

Population in Paradise

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Clad in their penis wrappers or grass skirts, the people of Paradise stared. We stared back. We had come to see traditional paradisaic life, (for which the Paradisians had been officially paid). Only a few years earlier, this village had been hostile to outside influence. Indeed, they had refused to take part in the census, and only a head count had been possible. They were not alone in their opposition; another such larger group on another paradisean island also refused to cooperate. But whereas the people in the traditional paradisaic village refused to cooperate because of their belief in a particular cargo cult...where a white man would one day return from the sea with all that the villagers needed, so that they had no need of national, and at that time colonial, governments and their censuses...this larger group was influenced by the politics of an old Paradisian man who sought to become the government at the imminent independence, if not for the whole country then for his island, and who waged war (the Coconut War) on the colonial landowners.

Refusals to participate in censuses are not uncommon in Paradise. Somehow we imagine that it is only we Unparadisians who have such a political and moral conscience. We think we have a monopoly on that, but we are clearly wrong. Giving information about oneself can be a very serious business in Paradise. In every aspect of paradisaic life there are all sorts of rules and taboos to be observed, which tend to differ from those in Unparadise; and there are also paradisaic spirits to please. One Paradisian group had the unfortunate experience of finding that they were unable to speak after giving their names and little else to statistics gatherers. The only remedy was to get their names back, and so an expedition was made from their island to the Statistics Office (on another island), accompanied by someone who could speak and who knew their plight. The Statistics Office sympathetically gave them each a copy of the relevant forms bearing their names etc, and their speech was returned.

Census day was a national holiday; in fact, it was more like a week. The entire national airline was commissioned to carry enumerators and census forms; boats were hired; there was the census song and much publicity. Paradisians were instructed to stay in their villages on census day and night, and chiefs were asked to make sure that people were available for interview.

The census did not provide such information of a purely demographic nature. Someone had decided at the planning stage that the special questions normally included to obtain demographic estimates do not give very good results. That may be so, but the estimates are that much worse without the questions! The only variables available were age and sex. There were problems with both.

In Paradise, exact age is irrelevant and yet age is extremely important. For most Paradisians, there is no need to know when you were born or how old you are. You don't have to go to school and if you do, you can start at any age. You don't need papers to work or drive; and there's no social security. It is hardly surprising,

therefore, that only half the population said that they knew their age, and many of them were mistaken. But status comes with age, especially for males, and after young adulthood there are advantages to advancing one's years. Indeed, according to the local newspaper, one man who claimed to be 127 years old had just died. Another man is so old that he can remember Captain Cook's visit to Paradise in 1774. Age exaggeration and misreporting are thus significant sources of error.

If paradiseical age is fraught with problems, paradisiac sex is no better. The census enumerated 13 per cent more males than females, a 'fact' which is hard to swallow. It is unlikely that sex would be mistaken in any but a very few cases, so that it seems that the excess of males arises from higher female mortality and female omissions. Both are plausible because of the low status of women in paradisiacal society. Indeed, pigs have held a higher status in the not too distant past.

For Paradisians, therefore, population estimates and demographic indices are somewhat unreliable. In any event, they are of little immediate concern to a people who live in small agrarian villages and who still live by the traditions of their ancestors. For many, a large population is generally seen as a good thing, though in some areas pressure on the land is already being felt. Population planning tends to take the form of planning for population: whilst the current spate of births is directly related to the banning of depo provera nine or so months ago, the reaction of politicians to the fact that the population will, at present rates of growth, reach double its present size in the early 21st Century is classic:

We had better start on the construction of a new Parliament Building to house all the MPs we shall need.

