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State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

Workshop Report 1

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PACIFIC ISLANDERS ABROAD: PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNANCE, DIASPORA, AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

**BRONWEN
DOUGLAS**

A one-day Pacific Islanders Abroad Workshop was held in the Coombs Building tea room at the Australian National University on 16 October 1999, funded by the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project with assistance from the ANU's Graduate Program in Anthropology. The workshop was originally conceived informally within the Fiji Students' Association and was a cooperative undertaking, convened by Katerina Teaiwa and Selai Korovusere and organised by the SSGM Project in conjunction with a committee of students.

Participants

In the absence of a representative of the local Ngunnawal people, Sonia Smallacombe of ATSIC welcomed participants on behalf of the indigenous people of Australia. Sunam, a group of Papua New Guinean-Australians from Adelaide, performed PNG songs and dances. The workshop was attended by representatives of Radio Australia and SBS, both Pacific Islanders, and was videoed by Paul Turnbull of the ANU's Centre for Cross-Cultural Research.

There were more than eighty participants—two-thirds women, half students, and highly diverse in background and age. Most are ACT based but about twenty were interstate visitors, including several from the Pacific Island Council of Victoria. About sixty of the participants are Pacific Islanders resident or studying in Australia, including indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians, Rotumans, Papua New Guineans, a Bougainvillean, a West Papuan, Solomon Islanders, Maori, Tongans, Samoans, a Niuean, a Cook Islander

and several of mixed ancestry. Two indigenous Australians attended and a member of the Foreign Service of the Republic of Palau.

Given the short lead-time (six weeks) in which the workshop was organised, the size and diversity of the attendance was astonishing and a testimony to the felt need for such an occasion, which was expressed publicly in heartfelt terms by a number of participants. It was said to be the first such gathering of members of Pacific Island communities in Australia.

Aims

The organisers' main aim was to initiate a forum for a wide cross-section of Pacific Islanders living, working and studying in south-eastern Australia to engage in serious but not overly academic discussion on questions of Islander identities, experiences and interrelationships as migrants, relations between migrants and home countries, and migrants' relations with indigenous Australians. Migrants bring different, often critical perspectives to bear on questions of nationalism, regionalism, governance and state-society relations. It is important that their viewpoints and experiences be seen as valid and useful in official circles, within the region and in Australia, and by international organisations, aid agencies and donor governments.

A further aim was to facilitate future networking of Pacific Islanders in Australia. To this end a Pacific Islands Discussion Forum has been set up on the SSGM Project home page at URL <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/pacnetwork.htm>>

The contribution of AusAID to this project is acknowledged with appreciation.

Structure

To encourage as much active participation as possible, most of the workshop was devoted to small discussion groups which were asked to address set series of common questions and each appoint a reporter to summarise their conclusions to the full group.

Though the small group format was sometimes cumbersome, in that it encouraged repetition, it achieved the important aim of spreading responsibility for discussion throughout the group. It was especially effective in providing space for young people to air their experiences as migrants or second generation Australians, and to voice their concerns. This is unusual in a gathering of Pacific Islanders, whose generally high valuation of age and seniority often inhibits or stifles the young from expressing their opinions publicly.

Some participants professed themselves confused by the set questions, especially those addressed during the session on governance, which were perhaps too numerous and over general. Nonetheless, some of the best reportage resulted from situations where people puzzled by unfamiliar concepts sought to thrash out their meanings in intensive discussion.

The workshop was divided into two sessions, one in the morning on *Migration and Diaspora* and another in the afternoon on *Diasporic Perspectives on Governance*. The two themes proved to be complementary in important ways, a point stressed in the concluding remarks.

Session 1: Migration and Diaspora

The session began with short presentations on diasporic identities and migrant experiences from four sponsored interstate participants: 'Alopi Latukefu from Sydney, and Kui Taylor, Mereana Taurima and Torike Jieni Senarive from the Pacific Island Council of Victoria.

Mereana Taurima, a self-styled housewife who said she struggled to understand the workshop outline, epitomised the value of the workshop in giving a voice to ordinary Islanders by reciting a prose poem in which she dissected the text from a community perspective and recomposed it in original and provocative ways.

The following are the major themes—including conflicting opinions expressed and negotiated—to emerge from this session:

- Resistance to the classification of "Pacific Islanders" as an homogenous single entity or identity (as by Australian Immigration law); insistence that the differences within and between Pacific communities be acknowledged and respected. Who defines "Pacific Islanders"?
- Appreciation that there are nonetheless important cultural and historical similarities between Pacific communities, some shared with Aboriginal people in Australia. There is a greater tendency to identify as a "Pacific Islander" when abroad.
- Acknowledgement that for citizens of Melanesian nations, especially PNG with its vast internal diversity, the experience of diasporic interaction with compatriots as an overseas resident or migrant—often through shared practice in dance and performance—can help forge a sense of national identity and unity, transcending cultural and linguistic parochialism.
- The importance for migrants to continue to practise their Island culture and identity, especially in song, dance, language, food style, sport and religion.

- Some criticism of ethnic exclusiveness: of the attitudes of some Islanders in Australia towards Aborigines; by non-indigenous Fijians of indigenous Fijian attitudes to other Fijian ethnic communities.
- A strong expression of the importance of forging closer, supportive links with Aboriginal people, despite the present widespread ignorance about them of most Pacific Island migrants.
- The following reasons (not always realised) were given for emigration: expectations of greener pastures, greater wealth and status, higher earning power, a better standard of living, opportunities for education and employment unavailable at home, better health facilities; the desire to help relatives at home through remittances or to join relatives living overseas; a sense of adventure; a quest for greater freedom, relief from customary pressures, especially on young people, or escape from political conflicts; marriage, especially for women.
- Concerns about the difficulties experienced by the children of migrants in growing up intertwined in different cultures, especially those of mixed marriages: some children have problems fitting into either culture or experience discrimination and ambivalence as "half-castes"; others identify strongly as Islanders or are proud of their hybridity; several speakers expressed regrets about the loss of religion and indigenous language by their children and stressed the importance of maintaining frequent physical contact with the home country.
- A sense that it is often easier to leave than to go back, especially as migrants develop individual self-reliance which may conflict with indigenous collective values. Yet emigration can be positive for the home country too if migrants feed back the benefits of their personal learning experiences.
- The need to examine the changes and continuities in women's roles in migrant communities: what are the implications of better education for women, careers outside the home, having fewer children, political participation? Why do migrant Island women still prepare the food, wait for men to eat first, defer to men as spokespeople?
- The need for Pacific Islanders in Australia to network and establish a unified body to represent them, fight for their rights and help them participate effectively in a multicultural Australian community.

Session 2: Diasporic Perspectives on Governance

This session began with short presentations by Jennifer Martiniello (on commonalities between Aboriginal people—also diverse and multicultural—and Pacific Islanders); Bronwen Douglas (on the global governance agenda, its indigenous relevance and possibilities for its strategic appropriation by Pacific Islanders); Tracey Banivanua Mar (on her problems, when growing up in Australia, with identity, racism and other people's notions of authenticity); Aisea Kaloumaira (on governance); Helen Morton (on the Pacific Island Council of Victoria).

The questions suggested for this session included big themes like "What is democracy/freedom/human rights/aid/dependency?" Some discussion groups tackled these, while others focussed on one or two, or on the more specific question: "How can Pacific Islanders living abroad participate in processes of governance and have an effect at home?"

The following were the major themes of the session, including differences of opinion:

- Democracy: the need to differentiate between state and village/community contexts; the need to distinguish between Western-style liberal parliamentary democracy and the constraints on democracy in Pacific countries, where leadership may be exercised according to stringent age, rank or gender criteria; the need to see the right to dissent as a fundamental aspect of democracy.
- Freedom: involves responsibilities as well as rights; personal choices as well as concern for the common good.
- Human rights: some argued that Islanders should return to their indigenous spiritual law; others that there are common, shared human qualities and ideas which transcend nation, class and ethnicity, and certain basic human rights, but that they are not unlimited.
- Aid: the need for Islanders to learn the policies and rules for obtaining and handling aid, which is vital to national development in Pacific Island countries; scholarships are both a personal privilege and a major contribution to the home country when the student takes back needed knowledge; accountability is important with respect to aid because it discourages corruption; donors' motives are often suspect and they are hypocritical to impose conditions on aid, especially when aid money is spent on grandiose projects implemented by short-term expatriate personnel who do not transfer expertise to local people; concerns about the sustainability of aid projects, and that central administration of aid funding by Pacific Island governments means that little is made available for women's groups, though women are more efficient and better managers.
- Governance and dependency: debate as to whether the global "governance agenda" should be condemned as a foreign imposition, inappropriate to Pacific Islands nations, or whether its various components (liberal representative democracy, small government, market economics, transparency, accountability, anti-corruption, universal human rights) can be selectively adapted by Islands governments and citizens to address local problems in locally advantageous ways; suggestion that the governance agenda can be internally contradictory: e.g., insensitive demands for structural adjustment and deregulation by international agencies and donors may divert resources from education and social welfare, diminish the capacity for political participation, weaken democracy and increase human rights abuses; by contrast, a reduction in economic dependency would enhance democracy, stability and good governance.
- Governance and the Bougainville crisis: are there general lessons in the Bougainvillean reliance on indigenous networks when the modern infrastructure was gone, or does this only work during crises?
- Diasporic effects on the home country: criticism from abroad is often resented and seen as damaging to national unity; remittances are declining because migrants have not achieved their goals; there are often unreal expectations on migrants, who cannot go home with nothing.

The session concluded with general comments from a dozen participants, unanimous in their appreciation of the value of the workshop, while suggesting improvements and future directions. A representative of the Pacific Island Council of Victoria announced that that organisation would host a similar forum next year, an offer enthusiastically endorsed by those present.

Concluding Remarks

Greg Fry of the ANU noted how unusual it is in RSPAS, and in academic forums generally, for Pacific Islanders' voices to predominate over those of white "experts". He stressed the complementarity of the themes of diaspora and governance. "Good governance" is not just an academic concept, but a code for a series of things that reflect current views in Canberra of how countries should be governed. It is not only imposed on Pacific Island and Aboriginal societies, but on universities and Australian society generally; it affects all our lives. Diasporas are important because migrants can influence powerful knowledge makers in Australia about their home countries, explaining their complexity and diversity, and helping shape the Australian imagination about the Pacific. Reciprocally, people of the diaspora can interpret Australian interests and intentions at home. They are thus in a position to relate to and see both worlds at once and their special vantage point should be taken advantage of by decision makers in both countries.

Satendra Nandan of the University of Canberra spoke as an Indo-Pacific Australian. He suggested that geography determines identity more than history, that migration is a metaphor for the modern world, and that ideas as well as individuals migrate. Aboriginal Australians belong to the world's most ancient multicultural society and non-indigenous Australians must work with them to achieve justice and reconciliation if Australia is to achieve its vast multicultural potential. Shame in being "half-caste" should be replaced by pride in hybridity and there are dangers in the desire for ethnic purity.

Final dinner

The workshop concluded with a spectacular Island dinner prepared by the Fijian community of Canberra, at which Sunam and other performers enacted aspects of their identity in song and dance.

Bronwen Douglas is a Fellow in the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project.

Community revelations
by Mereana Taurima
Welfare Coordinator
Pacific Island Council (Victoria)

Who, what, where, when, how to believe?
Who do we believe, what do we believe?
Where, when and how to believe?
That's the question I ask.
For community, battles and wars.
Wars of the words, culture, space, place.
Who should have what and where?
Government agencies, information resources.
Not relevant to the communities.
Lack of information.
They give you this paper, "Here, read it. It will help your cause."
And then they have this little strip on the bottom
saying you do not qualify for their funding,
you do not qualify for that.
Politics. It's alien jargon, bullshit.
Education. Meaning what? Does it help?
Perhaps in a new century it will be classed as out, like "Out of here".
Because our youth are leaving schools at the age of twelve.
They are leaving the education system at the age of twelve.
People. Well, there's a category for each section:
Upper class: We are your superior, obey.
Middle class: Always looking up, can go either way, up or down.
Lower class: Survivors, slavery to the above.
Creators of work, unemployed, so they create the work.
Because those organisations wouldn't be there if it wasn't for these
people.
Survival. Now, there's a quest not to be taken lightly.
Survival, survival of what? The human rat-race?
Humanity. Love, trust, care, share and believe.
Who? Who do we believe?
Young. They are innocent. They are crushed at an early age.
Old. They are wise and they are also stupid.
Health. Young, old, rich, poor.
Wealth. Luxury and destruction.
Spiritual. Explain, explain to me the spiritual.
History. Belonging, to who?
Computer network agencies. Open text book. Danger.
Religion. We in need, where indeed?
Customs. Do they help?
Society. We are locked up into a system full of dictators.
Unless good governance becomes simple text and easy listening
The battles of self-egos of those dictators will remain with governance.
Change must lead the way.
Enforce a national body for our people.

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