THE MARQUESAN NOTION OF THE PERSON
JOHN KIRKPATRICK, 1983

Review by Nick Macaluso
Department of Anthropology
Wichita State University

John Kirkpatrick authored this book copyrighted in 1983 based on his research that was done over a 25-month period between 1975 and 1977 in French Polynesia. His stated goal is to learn how Marquesans construe and organize their social world and communities.

Kirkpatrick’s first chapter lays out a primary, and some would think critical, concern of the investigation “that the problematic relation between observable physical bodies and the complex of intention, communication and biography that makes human action regular but not rule bound, understandable but not fully predictable” (Kirkpatrick, 2). It is this “observable” is all that can ever be documented and Kirkpatrick is very aware that the observable actions of the people he studied are what need to be fleshed out by his interpretations based on the detailed information gathered from the Marquesans and their indigenous perceptions. The great detail in which Kirkpatrick lays out the organizational and perceptual systems while using and defining terms in the vernacular are not supported with information about the specific informants and source locations within the small area studied. The information he has gathered is considerable but at times hard to interpret exactly where it is coming from without the specifics of his sources. When he does quote local informants the quotations are poignant and support his suppositions extremely well. This lack of information on his sources does not detract from the coherence of the overall text or from the goal of presenting the Marquesan view of person.

The author in great detail throughout covers all aspects of the social and familial organization, socio-political interaction with the local governmental agencies, age group divisions and responsibilities of the Marquesans being studied to a degree that it is sometimes hard to link these with what is the common perception by the locals of what is ideologically called self.

The work is intentionally limited in temporal scope and does not include history prior to European contact. This is acceptable to Kirkpatrick’s
study, as the Marquesans view that period prior to European contact as a sort of dark time and were not prone to speak of it. This helps Kirkpatrick’s development and definition by condensing the amount of both indigenous and his own externally perceived notion of the Marquesan self.

Marquesan families are organized bilaterally and are predominately Catholic due to the influences of the French though there are a significant number; approximately 20% of the total populace are Protestants. It is significant to note that this is the primary means of identifying and organizing one group from another as bloodlines differentiate people but that it is accepted that no one is totally unrelated to another so religion seems to be a simple way of identifying others from oneself. This religious distinction also is the apparent basis for political orientation and division.

The text is written with a continuing theme that carries the entire work that is of Marquesan self-sufficient independence of the individual, the familial group or communal or factional organizations. This self-sufficiency is pervasive throughout Marquesan society and with the supportive mutuality of shared responsibilities within the conjugal family contrasting strongly with the intentional rejection of any form reciprocal relationships being developed outside of the close kin group and even these tending to be avoided when possible. Relationships that require mutual long-term obligations tend to be restricted amongst close kin only. This tendency is supported by the lack of viable cash crop economies and the predominance of subsistence farming techniques supporting individual conjugal families. This self-sufficiency limits the need to develop a labor pool and the relational ties that are created when crops for sale replace the crops required to sustain a single-family group.

Kirkpatrick shows that the Marquesans are mutually supportive within the conjugal unit, with division of labor not clearly defined within that group and also shared with close kin. Some mutual responsibilities are shared within age groups and these are clearly defined but the causes of this overriding cultural necessity to retain self-sufficiency and independence from group affiliation or organization is either being overlooked by this reviewer or inadequately supported in the text.

Why Kirkpatrick does not delve into this relatively unique pattern of independence based social organization and character of individuals is a mystery that leaves the curious trying to understand. Without any apparent re-
strictive ethnicity, divisive geography, socio-cultural economic constraints or religious and historical animosity we have been exposed to a social system that so inordinately stresses self-sufficiency and independence, without the characteristic development patterns of social organization.

That this study of the perception of self confines itself to the period after colonial contact with the French (Catholic) but the reviewer can not help but wonder if this characteristic of self-sufficiency and independence is not a result of the French church perceiving a threat to strong indigenous lineages and clans. Without the background of a pre-French history it is impossible to know from this text if this is a Marquesan tradition or a reaction to an intentional colonial policy. Seeing, in this instance, that the policies of France and the Catholic Church were at that time are indivisible or at the very least mutually beneficial.

This may be a misperception by reviewer but after completing the text I did not feel that an answer to the question of why this analysis of Marquesan ideology and its in-depth review of the comprehension of ideal behaviors is the predominate perception of persons in the Marquesas and not elsewhere in the region was given to the reader.

Though the reviewer would emphatically recommend this book as a detailed source of demographics, individual and social organization material on the Marquesas but it must be said that the internal psychological mechanisms, as well as external influences, i.e. systems, must be included in any well-rounded ethnography to be complete.