

Contemporary Societies of the Pacific Region : Environment, Development, and Culture

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journal or publication title	関西大学東西学術研究所紀要
volume	29
page range	A15-A21
year	1996-03-31
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10112/15966

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Environment, Development, and Culture

Robert C. Kiste

Introduction

My topics are the peoples and cultures of the Pacific today, the environments in which they are located, and current trends in development. When I speak of the Pacific, I refer to the insular Pacific and the three culture areas into which it is usually divided: Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia.

On a global scale, the population of the region is small. About six and a half million people live in the islands today. The vast majority, approximately 84 percent, are in Melanesia. Two of the Melanesian countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji, are the giants of the region. PNG has four million people and Fiji has a little over a three quarters of a million. Together, the two account for well over 70 percent of all Pacific Islanders. In contrast, the populations of Polynesia and Micronesia are each smaller than Fiji. Polynesia has about nine percent of the region's people and Micronesia seven percent (South Pacific Commission 1995).

While the population is small, the region itself is vast, diverse, and complex. There are several types of islands, and they differ greatly in their natural resources. Most of the Micronesian islands are low lying coral atolls with relatively few resources. The islands of Melanesia are continental structures and are the most richly endowed in the region. Volcanic islands dominate Polynesia, and their resources are intermediate between that of the atolls and continental islands. Scattered over a vast expanse of ocean, the islands' combined Exclusive Economic Zones cover millions of square miles of ocean.

The people are also characterized by their diversity. As a conservative estimate, over 1200 languages are spoken in the islands, a number that represents somewhere between one-fifth and one-quarter of all the languages in the world today. The oldest of the major regional organizations, the South Pacific Commission (SPC), also has the largest membership. Twenty-one island countries belong to the SPC. They have diverse colonial histories and are divided among nine independent nations, five freely associated states, and seven dependent countries.¹³

Culture and Environment

Most scholarly research on the peoples and cultures of the Pacific has been done by anthropologists. In the Pacific and elsewhere, anthropologists have long been interested in the relationship between culture and environment. Culture is viewed as one means by which humans adapt to their environment, and the process involved is dynamic. Human populations and their activities have an impact on and alter their environments. Changes in the environment often require modifications in cultural practices, and the process is never ending.

The environment also involves a social and cultural dimension. With rare exceptions such as Easter Island, most human groups have regular contact with other societies and cultures. Their adaptations include their relations with other populations. Many island peoples were linked by systems of exchange and barter. On large islands, trading networks linked coastal peoples with those of the interior. Inter-island voyaging was common, and many atoll dwellers were great navigators. Ceremonial and utilitarian goods were circulated, and the trading networks provided security. Trading partners could rely on one another in times of natural and other disasters.

The colonial era brought radical changes in the region's environments and introduced two contrasting trends. On the one hand, the islands were drawn into a larger world. The introduction of the copra trade, plantations, mining, and other enterprises integrated the islands into the global economic system and forever altered island ecological systems. At the same time, the division of the Pacific brought the islands under the authority of the several European metropolitan powers and made them part of the larger world's political order.

That same division also set in motion the opposing trend. In many instances, ties among islands were severed by colonial boundaries. Inter-island relations were interrupted or lost, and the island countries became more isolated from one another.

Contemporary Trends

Decolonization. The decolonization of the Pacific began when Western Samoa achieved independence from New Zealand in 1962. Subsequently, the three Commonwealth colonial powers, i. e., the United Kingdom and Australia along with New Zealand, have largely rid themselves of their colonies. Four of the nine new nations are Melanesian: PNG, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu.²⁾ Nauru and Kiribati are Micronesian, and the remaining three are Polynesian: Tonga, Tuvalu, and Western Samoa.

France and the United States have been reluctant to decolonize, and each retains three dependencies. French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna remain

integral parts of France. American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas are American possessions. Tiny Tokelau is the seventh dependent territory. Tokelau is New Zealand's last remaining dependency, but it is scheduled to achieve greater autonomy in the near future.

Five countries have the quasi-independent status of freely associated states. They are largely self-governing but their former colonial rulers retain nominal responsibilities. The Cook Islands and Niue are self-governing in free association with New Zealand. The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Marshall Islands, and Palau are in free association with the United States.

The seven dependencies and five freely associated states have certain things in common. In all twelve, the metropolitan powers provide financial support, and the island peoples have the right to enter, work, and reside in the metropolitan countries. In eight of the twelve dependencies, the island peoples are in fact citizens of the metropolitan power.

Regional Cooperation. Regional cooperation has a great vitality and is thriving. Since the founding of the South Pacific Commission after World War II, the number of regional organizations has increased dramatically. Composed of the independent and freely associated states, the most influential body today is the South Pacific Forum. The University of the South Pacific is a regional institution that serves two-thirds of the region's nations. Additional organizations deal with fisheries, environmental, and other concerns.

Regionalism has eliminated much of the isolation among island nations. It has helped to overcome differences among diverse peoples and has promoted a pan-Pacific identity. Islanders pride themselves in a consensual style of doing business, and they refer to it as the "Pacific Way."

International Relations. Pacific Island nations are expanding their role in global affairs. The independent and self-governing states have diplomatic relations with many countries around world, and eight are now members of the United Nations. The island states are particularly active on the international scene with regard to issues pertaining to the Law of the Sea, the environment, and nuclear testing.

Official Development Assistance. Foreign aid donors have been generous to the Pacific, and the islands have enjoyed the highest rate of per capita assistance in the world. All Pacific countries but Nauru are aid dependent, and much regional activity is supported by overseas donors.⁸⁾

Observers speak of the "Pacific Paradox" today. The level of assistance has been high, but for reasons that are not fully understood, economic growth has been far less than anticipated. Donors are asking why performance has fallen short of expectations. The utilization of assistance funds is now under close scrutiny, and the dollar amount is declining.

Third World Problems. Until recently, problems that have been associated with other Third World countries have not been acute in the Pacific. In the last quarter century, however, conditions have changed, and the islands are now faced with a range of interrelated problems on a scale that is without parallel in their histories. There are six major areas of concern:

1) **Population Growth.** Growth rates are high across the region. It is projected that populations will double in Micronesia and Melanesia in the next two and three decades respectively. Growth rates are lower in Polynesia because of out migration. Rapidly expanding populations are having a detrimental impact on island ecosystems, and environmental degradation is becoming more commonplace.

2) **Heightened Aspirations.** Education and literacy, increased communications, and the availability of films, television, and videos have raised the aspirations of people everywhere. They desire a higher standard of living, and many are no longer content with life on remote islands.

3) **Urbanization.** Spurred by population growth and heightened aspirations, urbanization is accelerating at a rapid pace throughout the region. The towns and cities of Melanesia and Micronesia are among the fastest growing in the world. Everywhere, urbanization is unplanned, populations are outstripping infrastructures, and examples of urban poverty are becoming more common.

4) **Limited Economic Growth.** As indicated, economic growth has generally been disappointing. Fiji and PNG have the greatest potential for sustained growth, but there is reason to believe that even they will be among several nations that will have difficulty in meeting basic educational and employment needs early in the next century.

5) **Social and Health issues.** A number of ills are associated with rapidly expanding populations and urbanization. Unemployment, overcrowding, overburdened health services, substance abuse, and malnutrition are occurring in, but are not limited to urban areas. The so-call diseases of civilization, obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, are on the rise. There has been an increase in crime and delinquency. Problems are particularly acute in the towns of PNG.

6) **Social and Political Instability.** With the exception of the Solomon Islands, social and political upheavals have occurred in all of the Melanesian countries. In addition, French Polynesia has been racked on more than one occasion by disturbances related to unemployment, other social problems, and anti-nuclear protests.

The New Pacific

The Pacific is no longer the backwater that it once may have been. In remote areas and throughout much of Melanesia, most people remain village dwellers with subsistence economies. At the same time, 20 percent of all Melanesians are urban

dwellers. In Micronesia and Polynesia, well over 40 percent of the people are urbanized.

A wide range of political autonomy is represented among Pacific countries today. Obviously, the independent and freely associated states enjoy the greatest autonomy, but even the dependencies elect their local governments and have some control over their own affairs.

Communities, both urban and rural, continue to function in and to adapt to local conditions, but today they are also part of the larger nations and territories that makeup the contemporary Pacific. Those same countries are attempting to adapt to both the regional and global environments in which they are embedded. Those larger environments include financial and other resources, opportunities for emigration, and spheres of influence and power.

As discussed, Pacific countries are attempting to deal with a wide range of contemporary problems. Their ability to cope is complicated by changes that are occurring on regional and global levels. Two areas require mention.

1) The end of the Cold War has had significant consequences for the islands. The region has lost some of its strategic value and leverage, and the former entities of the Soviet Union are now competitors for development assistance.

2) Donor nations are experiencing economic difficulties of their own, and fewer funds are available for overseas assistance.

These events come at a time when donor nations are expressing doubts about the effectiveness of assistance to the region. There are tangible expressions of such concerns. In 1995, the United Kingdom withdrew as a member of the South Pacific Commission. The United States has closed its aid mission and is reducing its diplomatic presence in the region. Australia is reevaluating its assistance program and is demanding greater accountability from recipient nations.

Projections for the Future

Pacific countries are faced with some difficult times ahead. However, there is a substantial difference between the nine independent nations and the twelve nations that remain closely linked with the metropolitan powers.

To a large extent, the very ties that continue to link twelve of the Pacific countries with the metropolitan powers help to offset today's problems. For the near future, the five freely associated states seem relatively secure. The privilege to emigrate to New Zealand or the United States and the financial arrangements of free association should diffuse potential problems for the freely associated states. However, in the American examples, the Compacts (treaties) of Free Association have a duration of 15 years. The Compacts for the Marshalls and the FSM expire in the year 2001, and negotiations concerning their future political status will begin in 1999. There is considerable anxiety

in both countries. Both are heavily in debt, and it is unlikely that the future financial arrangements will be as generous as those of the past. Palau's Compact of Free Association was implemented in 1994 and will not expire until 2009. The agreements between the New Zealand and the Cooks and Niue are of indefinite length.

Of the seven dependencies, some changes in political status may occur in coming years, but in all likelihood, they will be minor. A referendum on New Caledonia's political status is scheduled for 1998, but the territory's ever increasing economic dependency makes significant change unlikely. In French Polynesia, economic uncertainty associated with the end of nuclear testing is the source of anxiety, and the main concern is to maintain a high level of financial support from France. In any event, all of the dependencies would resist any loss of the advantages that they now enjoy.

For the remaining nine nations, independence and sovereignty are the source of great pride and dignity. However, independence comes at a cost, and the independent countries must cope with the full burden of the problems that face the region today. The nine represent a cross section of the region's great diversity, and out of both choice and necessity, they are more reliant on their own people and internal resources.

With the exceptions of Tonga and Western Samoa, opportunities for emigration are severely limited for the independent states, and there is no safety valve to relieve the pressures of population on land and other resources. Because of its wealth, Nauru is of no immediate concern. As atoll nations with few resources, Kiribati and Tuvalu are particularly vulnerable and may require special monitoring and bilateral assistance.

The remaining four are Melanesian states with the vast majority of the region's population. With the exception of Fiji, their rates of population growth are among the highest in the region. With little or no opportunity for emigration, they will be particularly hard pressed to meet the needs of their people early in the next century. They could well become volatile trouble spots in the region's future, and that could be particularly troublesome because they are home to so many people.

The Pacific of today is much more complicated than it was in former times. A recent project, "Pacific 2010," at Australian National University assesses the future of the region, particularly the Melanesian states, and is pessimistic in its projections (Cole 1993). In an essay entitled "Our Sea of Islands," the Tongan scholar, Epele Hau'ofa, University of the South Pacific, focuses on Polynesia and Micronesia, and he offers a much more optimistic view of the future (Waddell, Naidu, & Hau'ofa 1993).

In any event and as we look to the future, one thing is certain. No single master plan can meet the needs of such a diverse region. However, it should be possible to identify those areas and countries that require the most attention. Hopefully the governments involved, regional organizations, international agencies, and external donors will have the political will and the vision to devise appropriate and collaborative efforts that respond to human needs.

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Note

- 1) Tiny Pitcairn Island with its 60 inhabitants is also a member of the SPC. However, it is not relevant to the concerns of this paper and may be ignored.
- 2) The latter was a colony jointly administered with France.
- 3) The wealth derived from its phosphate industry has allowed Nauru to be an exception. However, Nauru's phosphate reserves are nearly depleted, and the country will face a crisis in the not too distant future.