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## *Future Directions for Pacific Studies*

*Stewart Firth*

### PACIFIC STUDIES AS CULTURAL RENAISSANCE; PACIFIC STUDIES AS MODERNIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The social sciences tend to be multiparadigmatic, with the paradigms themselves forming something equivalent to what in other branches of knowledge are disciplines. Something of that tension between different paradigms of understanding applies to Pacific studies. People have different perspectives on the Pacific Islands depending on who they are, how they have been trained academically, and where they happen to be in the Pacific. In Hawai'i and New Zealand it is impossible not to feel a sense of loss—the loss of cultures radically modified, if not swept away altogether, by the events of the last two hundred years—and so the sensibility becomes one of grieving for what is lost, and retrieving, restoring, and celebrating what can be regained. Tradition becomes sacred because of its rarity; its wisdom, profound no doubt, is nevertheless magnified in retrospect. In the independent Pacific things are different. In Fiji, for example, some would regard Fijian tradition as having been preserved all too well. Where tradition is alive and well—where people still have loyalties to chiefs or loyalties to communities that compete with their loyalties to the modern state—tradition loses its sacredness and becomes another element in modern politics, sometimes a frightening one. Many Fijian students at the University of the South Pacific (USP) see traditional loyalties as a problem, a barrier to the kind of personal advancement that Americans take for granted, an obstacle preventing them from getting somewhere on merit rather than on the basis of who their relatives are, and, more seriously than that, a cause of political instability in their country. When tradition is alive in this way, people are at best ambivalent about it. Many Solomon Islanders, for

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example, feel embarrassed about the recent collapse of order in their country and want to know how they can modernize their political arrangements to stop it from happening again.

Tradition in Fiji does not need to be retrieved or restored or maintained. It is so alive and well that it is available for modern uses that have dramatic effects on people's lives, livelihoods, and prospects. Tradition in Fiji means a continuing contest over the most fundamental characteristic of government—legitimacy—especially the kind of legitimacy that refers to the authority people grant a government because they believe it has the right to rule. Given Fiji's colonial history, which resulted in a rather remarkable preservation of Fijian tradition, no election ever settles the matter of legitimacy, because so many Fijians believe, or can easily be frightened into believing, that democracy threatens their vital interests and that they should therefore turn to the other, supposedly traditional, source of authority in the Great Council of Chiefs. The 1999 election, though great hopes were held for it, was no different. Tradition is constantly being invoked in the service of modern ambitions, and, where necessary, invented and then invoked. The Fiji coup leader George Speight is an example, appealing to indigenous rights as sacred even as he sought to use them to enrich himself with extremely modern money. And those uses of tradition are best understood in a modern economic context that takes us far beyond the Pacific Islands to the rest of a globalizing world.

One might even argue that tradition matters less in the independent Pacific than development. People all over the Pacific want development, and that means simple and basic things such as running water, electricity, roads, health services, schools, and jobs that pay cash. Pacific Islanders everywhere want to be better off in the western sense.

Pacific studies in Hawai'i and possibly New Zealand, and certainly Hawaiian and Māori studies, are mostly conceptualized as projects of cultural renaissance, in which the aim is to reclaim, disinter, rediscover, and reassert cultural identity. The fundamental research question becomes How can we understand the Pacific in ways that honor the past and reclaim the future for uniquely Pacific Island ways of doing things? In the independent Pacific, Pacific studies tends to be conceptualized more, though by no means exclusively, as a project of modernization and development, and the fundamental research question becomes How can we understand the region in ways that will make people better off?

In the context of Pacific studies as cultural renaissance, the way is clearly open for a focus on dance, song, chant, and representation as celebrations

of culture and assertions of cultural pride, but in the context of Pacific studies as “modernization and development,” these things can take on different significance. When Morgan Tuimaleali‘ifano, a USP lecturer in history, teaches the history of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, he chants Samoan *fa‘alupega*. He would feel odd doing anything else. But he chants in the context of an argument that is distinctly critical about modern chieftainship, about the manipulation of tradition by chiefs for their own advantage, and about the way in which tradition is now blocking opportunities for commoners. The most important contemporary issue in the Pacific Islands would seem to be “the political uses of tradition.”

These two central paradigms of Pacific studies derive from different historical experiences, above all in the degree to which foreign influence expunged, absorbed, altered, or preserved tradition. Both paradigms have their place, and both contribute to our understanding. Nor should the bifurcation between Pacific studies in New Zealand and Hawai‘i on the one hand, and Pacific studies in the independent Pacific on the other, be quite so starkly drawn. Epli Hau‘ofa’s Oceania Centre at the University of the South Pacific exists to honor and preserve expressions of Pacific cultures in dance, song, and painting. USP students take pride in performing the traditional dances of their own home countries, and a number of USP courses chart and celebrate aspects of Pacific tradition. Nevertheless, the distinction remains as a matter of emphasis and priority.

### THE CONTEMPORARY MELANESIAN CONTEXT OF PACIFIC STUDIES

Events in Melanesia are an important part of the contemporary political background against which we must ponder the future of Pacific studies, and the outlook there is less positive than in Polynesia and Micronesia. Political events in Melanesia in the last few years point to increasing instability. In the Pacific, as in many parts of the developing world, globalization unites people at one level of society while issues of identity divide them at another. Australians now refer to an “arc of instability” to their north, stretching from East Timor to West Papua, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Fiji.

On the positive side, Bougainville and Papua New Guinea reached a permanent peace in 2001 after a peace process that began with the truce negotiated in New Zealand in 1997. Under an agreement approved by the Papua New Guinea Parliament in 2002, Bougainville will be given an

autonomous government and the opportunity of voting on full independence sometime between 2012 and 2015. The Bougainville war, which pitted Bougainvilleans against each other as well as against the Papua New Guinea Defence Force, had contributed more than anything else to the steady decline of security and good governance in Papua New Guinea in the 1990s.

The settlement in Bougainville, however, was the one bright spot in an otherwise gloomy picture of Melanesian political prospects. In 2000, after its third coup in thirteen years, Fiji descended into lawlessness unprecedented in the modern history of the country. The main political struggle was within the traditional Fijian polity, and between two of those large political units that historically emerged in Lau, on Vanua Levu, and in southeastern Viti Levu, and were later enlarged to cover the whole country, the units we call confederacies. While it was much else besides, the struggle for power was between chiefs of the Tovata confederacy, which has held sway under the leadership of Ratu Mara for the last forty years, and chiefs of the Kubuna confederacy, centered on the provinces of eastern Viti Levu north of Suva. Loyalties and ambitions that followed the logic of the Fijian polity were behind the desperate events of June and July and in the process radically affected the modern, democratic, constitutional polity. In a dramatic reprise in November 2000, mutineers in the Fiji Military Forces fought a battle with loyal troops in Queen Elizabeth Barracks in Suva. Repeated volleys of machine-gun fire and the loud explosions of grenade and rocket launchers could be heard all over Suva, and bullets landed as far away as the compound of the Australian High Commission. Eight soldiers died in the encounter, civilians were caught in stray gunfire, fifteen armed rebel soldiers escaped, and the authorities imposed an immediate thirty-six-hour curfew in eastern Viti Levu as far north as Korovou.

The situation in Solomon Islands deteriorated even more sharply in 2000. A continuing contest over land in Honiara between the Guadalcanal landowners and immigrants from the island of Malaita had already led to a mass exodus of Malaitans in 1999, and to attempts by the Commonwealth to broker a lasting settlement. The temporary peace did not last, and in June 2000, soon after the Speight coup in Fiji, a Malaitan-led group called the Joint Operations Force seized control of the capital and compelled the democratically elected prime minister, Bartholomew Ulafa'alu, to resign. He was replaced by a prime minister acceptable to the Joint Operations Force, Manasseh Sogavare. Weeks of armed conflict followed

on Guadalcanal, as the opposing forces of the Malaita Eagles Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement fought battles in Honiara and other parts of the island, forcing residents to flee to other parts of the country and provoking the evacuation of most expatriates. Looters ransacked much of Honiara. The Townsville Peace Agreement of October 2000 is an attempt to bring peace and reconciliation to Solomon Islands, a country that is now almost bankrupt and largely dependent on foreign aid, especially aid from Taiwan.

*Reformasi* in Indonesia, following the coming to office of something like a democratic government under President Abdurrahman Wahid, produced a ferment of pro-independence sentiment in the province of Irian Jaya, now renamed Papua. A Kongres Papua met in June 2000 and declared that the people of Papua had been independent since 1961 and that West Papua was not part of Indonesia. Most Papuans want independence, just as most East Timorese did, but no outside authority with any influence will support them—not Papua New Guinea, not Australia, not the United States, and not even the United Nations. The prospects for Papua's independence dimmed even further when Wahid was replaced as Indonesian president by Megawati Sukarnoputri in July 2001. Megawati, supported by the Indonesian military forces, is well known for her opposition to any further breakup of the Indonesian state, whether in Papua, Aceh, or elsewhere. The agony of Papua seems set to continue.

In what ways, then, do political developments of this kind affect the direction of Pacific studies?

An uncomfortable fact about scholarship, certainly about research funding, is that it is often driven by anything but scholarly concerns: the United States made research funds available for the study of Micronesia early in the Pacific War, when the Micronesian islands had suddenly assumed strategic significance in Washington. To some extent the same now applies to Australia's academic interest in the islands that stretch in an arc across its north from the Timor Sea to the Arafura Sea, the Coral Sea, and beyond to the Pacific Ocean. The State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project at the Australian National University (ANU), initiated in 1996, is flourishing in inverse proportion to the political stability of Melanesia. Focusing on "challenges to sovereignty and to civil society in the creation of new national entities out of former colonies" and concerned with political representation, public order, violence, legitimacy, ethnicity, nationalism, citizenship, gender, and the role of religion, project researchers work closely with the Australian aid agency AusAID and the Australian Department of

Foreign Affairs and Trade in identifying areas of research and undertaking consultancies. Some would say the relationship between state and academy in this case is too close, and that the project mainly serves Australian national interests. Others argue that Australia wants what is best for the region anyway, namely, good governance, accountability, transparency, democracy, and stability, and there is no necessary conflict between Australia's interests and those of its Melanesian neighbors. What is clear is that the Australian government's interest in encouraging the study of Melanesia does not extend beyond the Australian National University, and that Pacific studies in other Australian universities will continue to languish.

The idea that the Melanesian states might encounter difficulties after independence is not new. After all, *Black Unity or Black Chaos?* was the subtitle Hank Nelson chose for his 1973 book, *Papua New Guinea*, and numerous commentators in the 1970s thought democracy in Papua New Guinea was destined for a short life. Recent events in Melanesia will send scholars back to the key concepts that have always underlain their understandings of the region: Who is the foreigner? What is the nation? In what ways does the modern state redefine political legitimacy? What sustains order in countries with ineffective governments? There will be less room for romanticism about Melanesian tradition and more inclination to examine the endless ways in which Melanesians use tradition to serve modern ends.

#### A CONSORTIUM OF CENTERS AND PROGRAMS

Little of substance in teaching or research in Pacific studies can be achieved, however, without institutional backing. The best-funded and most productive research centers for Pacific Islands studies over the last quarter century have been in metropolitan states with national interests at stake in the Pacific Islands: Australia (the Research School of Pacific Islands Studies, later Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australia National University), the United States (Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawai'i), New Zealand (Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury) and France (Institut de recherche pour le développement [IRD], formerly ORSTOM). To this list we should add Kagoshima University Research Center for the Pacific Islands in Japan. Two of the leading academic journals in the field of Pacific Islands history and politics are based in Canberra and Honolulu (the *Journal of Pacific History* and *The Contemporary Pacific*). That is not to say that excellent research does not come from elsewhere.

In Australia and New Zealand the high point of teaching Pacific Islands studies at tertiary level came in the 1970s, when governments were expanding higher education systems and when the coming of independence to South Pacific countries gave the region a high academic profile. As governments tightened budgets in the 1990s, the good times came to an end. The teaching of Pacific Islands studies shrank in both countries, especially in Australia, where a tidal surge of university funding cuts has left only a few courses here and there as survivors of an earlier era. Pacific studies is livelier at the undergraduate level in New Zealand. The appointment of a Pacific historian as the head of the history department has recently reinvigorated Pacific studies at the University of Canterbury; the Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Auckland has received a major boost with recent appointments and plans for a new building/meeting house; and Victoria University of Wellington has joined the University of Auckland and the University of Otago to become the third New Zealand university to offer an undergraduate major in Pacific studies, with papers on the Pacific Heritage, Changing Environments, and Framing the Pacific: Theorizing Culture and Society. In the Pacific itself, the Center for Pacific Islands Studies and departments of the University of Hawai'i have maintained a significant level of course offerings despite funding cuts, and the University of the South Pacific has done the same: plans are afoot to make an introductory Pacific Islands studies course compulsory for all students. The University of Guam (which also houses the Micronesian Area Research Center) offers a Master of Arts degree in Micronesian Studies.

Most centers, schools, and departments do at least one thing well. For instance, the USP School of Humanities and the School of Social and Economic Development, for example, sponsor an annual Students Pacific Island Conference of Leaders (SPICOL), a weeklong political simulation where students play the role of leaders in a regional conference. The conference includes a weekend retreat where students work to produce a communiqué. A keynote speaker introduces the theme, and the week is spent on sessions dealing with different aspects of the theme, which in 2000 was "security." Most participants are called upon to speak knowledgeably to a sizable audience during the conference, and that in itself is a valuable learning experience, especially as speakers are usually asked questions by the representatives of other "national" delegations. The result is to alert students to the need for thorough research, clear presentation, and substantiated argument.

The ANU Centre for the Contemporary Pacific in Canberra does things well at the elite level. It sponsors seminars on topics of regional concern,



including the Distinguished Pacific Lecture Series; it brings Pacific leaders to the university; and it has assisted in organizing Pacific retreats in Canberra where leaders can frankly exchange views. The center is now beginning to produce publications.

The UH Center for Pacific Islands Studies does many things well, and one of the new ones is the Moving Cultures project, funded by the Ford Foundation, designed to link USP students with their counterparts in Hawai'i and New Zealand (University of Canterbury) via the Internet and email. As Terence Wesley-Smith suggests, the way forward lies in inserting experiments of this kind into existing courses. University administrations are usually committed to course structures well ahead of time, and creating new courses presents an obstacle that modifying courses does not. Backed by the magnificent resources of the Pacific Collection in Hamilton Library, the center has built itself over the years into a key location for Pacific Islands studies in the region and beyond, responsible for the best monograph series, for a leading journal, for hosting a stream of visitors, at least in part for the best website—*Pacific Islands Report*—and for much else besides. Only the Australian National University in all its Pacific manifestations, from the National Centre for Development Studies to the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, rivals the UH Center for Pacific Islands Studies as a hub of Islands research, conferences, and publication.

For a variety of reasons, other centers of Pacific studies are less well placed. The Macmillan Brown library is good on recent acquisitions but is not a strong collection for the study of Pacific history. The Canterbury center, which is housed in excellent quarters, must be further developed before it can become a firm research base for prospective doctoral students in the Pacific field. New Zealand students who wish to pursue graduate studies in Pacific history and politics—the few that there are—tend to go to the Australian National University or the University of Hawai'i, where the facilities are better. The Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS) at the University of the South Pacific is seriously underfunded, but it is committed to expanding Pacific studies at the undergraduate level and continues to issue publications. IPS publications over the years constitute an important contribution to Pacific studies as a whole. The Centre for South Pacific Studies at the University of New South Wales produces an excellent newsletter and hosts a good seminar series but suffers from the marginalization of Pacific studies characteristic of all Australian universities.

Outside the region, there have been some promising developments in recent years. At the University of Michigan, Asian Pacific Americans Stud-

ies, within the American Studies Program, now offers interdisciplinary graduate and undergraduate courses focusing on the Asian Pacific American experience. In Europe, the Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Nijmegen played a major role in organizing the first conference of the European Society for Oceanists (ESFO) in 1992, and was also involved in the 1994 ESFO conference in Leiden. (Since 1999, it has become the Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies.) And in 1995, the Centre de Recherche et de Documentation sur l'Océanie (CREDO) was created in Marseille under the auspices of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales; it is part of the Maison Asie Pacifique and is associated with the Université de Provence. With the largest concentration of Pacific scholars in Europe, CREDO researchers and their graduate students specialize in anthropology, history, and prehistory of Pacific Islands and Australia, and are in the process of developing a Pacific library and documentation center. They also host visiting scholars, and will be organizing the next ESFO conference.

These are just a sampling of the variety of Pacific Islands studies programs that exist for graduate and undergraduate education, research, and publication. The point of having a consortium is to make the most of what each member organization has. In imagining how a consortium might work, the emphasis should be on exchanges of every kind: of information over the Internet, of staff, of courses and simulations, and of students. We need to use the consortium to restore that sense of Pacific regionalism that served us so well in the past. A consortium might also be able to strengthen regional institutions of learning that have suffered from recent instability or might soon do so, such as Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, and the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Finally, a consortium may well be able to do more than each individual organization to promote the teaching of Pacific studies, not only in the Pacific Islands countries but also in Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, and beyond.

### *Abstract*

Pacific studies in Hawai'i and possibly New Zealand, and certainly Hawaiian and Māori studies, are mostly conceptualized as projects of cultural renaissance, in which the aim is to reclaim and reassert cultural identity. The fundamental research question becomes How can we understand the Pacific in ways that honor the past and reclaim the future for uniquely Pacific Island ways of doing things? In the independent Pacific and in certain other places such as the Australian

National University, Pacific studies tends to be conceptualized more, though not exclusively, as a project of modernization and development, and the fundamental research question becomes How can we understand the region in ways that will make people better off?

These two central paradigms of Pacific studies, both of which contribute to our understanding, derive from different historical experiences, above all in the degree to which foreign influence altered or preserved tradition. Events in Melanesia are an important part of the contemporary political background against which we must ponder the future of Pacific studies, and the outlook there is less positive than in Polynesia and Micronesia. There will be less room in the future for romanticism about Melanesian tradition and more inclination to examine the endless ways in which Melanesians use tradition to serve modern ends.

In imagining how a Pacific studies consortium might work, the emphasis should be on exchanges of every kind: of information over the Internet, of staff, of courses and simulations, and of students.

**KEYWORDS:** consortium, culture, Melanesia, modernization, Pacific studies, tradition