

Number 2 My country, my government: The path to self-government, independence and nation status

Max Quanchi

History Division, University of the South Pacific

My country

A Pentacost Islander once said that “European custom is like a bird that settled, that has flown to our shores just now, but our custom has been here like a banyan tree since the world broke up. It was here at the start”.¹ The term “Government” is generally associated with this foreign visiting bird, or European custom. Stories passed on down from earlier generations suggest that rulers, chiefs, big-men, leaders, alliances and the conquest and colonisation of neighbours and other people’s land had occurred across the Pacific, but the European custom of government, as a centralised, decision-making, law-making and potentially all-powerful influence over people’s lives, was for most Pacific Island people, a new experience. Government in the 19th century was therefore synonymous with colonial rule.

Foreign or colonial administration came first in 1840 (Aetearoa/New Zealand), then in Polynesia in 1842 (the French in the Marquesas), in Melanesia in 1853 (the French in New Caledonia), and after to Micronesia a Spanish-German dispute in 1885.² It divided entities by creating two Samoas, splitting the Solomon Islands archipelago into two and the island of New Guinea into three entities. Colonialism created artificial countries by linking Kiribati and Tuvalu, Banaba and Kiribati, Rotuma and Fiji, the Loyalty Islands and New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and 700 language groups in Papua and New Guinea. These new boundaries were governed by companies (such as the Jaluit Company in the Marshall Islands) and by a succession of different metropolitan rulers (the most ruled being Pohnpei under German, Spanish, German again, Japanese, UN/USA and finally the FSM³). Colonial rule created entities but then watched their fragmentation (the USTT divided into CNMI, Marshalls, FSM and Palau) while others suffered from joint administrations (British/New Zealand/Australian in Nauru and French/British in Vanuatu). Some still remain under the control of foreigners including Chile, the USA,

¹ Cited in Scarr, D, 1990, *The history of the Pacific Islands*, Sydney, Macmillan, p.182.

² The Spanish influence in the north Pacific goes back to the 17th century. Although involvement in local affairs was often direct, and tragic, a permanent presence, colonial officials and administration did not appear until 1885. See Hezel F, 1983, *The first taint of civilization; a history of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in pre-colonial days 1521-1885*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press; Hezel F, 1995, *Strangers in their own land; a century of colonial rule in the Caroline and Marshall islands*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.

³ Nauru’s record also demonstrates a similar succession of rulers; Germany (1988-1914), British Phosphate Commission (1914-1920), Australia/New Zealand/Great Britain “Mandate” (1920-1942), Japanese military administration (1942-45), Australia - military administration (1945), Australia - civil administration (1945-47), Australia/New Zealand/Great Britain “Trusteeship” (1947-68).

France and Indonesia. From this tangled web of boundaries, territories and cultural regions, fourteen new and eight still dependent nations were created.

These new entities were left a legacy of centralised foreign government, foreign languages, elites often not based on the previously existing clans, totems, genealogies or alliances, and urban centres which previously had not existed or were merely villages with no particular over-riding status. The dilemma of colonisation was the attempt by metropolitan powers to achieve the unattainable balance between promoting European exploitation and safe-guarding indigenous interests. The British Governor of Fiji, JB Thurston, parodied his own position when he noted that “Sir, the mission of the civilised man to the semi-savage is pretty much the same all over the world. It is to over-reach him in business and overcome him in war”.⁴ Colonial regimes had to be cost-effective yet actively protecting the interests of their settler societies and metropolitan investors and at the same time paternalistic towards their colonial subjects. However, there are difficulties generalising across the Pacific due to variations in the relative sizes of settler, indigenous and temporary (and permanent) imported worker populations, the varying intensity of resource exploitation and the degree of impact of direct central authority on dispersed regions, districts and communities. For those that have achieved independence the end of colonial rule also spans a thirty year period in which significant domestic, regional and international events influenced unevenly the nature of each nation’s transition period. There were pre-independence events which were embarrassing to colonial administrations and which might be said to signal later rebellious, anti-colonial and pro-independence campaigns. These may also be cited to demonstrate the agency of Pacific Island peoples over their own destinies despite being nominally under one or other European flag. Other events demonstrate the pervasiveness of global forces which continued to influence the lives and destinies of Pacific Island peoples.

Government, the path to self-government and finally independence, is associated with the competition inherent in the expansion of Euro-American colonialism, and secondly with the period of decolonisation in world history associated with the granting of independence to former colonies. For Pacific Island peoples, discussions on *government* and *nation* therefore focus on the meaning of the terms *colonialism*, *self-government*, *sovereignty* and *independence*. There is a distinction between “the state” and the “government” (called the “administration” in USA and former-USA entities).⁵ The phrase “the state” has a philosophical use and refers to the legal systems, rights, rules and regulations which are applied to bring order and legitimise control over society. The term “government” has a broader application, usually referring to the votes and proceedings of parliament or legislature and the activities of the bureaucracy, offices and departments which administer the laws passed by parliaments. However, all these roles may at times be associated with the term “government”.

⁴ Cited in, Scarr D, 1990, *op.cit.*, p.234

⁵ For example, students are alerted to this distinction by Terrance Wesley-Smit, 1999, “Changing patterns of power” in a 1999 text book, Rapaport M, ed, *The Pacific islands; environment and society*, Honolulu, Bess Press, p.150.

The term “nation” has a post-independence application and although in common usage internationally, and by historians usually in the context of a process of “nationalism”, it is less likely to occur in normal conversation or be used as a form of identification by Pacific Island peoples.

In newly independent and geographically dispersed communities the term “government” is associated with distant, urban, western-influenced leadership, mismanagement, corruption, personal and petty political squabbling and deeper ethnic and geographic divisions. Very few Pacific Islanders would relate “government” to their personal identity. “The Government” is rarely spoken of as “*our* government” or “*my* government”. First and foremost people are from their mother or father’s lineage; they are a speaker of a particular language, a member of a clan or a resident of a district or village. Their totem - for example, ant, eel, turtle - is more significant than the national flag, hymn or constitution. In Kiribati, teachers use the story of a worker arriving on Banaba in the 1920s to emphasise that i-Kiribati related to their home island rather than to their imposed colonial (and later national) boundaries. When workers landing on Banaba were asked to move into two groups, those from Gilberts (now Kiribati) and those from Tuvalu, the man didn’t move. When asked why, he said he came from Temwangaua on Mwaiana, and that he knew of the atolls called Mwakin, Abemama and Tamana - but he replied, “Gilberts, where’s that ?”⁶ As Malama Meleisea points out in regard to colonial rule in Samoa, like the i-Kiribati from Temwangaua on Mwaiana, Samoans were aware of but not affected by European presence and activities centred around Apia.⁷ The “government” was somewhere distant, somewhere else. However, in the post-independence era, Pacific Island peoples are asked to identify with this wider entity - to vote, to be aware of national issues and policies, to be proud to be independent, to put aside long-standing hatreds and rivalries, to be a nation, and to be a member of the regional and international community of nations.

The meaning of citizenship is rarely debated. It is a right that is assumed. (or is put aside as something only to do with “government”.) The need to be a responsible voter, to keep abreast of current issues and to put the nation before personal or other allegiances are ideas that are promoted by education, speeches and national celebrations. However, “citizenship” and its double-edged rights and responsibilities are new to most Islanders. It is a civic role and identity which is both unevenly and irregularly promoted, maintained and applied.

The triple concerns of the 20th C

The historian Kerry Howe argued that Melanesia up to the 1970s, “building on its nineteenth century experiences and especially the labour trade, thus became dominated by the triple concerns of plantation

⁶ Told by Tarakai of Butaritari, cited in a booklet prepared for student use by teachers in Kiribati, on *Nationalism and decolonisation*, (anon., nd., Ministry of Education, Tarawa, Kiribati)

⁷ Meleisea M, 1987, *Lagaga; a short history of Western Samoa*, Suva, Institute of Pacific Studies Press; Meleisea M, 1987, *The making of modern Samoa; traditional authority and colonial administration in the history of Western Samoa*, Suva, Institute of Pacific Studies Press

economies, the role of the Christian churches and European administration”.⁸ These are historically important themes but they are not as relevant as the Pacific moves from the last quarter of the 20th into the 21st century. The important influences on the daily lives of Pacific Island peoples today are the decisions which allow them to keep on “just living our lives”, meaning that local, traditional and personal choices (such as feasting, status and rank and respect for ancestors) are of paramount importance. Pacific Island peoples are also being asked to pay attention and in some cases are demanding, an active role in the centralised governing of their nation. To those seeking a voice in national and provincial decision-making, government has been recognised as a powerful influence over most aspects of daily life. Although there is nominally a widespread participation in government through elections and national celebrations, the extent of public, active, informed involvement in national policy making is limited. Despite this gap, all Pacific Islanders are asked to identify themselves as “citizens”. They are being reminded in many ways that they belong to a nation. European administration has been replaced by self-government and independence. Christianity and labour (internally and externally in the salaried workforce) are still important. But, the dominating “triple concerns” might now be listed as “just living our lives”, nation-making and government.

My nation ?

Western Samoans were the first Pacific Island people to regain their sovereignty.⁹ In 1962, New Zealand officials departed and Western Samoa became independent. It could be argued that Western Samoans never lost their sovereignty because the *fa’a Samoa* continued to dominate their lives. The New Zealand flag that once flew in Apia was replaced by the new flag of independent Western Samoa in 1962, but the speeches, offices and flag raising in Apia during German and then New Zealand rule had been consciously relegated to distant “government business” and ignored by Samoans actively following the *fa’a Samoa* and living in villages under their own councils (the *Faipule*, *Tumua* and *Pule*) scattered across the Samoan Islands.

But in the 1990s, after thirty years of independence, elections in Samoa are openly contested, parties rise and fall and new policies are devised, thrown out and others implemented with regularity and Samoans do identify personally with their nation. To emphasise this they recently dropped the “Western” from their name to become just “Samoa”. This would suggest that Samoans have integrated the *fa’a Samoa* into the twentieth century idea of centralised, democratic and representative parliamentary government.

⁸ Howe KR, 1984, *Where the waves fall; a new South Sea Islands history from first settlement to colonial rule*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, p.343

⁹ It is often claimed that Tonga was the only Pacific entity to avoid colonial rule. However, the terms of the Treaty of Friendship in 1900 and the Supplementary Agreement of 1905 ensured that British authority remained influential in Tongan politics. The British Consul and Agent, for example, exerted considerable influence over domestic affairs and decision making. The Tongan-British relationship ended in 1970 and Tonga resumed full sovereignty. See, Wood-Ellem E, 1999, *Queen Salote of Tonga; The story of an era 1900-1965*, Auckland, Auckland University Press.

However, questions could be asked about the other early nations to gain independence such as Nauru (1968), Fiji (1970) and other Island peoples who took control and created “nations” as the colonial rulers left. There are doubts about when the idea of the nation of Palau, of Kosrae, of PNG or of Kiribati began to be discussed. The leaders, elites and departing metropolitan powers who promoted and benefited from the creation of a nation are well known, but less well known are the processes by which the nation was created geographically (by red lines and boundaries), politically (by houses of parliament and bureaucracies) and symbolically (by flags, hymns and insignia). Much less well known is the extent to which citizens identified with and understood what had occurred. In PNG, newly recruited policemen, for example, often thought they were working for the “government” represented immediately by the presence of “kiaps”, but they never thought they were serving their nation. They were workers, policemen and obeyed European officers - the state and nation were ill-defined or unknown.¹⁰ In the period of transition to citizenship and nation status there are also gaps in the historical record on how citizenship was to be defined and who was to be responsible for creating and maintaining national cohesion and unity.

When a person sits at an SPC, SPREP, SPOCTU, USP, PIANGO or Pacific Forum meeting, they are identified by their “nation”. This is a useful and effective method for organising a large number of people into a list of speakers and order of importance. If an individual person travels overseas their passport identifies them by their nation, but on what other occasions would people want to use this form of identity?

People know the symbols of their nation status - their national song, national emblem and national flag - but what does *citizenship*, *government* and *nation* mean to ordinary men and women not employed by or professionally involved in the processes of government and administration? The historian Father Fran Hezel has asserted that towards the end of the 19th century, Micronesians “had just passed through troubled but exciting times and had emerged with their lives, their land (regardless of whose flag flew over their islands) and their social institutions rather well intact”.¹¹ They had remained Kosraean or Yapese rather than becoming German, Spanish or Japanese. Their “nation” was their community and was not defined by the red line drawn on the map or the flag flying in Lelu or Kolonia. This interpretation would probably apply across the north and south Pacific at the turn of the century in 1900. Thirty years later, in regard to Malaita Island in the Solomon Islands, the anthropologist Roger Keesing asserted that there was “striking juxtaposition between coastal villagers staunchly committed to fundamentalist Christianity, and their kin and neighbours in the mountains defiantly holding to the religion and ways of their ancestors”.¹² He argued that fifty years later in the 1980s this cleavage still existed. It still does. But Malaitans are also citizens of a modern state, travel overseas on “Solomon Islands” passports, vote for a national government, own land and businesses on other islands and have married partners from both inside and outside the Solomon Islands.¹³ For many Pacific Islanders the boundaries of identity in

¹⁰ See, Kituai A, 1998, *My gun, My Brother; The world of the Papua New Guinea colonial Police 1920-1960*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press

¹¹ Hezel F, 1983, *op.cit.*, UH Press, Honolulu, p. 318

¹² Keesing R, 1989, “Sins of a mission; Christian life as Kawaio traditionalist ideology” in Jolly M and McIntyre M, eds, *Family and gender in the Pacific*, CUP, Melbourne, p.193

¹³ In mid-1999 a civil disturbance on Guadalcanal, possibly with political origins, erupted in a violent Malaitan-Guadalcanal conflict in Honiara. This led to martial law being declared and the departure of many Malaitans back to their home island of Malaita.

language groups, geographic districts, provinces and nations have become increasingly blurred and indistinct.

UN Resolution 1514

Not many Pacific Islanders or other colonised peoples were aware of a resolution passed in New York in 1960 which gave the international stamp of approval for the end of the colonial era. United Nations Resolution No 1514 stated that immediate steps be taken to transfer all powers and grant complete independence to colonial peoples, without any conditions or reservations, in accordance with their freely expressed will and desire. However, in a study of the path towards self-government and independence in Western Samoa, the historian JW Davidson, argued that “the case for independence rests on two premises; that the people of a country desire to control their own affairs and that they possess the capacity to do so”.¹⁴ Samoans had openly desired the return of sovereignty and the departure of New Zealand officials starting in the 1920s. They gained independence finally in 1962. In Vanuatu the first appeal for independence from the British and French condominium was lodged with the UN by the *Nagriamel* movement in the 1960s. Vanuatu finally gained independence in 1980. In both cases there was a desire for independence, at least by some segments of the population. But as the historian Brij Lal notes in his study of the path to independence in Fiji, not many Fijians knew of, or understood what the transition from colonial to independent status might mean. He argued that “Fiji had traversed the road to independence rather hurriedly and somewhat secretly. The public were never informed much less consulted in advance about the agreements that took Fiji into independence. No real attempt had been made to build a solid basis of public support for the new order; the whole process being engineered from the top”.¹⁵ This suggests that in many cases in the Pacific, there may have been a desire for independence, but it was not universal, and may indeed have been limited to small, young, urban, western-educated elite and a few traditional leaders who had been closely associated with the colonial rulers. Yet independence did come to Fiji and all Fijians were asked to quickly acknowledge their own indigenous government in Suva, and to accept recognisable but uncertain elite of leaders and decision makers, now armed with a new range of powers. The slowness of the spread of the idea of Fiji (as a nation) and the idea of government (rather than colonial administration) might be judged by the 17-year honeymoon period and then 12 years of unrest, coups and re-writing of the constitution which have occurred since 1987.

Judgements vary on the post-independence capacity and competence of the Pacific’s new nations, but generally Pacific Island nations successfully managed the transition, despite the lack of training and preparation offered by their colonial rulers. Even in the case where traditional leaders maintained their existing authority and position in the cross over from colonial to independent rule they were often ill-prepared for the challenges of the new era. An exception was Queen Salote of Tonga. She admitted she was unprepared and lacked training for the position of supreme authority she was expected to assume

¹⁴ Davidson JW, 1967, *Samoa mo Samoa, the emergence of the modern state of Western Samoa*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, p. 415

¹⁵ Lal B, 1992, *Broken waves; a history of the Fiji Islands in the twentieth century*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, p.216.

when her father, the King, died in 1918. However, she became a respected and modernising monarch and led Tonga through the many changes of the 20th century.¹⁶ In Fiji, the opinion of Ratu Lala Sukuna, however, was rejected when he suggested that traditional chiefs should stick to traditional cultural and customary matters and keep out of politics because they were not trained or well versed in the tasks needed to govern an independent and modern Fiji.

The impetus for the transition in the north and south Pacific therefore came from three overlapping directions. Some nations were created due to active pro-independence campaigns; others were given their independence as the result of initiatives by the colonial power; and others chose self-government (and not full independence) in a continuing relationship with the former colonial power.¹⁷ The push towards decolonisation was also influenced by the creation of western educated elites, the Christian churches, the interregnum of the WWII, international pressure from the UN and the example of other newly independent nations.

The transition to nation status involved a move away from a strict identity with language group, clan and village and the recognition by ordinary people of their (compulsory) citizenship and their new loyalty to an (over-riding) nationality. This transition period is typically summed by phrases such as “Nauru got its independence in 1968”. But it might be the case that the twelve tribes of Nauru did not know what they “got” and had no sense of participation in what they were getting. This interpretation of the transition period suggests a lack of public involvement and association with the move to independence. The gap between a narrow, urban and informed desire for independence, and a wider population, at best partially acknowledging that changes were afoot, might apply to the situation in the immediate post-independence period. There is no question about nation status - attendance at the Pacific Forum, SPC, Pacific Games and Pacific Arts Festival, national holidays and regular elections remind people clearly and regularly who they are, and they play out roles in these arenas as the citizens of nations, controlled by centralised bureaucracies and ruled by their elected representatives and politicians. But, after independence there has been in some instances an embarrassingly slow process of inclusion and many Pacific island peoples are still not fully aware of, or given the full opportunity to exercise their rights (and benefits) and responsibilities (duties) as citizens of the nation. Independence should be celebrated and commemorated as a period of struggle and the reclaiming of traditional sovereignty, but it should also be interrogated and scrutinised in order to find the weaknesses, gaps and exclusions because this will alert the current generation to tasks which need attention in the present era.

Nations; 1963-1994 and still waiting

¹⁶ See, Wood-Ellem E, 1999, *Queen Salote of Tonga; The story of an era 1900-1965*, Auckland, Auckland University Press. (Chps 1-4)

¹⁷ Category 1 (from internal campaigns) - Western Samoa, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Vanuatu; Category 2 (initiative by colonial power) - Fiji, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and PNG; Category 3 (self-governing/independent but with continuing association) - Cook Islands, Niue, FSM, CNMI. See, Naidu V, 1992, “The path to independence”, in Quanchi M and Adams R, eds, *Culture contact in the Pacific*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press.

The successful transition from colonial to independent status in the Pacific came late by world standards. In 1960, thirty new nations around the world had rapidly gained their independence, but there were still seventy colonial and trusteeship territories. Perhaps in embarrassment at this slowness, in 1961 the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation was established and in the next two decades special UN “Visiting Missions” or delegations monitored the timetables laid down by the colonial powers for the self-government and eventual independence of their dependencies and territories. By 1980, the UN had adopted a resolution that called for colonialism in all forms to be eradicated by the year 2000. This appeal has not been successful. After Western Samoa (1962), the Cook Islands (1965) and Nauru (1968), the 1970s saw a rush of new nations in the Pacific; Fiji and Tonga in 1970, PNG (1975), CNMI, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands (1978), Marshall Islands, FSM and Kiribati (1979) and Vanuatu (1980). Palau (1994) was the last of the former TTPI entities to gain independence. The list of states in varying degrees of foreign control is equally long;

- Tokelau, Niue and Cook Islands (NZ),
- Rapanui (Chile),
- French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna and New Caledonia¹⁸ (France),
- Guam, CNMI, American Samoa and Hawaii (USA)
- West Papua (*Irian Jaya*, Indonesia)

The movement towards self-government

In 1971, JW Davidson, the founding Professor of Pacific History at the Australian National University, argued that examining the world context and domestic metropolitan settings was the key to understanding the process of decolonisation.¹⁹ He was writing when only Samoa, Nauru, Tonga and Fiji had gained independence. He acknowledged local forces but emphasised the global anti-colonial movement rather than the agency of Pacific Islanders asserting and negotiating their own return to sovereignty. His examination of the agents of change in the then four independent nations focussed on “top-down” history, referring to political parties, elites, constitutions, Chief Ministers, cabinets and Prime Ministers. There was no mention of the level of involvement of ordinary Fijians, Samoans, Tongans and Nauruans in the calls for change, negotiations over electoral rolls, education, rural and family policy and the nexus between borrowed political systems and inherited traditions and customs. Regionally he referred to the role of the South Pacific Commission, but not embryonic South Pacific Forum. This reflected his view that decolonisation was a global phenomenon, applied locally by the development of central institutions, decision-making processes and leadership at a national level.

¹⁸ Under the “Noumea Accord” of 1998, New Caledonia was granted a greater degree of internal autonomy with the election of its own Congress in 1999 and a change of territorial status. IKt is now a *Pays d’Outre Mer* (French Overseas Country).

¹⁹ Davidson JW, 1971, “The decolonisation of Oceania”, *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol 6

Thirty years later, historians continue to follow a similar approach. Looking back over thirty-seven years of decolonisation, one historian has declared that the “critical variable was the interests of the colonial power” and repeated a colleagues opinion that the greater the strategic value the less the likelihood of quickly gaining independence.²⁰ This is an interpretation which places the move to self government and independence mostly outside the ability of islanders to exert any agency in their own fate and leads to a description of the path to self government and independence viewed from the “top down”. Independence may have been orchestrated from above, but other historians now wonder what ordinary people were doing and how they were involved - a “history from below” approach to the past. The “Close-up” program in USA-flag entities addressed this by creating several categories in the timelines included in the student workbooks for the “Cultural profile” program material.²¹ The timeline categories - Culture, Economy, Government and History - direct students attention to events affecting ordinary citizens such as the opening of picture theatres, art galleries, restaurants, schools, cooperatives and bowling alleys, alongside the political turning points and key leaders who shaped and guided the nation and the move towards independence.

Pacific Island peoples had several huge obstacles to overcome before they could assume control of the centralised system of authority which had been established under colonial rule. First was the racism and paternalism of the colonial rulers. The colonial administrator, and later historian, Harry Maude argued in 1952 that the South Pacific Commission should take on the task of helping Islanders preserve their own histories and traditions in the face of encroaching westernisation. A metropolitan Commissioner replied; “feed and clothe, coset and pamper your dependent subjects if you will, but do not, that is if you wish them to remain dependent, assist them to recapture a pride in their own country and ancestral heritage”.²² Challenging those asking for the full return of sovereignty were others who saw stability and security in the continuation of colonial rule. They wanted to maintain the institutions, positions and status that had indeed been created by colonial rule, but which were believed to be, or were promoted as “traditional.” Under British colonial rule in Fiji, the ascendancy of Ratu Sir George Cakobau as supreme chief, the creation of the Council of Chiefs, the adoption of district (*tikina*) boundaries and practices of land tenure had been adopted and argued for because they were based on various Fiji practices and customs. But these were neither common across the archipelago nor initially accepted until given the weight of British colonial approval or implementation. Today they are seen as “traditional”.

There were some indigenous practices of long-standing legitimacy carried over to the post-colonial period. For example, in Samoa the four main leadership roles in the new nation were taken by the four leading traditional title holders, a continuation of the *fa’a Samoa* and based on respect for the four traditional lineages that made up the single *tafa’ifa* title. Independent nations also willingly carried over from the colonial period the political and legal systems of their colonial rulers and in a few cases, chose to maintain a degree of dependency on their former colonial rulers. Niue, for example, prefers to be known as “self governing in association with New Zealand” rather than as “independent”, and in the north

²⁰ Wesley-Smith T, 1999, *op.cit.*, p.149

²¹ See the student books in the “Civic Achievement Award program” published for Palau, Guam, CNMI, FSM and American Samoa (1995 - 1998). These were developed by teachers in the respective entities, and staff from the Close-Up program.

²² Maude H, 1971, “Pacific history; past, present and future”, *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol 6, p.23

Pacific, varying “compacts” of free association, rather than full independence, were negotiated in order to maintain links between the new nations and the USA.

In the post-independence period the Pacific’s new nations have managed with varying degrees of openness and success to localise the systems and institutions they borrowed from their colonial rulers. A uniquely “Melanesian” variation of the British Westminster system of parliamentary and executive administration might be said, for example, to operate in Papua New Guinea. Although inadequately prepared and faced by many urgent issues, Papua New Guinea’s first national parliament was “stunningly successful”.²³ Independence across the Pacific in this sense might not have been such a turning point with pre-independence “traditions” (inherited and invented) and institutions (educations systems, Councils of Chiefs, bureaucracies) merely carried over into the post-independence period. The personnel changed, but even this had been occurring as localisation and self-government were implemented prior to the actual day of independence. Many leaders merely moved, on the appointed day or first post-independence election into roles directly linked to their pre-independence position. Head Chiefs and Chief Ministers including Iremia Tabai, Hammer deRoburt, Michael Somare and Solomon Mamaloni in Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea and the Solomons respectively, became the first Prime Minister.

Belief in and active acknowledgment of tradition is part of normal political practice in the post-independence era and politicians manipulate “tradition” quite openly for its power to influence voters, cabinet selection and disbursement of scarce government funds.²⁴ The pre-independence link between Christian Churches and colonial governments also continued, though less significantly in the post-colonial period. The tradition unconsciously passed on from ancestors and followed as a matter of “custom” is now distinct from the “tradition” consciously promoted in the present. In using the terms *tradition* (in English), *kastom* or *pasim tumbuna* in Melanesian pidgins, *vaka vanua* in Fiji and *fa’a Samoa* in Samoan, Margaret Jolly and Nicholas Thomas point out the difficulty of distinguishing between unconscious cultural inheritance and the self-conscious proclamation of the past in the present.²⁵ Colonial rule therefore may be seen to have created, for example, the entity now known as “Fiji” and colonial rule clearly had “profoundly influenced Fijian’s perception of their traditional policy and sustaining beliefs”.²⁶ In French Polynesia, Colin Newbury concluded that the colonial period was “a source of two far-reaching changes; one in the structure of French Polynesian society and the other in its total dependency on overseas markets for investment and trade”.²⁷ In the former German territories in the

²³ Nero K, 1998, “The material world remade” in Denoon D, ed, *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.360.

²⁴ For example, in the 1992 Papua New Guinea elections, a procession in which a politician visiting a village was carried aloft in a sedan chair on the shoulders of several men, was declared to a “traditional” form of respect and greeting, and politicians regularly dressed in *bilas* for photo-opportunities’ and then re-dressed immediately into their Port Moresby style sunglasses, shirts and trousers.

²⁵ Jolly M and Thomas N, 1992, “Introduction” in *The politics of tradition in the Pacific* (published as special issue of *Oceania*, Vol 62, No 4) p.241

²⁶ Clammer J, 1973, “Colonialism and the perception of tradition in Fiji” in Asad T, ed, *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*, London, Ithaca, p.219

²⁷ Newbury C, 1980, *Tahiti Nui; change and survival in French Polynesia 1767-1945*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press p. 269

north Pacific the return of sovereignty in the 20th century faced other problems, with the Micronesian population of 50573 out-numbered by the 51861 Japanese immigrants who had arrived after the takeover of 1914.

The link between the maintenance of colonies and the expansion of global capitalism is a close one. Post-independence governments had to accommodate and where possible attempt to control this link between capitalism and colonialism (and neo-colonialism). Nauru, for example, celebrates “Handover Day”, the day when the nationalised Nauru Phosphate Commission took over from the colonial British Phosphate Commission. In the 19th Century and early 20th century, a new level of international capitalist competition, exploitation of raw materials and maintenance of imperial spheres of interest affected how Pacific Island peoples acknowledged their central government and later how traditional leaders and western-educated elites formulated the vision which saw them call for an end to colonial rule. Locally, a changed racial composition, invented or imposed traditions, and other factors also affected the response to “post-colonial “government”. The complex relationship between globalisation and the growth of localised political structures raises questions about the level of public involvement or entanglement in the decolonisation process. During the colonial period the majority of the population were not involved in the mechanics of “government” - elections, franchise, political parties, policy-making, national and international negotiation or legislative and advisory councils and committees. “Government” in the colonial period was not accountable to the people. This changed as nations rapidly moved towards independence day and then the first post-independence elections and setting of national goals and policies. Dispersed communities were drawn into a national network and were asked to act as responsible voters and citizens of the nation. Karen Nero notes that in the changeover period, and indeed continuing long after independence, this was a major task. She notes that to be “credible as successor governments, anti-colonial movements had to overcome localism and tribalism and forge political unity on an unprecedented scale”.²⁸

For some historians of this era, colonialism was replaced by neo-colonialism. The phrase “entanglement” is used by Nicholas Thomas to highlight the historical debate between those who worry about international inequalities and who see colonial peoples and local social systems influenced by world systems, and those who seek to highlight agency and the way local people appropriated western ends for their own means and asserted (relatively) their cultural, community and group autonomy.²⁹ The concept of entanglement applies historically to both the pre and post-independence periods and provides a useful historiography pathway for combating the narrowness of top-down narratives.

For schools - what is important

²⁸ Nero K, 1998, “The material world remade” in Denoon D, ed, *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.359

²⁹ Thomas N, 1991, *Entangled objects; exchange, material culture and colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.207

Events which occurred prior to a student's birth or youth but which are recent enough to have contemporary political importance, which are the basis for their nationality but are also subject to considerable myth-making, expurgation, revisionism and blatant lies, and which are often vaguely remembered by their parents and grand-parents but which are central truths in their nation's published history and social memory means that the study of government and the path to self-government and independence are likely to be either distant and mundane, or exceedingly sensitive and personal.

Students should learn about the recent past. Students should know why they celebrate Handover Day, Independence Day, FSM Day, Queens Birthday, ANZAC Day and other celebratory and commemorative occasions of a nation-making character. Students should be made aware of and be engaged in the unravelling of the complex events (and hidden voices) surrounding independence, nation status and the practice of government. This history should be celebratory and acknowledge the roles of men and women involved in the transition or return of sovereignty. But, these histories should also be critical, informed investigations of what might have really happened. Stories of the achievement of independence should be told and retold, enjoyed and converted into murals, posters, films and festivals, but the stories should not be taken for granted as statements of truth about what really happened. This type of investigative approach, based on a rigorous pedagogical and ideological position, should determine the way the content (listed below) is presented to students.

The following list is a suggestion for the appropriate content of a study of the path to self government, independence and the creation of the nation.

Content

Suggested topics, themes and inquiries

Loss of sovereignty

Annexation, Protectorate, Colony,

But wasn't that just a flag somewhere else

Geography

population distribution

familiarity with western models and ways

centralising and divisive factors

urban centres

Colonial rule

structure

impact on the whole population

elites and leaders

Political parties

The end of colonialism

the actual day, what happened

Meaning of the new names, symbols, flags, hymns

role of the UN

remnants of colonial rule

continuing association with former rulers

Decolonisation in Africa, Asia and Latin America

Decolonisation in other Pacific neighbours

The symbols of Unity

Parliament - meaning to ordinary people

Events - current meaning of celebrations/commemorations

Institutions/Agencies - which promote unity and national identity

Leaders/chiefs/rulers - who were they?

pre-independence

immediate post-independence

present era - links to earlier periods

Traditions - actual and invented

Nation-making

The global context

Case study - Indonesia, Japan, Italy

Self government

Advisory, Legislative Councils

Nominated and elected leaders

political education

Independence - pushed or abandoned?

Capacity for Leadership

Urban, western-educated elites

Chiefs, and Chiefs-in-politics

Political parties - new (and links to former parties)

Elections - results over time

Changes of government

Kastom, Culture, Tradition and Democracy - do they merge, mix easily?

How do I identify myself?

Conclusion

It is interesting to compare how historians have interpreted the decolonisation period and the creation of independent, post-colonial government in the Pacific. In 1971, JW Davidson, as a participant in the constitutional development and pre-independence planning for several Pacific entities, had the advantage of writing just as nations were making the transition to independence.³⁰ Davidson's analysis and description was also a prescription - suggesting to his readers the path ahead for other Pacific entities. Davidson alerted his readers to the "actions and aspirations" of Islanders but focussed on the importance of achieving benchmark international membership of the United Nations, the British Commonwealth and the annual meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers. His view of decolonisation focussed on the slow emergence of key leaders and elites, the lack of a sense of national unity, poor tertiary education and training, the peaceful and orderly nature of the transition period and the importance of "turning points" such as the visiting UN Visiting Mission in PNG (1962), and in the north Pacific, the Solomon Report (1963) and the Future Political Status Commission (1967). Davidson does not mention West Papua/Irian Jaya and the South Pacific Forum.

Twenty-eight years later, In 1999, Terrance Wesley-Smith, a historian looking back over the nearly-completed decolonisation process and wanting to provide undergraduate readers with a general survey of the period, chose to direct reader's attention to different aspects of the transition.³¹ He highlighted the fragmented and politically fragile nature of the nations today rather than the sequence of events which led to their independence day. He alerted readers to the imposed nature of the "nation-state" which the colonisers left behind and the internal disruptions of subsequent pro-democracy movements (in Tonga),

³⁰ Davidson JW, 1971, "The decolonisation of Oceania", *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol 6

³¹ The following paragraph is based the views offered by Wesley Smith T, 1999, *op.cit.*, pp.150-153

rebellion (in Bougainville), suffrage changes (in Samoa) and coups (in Fiji). He tells a negative story of urbanised decision making, disinterested villagers, problems and disruptions, weak states and emphasises in the case of Fiji, that these challenges have made “a single over-arching Fijian nation more difficult than ever to imagine, while centralised state structures survive essentially intact”. In the case of Vanuatu he repeats Van Trease’s view that the challenge is to forge “a viable ni-Vanuatu identity out of myriad competing local and regional boundaries based on vernacular language and *kastom*”. Wesley-Smith concludes that difficulties confront those attempting to transform indigenous cultural practices so they match the economic and political needs of the modern nation-state. He highlights a failure of leadership to engineer fundamental social and economic changes. JW Davidson would probably have not foreseen or agreed with the assertion that these are the proper roles of government for the independent nations in the Pacific. Davidson was concerned with the creation of post-colonial political entities and saw the transition period as being successfully managed by Island peoples. Wesley-Smith sees the period differently, focussing more on national identity, the conceptualisation of the nation and events which challenge this invented unity.

For students who are developing a deeper understanding of, and the skills to describe, their own “nation” and government, the differences in historical interpretation evident in these two examples should be a warning that the past is indeed a contested place. The struggle to achieve self-government, to close the colonial era and to gain independence was remarkable, but it is challenged by the following complex set of circumstances in which a struggle took place to construct and popularise a social and national memory of heroic events, to legitimise and link the nation today with the events of the past and to place the national before personal, clan and language loyalties. The students post-colonial “government” and the maintenance of independence and citizenship may be the focus for the discipline of Politics, but Historians have a key role to play in alerting future and current citizens to the competing versions they will hear, see and read about past and present good government.