

Migration and Social Transformation in the Contemporary Pacific

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Abstract

The current pattern of migration in the Pacific and its consequences are described set within the context of the previous four periods of migration in the Pacific.

Pacific Migration in Historical Perspective

One of the issues which confuses much discussion of migration in the Pacific is the common conception that migration is a relatively new phenomenon which has been occurring only since the Second World War. In fact, of course, migration in the Pacific has a much longer, and more varied history, than that. If we are to understand what makes contemporary migration different, and particularly significant, we need to be able to see it in a longer historical context. The migration which has occurred since WWII is, in fact, only the latest of five periods of migration in the Pacific, each of which has resulted in some level of social and environmental transformation of the Pacific. It is useful to review these briefly to provide a context for discussion of the impact of this most recent wave.

The First Wave: Austronesian Exploration and Settlement

The first, and arguably most significant, was the exploration and settlement of the Pacific by the Austronesian people and their descendants. This episodic west-east movement, described so comprehensively Howe and others in *Vaka Moana: the Voyages of the Ancestors*, commenced some 40,000 years ago and ended with the settlement of the easternmost islands of the Pacific, Rapanui, some 800 years ago (Howe, 2006, p.128).

That migration was significant because human populations brought the flora, fauna, and technology which established the bases of the unique ecosystems and societies which developed in various parts of Oceania. Without these introductions, the inhospitable islands, with very limited

flora and fauna, could not have sustained human populations. While subsequent waves of Austronesian movement within already discovered areas, and return voyaging between island groups, added periodically to these factor endowments, the basic parameters of development were established by these first explorers who brought the food plants and animals which were essential to colonisation of the region (Howe, 2006, p.128).

The Second Wave: Spanish Interest

The second period of migration commenced with the entry of Spanish and Portuguese expeditions into the Pacific in the early 16th century (Chapell, 1999, p.65). The period of exploration, driven by two ideologies of the day: imperial expansion and religious expansion, sought to find direct routes to Asia and its riches so that they could bypass Middle Eastern middlemen who controlled the trade. This imperial expansion eventually resulted in the establishment of a trade involving silver from Mexico and luxury goods from the Philippines (Chapell, 1999, p.65). The expedition was also significant because it led to a brief attempt at permanent settlement and colonisation by Europeans in Guam in what is now known as Micronesia. The settlement by Jesuit priests, with an armed escort to support the conversion process, commenced in 1668 lasted only for a very short period before the Spanish withdrew, but not before the settlement and wars between supporters and opponents of the Spanish presence, resulted in the loss of 90% of the Chamorro population whom they sought to convert to Catholicism (Chapell, 1999, pp.65, 135).

The settlement is significant because the tragic encounter reflected the cultural gulfs between the peoples who confronted one another and which would continue to bedevil later contacts. The deaths from combat injuries, introduced diseases and forced relocation foreshadowed the shape of later encounters between the two worlds. (Salmond, 1991, p.29; Salmond, 2003 p.26; Chapell, 1999, p.65). Its significance lies in the fact that Europe became aware of the Pacific, and of its 'need' for conversion and salvation, and ensured that it was only a matter of time before a larger, more significant, European sustained interest and presence commenced.

The Third Wave: European Trade and Settlement

The third wave commenced in the mid-18th century with the arrival of more people from Europe, driven by one of three powerful ideologies. These were imperial powers' relentless drive for new territory; capitalism's relentless search for new resources; and the Christian religion's relentless search for new souls. European nations, European businesses, and European churches competed with one another to expand their reach into the Pacific. This resulted initially in temporary contact and later, as competition intensified, in permanent settlement.

Later in this period, as colonial capital seeking ever cheaper more readily controlled labour started to recruit from China and India, new people from beyond the region started to settle in the Pacific. While many subsequently returned to the places from which they were recruited, others chose to remain and establish themselves in the Pacific.

In the same period, Pacific populations began to move round in the Pacific again. Some moved involuntarily as slaves (Maude, 1981, p.116), some moved as labour for new plantations, and others moved as missionaries taking the gospel to the people of the Pacific (Gunson, 1978, p.106; Crocombe, 1982, p.129; Gunson, 1997, p.105).

This period was significant because colonialism, commerce, and Christianity had profound and lasting effects on the worldviews and lifestyles of Pacific societies. They would introduce new systems of currency, new forms of literacy and of numeracy, the creation of markets for land, labour and surpluses, and new notions of private property which were essential to the incorporation of these Pacific economies into the world economy. The period was also marked by ongoing tensions between people in contact (Salmond, 1991, p.29), and by a gradual decrease in tension which accompanied an equally gradual increase in mutual understanding (Howe, 1988, p.2).

Fourth Wave: Increasing Population Mobility

The fourth period, comprehensively documented by Howe et al. (Howe, 1994, p.3), commenced at the beginning of the 20th century and was marked by increasing mobility of both Pacific and European populations and the consolidation of settlements of Chinese and Indian labour in the Pacific.

Pacific people moved as they became increasingly involved in missionary activity (Crocombe, 1982, p.129;), as migrant labourers in plantations in the Islands and in Australia (Chapell, 1999, p.65), in trade as sailors, and as they intermarried with Europeans and began to establish small enclaves in the countries around the edge of the Pacific. European populations continued to move into the Pacific in larger numbers as a consequence of the intensification of missionary activity, commercial activity and colonial activity. Some labour recruited earlier from China and India remained and settled in the Pacific islands and formed small but significant enclaves which would over time become more significant.

The significance of this period lay in the consolidation of colonial power, the extension of western models of governance, and the formation of the various multiethnic populations which would become the foundations for nations later.

Fifth Wave: Decolonisation and Restructuring

World War II was a watershed in Pacific migration. Large scale contact with the military forces of the US, Japan, Britain and New Zealand had a profound effect on the world views and lifestyles of those Pacific populations which were exposed to them (Chapell, 1999, p.65). It is said to have reawakened an interest among Pacific people in reclamation of autonomy and independence (Howe, 1994, p.3; Chapell, 1999, p.65), and in exploration and settlement of the outer reaches of the Pacific.

The first aspiration gained momentum with successful decolonisations in Africa and in India and led to creation of a series of independent and autonomous states within the Pacific from 1962 on. The increasing speed of decolonisation during this period led to declines in numbers of European colonial administrators and the military forces which had supported them in some parts of the Pacific, while in others, where for imperial reasons decolonisation was resisted; the numbers of Europeans remained significant. Europeans continued to manage the trading operations of companies based in the UK, New Zealand and Australia, and to fill leadership roles in some churches.

But it was the restructuring of the economies at the edge of Oceania which would have the greatest demand for labour and would result in the largest migration of people from Oceania to the states around the rim and

which would have the greatest impact on the contemporary Pacific. It is to this migration which I now turn.

Reorientation

There is a tendency, in Aotearoa at least, to presume that this movement had its greatest impact in the societies to which people from Oceania moved, and to focus primarily on the impact of this migration on the receiving societies. Thus, there is a significant literature which documents the history of Pacific migration to the rim countries and analyses the social, economic, demographic and political ramifications of the movement for the 'receiving' countries. There is a very much smaller literature on the history and ramifications of that movement for the labour-supplying economies.

This focus on the impact of migration on the receiving countries is readily understandable. In the case of Aotearoa, which was one of the most significant receiving countries for migrants from Polynesia, migration is part of our collective experience and consciousness. We are increasingly aware of it because it surfaces regularly in public discourse: in policy debates, which tend to occur around elections, about the demographic, educational, epidemiological, public health, economic and political consequences of this migration, but increasingly at other times.

It is also increasingly a part of our personal experiences: more and more Pacific people become parts of personal social networks and our daily lives as co-workers, co-worshippers, team-mates and spouses.

Redressing the Imbalance

But while this focus is readily understandable, it does distract our attention from the very wide-ranging and significant impacts which this more recent migration has had on the societies and nations from which the Pacific people have come. In an attempt to redress the imbalance, I wish to focus, on four of these: the demographic, social, economic and political impacts which this most recent migration has had on the so-called 'sending societies'.

An Analytical Framework

Sociology offers us a useful framework with which to document and analyse these impacts more systematically: the *comparative method*. This method involves comparing a set of societies which have had access to

opportunities for emigration with a set of societies which have not had opportunities for emigration. When the character and patterns of change, as reflected in a set of key indices, in these two groups of societies are compared over comparable periods of time it is possible to identify some of the consequences of migration.

The Pacific: An Interesting Case

Oceania provides an interesting case for such a comparison since within it are:

- states which have had high levels of emigration over sustained periods of time: Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue
- states which have had lower levels of emigration and over a shorter period of time: Tonga and Fiji
- states which have had virtually no emigration such as Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Kiribas, and Tuvalu.

A comparison of the experiences of these groups allows us to identify the different consequences of migration, and indeed, of different levels of emigration.

What insights might we gain from this approach to the study of migration? In an ideal world this would involve careful comparison of cases: the limits of space mean that we are forced to take a somewhat more schematic approach which will focus on the nature of transformation of those states with higher levels of emigration.

Demographic Impacts

In states with access to migration the loss of large proportions of both males and females in the 19-35 year age group led to a decline in population growth rates.

These population growth rates, which had been increasing steadily as a consequence of improvements in public health, were becoming a matter of concern to the leaders of newly autonomous states, and the emigration was generally regarded as beneficial because it:

- relieved pressure on social provision,
- relieved pressure on economic growth,
- relieved pressure on natural environment.

In the longer term, however, this loss of population and of fertility, had more serious consequences for the small states. The small states lost:

- Loss of reproductive capital, that is the ability to replace population but more serious, was the ...

- Loss of human capital, many of the best educated and most skilled left and could not be readily replaced. There are now cases in which large amounts of human capital are not directly available to these states (Niue: 90% of Niueans live abroad; Samoa: 50% of Samoans live abroad; Fiji: 8% of Fijians live abroad; Solomons: >1% of population abroad).
- Loss of ‘critical mass’ necessary to generate revenue to provide and to justify services,
- Viability of states, as illustrated by the case of Niue which is no longer viable because it cannot sustain itself and the Cook Islands which are rapidly approaching this level.

Social Impacts

If the demographic impacts of emigration were serious, the social impacts were equally serious. Initially, at least, emigration seemed to consolidate tradition. Where families could influence selection of migrants they used their influence to select as migrants those who had demonstrated commitment to traditional institutions in the belief that they could be relied on to support these institutions.

No one could have anticipated the ways in which migration and the remittances which flowed back to the islands could undermine traditional institutions. Migrants, who were now free to remit money and goods to whomsoever they chose, no longer felt compelled to send money to those who had traditionally controlled the village. As migrants chose to send money to directly to parents, rather than chiefs, and to siblings, as well as parents, the distribution of both incomes and power began to shift subtly within both villages and families.

Economic Impacts

As long as migrants continued to feel a part of the community in which they had spent their formative years, they remained committed to the villages and families. Remittances from migrants gave families and villages access to:

- new technologies, which made a variety of activities more efficient and made new sources of income available (chain saw, refrigerator),
- new sources of finance in the form of capital and credit, and
- new human capital in the form of knowledge and advice.

This set of economic ties effectively:

- expanded villages' boundaries, as villages now, effectively, included not only the resident population, but villagers in other places who continued to contribute to the village,
- raised average incomes in villages, as the wages of expatriate villagers were effectively added to those of people residing in the villages,
- restructured the 'village' economy, by effectively expanding the labour market and diversifying the activities from which villages and families derived their incomes,
- redistributed economic risk as the villages incomes were no longer produced in a single location. No hurricane could again devastate a village economy for 12 months, or crop blight reduce village income by 90% as export income produced more distributed, and more resilient, economies.

Political Impacts

In the short term, out-migration had a number of political consequences which suited some politicians well, which may explain why little concern was shown initially for the outflow. Out-migration saw:

- dissidents depart and remain abroad which,
- delayed the emergence of civil society, which
- relieved pressure for political reform.

In the longer term, however, settlement and experience abroad only postponed challenges to established authority. The period abroad produced exposure to and increasing familiarity with:

- new models of political organisation,
- new human rights discourses promoted by international agencies which redefined the nature and foundation of 'rights' which had once been connected with age, genealogy and gender.

This set the stage for the emergence of an increasingly active civil society, in which better educated and informed leaders with increasingly sophisticated arguments supported by sympathetic and well-funded NGOs and NSOs began to challenge governments and tradition. This has become increasingly obvious as the confrontation between:

- advocates of 'individual rights' claiming national constitutions as their authority and advocates of 'collective rights' claiming cultural tradition as the foundation of their authority,

- advocates of 'transparent' technical competence in governance and advocates of the embodiment of tradition and traditional privilege in government.

These tensions have produced growing pressure for political reform which are most evident in recent events in both Tonga and Fiji, but which are also evident to lesser degrees elsewhere in the Pacific.

The Limits of our Vision

Much of the analysis of these trends by academic anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, economists, planners and policy-makers focuses the impact of these factors and changes on 'nations'. These analyses represent nations as 'closed systems'. These have 'bounded':

- national populations,
- national economies,
- national polities and politics, and
- national cultures and societies,

all of which are convenient because they can be, and have been, quantified; related to other entities, and studied.

But, is this the most productive way of understanding what is really happening in the Pacific or does this confine our vision in unhelpful ways? Some argue that the nation as a 'unit of analysis' is in fact a poor reflection of Pacific reality:

- The sociologist Epeli Hau'ofa, in an article entitled '*A Sea of Islands*', suggests that this analysis is problematical and arises from the tendency to consider the sea as something which separates communities rather than something which connects them.
- The demographer Bedford 2007 talks about the 'effective population' of nations which includes not only those who reside in and use the services of a nation but all of those who contribute to and may use the services of a nation.
- The sociologist Macpherson 1997 has floated the idea of 'meta-societies' which exist not only in one place but which exist across a number of locales and are periodically redefined when representatives of the communities come together in ceremonials and in chat rooms.

Reconceptualising the Pacific

To understand the real impact of emigration and change in contemporary Oceania we may need to reconceptualise Pacific societies. It may be that, instead of looking at impacts of migration on *jurisdiction* 'a' or

jurisdiction 'b', we may be better advised to follow flows of people and resources.

This leads away from discrete impacts within constitutionally defined entities to a study of dispersed but connected populations which exist in more than one jurisdiction. This may lead us to focus instead on the benefits of existence of:

- Transnational families,
- Transnational villages,
- Transnational economies,
- Transnational populations.

Many planners and economists, and the international financial institutions which they represent, attempt to dissuade island governments from thinking in this way, on the grounds that the resources of these transnational entities may not always be available, and should not form the foundation of national economic planning.

This raises the real question of how long the bonds which connect these transnational entities will last. And whether in the long terms this evaluation of the impact of migration on the contemporary Pacific will prove to be too optimistic. But that is a problem which will have to be addressed in another lecture at another time.

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