

RETURN TO UTOPIA

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Tristan da Cunha, the tiny South Atlantic island on which my sociologist father, P. A. Munch, based most of his career, is a hard place to get to. So much so that when I read of a planned quincentenary cruise in the Tristan da Cunha Association's newsletter, it took only a quiet "Now that would be an adventure!" from my Norwegian cousin to have me sign up for the 17-day ocean trip that started in Cape Town, South Africa.

In February, 2006, my partner Jerry Spady and I therefore found ourselves among 114 passengers on the Royal Mail Ship (RMS) St. Helena, which was making this special trip out of her normal schedule to celebrate the 500th year since the discovery of Tristan by the Portuguese navigator Tristao da Cunha. The island has only been inhabited for 200 years, starting with the remnants of a British garrison sent there to prevent the escape of Napoleon from St. Helena and since then by ship-wrecked sailors and whalers and adventurers and families who have come and gone over the years, leaving the island with its current population of 273.

Did I mention hard to get to? Tristan, a British Overseas Territory, is 1500 miles southwest of St. Helena, the nearest point of land, and 1760 miles west of Cape Town, the nearest continental spot. It is on 37 degrees latitude, making it just north of the "roaring 40s" and just south of due west from Cape Town; 5 days steaming at an average pace for a modern ship. Once there, passengers, cargo, and mail must all be taken off in small boats (or helicopters) because there is no harbor for ocean-going vessels on the volcanic island some 8 miles in diameter.

The Crisis in Utopia

The Tristan volcano, a 6,700-foot peak that had been dormant for hundreds of years, sent out a stream of lava from its side in 1961, forcing evacuation of the inhabitants from their settlement to England, from which they returned again in 1963. The exodus and return was documented by my father in his 1971 book, *Crisis in Utopia*, describing the transitions undergone by a peaceful society he had come to admire in 1937-38 as part of a Norwegian scientific expedition to the island and again in 1964-65 after the resettlement. By this time, the islanders had not only undergone a 2-year exile, but the bare subsistence economy of 1938 had been supplanted by money and paid labor as a result of the 1950 introduction of commercial fishing and freezing of Tristan crayfish (rock lobster).

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Crisis in Utopia described not only the physical danger of the volcanic eruption, but also the crises experienced by the islanders in the early 1960s when they had to fight with modern bureaucracy for the continued existence of their culture and return to the island. For Tristan and English culture were indeed distinct from one another and were later described by my father (Munch 1964) as “culture” and “superculture;” that is, the indigenous culture of the island settlement as opposed to the culture of the British bureaucracy that saw fit, for various good reasons, to establish a permanent presence on the island in the form of an Administrator whose authority was never questioned by the islanders but whose goals sometimes differed from their own.

The Tristan Tradition

Pride in their distinctive identity as a group, which had evolved in a small community by and large isolated from contact with the outside world for almost 150 years, was a hallmark of Tristan tradition both in 1937 and in 1965. The group identity then described by my father included

- absence of government and law,
- freedom from superimposed control,
- individual freedom and equality,
- absence of violence and aggressive self-assertion,
- overlapping networks of cooperative groups cemented by gifts and mutual aid, and
- individual allegiances rather than group action.

These anarchical traits were underpinned by a fundamental and pervasive kindness, and co-existed with unquestioned respect for outside authority and prestige (Munch 1964; Munch and Marske 1981).

Visiting Tristan da Cunha would not only be an adventure, but a pilgrimage of sorts, meeting people I grew up hearing about, witnessing what Tristan was like in 2006, and wondering whether my father’s earlier observations still held. Was it still a distinct culture with distinct values? Or had the Tristan islanders been assimilated into our familiar Western culture with more materialistic values and more violent behavior patterns?

Arrival in Utopia, 2006

When the RMS St. Helena arrived at the anchorage off the island for her seven-day stay, Tristan immigration officials boarded the ship from a Zodiac RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat) and stamped our passports in the ship’s lounge. Those passengers going on the island that day climbed down a rope ladder into the Zodiac bouncing on the waves below and manned by three Tristan crewmembers who knew how to help novices jump from the ladder safely into the boat. With a dozen passengers seated on the inflated sides, the Zodiac headed into the waves and towards the harbor. An exciting ride that was not necessarily totally dry! But in ten minutes we arrived, surfing through the harbor opening and into the “protected” area where the surf smashed against the far side. (Boats were never

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left unattended in the harbor but lifted ashore by cranes when not immediately needed.) The harbor master greeted passengers and helped them ashore on solid steps. There was a representative on the dock who kept track of who had come ashore and let people know whether their guests had arrived: “Andre, tell your mum her visitors are here!” was our introduction to Tristan society.

So far, we had interacted with many people in official Tristan capacities, but only with native inhabitants. That is, the Tristan islanders themselves performed the jobs that came with being a government entity, although the governing had not been their idea, and from whose culture, we later discovered, they still considered themselves distinct. This was different from my father’s return visit to the island in 1964-1965, when he reported that “the superculture stood between the islanders and the sea.” No more. It was not until the next day, and then by accident, that we met a representative of the “superculture,” the British administrator. If not totally in charge of their own governing (Tristan is after all a British Territory with all the oversight that such a designation entails) islanders nevertheless were visibly and capably in charge of the execution thereof.

In no time at all our hostess Trina was there with a warm welcome, a hostess I had never met, but whose mother Alice had been my father’s helper, friend, and confidant during his 4-month stay on Tristan in 1938. We were treated to a week of hospitality such as we had not experienced before. Kindness survives.

Meeting the People I Had Heard About

In July I had written letters to Alice and her daughter Trina (named after me by Alice in memory of the baby pictures she used to dust on my father’s shelf) but I was not sure the letters had been received (the answers were waiting for me when I returned to Tennessee in late February!). However, I knew from other contacts that Alice had just turned 90 and that she was well. What a thrill it would be to meet her! Trina said she would take to us to see Alice the next morning.

And Alice was a wonder: a testament to the basic “goodness” of Tristan culture. Despite some problems with circulation in her legs, she kept her own house, tended a gorgeous flower garden, cooked for herself, and had less grey hair than I! Moreover, she remembered all the old stories she had told my father. We visited her every day of our 6-day stay and spent the hours reminiscing and having tea. Like she had been for my father, she was for us a source in understanding Tristan da Cunha as she showed us her house and explained how she lived.

The Tristan Environment in 2006

Alice’s house, like all island houses, was one story and sheltered from Tristan’s winter gales by being built into the slope on which the settlement is located. The houses all face the ocean several hundred feet away, and are sheltered in the front by stone fences edged with 7-foot-high New Zealand flax. Alice’s house had two

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bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and bath. Her bath had been added on in the front of the original house in which years ago she raised her children, and had hot water, big bath tub, and flush toilet. Electricity, furnished by diesel generators, had come to the island with World War II military activities and the lobster freezing plant. Bottled gas furnished heat for cooking, hot water, and heating; the kitchen had gas stove, refrigerator, and freezer; and she had just installed new kitchen cabinets ordered from Cape Town. Alice also proudly showed us her pretty bedroom, neat and tidy, with the television set in the corner. Tristan gets one channel, sent out by the British for their armed forces abroad. Tea was served in her living room, where a dining-room table was crowded with framed photographs of her family...and one photo of me I had sent with my July 2005 letter! On the day before we left tea was drunk at the eating area in Alice's kitchen, and then I knew we were having a good time!

Alice's environment was therefore not so different from our own, and full of material comforts. The noteworthy difference was the scarcity of communication capability: there was no telephone, no computer for internet access², and mail service took six months for a round trip. Alice's house was also special in that it was tended by a 90-year old who remembered all the shenanigans of her youth (which matched the accounts in my father's 1937-38 diary). She shared with us the practical matters of her current everyday life, which she understood would interest us. She gets a cash pension from the British government of 11 pounds a week, which she must be careful with so she can pay her expenses. These include the shopping that Trina does for her at the island "supermarket," and her regular electric bills. Bottled gas is a carefully budgeted item, because when her tank suddenly runs out, she must pay 20 pounds to have it refilled. Alice's medical needs are taken care of by the British government: there is a doctor always assigned to the island, a small hospital, and drugs are also free for pensioners. Alice obviously treasured her regular weekly visits from the island doctor as a very special time.

On the other hand, Alice also participates in what remains of the island's subsistence economy. She owns two head of cattle and told us that when she had one butchered last year, a hind-quarter was for gifts, and the rest filled up the freezers of the family. She can get chicken and fish or crayfish from the store or from Trina's supply. Trina, who checks in on her twice a day, complained lovingly that her mother was "particular" about what she ate and how it was stored and prepared. Knitting is another part of the old economy that survives. We did not notice that all women always knitted (as in 1937), but Alice did! We received socks for ourselves and our mothers, and a shawl for me. The yarn was not the homespun and itchy variety from Tristan sheep, but soft and imported from the outside. This was an improvement as far as I was concerned: homespun wool is

² There is a public radio telephone building the islanders can use for emergencies, and internet connection at the administration building, but both are for external use only and expensive to use for private purposes.

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not desirable apparel in Tennessee. We also received gifts from Trina, socks and Tristan souvenirs. Gift-giving survives.

Tristan Culture in 2006

Clearly, Alice at 90 participates fully in the new money economy as well as in the traditional Tristan culture, loving her independence and freedom from control by the community, and paradoxically also enjoying her subservient relationship with a representative of the superculture, the island doctor. But what about the new generations? The quincentenary celebration included events at the island school and parties at the community hall, so we had a chance to witness younger islanders' activities.

At the school

One of the highlights of the RMS St. Helena visit was a concert and skit put on for families and visitors by the school children. Tristan schooling includes children up to the age of 15, and there were 28 children who performed. Formerly, the British government furnished a professional teacher as headmaster, but now all teachers are women from the island population, including a head teacher. Their efforts have produced a group of kids that seem as bright and cheerful as any.

Some in the Tristan community missed having a head teacher provided by the British from the outside; the addition of a headmaster to the expatriate community, currently consisting of administrator and doctor, seemed to be desired. I discovered later that the Tristan teachers did not, however, feel so comfortable with wives of the administrator and doctor as volunteer helpers at the school, despite the fact that these wives were educated as teachers on the outside. Respect for the outside authority represented by an outside professional teacher with official designation and responsibility as the "head" would apparently still be unquestioned, but that relationship could, as in the past, co-exist with allegiance to a distinct Tristan value system. On the other hand, mixing expatriate teachers and Tristan teachers at the same level of authority might support the idea that Tristan culture, with its many adaptations, is no longer distinct from the "superculture." This apparently is not acceptable to some islanders. Pride in the unique Tristan identity survives.

At the Parties

Social life and parties were naturally a part of a 500th year celebration. Two birthday parties, one for 18 years, and one for 21, took place during our week on the island. These were amazing participatory events, with the whole island contributing to beer, drinks, and mountains of food at the island community hall with adjacent pub. All the visitors were invited! When we asked about the large expense involved, we were told that everyone on the island donates food and drink to these major celebrations, getting "paid back" in kind when their occasions arose. Cooperative groups and mutual aid still survives.

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The main quincentenary party featured not only food and drink, but speeches, presentations, dancing, and an Elvis impersonator! The island women preferred to sit along the wall to chat, while the men gathered in small groups outside. We felt very welcome. I was also amused and sentimentally pleased by the fact that cross-dressing by men and boys was an entertainment feature at Tristan both in 1937 and in 2006. New Year's Eve in 1937 the islanders came to the Norwegian expedition hut and dressed the scientists in island women's clothing and outfits and then took them on a night-long party from house to house. It was morning before my father got "home." In 2006's quincentenary celebration, we were treated to skits both at the school concert and at the main party that included boys and men dressed as women and performing for all of us. This indicates the strength of the Tristan tradition, with interwoven tenets that supported each other to make a strong fabric. The cross-dressing was an adjunct, but survived.

Conservation and Assimilation

Conservation, however, is a new area of concern to the Tristan islanders in their materially comfortable economy that depends on conserving the stock of Tristan rock lobster (crayfish). During the period of subsistence economy, Tristan islanders almost "used up" their island. In 2006, we had to make a difficult scramble up a hillside in order to find a good example of the island tree *Phyllica* within walking distance of the settlement. Between the need for firewood and for grazing sheep and cattle, the area was devoid of native plants. We saw no penguins close to the settlement; in 1937-38 and earlier their skulls had been used to create "tassel mats" (eight skulls to a mat!) for trading with passing ships for tea, sugar, and flour. There were many albatrosses out at sea, but their numbers are apparently shrinking, and we did not climb high enough to see nesting or courting on the island itself. Today, albatross chicks and eggs are no longer part of islanders' diet, and albatross and penguins and endemic plants are protected at Tristan from further human encroachment. However, the rats that were introduced in sailing ship days are still a problem for the island's bird population, and eradicating them may be a test of the traditional Tristan culture.

Rats have been successfully eradicated on isolated islands in New Zealand by helicopters flying in a grid pattern, dropping single-dose pesticides. To successfully eradicate the rats this way will take funding, but Tristans will also have to limit each other's individual freedoms by

- restraining the pet Australian shepherds that roam the settlement to protect them from the single-load pesticide that will have to be used against the rodents,
- cutting down on the number of cattle to a number that can be supported on the island's grass to obviate the need for imported hay that would possibly bring in additional rats, and
- enforcing better waste management so that trash piles would not provide a safe haven for the rats.

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This would require superimposed control, and so far, the Tristan islanders we talked to don't see the rat problem as critical enough to change their way of life and their individual freedoms. Perhaps the need for conservation in general in an industrial economy whose material comforts they embrace will be the inducement that will lead to the emergence of what my father in 1963 called an "elite action group" similar to the one that emerged when the islanders were exiled in England and needed to petition the "superculture," to whose wishes they had heretofore otherwise deferred, to return them to the island. Such an "elite action group" would dilute the traditional value system and make the island culture more like our own. We saw no sign, however, that this gradual and natural assimilation in any way affected the natural kindness or absence of violence that make the traditional Tristan culture a prime example of a "Peaceful Society."

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