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## Themes

Stewart Firth

### **Stewart Firth: Personal Journey**

I arrived at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva in 1998 and was delighted to be back in the Pacific. Thirty years earlier I had taught in Port Moresby—in the first years of the University of Papua New Guinea—and I knew that, in order truly to know the Pacific, one had to live there. My expectations were fully justified. I knew I would learn a great deal from the students, and so it proved, as my romantic preconceptions about Fiji fell away in the face of the country's uncompromising politics and deep divisions. And I knew Fiji and the region would prove endlessly interesting, as indeed they did. Most rewarding of all, I had the opportunity to return to teaching Pacific history—my starting point in doctoral research—and to mine the immense research resources at The Australian National University (ANU) on Pacific history to inform my teaching. ANU and USP thus came together in a tangible way in the classrooms and lecture halls of the old School of Social and Economic Development building, where students would discuss the legacy of Sir Arthur Gordon or the Indo-Fijian experience or Maasina Rule in the Solomon Islands or the Mau movement in Samoa—subjects that in a real sense belonged to them. I had marvellous colleagues at USP and my time there will always live with me.

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is the inspiration for this collection, which brings together contributors who have all been students, lecturers or researchers there during its 50-year history. This volume is sponsored by The Australian National University's (ANU) Department of Pacific Affairs, through the Australian Government's Pacific Research Program, as a celebration of the Pacific's best-known university 50 years after its founding and its collaboration—personal and intellectual—with Australia's national institution of learning and research.

For many years it was a common career trajectory for young lecturers at USP to undertake doctoral research at ANU, almost always on a Pacific Islands topic. Twelve of our 19 contributors gained their doctorates at ANU, most of them before or after being students and/or teaching staff at USP. They are Matthew Allen, Alumita Durutalo, Miranda Forsyth, Joe Foukona, Epeli Hau'ofa, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, Brij Lal, Sandra Tarte, Katerina Teaiwa, Morgan Tuimaleali'ifano, Joeli Veitayaki and Christine Weir. Greg Fry and Claire Slatter, both of whom taught and researched at USP, are ANU graduates with involvement in USP extending over decades. In all cases the award of an ANU postgraduate degree was merely the springboard for academic careers that included many other achievements and distinctions over decades. The fit between the two institutions is a natural one, with USP being a premier institution of learning in Oceania and ANU the centre of Pacific Islands expertise, teaching, and research in Australia.

The connections to USP and ANU of the remaining five contributors are various: Vijay Naidu's career has been defined by USP as he rose from being a student there in the 1970s to occupying a succession of senior roles and becoming professor of development studies. He has worked closely with the ANU over the years in research, conferences and publication; Stewart Firth was professor of politics at USP for six years before moving to the ANU; Jon Fraenkel spent 11 years at USP before becoming a research fellow at the ANU and is now professor in comparative politics at Victoria University of Wellington; Steven Ratuva was a student at USP, later head of sociology, spent time at ANU, and is now professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Canterbury; Gerard Ward retired in 1998 after a distinguished academic career, which included being foundation professor of human geography at the ANU as well as undertaking pathbreaking geographical research in Fiji and serving USP in a number of review capacities.

Contributors have been asked to make their own choice for an article or chapter, already published elsewhere, to be republished here. Only in one case—Eveli Hau‘ofa, perhaps the greatest mind associated with USP since its founding and who died in 2009—did we as editors make our own choice. ‘The Ocean in Us’, his remarkable article from the late 1990s, called for a coherent identity for the Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders, one that he saw deriving from the Pacific Ocean itself and the close relationship of Pacific peoples with the sea. Alumiata Durutalo was looking forward to the republication of her chapter ‘Defending the Inheritance: The SDL and the 2006 Election’ before her sudden tragic death in October 2018.

This voluntary approach to organising the volume led, perhaps unexpectedly, to the emergence of a number of common themes, not least about USP itself.

In his commentary on the history of the institution, Vijay Naidu points to both its success and its limitations: success as a regional university which is a key institution of learning for the Pacific and which has vastly increased in numbers of campuses, students and staff over 50 years; and limitations imposed by a top-down model of governance, a focus on training for employment at the expense of a wider education, and by political events in Fiji.

In his account of the road from Laucala Bay, Brij Lal revives the sense of liberation that accompanied the founding of USP. He writes:

The opening of the University of the South Pacific was a monumental achievement in the modern history of the Pacific Islands, a genuine turning point, much like the impact of the Second World War, or the beginnings of decolonisation in the 1960s. It placed higher education within the reach of all school children who passed the appropriate exams with requisite marks, not only those who (or whose parents) could afford it, or the select few who went overseas on a small number of government scholarships.

Lal remembers new people and new ideas: lecturers such as Tony Chappell, Ron Crocombe and Ahmed Ali, fellow students such as Vijay Naidu, Jone Dakuvula, and Amelia Rokotuivuna, as well as writers who charted the Fiji Indian experience such as Ken Gillion and Raymond Pillay. Vanessa Griffin described the part-European experience and Albert Wendt raised disturbing questions about history and literature. USP in the 1970s was

a crucible of fresh thinking about decolonisation, the place of the Pacific Islands in the wider world as well as key political issues such as French nuclear testing.

## Balancing Tradition and Modernity

Gerard Ward, a distinguished geographer and the oldest of our contributors, visited three Fijian villages in 1958 and 1959—Saliadrau, Sote and Nabudrau—and returned there in 1983. During that time the population of Fiji had almost doubled. In the quarter century between these visits, thatch roofs and bamboo walls had given way to iron, timber and concrete, and many people had many material possessions. Roads had reached two of the villages and bananas as a cash crop had disappeared. At the same time the informality that had characterised relations between landowning *mataqali* (landowning group) and non-landowning villagers had yielded to more formal, legalised relationships as land grew more scarce and the commercial imperative grew stronger. Ward observed ‘much greater variation in wealth and income within villages’ and correctly predicted a loosening of the bonds between chiefs and commoners.

‘*Matai* Titles and Modern Corruption in Samoa’ gives Morgan Tuimaleali‘ifano an opportunity to describe what happens when a *saofa‘iga* (title installation ceremony) and the gifting that accompanies it ‘is taken out of the public and into the private and individualised arena’. He does this through the lens of a ceremony in which a title was bestowed upon him and his family, showing the extent to which previously reciprocal exchanges are being reduced to the payment of cash and ‘shameless public demands’ for more cash are being made by the orators of the village. Capitalism, Tuimaleali‘ifano tells us, is undermining the essence of the *fā‘a Samoa*.

In ‘Making Room for Magic in Intellectual Property Policy’, Miranda Forsyth reminds us that the arid assumptions of the market economy are made even by those who wish, with the best of intentions, to recognise traditional knowledge in order to protect Pacific cultures against misappropriation. Whereas traditional knowledge is embedded in social relationships, modern Western knowledge has been reduced to purely economic and legal instruments that ignore this difference in dealing with intellectual property. Forsyth suggests ways of ameliorating this problem: by recognising the dynamic character of indigenous knowledge and

innovation; by using vernacular languages in legal instruments to capture the ‘different epistemological frameworks at play’; by using indigenous institutions to regulate traditional knowledge; and by taking account of the values inherent in that knowledge.

## Politics and Political Economy

Politics, political institutions and diplomacy are the themes of our third section, which begins with a classic survey of Pacific political institutions by Jon Fraenkel. He points to the variety of ways in which Pacific Islanders have dealt with the eternal dilemmas of politics: how to accommodate ethnic diversity and other sources of conflict, adapt modern government to tradition, build states where none existed before, and provide for women’s representation. Just as electoral systems vary throughout the region, so do the political systems that owe their origins to Westminster, Washington or Paris. And the relationships between island territories and metropolitan powers are diverse. As Fraenkel notes, ‘In between the extremes of independence and incorporation, the Pacific Islands are host to a range of hybrid political arrangements between island territories and former colonial rulers’. At the same time, there are region-wide commonalities—in the weakness of political parties, for example, and the readiness of elected representatives to change sides.

A number of contributions place Fiji and the Fiji economy in the broader context of globalisation and the turn to neoliberalism in economic policy, both of which have affected Fiji profoundly since the late 1980s. At the height of international enthusiasm for neoliberal economic policy, the Pacific Islands, as Claire Slatter shows, were supposedly in need of firm management by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, aid donors and policy experts in order to shape up as competitors in the global economy. This broad issue of the place of small Pacific Island states in a globalised world is one that has occupied the intellectual energies of staff and students at USP over many years and continues to do so.

In her chapter on the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) party’s victory in the 2006 elections, Alumita Durutalo takes us to a moment in time that now seems remote: after the election, with Laisenia Qarase confirmed as prime minister, but before the coup that ushered in a newly dominant role for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and its commander Frank Bainimarama. Back then it seemed as if the traditional appeal to

indigenous Fijians of *vanua* (domains of chiefly rule and Fijian identity), *lotu* (the church) and *matanitu* (traditional government) in the election of a government had been reconfirmed and would continue to form the basis of political strategies by the parties—over the decades the Alliance, Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) and SDL—that had the support of the majority of iTaukei. Four out of every five iTaukei, after all, voted for the SDL in 2006, ensuring its success. But as Durutalo warned at the time, there was no guarantee that this formula for political victory would endure. And so it proved.

## Reimagining

A key theme of this collection is the Pacific in the imagination, and the gap between image and reality in the region.

Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka examines it in his chapter on Melanesia. Notions of a ladder of evolutionary development deeply influenced the European way of looking at the Pacific Islanders. Europeans could recognise themselves in Polynesia, with its hierarchy, aristocracy and relatively large-scale political organisation. Some Polynesian island groups were on the way to becoming states already and their customs of respect based on rank seemed to mirror those of Europe. The Europeans had a similar reaction to Fiji, where Fijian chiefs quickly adapted to the service of the British colony established in 1874, becoming instruments of the new state structure. In the rest of Melanesia, however, the Europeans encountered a bewildering array of languages, senses of identity and communities, all on a small scale and none suited to be building blocks of coherent colonial administration. European notions of race, as Kabutaulaka emphasises, were fundamental in the way the Pacific Islanders came to be categorised and to the inferior place accorded to Melanesians in the Pacific racial hierarchy. The prejudice extended to gender and Kabutaulaka draws on the work of Margaret Jolly and Marata Tamaira to remind us that Europeans tended to depict Polynesian women as more attractive and alluring than Melanesian women. He sees Pacific Islanders as having internalised these European prejudices in their attitudes towards each other, with some Polynesians, for example, looking down upon Melanesians and Melanesians discriminating among themselves on the basis of skin colour. The argument Kabutaulaka brings

us, though, runs counter to this history of denigration, because he sees a contemporary movement to embrace Melanesia in positive terms as the basis for a cultural and political reinvigoration.

Steven Ratuva finds another need for reimagining. He focuses on an issue that has been a lively source of debate in the classrooms of USP and that addresses a key question often raised by iTaukei students—namely, what accounts for the differential development of their community compared with that of others in Fiji, especially Fijians of Indian descent? Did British protection of the iTaukei community over the whole period of British colonial rule stifle their opportunities in the modern world and leave them behind at independence and beyond? Ratuva takes the case of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, the best-known indigenous Fijian of the 20th century and a man held up as an unqualified hero of the Fijian people to generations of iTaukei. His ‘concerns and deeds’, as he reminds us, ‘were beyond reproach’ in his time, but need to be reevaluated in the light of Fiji’s history. With his deep attachment to chiefly Fiji and to keeping people in the village, Sukuna can now be seen, in Ratuva’s view, as a conservative force standing in the way of the emergence of commoner Fijians into the modern world; his efforts to protect the iTaukei ‘had the effect of disempowering and undermining their potential for progress’ and kept them ‘politically and culturally submissive’.

We need to reimagine Indo-Fijian history as well as iTaukei history. We tend to overlook the importance of Christian schools in the education of Fijians of Indian descent, yet as Christine Weir points out in her chapter on All Saints Primary School in Labasa, in the 1940s and 1950s almost a third of Indian children were attending Christian mission schools, Anglican, Methodist and Catholic. Not many converted to Christianity, but their parents liked the education these schools offered. They played their part in the rapid upward mobility of generations of Indo-Fijians, reflected also in their higher education at USP from the late 1960s.

## Rethinking Development

In some parts of the Pacific, especially the small island states, development is almost synonymous with development assistance, which assumes an enormous importance in budgets and political calculations. In his chapter on ‘Development Assistance Challenges’, Vijay Naidu places the aid process in its wider economic and political context, emphasising

the extent to which aid conditionalities are designed to remake Pacific Island economies in the service of market competitiveness. But Naidu goes further, setting the aid scene in the context of the years after September 11, when Western donors became keener than ever to ensure that aid served security purposes. The aid flows from Australia, New Zealand and the US to the Pacific Islands were ‘geopolitical rent’, he observes, paid to Island governments for the purpose of bringing stability and a pro-Western orientation to the region. Much the same still applies except for the rise of China, which has complicated the strategic calculations of longstanding Pacific partners such as Australia and New Zealand. Writing in 2006, Naidu saw China ‘emerging as a major player in the region’, one whose presence would be welcomed by Fiji. Twelve years later, we can see that Naidu was right. When USP opened in 1968, China was convulsed by its Cultural Revolution and played almost no part in Pacific affairs. Fifty years later, China is a presence to be reckoned with, above all through its investments, trade, tourism and thousands of new Chinese migrants, but also because of its highly visible soft loan and aid program. Naidu is also right to remind us of the strategic origins of development assistance, clearly on view in Australia’s recent shift towards closer engagement with the region, an initiative driven by alarm in Canberra about the growth of China’s influence.

Just as development has an international dimension, so it also has a domestic one. While the standard of living for many Fijian villagers had improved by the 1980s, rural development remained slow in the decades that followed. Writing in the wake of the 2006 coup, Joeli Veitayaki connects Fiji’s succession of coups to a lack of rural development for indigenous Fijians. The discontent of rural iTaukei, he suggests, was a political resource seized upon by coup leaders who knew that the promise of a better life would bring iTaukei support. But the affirmative action policies of the 1990s and the early 2000s, introduced by indigenous Fijian governments, had few positive effects in the villages, where ‘poor performance in rural development’ remained. The main beneficiaries of affirmative action, he argues, were indigenous Fijian elites in a position to access these programs of assistance. The corollary is that genuine rural development will break Fiji’s coup culture.

The most contested of all development resources in the Pacific Islands is land and in their chapter on urban land in Solomon Islands, Joseph Foukona and Matt Allen examine the complex interplay of law, the market, migration, squatter settlements and an ideology of customary



land ownership in conflict with the law. Their conclusion is that, even after the long peace since the so-called ‘Ethnic Tension’ of 1998 to 2003, ‘a spectre of ethnoterritorial violence’ continues to hang over the city and that ‘the formal rules governing land and property rights often bear little resemblance to on-the-ground realities’, where issues of land ownership are determined by personal patronage networks and personalised politics. Just as legal claims to the land of Honiara have been contested since the 1920s, so that contestation will continue in a cultural framework that lends legitimacy to tradition.

## Into the Future

In his classic commentary on Pacific regional identity, Epli Hau’ofa offers USP as an example:

In a very real sense the University of the South Pacific is a microcosm of the region, and many aspects of its history, which began in 1968 in the era of decolonisation of island territories, mirror the developments in the regional communities it serves. The well-known diversity of social organisations, economies, and cultures of the region is reflected in the student population that comprises people from all 12 countries that own the university, as well as a sprinkling from other regions.

Writing in the 1990s, Hau’ofa saw USP as the ‘premier hatchery’ of regional identity. He pleaded for the most expansive concept of this identity, one that would be genuinely postcolonial and independent:

The issue of what or who is a Pacific Islander would not arise if we considered Oceania as comprising people as human beings with a common heritage and commitment, rather than as members of diverse nationalities and races. Oceania refers to a world of people connected to each other ... As far as I am concerned, anyone who has lived in our region and is committed to Oceania is an Oceanian.

The single common heritage of all Oceanians is the sea itself, the same sea lapping on the shores of every Pacific Island country. Hau’ofa’s call for an Oceanic identity remains more urgent than ever as the region faces a common and existential security threat in climate change. What is needed is new and more effective regional diplomacy.

This ‘new Pacific diplomacy’ is addressed by Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte. Fifty years ago only two Pacific Island countries were independent—Samoa and Nauru, with Cook Islands having moved into free association with New Zealand—and even the possibility of a distinctive Pacific diplomacy did not exist. And for decades afterwards, Pacific diplomacy on numerous issues from decolonisation to tuna fisheries and nuclear testing was refracted through an Australia/New Zealand lens, one that gave expression to Pacific Island interests within limits. Those limits were on display at the 1997 meeting of the then South Pacific Forum, when agreement on a weak statement on climate change as desired by Australia was reached in the face of concerted opposition from Pacific countries. Since then much has changed. The seas have begun to rise, the largest cyclones ever recorded have battered Pacific countries, and Pacific Islanders’ concern about climate change has intensified. Driven by urgent national interests, Pacific Island states are taking the initiative on climate change without reference to Australia through groups such as the Pacific Islands Development Forum and the Pacific Small Island Developing States group at the UN.

Katerina Teaiwa takes us outside the Pacific to the Pacific diaspora in Australia, and specifically to the strikingly dominant participation of Pacific Islanders in sport, where ‘it is the Pacific Islander male, and more specifically Polynesian male, who is the most visible’. In the Australian diaspora, Teaiwa notes that, ‘participation in sport and popular culture is a particular area of visibility and success for Pacific peoples that holds great meaning for minority communities’, and the links between *mana*, masculinity and sport become evident. The arena is one in which men can show their *mana*, defined as ‘being strong, efficacious, prosperous, successful, having “status and prestige” and performing mighty acts. These mighty Pacific sportsmen uplift whole communities of Pacific Islanders in a situation where ‘I’ is the same as ‘we’ and the individual can bring respect to the many.

The Afterword looks forward to the continuing and emerging Pacific contexts that will inform the teaching and research of the USP and ANU in the years ahead.

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