

PACIFIC NEIGHBOURS: UNDERSTANDING THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

By Prof Stewart Firth, The Australian National University, The Pacific Centre, October 26 2009

Why is teaching Australian high school students about the Pacific Islands a venture worth undertaking? The teacher guide to *Pacific Neighbours: Understanding the Pacific Islands* gives one answer, a good one: 'Australia is geographically located in the Pacific region, and the Pacific island countries are our closest neighbours, so developing our appreciation of the countries in our region is a fundamental step towards fulfilling our role as responsible global citizens'. I would like to give another answer, which is that the Pacific Islands are extraordinarily interesting, and therefore worth teaching about.

And to show you what I mean, I want to take three examples from the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial history of the Pacific.

PRECOLONIAL

WHERE DID THE PACIFIC ISLANDERS COME FROM?

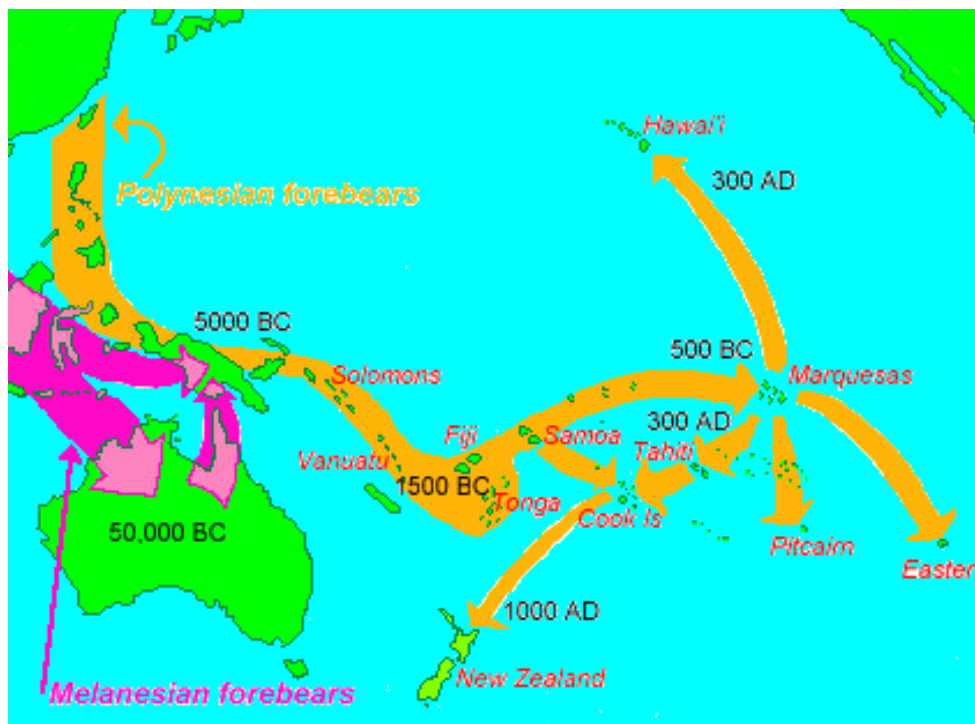
Captain James Cook arrived in the Pacific on the first of his three great expeditions in 1769, when he landed at Matavai Bay on the north coast of Tahiti. Like other Europeans who visited the Pacific in the eighteenth century, he wanted to know where the Polynesians came from. Cook quickly saw how similar people were to each other in looks, language and customs all the way from Tahiti to New Zealand and Hawai'i and all the islands in between in what we now call the Polynesian triangle. 'It is extraordinary', he wrote, 'that the same Nation should have spread themselves over all the isles in this Vast Ocean...Many of them at this time have no other knowledge of each other than what is recorded in antiquated tradition and have by length of time become as it were different Nations having adopted some peculiar custom or habit etc never the less a carefull observer will soon see the Affinity each has to the other'.

In identifying the existence of Polynesia as a distinct culture area populated by closely related peoples, Cook had expert assistance from the Polynesians themselves. In Tahiti a highly knowledgeable high priest called Tupaia worked alongside Cook and Banks in compiling charts of the islands of Tahiti and Ra'iatea, and then piloted Cook safely through the islands to Huahine and Borabora. Tupaia went to New Zealand with Cook, who spent six months circumnavigating the north and south islands, and wherever they stopped it was Tupaia, speaking in a language the Maori understood, who made the initial encounters with local communities and ensured that Cook's party would be welcomed. Tupaia drew a map covering a large area of Polynesia, a remarkable feat, and evidence of the knowledge Polynesians had about themselves.

In Hawai'i in 1778, where he was to be killed the following year at Kealakekua Bay, Cook wrote: 'How shall we account for this nation spreading itself so far over the vast

Ocean?’ He was sure the Polynesians had not come from Australia or the Americas. There were too many similarities of language with the Malays. Tupaia had told him of long voyages in double canoes, and Cook wrote ‘In these Proes or Pahee’s [double canoes] ...these people sail in those seas from Island to Island for several hundred leagues, the Sun serving them as a compass by day and the moon and Stars by night. When this comes to be prov’d we Shall be no longer at a loss to know how the Islands lying in those seas came to be peopl’d, for if the inhabitants of Uleitea [Raiatea’a] have been at Islands laying 2 or 300 Leagues to the westward of them it cannot be doubted but that the inhabitants of those western Islands may have been at others as far to the westward of them and so we may trace them from Island to Islands quite to the East Indies.’

Cook was right. We now know that the Polynesians, and many other Pacific Islanders, have their ultimate origins in East Asia. Like Cook’s, our evidence is partly linguistic. There are two great language families in the Pacific, the Austronesian and the non-Austronesian. All Pacific languages east of the Solomons are Austronesian languages and quite a few coastal languages in the Solomons and Papua New Guinea are Austronesian as well. All Australian Aboriginal languages, and most PNG inland languages, are non-Austronesian. The language families point to two great migrations. The non-Austronesian one was in the distant past, spanning tens of thousands of years, began about 60,000 years ago and brought people to ‘Sahul’, the Ice Age continent that included Australia, New Guinea and Tasmania. The Austronesian migration began only about 3,500 years ago. It was the last phase of human settlement throughout the globe, because it was to such remote places, and arguably the greatest phase, because it depended upon extraordinary feats of long-range voyaging over open oceans.



Pacific Neighbours: Understanding the Pacific, page 30.

We should stand in awe of the achievements of Pacific Island sailors and navigators in precolonial times, and students of Pacific Island origin in Australian schools have every reason to take pride in them. The ancient navigators mastered knowledge of

the stars, the swells, the birds, and the feel of the ocean, and were able to undertake voyages of both discovery and settlement, finding their way back home and taking new settlers to newly discovered island homes. In 1976 the Micronesian traditional navigator Mau Piailug guided a traditionally built Polynesian canoe, the Hokul'ea, from Hawai'i to Tahiti without the use of modern instruments; and his feat was repeated four years later by a Hawai'ian Nainoa Thompson, who also brought the canoe back home to Hawai'i.

COLONIAL

THE PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN WORLD WAR II

We tend to think of the history of World War II in the Pacific as a series of battles won by Americans and Australians, from the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 to the Battle of Tarawa at the end of 1943 and, finally, ending it all, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. In recent years Kokoda, in particular, has acquired mythic status for many Australians, who see it as a unique moment in the forging of Australian national identity. Thousands of people trek the Kokoda Track every year.

But the war is equally epic in the history of the Pacific Islanders, especially for those in the battle zones of New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Kiribati, and the islands of what became American Micronesia.

In Papua New Guinea the war had to be carried on people's backs – roads hardly existed – and those people were Papua New Guineans. By mid-1944 the Australians were employing 37,000 Papua New Guineans, for service as labourers and carriers. Many were conscripted. 'If the natives do not wish to volunteer', an Australian military officer explained, 'they are to be conscripted to work for twelve months anywhere in the Territory'. So for many villagers from Papua, the experience of Kokoda was one of being conscripted, then sent into the jungle with an eighteen-kilo pack, which consisted of 600 rounds of rifle ammunition, three small mortars or a man's rations for twelve days; then carrying out the wounded along the slippery mud and tangled roots of the forest floor. An Australian officer wrote: 'The conditions of our carriers at Eora Creek caused me more concern than that of the wounded...Overwork, overloading (principally by soldiers who dumped their packs and even rifles on top of the carriers' own burdens), exposure, cold and underfeeding were the common lot. Every evening scores of carriers came in, slung their loads down and lay exhausted on the ground; the immediate prospect before them was grim, a meal that consisted only of rice and none too much of that, and a night of shivering discomfort for most as there were only enough blankets to issue on to every two men'. Back in Australia we romanticised these men, in an artlessly racist way, as 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels', and there is no doubt they performed heroic deeds for our sake, but it is also true that they were recruited at the point of a gun and often took the chance to desert and return to their villages.



Australian War Memorial 13600, Papua 1942. The anzacday.org description reads: 'A wounded digger is given a drink by a 'fuzzy wuzzy angel' as he waits to be evacuated by plane. Leaves stuck in the ground provide shade for him'. www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww2/bfa/kokoda.html

Pacific Islanders also fought in the war. More than 3,500 Papua New Guineans served in the Pacific Islands Regiment, and more than 3,000 Papua New Guinean police saw action. Over 11,000 men passed through the Fiji military forces, which peaked in size in August 1943 at 8,513 men. The British appeal to fight for King and country fitted perfectly with Fijian tradition. When called upon to fight by their chiefs, young Fijian men considered it an honour to obey, and willingly took to training and drill, practising jungle warfare across Viti Levu with their boots on and with their boots slung around their necks. Indeed, shame would have come to any Fijian community that failed to have a generous complement of volunteers in the armed forces. Fiji's leading chief, Ratu Sukuna, played a key role in explaining the need for warriors to the people of the villages, and he was not disappointed by the response, which was magnificent. The Fijians liked what the new Governor Sir Philip Mitchell had to say when he arrived in 1942. 'The business of brave men in time of danger', he told the Council of Chiefs, 'is to fight, to suffer, to die if need be: but above all else to seek out the enemy and fight him...'

The small Fiji Defence Force of pre-war days was quickly transformed into the Fiji Military Forces.. By 1943 Fijians were fighting the Japanese in the Solomons and performing with such distinction that the Americans were asking for more. One American naval commander described the men of the 1st Battalion and the 1st Commando on Guadalcanal as 'the finest that we have had the pleasure of carrying at any time since we have been in the South Pacific area'. The men of the 1st Battalion spent seventeen months in the Solomons and were continuously in action for the first six months of 1944. Corporal Sefanaia Sukanaivalu won the Victoria Cross when he rescued two wounded men and sacrificed himself so that his fellow soldiers could escape safely.

World War II was a turning-point in the history of the Pacific Islands. Pacific Islanders had seen Europeans run away from the advancing enemy, leaving them to their fate. Colonial rule would never be the same again, and the way was prepared for decolonization and independence.

POSTCOLONIAL

MIGRATION AND THE PACIFIC DIASPORA

We now live in an age of globalization, and one effect of it has been that more and more people are leaving their homelands to find a better life overseas. For years Pacific Islanders have migrated from the Island states and territories to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. Wherever people have had automatic right to entry to a metropolitan state (as do Micronesians to the United States or Cook Islanders and Niueans to New Zealand), they have left their home countries in droves. Elsewhere, people also leave if they can for the chance to enjoy the comforts and securities of a higher standard of living. And when Pacific Islanders get to Australia or New Zealand, they send home money to relatives in the form of remittances.

For the last fifteen years the leading remittance economies in the region have been Samoa and Tonga, where roughly half the population lives abroad. Many Samoans and Tongans have migrated to New Zealand, which now has a sizable Pacific Islander population, and their remittances have become a vital contribution to national income.

Fiji has joined Tonga and Samoa as a remittance economy. Thousands of Fijians have joined the British Army or been recruited as private security guards. Many more are being recruited by other security companies and some have been killed in the line of duty. Fiji's former Reserve Bank Governor Savenaca Narube pointed out that personal remittances, often unrecorded, had become a key source of foreign exchange, and he thought 'Everyone should say thank you to all our peacekeepers, security personnel, nurses, sportspersons and family members abroad for helping us pay for our imports'. The hunger for cash incomes among Fijians could be seen in Suva as word spread of opportunities in Iraq in 2004, and queues of prospective guards gathered in hundreds at the recruiting headquarters of the security companies in Suva. In this case the driving force behind the exodus of Fijians was another phenomenon of the globalizing era, the privatization of security and the outsourcing of military support tasks by the US armed forces in Iraq. Since the beginning of the war on Iraq, companies such as Global Risk Strategies, Homeland Security Limited, Triple Canopy, and Sabre International Security Fiji have sent hundreds of former soldiers and police to Iraq to serve as escorts and guards.

There is another kind of emigration from Fiji, the permanent departure of people of Indian descent, most of whom are highly skilled and well educated. It can be called 'ethnic emigration' and is driven in part by the pull of job opportunities in globalizing economies nearby, and in part by the push of political instability. For years after independence in 1970 a steady flow of skilled and educated Indo-Fijians left their home country in search of a better life overseas. 120,000 people have left Fiji permanently since 1987, 90 percent of them are Indo-Fijians. They are now industrious Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, and Canadians, contributing their skills to successful OECD economies and returning to Fiji only as tourists.

When we speak of Pacific Islanders today, then, we are speaking not only of people who live in the Pacific but of those who live in Sydney, Brisbane, Auckland and Melbourne, and who constitute a Pacific diaspora. And we saw the strength of that diaspora in the last few weeks following the earthquake off Samoa and the tsunami that followed. As Sitagata Dominic, President of the Samoan Council of Sydney, told

the ABC at a Samoan independence day celebration on 5 October: 'It's a very, very close knit society, so if anything happens to someone, it affects the whole community. So that 's why it is important to bring everyone together. So they would be able to enjoy themselves and be able to have some sort of break in their emotional feelings about what's happened back home.' Tragic though it was, the tsunami pointed to some of the successes of the modern Pacific. The Samoan government was well prepared for disaster; wreckage was quickly cleared from the beaches; the Samoan hospitals operated an effective triage system for incoming emergency victims; and the Australian government expressed confidence that its emergency assistance would be well spent. The idea that the entire region is an 'arc of instability', as some Australian commentators like to think, is false.

In teaching about the Pacific, then, we need to remember the extraordinary accomplishments of its first settlers, who fashioned unique civilizations in remote isolation from the rest of the world. We need to remember that World War II was not just about us – and about our brave soldiers fighting the enemy – but about those people over whose homelands that war was fought. And in contemplating the contemporary Pacific, we need to think of it not only as a collection of Island countries, but also as a population of Pacific Islanders who live around the world and especially in Australia and New Zealand.

INTERNET SOURCES

Precolonial:

<http://pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/> website of the Polynesian Voyaging Society

Colonial:

http://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=48

World War II database on the war in New Guinea

Postcolonial:

http://epress.anu.edu.au/migration/pdf_instructions.html

Helen Lee and Steve Tupai Francis, eds, *Migration and Transnationalism: Pacific Perspectives*

http://epress.anu.edu.au/ssqm/global_gov/pdf/ch07.pdf

Helen Lee 'Tonga Only Wants Our Money': The children of Tongan migrants'

General:

Pacific Islands Report at <http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport/>

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