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DOUGLAS OLIVER
1913–2009

A Biographical Memoir by
ROBERT C. KISTE

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Biographical Memoir

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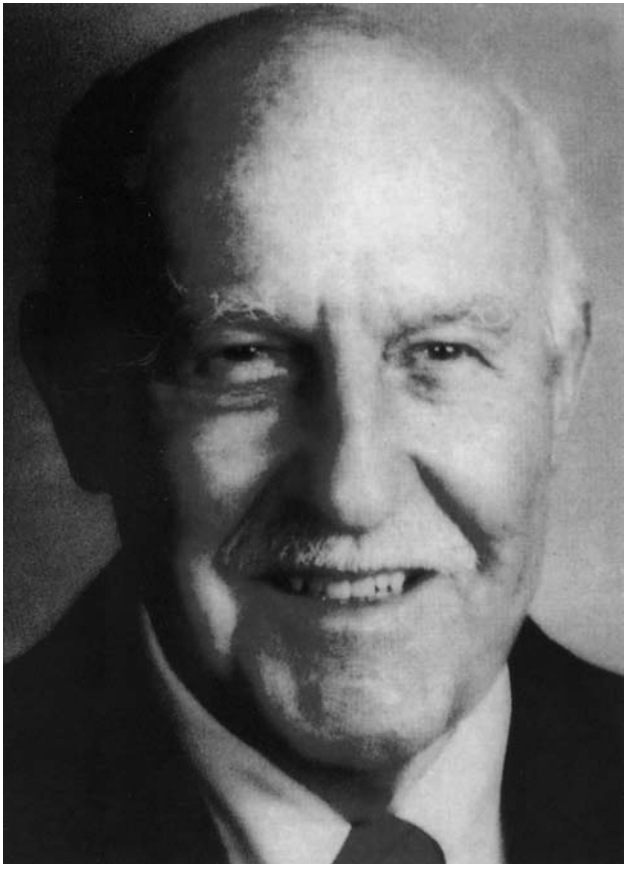

Douglas Olin

DOUGLAS OLIVER

February 10, 1913–October 30, 2009

BY ROBERT C. KISTE

DOUGLAS OLIVER WAS BORN in Ruston, Louisiana, in 1913. His father was an instructor at Louisiana Technological University, but he knew little about the man. According to Oliver's own account, his father "did not return from World War I."[1] His mother remarried, and Oliver was raised under modest circumstances by his widowed paternal grandmother in Atlanta, Georgia. His primary and secondary education was in Atlanta; Georgia's schools were segregated at the time. Two of the schools were preparatory for tertiary education, one for boys and one for girls. A third focused on vocational education. Oliver attended the Boys High School.

Oliver was an obviously gifted and highly motivated youngster. By 1928 he had completed high school and in three years had earned the rank of Eagle Scout well before his 16th birthday. At about this time Oliver hitchhiked to California and worked for a summer at one of its national parks. Two remarkable achievements were soon to follow. In a national competition involving hundreds of applicants, Oliver and two other Eagle Scouts were selected to go on safari in East Africa.[2] The young men began their journey in New York City where they were guests of President Theodore Roosevelt's widow and son. On their voyage across the Atlantic on the luxurious *Ile de France* they were treated as special guests and

met Bill Tilden, the world-famous tennis star. In Paris they were welcomed by America's ambassador to France, stayed at the Hotel Astoria, toured the city, and met Gene Tunney, the world's heavyweight boxing champion. A voyage through the Suez was followed by a five-week safari in Tanganyika. The boys were required to keep diaries that would later be turned into a book. Oliver and his fellow scouts were credited as the coauthors; *Three Boy Scouts in Africa* was Oliver's first publication (Douglas et al., 1928). The book was noted by the prestigious Chautauqua Institute in New York State, and Oliver was invited to give presentations on his African experience at the institute's summer program.

Oliver assumed that he would attend his hometown institution, the Georgia Institute of Technology, commonly known as Georgia Tech. However, when a recruiter from Harvard visited Atlanta, Oliver recalled that he thought Harvard "sounded like an interesting place." A high school adviser helped Oliver secure a scholarship for his undergraduate studies, and upon his arrival at Harvard, he discovered anthropology by accident. Oliver expressed an interest in Egyptology, only to learn that the university's sole Egyptologist was on leave. As an alternative he was advised to go to the anthropology department, which was nearby and described as close enough in subject matter. Oliver finished his B.A. degree in three years, in 1934, and completed the D.Phil. in ethnology at the University of Vienna one year later. Written in English, Oliver's dissertation was based on library research and entitled *Some Aspects of Tribal History in Africa (Banyankole, Bagana, Shilluk, Asande)*.[3] Both degrees were officially awarded in 1935 when Oliver was 22 years old.

Oliver expressed interest in earning a Ph.D. at Harvard but was informed that it would be redundant because of his D.Phil. from Vienna. When he inquired about a faculty position, he was caught in a catch-22: the Harvard faculty did

not believe the Vienna doctorate was equivalent to that of Harvard. Oliver then joined the staff of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Ethnology and Archaeology, where he served as a research associate from 1936 to 1941.

Early in his appointment at the museum, Oliver's first excursion to Melanesia came about by chance. He was asked to accompany the heir to a large manufacturing fortune on an expedition to collect exotic artifacts in New Guinea. Once in the islands their interests quickly diverged, and they went their separate ways. The Australian government anthropologist E. W. P. Chinnery took Oliver under his wing and advised that research opportunities on Bougainville in the Solomon Islands would be more affordable than the New Guinea mainland.[4] Oliver took the advice, and his mentors at Harvard arranged modest financial support ($70 per month), part of which Oliver directed be sent to his grandmother in Atlanta. Oliver's groundbreaking research with the Siuai[5] people was conducted on Bougainville between early 1938 and late 1939.

A little known fact, reflected only in Oliver's curriculum vitae, as a Social Science Research Council fellow, he conducted field research in a rural community in Virginia from September 1941 to February 1942, when he entered wartime service. Further details about the Virginia work are unknown.

With the outbreak of World War II Oliver's experience in Melanesia made him an invaluable resource for the U.S. government, and he was engaged by the U.S. Navy as a civilian consultant. Oliver was attached to the Western Pacific Command in Noumea, New Caledonia, popularly known as "Pentagon West." Immediately after the war, the Navy sponsored several projects. The U.S. Commercial Company was among the first, and it conducted an economic survey of Micronesia with Oliver as project director. He also wrote

the summary report for the entire endeavor. In response to continued requests from the Navy, the Pacific Science Board was established as a committee of the National Research Council in late 1946. The board promoted research, advised government, and encouraged international cooperation on Pacific science. George Peter Murdock, chair, Department of Anthropology, Yale University, was a member of the board and Oliver served as a consultant. He was also a cofounder of the Society for Applied Anthropology, in 1941, and a member of its executive committee. Oliver published in the early issues of the society's journal.[6]

In 1947 most of Micronesia came under American rule when the area became the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. In the same year the Pacific Science Board became the administering agency for the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA), with Murdock as director. The design for CIMA drew heavily on a plan drafted by Oliver for a research initiative that would be of scientific value and practical use for administration and development in Micronesia. Between July 1947 and January 1949, 41 CIMA researchers were divided into teams to conduct research in different parts of Micronesia. Of the lot, 25 were cultural anthropologists, 4 were physical anthropologists, and others were linguists, geographers, sociologists, physicians, and a botanist. Collectively they came from 20 universities and museums. Naval funding continued after CIMA to launch the Scientific Investigation of Micronesia (SIM), a program of studies in the physical, biological, and life sciences. Between 1949 and 1951, 31 researchers were engaged in the project. Another CIMA offshoot was the appointment of applied anthropologists to work in the various district and territorial levels of the trust territory.[7]

Of the navy-sponsored anthropological initiatives in Micronesia, CIMA had the greatest impact. Fewer than 20 American

cultural anthropologists had worked in the Pacific prior to World War II. A number of the CIMS and SIM researchers went on to have productive university careers, and they taught the next generation of American anthropologists. While they may not have been aware of it, Oliver's influence had shaped the course of their careers.

After his work with the Pacific Science Board and projects in Micronesia, Oliver served in advisory capacities with the U.S. Department of State, the South Pacific Commission (which included most nations in the Pacific), and the United Nations between 1948 and 1951. In 1948 he finally achieved the faculty position that he had long desired when he was appointed as a lecturer in Harvard's anthropology department, where he eventually became a professor of anthropology and curator of Oceanic ethnology.

In the two decades that followed, Oliver organized or played a major role in three projects that placed a sizeable number of doctoral students in the field. The first was a joint effort with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from late 1952 through 1954. Inspired by Raymond Firth's study of Malaysian peasantry, the MIT project focused on peasants in Java, and about a dozen researchers were involved.[8] The second project, also in the 1950s, was conducted in the Society Islands. Four pairs of communities were researched to compare varying degrees of acculturation in the archipelago. Oliver and three of his students each studied a pair, and a fourth examined the influence of the Chinese in French Polynesia (1981).[9]

The third initiative was the Harvard Solomon Islands Project, which linked physical anthropology and epidemiology with ethnography and studies of social change. Research was conducted in eight communities in the Solomons between 1966 and 1972. In each instance an anthropologist conducted extensive research in advance of and in preparation for the

work of a biomedical team. Follow-up visits to seven of the same communities occurred during 1978-1980, and the work was summarized in Friedlander's *The Solomon Islands Project* (1987).

In 1969 Oliver made a major career change. In an arrangement with Harvard he accepted a half-time appointment in the University of Hawai'i's Department of Anthropology on the condition that he be allowed to divide his time with fall semesters at Harvard and the spring of each academic year at Hawai'i. In 1973 Oliver left Harvard and became full time at Hawai'i until he retired in 1978. In the following year, 1979, he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Beginning in the early 1970s Oliver became a consultant for Bougainville Copper Ltd. and it provided generous research funds to evaluate the impact of the large mining operation on the people and environment of Bougainville. Oliver designed and headed a second research project on the island. Entitled "Anthropology, Demography, and Geography of Bougainville," it involved about half a dozen researchers.[10] In the three projects at Harvard and the one in Hawai'i the majority of the anthropologists involved were Oliver's graduate or postgraduate students. By his own estimate Oliver produced more than 40 Ph.D. students in his career.

Hawai'i was not new to Oliver. On numerous occasions, his work in the larger Pacific had taken him through what was still an American territory. Soon after his move to Hawai'i, he acquired a home in one of Honolulu's most desirable neighborhoods. Oliver was also a longtime member of the Outrigger Canoe Club, an elite gathering place located on Waikiki beach with a history of over a hundred years.

I first met Oliver in 1968. I was a new assistant professor beginning a career in the Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota. Oliver was visiting his longtime friend E. Adamson Hoebel, chair of the department and

like Oliver a major figure in American anthropology. Later I met Oliver at annual meetings of the Association of Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) and on other professional occasions. Upon first meeting, many people, including myself, assumed that Oliver had been born to privilege. He was a well-known full professor at Harvard; his self-confidence, manner of speech, dress, and overall deportment belied his modest beginnings. Oliver always marched to his own drummer. He always knew what he wanted. In his interaction with others he tended quickly either to like or dislike those he met. There seemed to be no in-between and at times he could be quite dismissive of those who crossed his path. He was a demanding teacher, and had little patience with those who fell short of his expectations. Many, including graduate students in anthropology, found him intimidating, and some people were put off by his wry sense of humor. As a consequence Oliver had some difficulty in recruiting students for his several research projects.

Oliver seldom spoke about his private life. He was married four times. His first wife, Eleanor Schirmer Oliver, accompanied him to Bougainville and was his companion during his fieldwork with the Siuai. The union produced one child, Susan, Oliver's only biological offspring. Eleanor wrote her own account of her time on Bougainville. "A Woman's Experiences Among Stone Age Solomon Islanders" appeared in the December 1942 issue of *National Geographic* magazine. The marriage ended in divorce. Susan now lives on Cape Cod.

Oliver's second wife, Sheila, was an Australian, and they adopted two boys, Andrew and John, and one daughter, Ami. Andrew, the eldest son, was successful in the banking industry and died in a plane accident en route to visit his father in Hawai'i in 1978. Oliver was devastated by the loss, and he retired in that same year. John now lives in Australia and Ami is a California resident. Oliver suffered another major

setback when Sheila died of cancer at an early age. Little is known about Oliver's third wife, Ann Gutmann. The union ended in Oliver's second divorce without offspring.

Oliver's fourth marriage was his most successful. Margaret McArthur was also an Australian, and she was a much-accomplished anthropologist in her own right. She was a nutritionist as well as anthropologist who conducted groundbreaking research on the diets of the indigenous people of Australia and Papua New Guinea. She completed her Ph.D. at Australian National University in 1962. Her work was recognized internationally, and her services were sought by the World Health Organization. She also served as a consultant to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, and conducted research in Africa on its behalf. Margaret was the first female to receive an appointment as a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology of Sydney University. She moved to Hawai'i in 1976 to marry Oliver. The bond and affection between them was a pleasure to observe. Free from other commitments, Margaret was working on a major writing project based on her Ph.D. research with the Kunimaipa people of Papua when she fell victim to an incapacitating and irreversible neurological disorder. Oliver remained by her side until she died in 2002, and for the third time Oliver suffered the loss of one of the most cherished people in his life. Oliver salvaged what he could of Margaret's work, and it was published under her name in Oceania Monograph 49, University of Sydney Oceania Monograph Series.

Oliver's move to Hawai'i was not without complications. Soon after his arrival, he became involved in departmental discussions concerning a new hire and tenure for up-and-coming young faculty. Oliver successfully opposed the hire, and he differed with others regarding some tenure decisions. He also questioned whether some students were qualified to remain in the graduate program. The depart-

ment became deeply divided over the issues involved. There were also concerns about the conditions of Oliver's hire. The university had indicated that a new position as chair of Pacific anthropology would be created with Oliver as the initial occupant. The position never materialized. Within a short time there were also misunderstandings about Oliver's salary. In response Oliver wrote a letter to the president of the university in which he was extremely critical of the institution as a whole.

There was another source of contention. Long before Oliver's arrival, in 1950 the university had authorized the M.A. degree in Pacific Islands studies, an area studies program. Such programs are predicated on the assumption that world areas may best be understood through the lenses of several academic disciplines in collaborative research and study. Area studies were new to universities in the years prior to World War II and their value was seriously challenged by much of the academic world. It was generally assumed that only traditional disciplines warranted a place in universities. As a matter of principle Oliver himself was opposed to interdisciplinary programs, and he was not alone in the Department of Anthropology. Given such circumstances, a series of seemingly inexplicable events followed. In July 1977 Oliver was appointed director of the Pacific Islands Studies Program (PISP). In less than four months he resigned and recommended that the program be terminated. Nonetheless, he remained involved and managed to have himself appointed as chair of the search committee to find his successor.

After my first meeting with Oliver, in 1968, I pursued my own career at the University of Minnesota, including a return to the Marshall Islands, where I had conducted my doctoral research. I spent the 1972-1973 academic year on sabbatical as a visiting professor in the Department of Anthropology at Hawai'i. A second stint as a visiting professor at Hawai'i

occurred in the fall semester 1976. In the following year the search for a new PISP director was launched. Several colleagues in Hawai'i encouraged me to apply, but the position as advertised was not attractive and the future of PISP was tenuous at best. Oliver urged me to reconsider and used his influence to arrange a more attractive offer. He kept me informed of what could be negotiated and gave assurances that there was substantial support among some members of the faculty. Because of my own involvement and commitment to the region, Hawai'i was attractive and worth the gamble. I became the director of PISP in July 1978. Shortly thereafter, the program's name was changed to the Center for Pacific Islands Studies (CPIS).

The timing could not have been better. In the 1970s and the middle of the Cold War the Soviet Union approached Tonga to establish an embassy, develop a fishing base, and provide development assistance to upgrade harbor and airport facilities. The Soviets also explored the possibility of arranging fishing agreements with other island nations. The American response was relatively quick. In 1978 an Office for Pacific Island Affairs was opened in the U.S. Department of State. Diplomatic missions in Fiji and Papua New Guinea were upgraded to embassies. The U.S. Agency for International Development launched its first program in the region. Within two years three new regional organizations were created with headquarters in Honolulu. Funding became available for a variety of initiatives designed to enhance American interests in the islands. Some longtime Washington observers joked, "One would have suspected that there was a communist behind every coconut tree in the islands."

Oliver's life was not confined to the halls of academia. Throughout his Hawai'i years he maintained a vigorous exercise regime. He had his own one-man outrigger paddle canoe and was often seen on the Ala Wai Canal on the

inland side of Waikiki Beach. Oliver also took long walks along the highway bordering the ocean near his home. Quite unexpectedly, he suffered a heart attack on a visit to Sydney, Australia. Upon his return home he consulted a group of physicians who specialized in heart attack victims. After extensive therapy and training, Oliver surprised most everyone when he completed a run of the Honolulu Marathon. In his more advanced years Oliver's daily exercise routine became somewhat less strenuous with an hour on his rowing machine and a mile walk.

Oliver was a remarkably productive scholar. His first professional publication was in the previously mentioned journal *Applied Anthropology*, which he cofounded. Between 1942 and 1969 he published six journal articles, four chapters in books, six museum papers, and seven other articles in a variety of places. After 1969 his record was solely one of books. Oliver never penned a single book review, and was known to comment, "I don't do that kind of work."

The first six of Oliver's books were published while he was at Harvard. Three of the six focused on Bougainville. *Studies in the Anthropology of Bougainville, Solomon Islands* was published in 1949. Oliver's second book was an edited volume, *Planning Micronesia's Future* (1951), an account of the economic survey he had directed in postwar Micronesia. His next two books established Oliver as a major figure in Pacific scholarship and had a greater impact than the rest of his books combined. One of the most widely read books ever written on the Pacific, *The Pacific Islands*, first appeared in 1951. In the opinion of the noted Pacific historian Doug Munro, "[I]t was a young man's book, oozing youthful vitality but disciplined in the sense of being well paced, carefully proportioned, and adequately researched" (Munro, 2006, p. 30). It was reprinted numerous times and read by generations of students and general readers. *A Solomon Island Society*

(1955) was based on Oliver's earlier mentioned research with the Siuai people of Bougainville. His detailed ethnography provided the first ever analysis of "big man" leadership in Melanesia and sparked major theoretical attention and debate in anthropology that continue yet today. *An Invitation to Anthropology*, an introductory text, appeared in 1964 and enjoyed only modest success. *Bougainville: A Personal History* (1973) is a firsthand account of the Bougainville copper mine, one of the largest mining operations in the world, and its impact on the island's people and environment. It was the last book Oliver published as a member of the Harvard faculty. His remaining eight books were published during his years in Hawai'i.

Oliver evidenced little interest in the theoretical issues of anthropology. He thought theories have a limited shelf life and that they come and go with time. In both print and conversation he emphasized the importance of solid description. He valued straightforward language and had little or no tolerance for the use of jargon, and he abhorred postmodern analysis. Such preferences became most evident in his publications after his move to Hawai'i. In that period his interests came to focus on Polynesia. The first three of his Hawai'i books were focused on Tahiti, and the first two were descriptive works of encyclopedic dimensions. *Ancient Tahitian Society* appeared in 1974, a massive three-volume work of just over 1,400 pages. *Two Tahitian Villages* (1981) was based on his field work in Tahiti; In the preface to that volume Oliver wrote, "I expect that the description portions of my monographs will prove to be the most useful" (Oliver, 1981, p. xiii). *Two Tahitian Villages* is a hefty tome of 557 pages. *Return to Tahiti* (1988) is an account of Captain William Bligh's second voyage to Tahiti.

Oliver's next three books moved away from a focus on Polynesia. *Oceania: The Native Cultures of Australia and the*

Pacific Islands (1989) is a survey of the pre-European cultures of the entire region; its two volumes total 1,275 pages. *Native Cultures of the Pacific Islands* is a radically abridged (172 pages) version of the two-volume work of the same year. In many respects *Black Islanders: A Personal Perspective of Bougainville 1937-1991* (1991), is a continuation of Oliver's earlier book on the same island; it is the only book on Melanesia that Oliver published during his Hawai'i years. Oliver's last two books represented a return to Polynesia. *Polynesia in Early Historic Times* (2002) is a nontechnical account of Polynesian cultures shortly after European contact; it is aimed at a general readership and has been well received. Oliver's last book, *On Becoming Old in Early Tahiti and Early Hawai'i: A Comparison* (2002), draws on description of the islands written by Europeans shortly after contact and examines the status of the elderly in both places; Oliver (2002, p. 7) commented that writing as an octogenarian, he was qualified to write about old age.

Oliver's contributions to Pacific studies were enormous and threefold. First, his wartime involvement with the U.S. Navy and postwar work contributed to the war effort and helped set the national agenda for the region in the postwar era. Second, his teaching at Harvard and the University of Hawai'i and research initiatives in Java, Bougainville, and French Polynesia produced cohorts of students, many of whom went on to have productive careers and produce a substantial body of island studies. Third, Oliver's record of publication can be matched by few, if any, others.

Oliver never altered his opinion about the interdisciplinary nature of CPIS, but he was quick to praise things that he could relate to and valued. A case in point: in the 1980s CPIS launched a two-pronged publishing program in collaboration with the University of Hawai'i Press. Both initiatives have been well received and have met with continued

success. The first volume of the Pacific Islands Monograph Series (PIMS) was published in 1983; volume 25 appeared in 2011. *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs,* the only academic journal that focuses entirely on contemporary island affairs, first appeared in 1989 and is published biannually. The first issue won two national awards: one for the best design for a new journal and the second for the best content of a new journal; volume 23 appeared in 2011. Publications of substance and quality were always at the top of Oliver's agenda, and he was never failing in his support for both PIMS and the journal.

In his final years Oliver suffered a series of strokes, and for a short time he struggled to maintain his exercise routine. He died on October 30, 2009, at age 96. A well-attended memorial service celebrating his life was held at the Outrigger Canoe Club. All of his children were present, as well as many of his friends and professional colleagues who shared his interest in the Pacific. At his request his ashes were taken by canoe and scattered in the ocean off Waikiki Beach.

In many respects Oliver was a remarkable human being. On a personal level I greatly enjoyed and valued my friendship with the man, and I am much indebted to him for his support and contribution to the success of my own career. His absence leaves a void, and I am only one of many who sorely miss him.

I am indebted to Eugene Ogan for his contribution to this memoir in honor of Douglas Oliver. Ogan was a student of Oliver's at Harvard. Later Ogan and I were colleagues in the Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota. Upon his retirement Ogan moved to Honolulu. We often discussed our perceptions of and relationships with Oliver. This memoir reflects our effort to portray the remarkable man we knew.

In developing this memoir I drew heavily upon an article I originally published in the journal *Pacific Studies.*[11]

NOTES

1. Oliver's statement about his father's failure to return home is ambiguous. According to a source close to Oliver, his father survived the war but abandoned the family.
2. The competition was noteworthy enough to warrant coverage by *The New York Times.* The article was in error, however, as it reported that two and not three young men were selected. "Two Boy Scouts are to go on an African Expedition," *New York Times,* May 6, 1928.
3. E-mail from E. Neuber, librarian, Social and Cultural Anthropology Library,University of Vienna, December 13, 2007.
4. In the "Acknowledgment" note of *A Solomon Island Society* Oliver (1955) mentions Chinnery's assistance and reports that M. Mead and G. Bateson were also helpful on that occasion in Papua New Guinea.
5. While later authors have used the spelling "Siwai," I prefer to remain with Oliver's usage of "Siuai."
6. D. L. Oliver. A case of change in food habits in Bougainville, British Solomon Islands. *Appl. Anthropol.* 1(2)(1942):324-326. L. Mason. The Bikinians: A transplanted population. *Hum. Organ.* 9(1)(1950):5-15. (When it first appeared in 1942, the journal for the Society for Applied Anthropology was entitled *Applied Anthropology.* The title was changed to *Human Organization* beginning with volume 8 in 1948.)
7. H. G. Barnett was the first civilian appointed as the staff anthropologist attached to the Office of the High Commissioner, U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Barnett's *Anthropology in Administration* (1956) is a general discussion of the application of anthropological research, but the majority of examples are drawn from his own experience in Micronesia.
8. A. Dewey, University of Hawai'i Department of Anthropology, personal communication, April 29, 2008. Dewey was Oliver's first Ph.D. student at Harvard and was a participant in the Java project.
9, B. Finney, University of Hawai'i Department of Anthropology, personal communication, February 25, 2008. Finney was a participant in the Society Islands project and one of Oliver's Ph.D. students at Harvard.

10. M. Hamnett, University of Hawai'i Research Corporation, personal communication, May 25, 2008. Hamnett was a Ph.D. student of Oliver's at Hawai'i and a participant in his second Bougainville project.

11. In a letter dated May 30, 2011, P. McArthur, editor, Pacific Studies & Publications, the Pacific Institute, wrote, "I hereby grant permission for the use of 'Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i: The First Three Decades,' originally published in *Pacific Studies* 32(4):439-466. Permission is granted without fee for use of all or part for publication of a memoir on Douglas Oliver with the National Academy of Sciences."

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