

## Reflection

### **How Significant is the Colonial History of the Pacific?**

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For many years colonialism has been a convenient explanation for the existence of various intractable problems. At the same time the study of colonialism has been disengaged from the wider scope of Pacific studies. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this critical attitude seemed to be changing as some Pacific Islanders sought closer relationships with larger states. Failures of governance in independent states made the continuation of colonial or semi-colonial relationships more acceptable. By extension, there is a growing willingness to take a more positive view of colonialism, which should lead to a re-appraisal of it as a dynamic and constructive phase of Pacific history that continues to influence Pacific affairs.

I suggest that such a reappraisal should begin by recognising that the Pacific is important because of its comparatively successful transition from colonization; that part of the reason for its success is that its colonial experience was atypical, and that this experience remains important because it continues to shape the manner in which the islands are governed and relate to the outside world.

For over fifty years now Pacific history has had a measure of autonomy as an academic specialty. One of the arguments justifying it was that Pacific islands and Islanders had histories of their own, and were not merely exotic scenery or supporting cast for a drama of European history-making in the South Seas. The argument cannot be contested, and its popularity has led to its being made in various forms on numerous occasions since. But like many good arguments, it draws some of its force from a moral position as well as from a logical syllogism. It depends on the premise, whether implied or asserted, that the historiography of the Pacific before 1954 privileged European activity and depreciated both indigenous agency and the validity of indigenous

sources of information. This is unfair to earlier historiography, for although there were certainly works of European activity in the Pacific, there was also a long tradition of the study of indigenous society, traditions and social processes. Perhaps the difficulty was that the two approaches were not synthesised, or that academic historians happened to be interested in the former, leaving the latter to non-academics and to ethnologists.

The charge entrusted by the distinguished Pacific historian J. W. Davidson to his students and associates at the Australian National University was that Pacific history should be autonomous, and that Pacific Islanders' experience should be the centre of attention. This charge was accepted by a generation of scholars, but it is much less spoken of today, and I believe that there has been a loss of momentum in the pursuit of so-called 'island-oriented' history. There may be several reasons for this: attention has shifted from the early years of contact when the power exercised by Islanders was very considerable, and 'islander agency' was less easily demonstrated for the period when political power and economic resources had been largely removed from their hands. Then again, the historical sources of European activity in languages read by Europeans are far more abundant and readily accessible than sources relating to indigenous experience. Third, since the 1960s there was a growing critique of the assumption that history could be written from across cultural boundaries, and the influence of post-modernist theory, and 'minorities' activism in the West, eroded the confidence of scholars to undertake work that might attract obstruction or criticism on non-academic grounds. Moreover, it is more congenial to a post-colonial reading of history to revive the 'victim' interpretation. Of course, it might simply be that European scholars were indifferent to the experience of Pacific Islanders, and preferred the histories of their own kind, albeit in a Pacific setting.

Whatever the explanation, histories of the colonial period tend to concentrate on the exercise of power: policy formation and implementation, the careers of European officials, the extension of colonial authority, and the ethos of settler societies. Now more than at any other time, the Davidson manifesto of 1954 seems apposite.<sup>1</sup> A dichotomy

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<sup>1</sup> I speak with less assurance about the interests of political scientists, but my impression is that among Pacific specialists there is more interest in the relationships of the regional powers with the 'PICs', with questions of aid, security and trade:

has grown up in the treatment of Pacific colonial history: it has come to be the history of European (or Japanese or American) power in the Pacific, and not written as part of the authentic historical experience of Pacific Islanders. At the very least, it has not been subject to the same scrutiny for authenticity in representation. The treatment of the colonial period is more subject to ideological expression than would now be possible for the histories of commerce or Christianity or political engagement in the nineteenth century. This is regrettable, and I want to suggest that an argument be made for the recognition of colonial history as a central theme in Pacific studies, and not merely as the European part of Pacific history.

Its colonial phase is part of what makes Pacific history important to the rest of the world. A case may be made for 'exceptionalism' in these terms. 'Exceptionalism' as an historiographical concept derives from American history. While to the historian, every country's history is unique - and this might allow one to say that every one is exceptional, or since there are no rules, that none are exceptional - the point about American history was that it was so European. If Americans were to differentiate themselves from Europeans, as they wished to do, they had to focus on what was distinctive about their society and experience. The question was asked and answered by Frederick Jackson Turner: America was unique for being a property-owners' democracy, and it was made that way by the experience of the American frontier which fostered individual initiative, responsibility and self-reliance. Similarly, half a century after Turner, Russel Ward asked what it was that defined Australian society, and suggested collectivism, and 'mateship'. He traced Australian distinctiveness to the ethos of its convict founding population, and like Turner, to the influence of the frontier environment though with an opposite effect. If one were to ask the same question of New Zealand, the answer would most likely be government paternalism, the propensity for 'state experiments', something which possibly grew out of the quest for an ideal society by the 'colonial reformers,' the associates of Edward Gibbon Wakefield who played a prominent role in the European peopling of New Zealand in the middle of the nineteenth century.

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issues that are of concern to their own countries. Studies of Pacific states' political processes, behaviour and institutions seem much less common, with the result that these are much less understood by the predominantly western news media.

The answer to a similar question about the Pacific Islands is much more problematic because the subject of the question is not a single national community; nor indeed are many of the component states.

About 30 years ago, Ratu Mara of Fiji spoke of the 'Pacific Way' in a manner that implied a distinctive Pacific ethos, the content of which was a determination to talk rather than fight, to seek consensus rather than victory, and to work together cooperatively to solve problems. This ethos sprang from what was common to traditional Pacific Island cultures. An alternative representation of the same trait is the respect for constitutionalism in the independent Pacific, and its correlate, the absence of civil violence. Since these attributes first impressed themselves on me, there have been three coups in Fiji, paramilitary confrontation in Vanuatu twice, two political assassinations, attempted secession and civil war in Bougainville, the reported retreat of central authority in parts of Papua New Guinea, the virtual collapse of the state in Solomon Islands, and numerous instances of notorious corruption almost everywhere. Nevertheless, there are many more instances of elections being honestly conducted, of the result being accepted by the losers, of governments accepting adverse decisions by courts, of military and paramilitary forces accepting civilian authority, and constitutions functioning without challenge or radical modification, during an independence period of between 20 and 40 years. This may be compared with the rapid political transformations in both Africa and Asia in the immediate post-independence years, the long history of political instability in Latin America, and the continuing and deepening chaos of Africa. Not only are the problems of the Pacific insignificant by comparison, but when they are publicised, commentators are apt to refer to the 'Africanisation' of the Pacific. The application of the term has been thoroughly analysed and dismissed by Dr Jon Fraenkel, but one need only imagine an Africa to which one could apply the term 'Pacific-isation' to realise the striking success of Pacific Islanders in administering new states.

Herein lies the Pacific's claim to exceptionality, but how is it to be explained? By Ratu Mara's pan-Pacific cultural tradition, or by something more tangible in its more recent history?

I want to suggest that colonialism also has something to do with it. There has been a trend since independence to attribute the Pacific's problems to the distortions created by colonialism: for example, arbi-

rary boundaries that divide related, or combine disparate, peoples; problems of economic development, or of law and order; or of dependency, or the gap between consumer aspirations and commercial productivity. Somehow, colonialism could easily be held responsible: either it created the problem by (for instance) destroying traditional authority, or it negligently failed to solve a problem as in the radial communications patterns of Pacific Islands states with the outside world, or by simply not doing enough of anything. Many of the problems were independent of colonialism, and if the impoverished colonial regimes did not manage to solve them they can hardly be blamed when better resourced, more modern independent states have not succeeded.

If however, we might attribute modern problems to colonialism, it is only consistent and fair that the strengths of the modern Pacific might also owe something to colonialism. The nation state would not exist at all (with or without awkward boundaries) but for colonialism. Would the relatively high quality of life indicators as given by the Human Development Index be so positive but for the role of colonialism in creating the core services and establishing peace? Would the high levels of development assistance be forthcoming if former colonial powers had not continued development subsidies after independence? Those states that have benefited from large scale emigration have mostly seen their population surpluses received by their former colonial power or a *de facto* colonial power (for example, Tonga and New Zealand). Marketing arrangements, such as SPARTECA and Lomé, generally have followed colonial patterns; it has proven very difficult to establish alternative ones. Whether one regards these boons as gifts of atonement for colonial sins or simply as confirmation of the inevitability of the client-patron relationship between poor and rich neighbours, or as signs of *noblesse oblige* is probably less significant than the fact that they tie the political, economic and social present to the colonial past.

In trying to characterise colonialism in the Pacific one is immediately confronted with its variety. Which colonialism are we talking about? Is there anything in common between New Zealand's policies in the Cook Islands in the 1950s and France's policies in New Caledonia in the 1870s? Is there even much in common between Australian rule in Papua and in the mandate of New Guinea in the 1920s? Or between Japan in the 1930s and the United States in the 1960s in Mi-

cronesia? One needs to rise to a very high level of generalisation to accommodate these differences, such as the negative images of 'alien rule', 'white supremacism', 'economic exploitation', 'racial stratification'. These are all loaded terms that accentuate the break made by decolonization, classing it as a release from oppression or alienation. But if we accept as a premise the continuity between colonial past and independent present, then the emphasis will change, and we might say that the common factor in colonialism was that it established national institutions through which the process of modernization was mediated. Different regimes chose different strategies for doing this; and some were hardly concerned with it at all. But even the most negligent regime constructed the apparatus of bureaucracy, established the rule of law, provided security for economic enterprise, and carried through the proletarianization of labour. Whether they took a protective or exploitative approach to indigenous land tenure, all made sufficient land available to meet the needs of developers. No Pacific island state has sought to undo these colonial legacies, and none has sought to revise the international boundaries of the colonial period. There is thus a substantial practical acquiescence in the colonial heritage. Indeed, modern élites may be said to owe their positions to colonialism.

The truly distinctive feature of modern colonialism, whatever its form, is that it was engaged in deliberate social reconstruction. I do not mean simply 'social change' but attempts to redesign society in accordance with definite principles. The term 'social engineering' was not coined until much later, but almost from the beginning was inherent in the colonial undertaking. This did not often have a coherent design underlying it, but was framed by semi-conscious assumptions about how human society should be organised. For example, the French in Tahiti during the nineteenth century were content to let Tahitians live their own lives under their chiefs and pastors, subject to the supervision of a gendarme. It also wanted to superimpose on this individual concepts of freehold land tenure. This was expected to encourage productivity and market agriculture. It also encapsulated assumptions about morality, family structure and local authority. The same might not be said of the French in New Caledonia where, at the same time, they were engaged in alienating Melanesian land by force to encourage French settlement. This confined the Kanaks to smaller allotments, forcing different communities to live together under a chief appointed by the French. This determination to change Kanak

society was not motivated by any sense of what Kanak society was or ought to be, but simply to suit colonial wants. New Caledonia was conspicuous if not unique for an absence of what was known as 'native policy'.

Setting aside such extreme examples, colonial social design was directed by two mentalities: one might be called a pragmatic humanitarianism that arose out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-slavery and aboriginal protection movements in Britain, and the second can be classified as ideological, arising from an intellectual consideration of how to manage societies that were fundamentally different in every way from European societies. One might distinguish these two currents as 'sentimental' and 'rational'. The model for pragmatic humanitarianism in colonial government is the regime established by Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji in 1875. Gordon's system is well known. It may be debated how far his views on governing the Fijians stemmed from his own antecedent associations with liberal politics and High Church Anglicanism in England, and how much from the impracticality of behaving in the French manner. I think, however, that it was impossible for Gordon not to tinker with a system to improve it; and it was equally foreign to him to think that a social system could be abolished or changed rapidly. The underlying thinking of his arrangements were that change was and should be evolutionary, and that time was needed for Fijians to adapt to the modern world. The indifference shown by the French was totally alien to Gordon's nature. He believed that people should be treated justly, and also that they needed to be governed in ways that were in accordance with their own understanding of social and political relationships. He was not the first figure in colonial history to realise that one must study the people to be governed in order to understand how to govern them, but he was certainly influential in disseminating that as a principle.

Nothing demonstrates Gordon's influence more clearly than the contrast between the provisions of the Deed of Cession and his own administration. The Deed of Cession allowed no concessions to Fijian politics or society. It was absolute in its insistence that the British government should have a completely free hand. This was in strong contrast to the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand only 34 years earlier. That agreement guaranteed indigenous land rights, and upheld chiefly authority under the crown in a formula that created ambiguity and dispute as both European settlers and the authority of government

reached further and further into Maori society. As if its composers were mindful of the trouble caused by compromise agreements, the Fijian Deed of Cession gave no undertakings as to the inalienability or sacrosanctity of native land, and insisted on the subordination of the chiefs to colonial authority. The source of Gordon's unpopularity with Fiji's European settlers was that his own policies were at variance with the provisions of the agreement: he not only declared Fijian land inalienable by Fijian custom and colonial law, he incorporated chiefs into the structure of colonial authority. The Great Council of Chiefs was created by him at the pinnacle of a pyramid of district and local councils and was probably unique in British colonial practice at the time. In all this we can see a plan to slow social change but also to give it evolutionary possibilities, the Fijians themselves to set the pace.

Gordon's influence was profound. He was succeeded in Fiji by members of his own staff and later by the co-architect of his system, Sir John Thurston. In this way a tradition was established that has continued to shape Fijian politics ever since. Gordon's influence spread elsewhere as his staff were appointed to other territories. Sir William MacGregor became the pioneering administrator of Papua, and he was succeeded by another Gordon protégé, Sir George LeHunte. MacGregor was to Papua what Gordon was to Fiji: a humanitarian with a strong sense of justice, and a devotion to the idea that Papua was the Papuans' country and that their needs were to be taken into account, not set aside in the interests of foreign settlers. But because Papua was not Fiji his methods differed. There was no possibility in MacGregor's time of district or national councils of chiefs. His emphasis was necessarily on establishing peace between Papuans and with settlers, and to reconcile Papuans to the fact of higher authority and law. Attempts to weaken this tradition in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century failed, and ultimately the man whose name is most associated with Papuan colonial history, Sir Hubert Murray, associated himself with the MacGregor tradition and developed it further, so much so that he was bitterly opposed by settlers for his pro-native policy.

The pragmatic humanitarian tradition became an article of faith among English-speaking regimes. This does not mean that they were all conducted similarly, or that there was an overall directing policy: but these regimes always justified themselves in humanitarian terms, and made some effort to adjust their practice accordingly. This applies



even to the American government of Eastern Samoa which despite American efforts to dissociate themselves from British colonialism, established a system of government and gave priority to Samoan interests ahead of settler interests in a manner that fits well within the British range of variation. The New Zealand regime in Samoa, established in succession to the German government in 1914, also espoused a pro-native policy. Its slogan was 'Samoa mo Samoa' (Samoa for Samoans) and until the Mau undermined it, it pursued a vigorous policy of social development and political tutelage. Even the government of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, usually characterised as little better than a caretaker regime primarily concerned with supplying labour for plantations, was restricted more by its slender resources than by its intentions. Throughout the interwar years officials debated the rate and form of political development, and these were usually in terms of what Solomon Islands society could bear in its then state of organization.

Inherent in all these systems was the assumption that empire was not a state of permanent, unchanging domination; nor was it devoted to the extraction of wealth. Economic development was necessary to pay for government and modernisation. But all of these regimes spoke consistently of preparing the people to be able at some future time to govern themselves. Before the Second World War they had small means available to accomplish this, but did so by encouraging and sometimes subsidising mission education, or in the case of both Samoas, actively sponsoring education and training. Similarly, they began to incorporate Islanders into the work of government: chiefs in Fiji had positions of responsibility; there and elsewhere native clerks, messengers, medical assistants and mechanics were employed in junior positions. After the Second World War things changed radically in a shift from enlightened pragmatism to ideologically-driven development.

The ideological strand in colonial administration evolved out of the humanitarian tradition, but eventually developed characteristics of its own. It is distinguished by the aspiration to base development practice on scientific investigation. As pointed out previously, the conviction that one must understand the governed to be able to govern may be traced at least as far back as Sir Arthur Gordon, but by the time of the First World War, forward thinkers were suggesting that the understanding of indigenous society could be placed on a scientific footing,

taking advantage of the studies of ethnographers or, as they were coming to be called, anthropologists.

Amateur anthropologists had been at work for many years in the Pacific, many of them being missionaries who made attempts to present their knowledge of indigenous societies and languages in systematic form. George Brown and R. H. Codrington are the most distinguished of these missionary-ethnographers of the nineteenth century. Augustin Kraemer was an exponent of early professional ethnography, amassing a monumental collection of data on Samoa. The need, however, was for anthropologists who, more than merely recording indigenous cultures, could also explain both the indigenous outlook, and the implications of proposed changes in native society.

The lead was taken by Hubert Murray in Papua who was at length able to appoint a specialist anthropologist to his staff in 1921, specifically to study native society, and advise government on managing the process of culture contact. The questions that Murray was interested in ranged widely: why did Papuans commit murder? What would happen if sorcery was suppressed? How much land did a Papuan family need? How could Papuan children be educated so that they could take their place in the new life that modernisation was creating? What limits should be placed on the migration of men from villages to paid employment?

The Mandated Territory of New Guinea followed Papua's example in also appointing a government anthropologist. No other regimes did, but it was a relatively small step from having an anthropological expert on hand to seeking an anthropological education for colonial officials, and again as a result of Murray's efforts, the Australian government adopted a recruitment and training programme whereby young men appointed to administer Pacific Islanders were educated to full degree standard in anthropology. In this way they were trained to make systematic observations of indigenous society, understand what they saw, anticipate the consequences of their policies, and generally deal with people in a more sensitive and enlightened manner. By this time, Britain had adopted the practice of appointing only university graduates to colonial administrative positions, and was also experimenting with specialised training that should be added to a general education. New Zealand in the 1930s briefly attempted a similar scheme. These steps gave shape to the new ethos of colonialism that was developing around the time of the First World War and later: that

colonialism had to be able to justify itself by its results in increased native participation in government and in continually rising standards of living.

The idea behind all these reforms was that people who were responsible for administering indigenous societies should understand fully what they were doing, and be able to manage change in island society in an intelligent, purposeful and constructive way. They were not usually able to realise these hopes, but after the Second World War greater resources were available to colonial administrations, and the mood of international politics was such that most regimes were eager to accelerate development. Post-war planning began during the war, by officials who had been exasperated at how little they had been able to accomplish in social and political development during the difficult and penurious pre-war years. The training and professionalization of officials who were to manage this development were further upgraded: Australia established a college specifically devoted to it; New Zealand sent selected members of its staff for specialised training in anthropology, the United States followed the Australian pre-war model in both giving officials some anthropological training, and in recruiting specialist anthropologists to advise or administer in Micronesia.

In the years following it was realised that the problems of social development required even more specialist advice, and so the consultancy came into being. There were pre-war precedents for this: the Anglo-Australian anthropologist, Camilla Wedgwood, advised on education in Nauru in the 1930s, and the Australian educationist W. C. Groves prepared a report for the Western Pacific High Commission on education in the Solomon Islands in 1940. The war stimulated further research on developmental questions, but the extensive use of consultants began in the 1950s with intensive investigations in Western Samoa, Cook Islands and Fiji, and in the 1960s in Papua New Guinea and Micronesia. At the same time, previously unimagined sums were being spent on education, health, agriculture and co-operative societies. Transport facilities were quickly expanded and diversified, and all of this was guided by professional advice on how traditional societies should be modernised. Governments had a role now that they had never had before, of being virtually the only, or at least the most potent, factor in the pace and direction of social change, and moreover, that was all being driven purposefully and urgently.

In somewhat different political circumstances, the same trend was taking place all around the Pacific. The number of colonial powers had been reduced by the two world wars, and a greater degree of consensus developed perhaps through the working of the South Pacific Commission established in 1947. The French, though never willing to contemplate independence, were similarly undertaking development projects that could only lead to greater political devolution and indigenous participation at all levels of national life.

The South Pacific Commission became the prototype for the myriad of regional organizations founded since 1970. The SPC survived the transition from colonial to post-colonial and is now the Pacific Community. The mentalities that shaped it also survived in the formal institutions and in the aid and development policies of the later era. In the foundation years from 1944 to 1947 Australia and New Zealand, the initiators, were impelled by a mixture of motives: genuine humanitarian concern and a sense of duty to colonial populations to raise their standards of living and increase local participation in government; concern for their own security as being inextricably linked with the well-being of the Pacific Islands, and an anxiety about the intentions of the great powers (especially friendly ones) in the Pacific. There is nothing new in this: it was as typical of the 1860s and 1880s and 1920s as of the 1940s, and has not been absent from Australian and New Zealand thinking about the Pacific in the half century since. In this way, post-colonial regional and national institutions and the mentality expressed in aid and development policies have a continuous history of almost a century and half. We can thus see the legacy of colonialism in the Pacific as being government activism and international government activism in development, shaped if not directed by specialist advisers often from outside the region, and with substantial funding and guidance from the extra-regional powers.

In content as well as motive and rhetoric there is direct and continuous line of descent from 'native policy' to post-war 'advancement' to post-colonial aid and development assistance. Similarly, contemporary issues associated with governance and development have a history that did not begin with independence or at some arbitrary point since, but have roots deep in the colonial past, indeed, right back to the beginning. In this last respect the Pacific shares its experience with that of the rest of the former colonial world, but it may make a claim to exceptionalism in the successes of the post-colonial period and the

consistency and vigour of the sentimental and intellectual currents of the nineteenth century.

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