

Oceanic Diplomacy: An Introduction

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When practitioners and scholars think of diplomacy in the Pacific context they usually have in mind the diplomacy of the post-independent Pacific Island states or the diplomacy of larger powers with interests in the region. Both of these understandings refer to a form of diplomacy built on Western practices and protocols and focused on the engagement between modern sovereign states.

What we are attempting to bring to the fore in this In Brief, and the research project which it introduces, is a third understanding of diplomacy in the Pacific region which we are calling ‘Oceanic diplomacy’. It refers to the distinctive diplomatic practices and principles which come out of the long history and diverse cultures of the Pacific Islands. These longstanding traditional systems are still important in the conduct of relations among tribes and clans within the postcolonial states of the Pacific. These principles, practices and protocols work alongside Western diplomatic practices in the performance of modern diplomacy by Pacific Island states and are sometimes employed in the region’s diplomatic approaches to the global arena. Our purpose is to explore the value and significance of these practices in modern contexts within the state, between Pacific Island states, and in Pacific diplomacy in the global arena.

We start from the assumption that the existence and contemporary significance of these diplomatic ideas and practices have been underexplored and undervalued. The focus of diplomatic studies on engagement between states takes the academic gaze away from the acknowledgement of diplomatic relations between precolonial forms of political community such as tribes and clans. This state-centric bias of conventional diplomatic studies clouds the ability to ‘see’ the continued operation of these diplomatic systems — or adaptations of them — in the postcolonial era, both within states and across state boundaries. It therefore misses the key point that while westernisation has added new layers of political community and diplomatic practice, it has not eliminated, or even marginalised, traditional diplomatic systems and their protocols of engagement.

This project builds on the rich literature by Pacific anthropologists on the engagement between precolonial Pacific Island political communities in relation to exchange, war, conflict resolution, access to resources and movement of people across borders. Pacific historians have also provided important studies of precolonial links between political communities. It also builds on the growing literature on Pacific Island philosophy, cosmology, mythology and Indigenous studies that reclaim practices of ancient Islander religions and worldviews. This project builds on this research with different questions in mind, questions that focus on establishing the practices and principles of the diplomatic system surrounding these engagements. This project also moves beyond the existing literature by providing new research into the value and significance of these Oceanic diplomatic systems in the contemporary period.

Conceptual approach

The conceptual basis for this project is drawn from the relatively new writings on what are termed Indigenous diplomacies and non-Western diplomacy within diplomatic studies. We draw three key insights from this literature. First, as one of the leading scholars in this ‘postcolonial turn’ in diplomatic studies, Marshall Beier, argues, ‘What many may be accustomed to thinking of as “diplomacy” [Western diplomacy] is actually a very narrow slice of human possibility in the interaction between political communities’ (Beier 2016:643). Second, these other possibilities should not be seen through the lens of Western diplomacy but rather as alternative ways of doing diplomacy, which have their own logic and value. Third, while conventional Western notions of diplomacy assume that diplomacy is about the governing of relations between sovereign states, Indigenous diplomacies and non-Western diplomatic systems tend to operate between political communities which have a degree of *connectedness*, for example through kinship or shared cosmology (de Costa 2009).

We therefore intend to work from a broad definition of diplomacy inherent in these insights and which are consistent with the broadening of the concept in mainstream diplomatic

studies. We take diplomacy to be the social institution existing between political communities (not just between sovereign states), which governs interactions between them on such matters as trade, exchange, sacred events, access to resources, movement of people, conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the conduct of war and its aftermath. Seen in this way, diplomacy is a culture of engagement, a set of cultural rules and norms that shape interactions between political communities. As we explore forms of Oceanic diplomacy, we are not looking for the equivalents to, or early forms of, Western diplomacy — such as ambassadors, treaties or diplomatic immunity — but rather the alternative ways in which Oceanic societies have resolved the governance of relations between political communities, and how these practices remain relevant, important — even central — to how relations are managed in the postcolonial era, both inside the state and between states.

Key lines of inquiry

The Oceanic diplomacy project will pursue several lines of inquiry. The first focuses on exploring traditional Oceanic diplomatic systems and practices with an eye to understanding their practices and underlying principles. These include the diplomatic complex centred on Taputapuātea in Raiatea in French Polynesia, the *sawei* diplomatic system in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia, intertribal diplomatic systems within particular islands such as Guadalcanal or Viti Levu, and the protocols of engagement within the tributary system of the Tu'i Tonga empire.

In the second line of inquiry our purpose is to explore how these Oceanic systems are adapted in the postcolonial context within the modern state and with what success. This will include such cases as the effective use of Māori and Melanesian diplomacy at the Bougainville peace talks at Burnham; the successful reconciliation in New Caledonia between Jean-Marie Tjibaou's tribe and the Ouvea and Mare clans of his assassins; the Solomon Island government's use of the diplomacy of Lengo speakers in its attempts to reconcile conflicting communities; and the role of traditional methods in peacemaking in Bougainville. It will also include the case of the Aotearoa/New Zealand government's use of the Samoan *ifoga* in seeking the forgiveness of Pacific Islander communities in New Zealand.

The third line of inquiry focuses on the role of Oceanic diplomacy in contemporary Pacific Island regional relations, for example, in the Solomon Islands-mediated [reconciliation](#) between Vanuatu and Fiji in the Melanesian Spearhead Group; the use of kava diplomacy in other regional disputes between Pacific Island states; the role of cultural institutions such as monarchy, chiefs and church in foreign policy or diaspora diplomacy; or the way in which traditional principles inform the understanding and operation of consensus in Pacific regional

decision-making (Carter 2018).

Finally the project inquires into how Oceanic diplomacy has been deployed by Pacific Island states in global diplomacy, for example, in Fiji's deployment of the [Talanoa Dialogue](#) at the Bonn climate change talks and Tuvalu's use of [traditional concepts](#) to guide its modern diplomacy.

Conclusion

This joint project between ANU and the University of the South Pacific, which includes Pacific Island scholars from across the region, introduces a novel way of understanding diplomacy in the Pacific. It introduces the key role of longstanding Oceanic diplomatic systems, principles and practices and examines their value and significance in contemporary contexts.

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