

THE PACIFIC ISLANDS  
IMAGES AND IMPACTS

by

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The six papers that follow are concerned with projections as to what the Pacific region will be like a decade and a half from now. In order to provide an historical context, it is my task to examine what Westerners have thought and written about the Pacific. Essentially, this involves an examination of Western perceptions of the Pacific Islands and their people since initial contact between Europeans and Pacific Islanders and the impact that the Pacific has had upon certain aspects of Western thought. Lastly, I attempt to relate what has been perceived and thought in the past to what may occur in the future. My biases are probably quite evident; I write as an American anthropologist who has some knowledge of Pacific history.

Western Images of the Pacific

It is common knowledge that Magellan crossed the Pacific from east to west and by accident came upon Guam in 1521. His own perception of the Chamorros, who liberated all pieces of iron from his ship that they possibly could, is clear: Magellan named the Marianas the Islands of Thieves. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Spanish and Portuguese were particularly active in the Pacific, but there was little impact in Europe. Indeed, both nations hoped to make great fortunes from the island world, and they were secretive about their voyages.

Excitement about the Pacific had to wait until the voyages of exploration by Bougainville and Cook, and it was they who triggered off a great reaction in Europe and America. Cook was the more important of the two. R. A. Skelton (1969:25) has commented that before Cook's time, the Pacific was almost a closed book to Europeans. New Zealand biologist H. Newton Barber (1970:88) has indicated that the first of Cook's three voyages was significant in at least three ways: 1) the development and demonstration of new precision in navigation; 2) the major island discoveries that were made; and 3) the precedent that was set for taking scientific observers on voyages of exploration. Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist aboard the H. M. S. Endeavour, went on to become famous in his own right.

To place the voyages of Bougainville and Cook into context, it must be recalled that in the 18th century there was the somewhat popular notion that at an earlier time, humans had existed in a purer, a better, a more innocent, and more happy state. Of course, I am referring to the notion of the "noble savage" that J. Rousseau had done so much to promote. Bougainville had read Rousseau, and when he arrived in Tahiti in mid-1767, he thought he was the first European to land there, and he was certain he had discovered paradise. (Actually, the British explorer Samuel Wallis had beaten Bougainville to Tahiti a few months earlier.) Bougainville reported that the climate of the islands was all that could be desired. He was under the impression that the land provided a bountiful sustenance and the people were not required to work. Bougainville found the Tahitians to be physically a beautiful and handsome race, and the sexual availability of women did nothing to change his opinion.

Bougainville named Tahiti New Cythera after the Greek island where Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had risen from the sea. Later, Sir Joseph Banks was also overwhelmed with Tahiti. As Bernard Smith (1960:26) has written:

Banks was just as enthusiastic; to him as to Bougainville, Tahiti was the Golden Age come again. The sexual freedoms of the people filled him with admiration and delight, but in his English way, he was more circumspect about it than the Frenchman.

Smith also reminds us that there were two contrasting notions about the nature of the "noble savage." On the one hand there was the view of "soft primitivism" which was represented by the Tahitians. Life was portrayed as being easy, and people were pure and guileless. Their lives were filled with pleasure and uninhibited sex. On the other hand, there was "hard primitivism." It was represented by people who lived in harsher climates which made them tough and Spartan. They supposedly did not need or want all of the material goods considered necessary by Europeans, and thus they were better off. In the Pacific, indigenous people of Australia, New Zealand, and Terra del Fuego were thought to represent this type.

It goes without saying that the image of the "soft primitive" made the greatest impact upon Europeans. It was the image that appealed. Perhaps all humans could find their Tahiti, or in a broader sense, what came to be taken for Polynesia as a whole.

A little over a century after Bougainville and Cook, a certain J. G. Wood published a tome with the title The Uncivilized Races of Men in All Countries of the World, and he commented on another group of Polynesians:

Being savages, the Samoans have many of the imperfections which necessarily accompany savage life, but at the same time they approach nearer to the "noble savage" of the poet than most races of men. They are hospitable, affectionate, honest, and courteous, and have been well described as a nation of gentlemen. Toward strangers they display a liberality which contrasts greatly with the cruel and blood thirsty customs of the Papuan tribes (1878:1008).

These idyllic images of Polynesia and Polynesians came to be incorporated in and sustained by popular literature. In his book The Mentor published in the 1920's, Frederick O'Brien, a former editor of the Honolulu Advertiser, offered this view:

I have roamed from Sakhalin to Tonga. Above all, I have loved Polynesia and shall remember it longest. In it are the most lovable and handsomest untutored men and women that grace the earth (quoted in Wolfram 1984:49).

The romantic myth about the islands is what is conjured up by such phrases as the "South Seas," and the "South Pacific." It is the stuff that movies are made of and the range has been great, from Dorothy Lamour in her sarong of the 1930's to the third and latest film version of the Bounty. To those of us in Hawaii, it is obvious that the myth sustains a tourist trade. And myths die hard. After more than a dozen years of the extremely popular TV show Hawaii Five-0, with viewers watching Jack Lord chasing the bad guys around in a very urban Honolulu, tourists still arrive expecting to see the mythical islands and not the high rise buildings which fill the sky line. Perhaps the epitome of the myth appears in the Broadway musical version of James Michner's Tales of the South Pacific and one thinks of the lyrics from the song Some Enchanted Evening.

The nature of J. G. Wood's reference to the Papuan tribes should remind us of another image about the Pacific and its people. Something else enters in. Certainly Europeans responded positively to Polynesians, while the lesser known Micronesians were either ignored or lumped with Polynesians. In both areas, Europeans could relate to paramount chiefs at the apexes of stratified societies. Albeit inaccurately, these were seen as the same or similar to the kings and nobles of the Old World. The oral histories about great voyages and battles stimulated the imagination. The freer sexuality found most places certainly had its attractions, but it was also very important that the Polynesians and their Micronesian cousins were of the "right" color. They are the lighter skinned peoples of the Pacific.

In contrast, the Melanesians represented what Europeans did not prefer or understand. As their very name indicates, the Melanesians are the black-skinned peoples of the region. The fragmented and small polities with their respective "big man" leaders were difficult to deal with and did not make sense to early Europeans. The prevalence of magic, sorcery, and in some instances, cannibalism, were an anathema to the white interlopers. The very geography of the large Melanesian islands made them more difficult places and their less healthy environment made them less attractive. It is not an accident that Douglas Oliver's book of some thirty-five years ago, The Pacific Islands, consistently referred to the Melanesians as "savages." The book, like all other things, was a product of its time.

The point is, Europeans had a strong tendency to idealize Polynesians, and eventually, the latter were even sent to missionize parts of Melanesia. The combination of all these factors gave the Polynesians a sense of superiority.

Understandably, this has caused resentment among Melanesians, and these emotions affect regional politics today. Sentiments related to what is sometimes referred to as the "Melanesia alliance" are real and have some depth. Further, a sense of a common racial heritage and the sharing of Melanesian pidgin in the Solomons, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu are all variables which tend to promote a certain cohesiveness among the Melanesian states.

The above mention of the mission effort reminds one that there was another important and powerful perception held by many Europeans about Pacific peoples. It was the opposite of the "noble savage" notion, especially that of the soft variety. The pagan could not be noble. As the islanders were living without knowledge of Christ and the God of the Hebrews, they were living in a state of pathetic sin. From the missionary view, the islanders were enveloped in an age of darkness. They had to be converted and Westernized.

The unconverted could only be ignoble, and the thoughts of Hiram Bingham as expressed in his mid-19th century book A Residence of Twenty One Years in the Sandwich Islands make this perfectly clear. Reflecting on the early days of the mission effort in Hawaii, Bingham reported: "Darkness covered the earth and the gross darkness of the people" (1855:2).

His overall view of Hawaiian culture and society is reflected in the following :

Polygamy (implying plurality of husbands and wives), fornication, adultery, incest, infant murder, desertion of husbands, wives, parents and children; sorcery, covetousness, and oppression extensively prevailed.... The heathen system, therefore, tends to immeasurable evil (Ibid.:21).

No sooner had islanders been identified as noble or ignoble savages, another perception about them emerged. This is the notion of the "fatal impact," the subject and title of a well-known book by Alan Moorehead, and it saw the destruction of Pacific cultures and the depopulation of the indigeonous peoples as inevitable consequences of European contacts. By his third and final voyage, Cook himself was convinced that introduced diseases, the creation of new wants, and the general disruption of island societies were tantamount to their death toll (Howe 1974:138). Mission activity came under fire from proponents of the view. For example, the Russian explorer Otto von Kotzbue was extremely critical of the disruptive activities of individuals like Bingham (Ibid.:138-139). Early anthropologists, working in the Pacific contributed to the general acceptance of the fatal impact view. In his Argonauts of the Western Pacific, Malinowski expressed his opinion that the subject matter of ethnologists was rapidly vanishing (1961 [original 1922]: xvi).

During the 1920's and 1930's, the conviction that Pacific peoples were doomed to extinction remained firm even though there was mounting evidence that populations were recovering. R. W. Robson founded the magazine Pacific Islands Monthly in 1930, and he predicted the Pacific would soon become a "whiteman's lake" with the demise of Pacific islanders. Robson was the first advocate of regional cooperation, but his concept of regionalism was far different from today's. Robson had in mind associations of European planters (Fry 1979:46-47).

Immediately prior to World War II, it was becoming increasingly evident that Pacific populations were not dying out. Felix Keesing called for a

change in view. He noted that island populations were not only recovering, but that they were increasingly youthful ones.

During the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century virtually every commentator foresaw no future ahead of the South Seas peoples except a more or less speedy decline to extinction. So widely was this mournful picture publicized that most people accept it as holding true today. Actually, however, from before the turn of the century, depopulation has been stayed in an increasing number of Oceanic groups, and the trend has usually been reversed in the direction of marked increase (1941:37).

In a lecture on the University of Hawaii campus in the fall semester, 1984, historian K. R. Howe pointed out that the fatal impact era of thought also involved a particular viewpoint by writers of history. These are issues that Howe has touched on in an earlier article (1974) and his recent book (1984). In his lecture here, Howe suggested that we might conceive of Pacific history as falling into three periods. In the first two periods, Pacific islanders were not only thought to be on the road to extinction, they were also seen as being of little importance in shaping their own histories since European contact. Islanders were viewed as passive, on the receiving end of changes initiated by Europeans, and not initiators of innovations themselves.

Howe suggested that there was first "imperial history" which was concerned with the "official agents" of colonial powers, i.e., explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and perhaps military types. Second to appear, there was a history of "European expansion" when it was realized that "unofficial participants" had to be written into the scheme of things past. Such unofficial actors included beachcombers, whalers, traders, etc. From this



perspective there were waves of various categories of outsiders, and hence the title of Howe's recent book, Where the Waves Fall. Howe's history includes the responses and actions of islanders, however, and that places his work, in the third period of Pacific history. This era was launched under the direction of J. W. Davidson of Australian National University (ANU). It recognizes that islanders were not passive in the wake of the arrival of Europeans, and that they were often as not creative and important actors in shaping the course of post-European events. As an anthropologist, I do not find this to be a startling insight. Under Davidson's influence, Pacific history at ANU became interdisciplinary in nature and graduate students began to include ethnographic style fieldwork as part of their doctoral studies.

In a review of Where the Waves Fall, Peter Hempenstall tells us that: "The Davidson age is over....," but he does not tell us what the future holds (1984:44).

#### The Pacific as Scientific Laboratory

I need to jump back to Cook's time. I noted earlier that on his first voyage, a precedent was set, that of taking scientific observers on exploring expeditions. This precedent helped to launch a revolution in biological thought and helped lead the way to the theory of evolution. The aforementioned Sir Joseph Banks, a naturalist, collected specimens of all sorts. He later became president of the Royal Society and was instrumental in establishing the policy that scientists would be regular fixtures on the exploring ships of the British Royal Navy. Banks was followed by a long line of scientific observers, up to and including Charles Darwin on the voyage of the H. M. S.

Beagle, which sailed on England's probes into the Pacific region. Darwin's observations, particularly those in the Galapagos, greatly influenced his thinking. To him, each island appeared as a laboratory experiment. The faunal species of each island differed in minute ways from those of others, and Darwin eventually concluded that successive generations had differentiated themselves from ancestral forms as new adaptations to isolated and local island environments. In another development, Darwin's theory about origins of coral atolls has subsequently been demonstrated as scientific fact.

Later in England and after the publication of On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection in 1859, others defended Darwin. Two of his most prominent supporters were Joseph Hooker, an eminent botanist, and Thomas Huxley, the self-proclaimed "bulldog of Darwinism." Like Darwin, both had spent their formative years on voyages in the Pacific (Jastrow 1984:230).

While scientific inquiry in the Pacific had lasting impact on the biological sciences, the Pacific has also greatly influenced my own academic discipline of anthropology. Modern anthropology has mainly been a product of British and American academia. In England, Thomas Huxley encouraged what was to become the Torres Straits Expedition, conducted between 1898 and 1900. Its three principal members, A. C. Haddon, W. H. R. Rivers, and Seligman went to the field as practitioners of other disciplines but all became ethnologists because of their experience on the expedition (Eggan 1968:128). The three men trained the next group of anthropologists to emerge in England, including the founders of the two varieties of functionalism which came to dominate British anthropology for decades. Bronislaw Malinowski was a student of Seligman and others at the London School of Economics, and as those familiar with

anthropology well know, Malinowski set the standards for modern field research in the Trobriand Islands during World War I. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown was the first ethnological student of Rivers and Haddon at Cambridge, and while he did not work in the Pacific, his initial fieldwork was in an island society, the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal between 1906 and 1908. Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown trained the next generation of British social anthropologists and had a significant, but lesser, impact on American anthropology.

In the United States, Margaret Mead's first field research was in American Samoa in 1926 and it led to her famous book Coming of Age in Samoa. Mead later worked in several locations in what is now Papua New Guinea. Mead's anthropology was definitely influenced by her work in the Pacific; it is an understatement to indicate that her own influence both within and without the discipline has been nothing short of phenomenal. Her greatest impact was on the American public. Mead popularized anthropology. Cultural relativism and the importance of culture as a determinant of human behavior have been widely accepted because of Mead; she carried the basic messages of American cultural anthropology to the world at large. Mead's portrayal of Samoan sexuality unintentionally also reinforced the romantic and popular view of Polynesia.

The next really significant involvement of American anthropologists in the Pacific came with World War II. During the very early years of the war in the Pacific and under the direction of George Peter Murdock, anthropologists helped prepare informational handbooks for the military occupation of the Pacific. Immediately after the war, Murdock directed the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA), the largest anthropological expedition ever launched at the time.

American Micronesia or the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was also the scene of one of the most ambitious experiments ever launched in applied anthropology. The anthropological involvements in the Trust Territory included some of America's best known anthropologists. The names of Homer G. Barnett, Ward H. Goodenough, and David Schneider came immediately to mind as senior Micronesian hands who have made substantial contributions to anthropological theory. A host of others are also well known, and many of those who were first involved in the Trust Territory have trained students who have also worked in Micronesia. Those students have in turn tutored the third generation of Americans to work in the area, and generation four is now emerging. Micronesia is probably the most studied culture area of the world, and the overall impact on American anthropology has yet to be measured.

Thus, the Pacific Islands have had great impact on biological and anthropological thought. In both cases, the islands have been viewed as laboratories. Clearly, islands offered biologists somewhat the equivalent of relatively isolated breeding populations, and like Darwin's birds and reptiles, island societies were and have been viewed by anthropologists as entities in the process of continual modification and adaptation to their insular environments. It is not surprising that some of the best work in cultural ecology has come from the Pacific.

#### The Islands in World Affairs.

With the exception of Spain's possession of the Marianas beginning on Guam in 1668, the partitioning of the Pacific among the colonial powers was accomplished in the 19th century. The Pacific was thus the last area of the

world to fall under the yoke of European colonialism. The French acquired Tahiti in 1842, and the race for colonies was on. The colonial powers hoped for profit, but more often than not, national pride and prestige were equally at stake. In any event, the colonial division of the Pacific was complete by about the turn of the century, and the islands had had some importance in at least European affairs between the 1840's and 1900 when they were the prizes in European colonial expansion.

By the turn of the century, not only was the colonial partition complete, but all island groups had been missionized. Trading firms and plantations had been established, and the colonial era was firmly in place. Little new was occurring, and the Pacific came to be viewed as a relatively unimportant backwater of the world. Certainly in America, there was little interest in the region. The U.S. Navy had its outposts at American Samoa, Guam, and Hawaii and the commercial interests in the last were firmly tied to the American mainland. Knowledge about the area was also limited, and as a result, the aforementioned anthropological research at the outset of the war was launched as an emergency effort.

The Pacific became of world wide importance with the outbreak of the war, but not because of the islands or their people. It was the arena in which Japanese imperialism was to be fought, and Western propaganda portrayed the Japanese as the "yellow peril" to be cast out of the region. When that was indeed accomplished, interest in the islands waned once again.

While the importance of the Pacific in world affairs declined after the war, there was a difference from the pre-war years. Partly out of the idealism of the global conflict, there was a new social and moral

consciousness, and it was no longer respectable to be a colonial power in the old sense. In 1947, the South Pacific Commission was formed by the metropolitan powers in the region, and there was a belief that more should be done in the areas of education, health, and general social welfare. K. R. Howe (1974:145-146), suggests that Westerners, especially Americans as a consequence of their deep involvement in the Pacific war, felt a sense of guilt about what had occurred in the islands since the intervention of outsiders. Howe believes this theme is reflected in two works on Pacific history of the time: J. C. Furnas's Anatomy of Paradise (1946) and Douglas Oliver's The Pacific Islands (1951). Howe also comments that there was "... a feeling of growing responsibility for the region in the post-war era" (Ibid.).

At least in the British Commonwealth, the notion that the region demanded some new and a different kind of attention came with the beginning of decolonization. The process began with Western Samoa's independence in 1962, and at least on official governmental levels, the metropolises have had to pay more attention to the region. The eleven recently independent and/or self-governing states must be treated as such, and four of them are now members of the United Nations. As the two metropolises most reluctant to give up their Pacific colonies, France and the United States have been the last to show a responsiveness to these developments. The U.S. Department of State did not establish an Office for Pacific Affairs until 1978 (previously the Pacific Islands were lumped with Australia and New Zealand), but the belated creation of that separate office does represent recognition of the new political status of the island states.

There are two other major sets of forces that are shaping contemporary views of the Pacific. In one of these, the island Pacific is being overlooked and the context is primarily economic. High level government officials in the United States, Japan, and elsewhere and the editorial pages of the Honolulu newspapers speak of a pan-Pacific community, and it is projected that the next century will be the century of the Pacific. There is a Pan-Pacific Community Association, Inc. headquartered in Washington, D.C., and it publishes a Pacific Community Newsletter. The association is a private organization, but its members include U.S. ambassadors, congressmen, as well as influential leaders in the business world. On the surface, all of this might suggest that the Pacific Islands are on the verge of becoming more important players on the world stage. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth in the eyes of those involved in the discussions. The discussions about a pan-Pacific community are now being conducted by the Pacific rim countries and reflect the fact that trade among the large Pacific rim countries, particularly Japan and the United States, is now larger than trans-Atlantic business. At a Pacific Cooperation Conference in Bangkok three years ago, the actors were Australia, Canada, Chile, Indonesia, Japan, Melanesia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States. As an after thought, Fiji and Papua New Guinea were invited to attend the conference, but neither attended.

It appears relatively clear that in the deliberations among the rim countries, the Pacific is viewed as an empty expanse of water to be plied by the containerized shipping vessels of the rim's economic giants. The island nations are simply overlooked, or only belatedly remembered, and some island

leaders have expressed a fear that the interests of their countries will not be considered except as they occasionally might be of relevance to the economic concerns of the rim nations.

While there is some current concern over fishing rights in the region, and in the distant future, the mining of the sea beds within the exclusive economic zones of Pacific nations may be a source of interest, the resources and products of most Pacific countries will not generate much immediate attention from the major economic interests in the region. However, the second set of forces operating in the region will not allow it to be perceived as an unimportant backwater as was the case between the turn of the century and World War II. Unfortunately perhaps, the main reasons are the perceptions which linger from the war. In the United States, there are strong feelings that it would be undesirable to allow any part of the Pacific region to fall into hostile hands. The compacts of free association which have been negotiated with the Micronesian states include the strategic denial of any third parties and reflect this defense concern. The desire of Australia and New Zealand to preserve the dominance of English speaking nations in the Pacific has roots which date back to the last century. They appear to be pleased that the United States will maintain a strategic presence in Micronesia, and the three ANZUS partners are united in their wish to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining a toe hold in the Pacific.

Given the combination of the facts that the West has a strategic interest in the region and that nine Pacific nations have achieved independence and two others are self-governing in free association with New Zealand, those eleven countries have considerable leverage with the Western metropolises that will



extend well into the next century. Three Micronesian states may well soon join them as even newer self-governing states in free association with a major Western power.

The Pacific is not the paradise as envisaged by the early explorers. Like most nations of the world, Pacific countries have real problems which must be dealt with, and the following papers make some projections as to what the region may look like in the next one and one-half decades.

My own comments here have been concerned with the changing images of Pacific Islands held by the outside world during different historical periods. That these have always been, at best, partial or confused should be clear, nor is there reason to believe that images of the Pacific in the year 2000 will be less subject to the distorting effect of other cultural lenses. I have not had the time or space to discuss the efforts of Islanders themselves — whether in the field of politics, science or the arts — to present different kinds of images to the nations beyond their vast ocean realm. The success or failure of these efforts will be a matter of the utmost interest as the Pacific enters the 21st century.

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