wahu* (honor) also means "valley," and according to Pohnpeians, this signifies the separation between the chiefs and the rest of the people.

24. As noted by Garvin and Riesenbergs (1952):

nonverbal behavior showing respect is not limited to a few ceremonial occasions—though it is most pronounced and detailed at those times. . . . Rather, it permeates the entire way of life of the average member of Ponapean society, and no interpersonal contact is possible without clear definition in terms of mutual status and the modes of behavior showing respect contingent thereon. [1952:217]

25. See Rehg (1981) for a fuller description of the Pohnpeian language.

26. Honorific or status-marking speech systems can be found in other Pacific societies (see Duranti 1994; Fischer 1969; Philips 1991; Watson-Gegeo 1986) and elsewhere (Agha 1993; Beeman 1986; Dunn 1996; Irvine 1985; Kroskivity 1993; Wolfowitz 1991). See Agha (1994) for a review of this literature. Honorifics are "one of the major forms of the linguistic expression of social status (with dialects, levels)" (Irvine 1985:557).

27. See Irvine (1979) for a discussion of problems with the terms *formal/informal*.

28. *Mwohnsapw* means "first of the land."

29. By "secondary" I refer to the Nahnken, the chief who is the head of what ethnographers and Pohnpeians gloss as the "second" line of titles.

30. As Petersen relates: "Though Ponapeans acknowledge that titles are the chiefs', they also understand that titles are so important to a man's identity that such a matter may be used as an excuse to break away. One of the set of brothers who lost their titles in the Vale of Awak's succession dispute told me that he cried when his title was taken, even as he stressed that he could not object" (Petersen 1982:133).

31. See Keating (1997, 1998a) for a discussion of this concept.

32. See Duranti (1992a) for an extended discussion of the semiotics of greetings and their role in establishing social position.

33. But see Irvine (1974) for an interesting discussion of leaders negotiating high status through greeting.

34. See also Bahktin (1981) and Wilson (1990).

35. This idea was formulated by Dumont with Raymond Aporthe.

36. Leiber states that the only implication a title has about place is the presupposed commitment of the man holding the title to people in the place—section or chiefdom—where he accepts the title and its obligations (1990:86).

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