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## The South Pacific experiment<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the reach and depth of ancient ties among Pacific islanders, the postwar attempt to create a regional identity among the emergent elite of the territories stretching from Dutch New Guinea to Tahiti was regarded as novel by those involved. The novelty is captured in the official photograph of the first South Pacific Conference, which met in the assembly hall of the Nasinu Teachers' Training College in Suva in April–May 1950.<sup>2</sup> In stark contrast to the photographs of the South Seas Conference of 1947, at which no islanders were present, the 1950 photograph shows only one European delegate, the representative of French Oceania. In his opening address as chairman, Sir Brian Freeston, Governor of Fiji and Western Pacific High Commissioner, described the gathering as a 'Parliament of the South Pacific Peoples' and observed:

Never before in the history of the world have the peoples of the South Pacific met together under one roof ... never before has an opportunity been afforded for spokesmen from all the islands, spread over many millions of square miles of ocean, to meet each

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1 This chapter was first published as 'The South Pacific Experiment: Reflections on the Origins of Regional Identity', in the *Journal of Pacific History* (32[2], 1997: 180–202). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reproduce this work.

2 The conference, held from 25 April to 5 May 1950, was attended by 43 representatives of 14 Pacific island territories: American Samoa, British Solomon Islands Protectorate, Cook Islands (including Niue), Ellice Islands, Fiji, French Oceania, Gilbert Islands, Nauru, Netherlands New Guinea, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, Papua, New Guinea and Western Samoa. Representatives of the Tongan Government also participated. Tokelau Islands, although entitled to representation, did not have a delegate present.

other on common ground, united by a community of interest, and animated by a common purpose ... during the next ten days, you will be making history; and that throughout the length and breadth of the Pacific, the generations to come will look back on this conference as an outstanding landmark in their progress ... Let us remember that we are embarking together on a momentous experiment.<sup>3</sup>

Other observers echoed these sentiments. Editorials in newspapers in Fiji, New Zealand, Australia and even as far afield as *The Times* and *The New York Times* commented on the significance of the occasion. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial, for example, asserted:

To-morrow a new chapter will be opened in the history of the South Pacific. For the first time, representatives of all the races of the South Seas—Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian, together with the more recent immigrant races such as the Indian community in Fiji—will meet to discuss common problems.<sup>4</sup>

Island delegates seemed to share this view. Mariota Tuiasosopo, Speaker of the House of Representatives in American Samoa, for example, commented at the conclusion of the meeting:

[F]or the first time in history we are gathered here as one people desiring the welfare of our communities. I pray that we, the hereditary leaders will realise that it is now our turn to do our best for our people.<sup>5</sup>

Crown Prince Tungi, the premier of Tonga, was reported as saying 'the conference was a milestone in Pacific relations and could mean a new dawn for the peoples of the South Seas'.<sup>6</sup> Tupua Tamasese Mea'ole, a member of the Council of Ministers of Western Samoa, commented more cryptically (but possibly in reference to the successful struggle of the *Mau* against New Zealand rule) that the conference marked 'the end of the beginning' for the peoples of the South Seas.<sup>7</sup>

3 As reported in 'Pacific History Made Today', *Fiji Times and Herald*, 25 April 1950.

4 'South Seas Experiment in Co-operation', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April 1950, p. 2.

5 'Talks End on S. Pacific: Results Pleasing to Delegates', *The Age*, [Melbourne], 6 May 1950.

6 *ibid.*

7 'New Era for South Seas: Success at Suva', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 1950.

More intriguing, perhaps, than this image of the Nasinu meeting as a point of departure for a sense of region among islanders is its widespread representation among European officials, observers and media commentators as an ‘experiment’—whether ‘courageous’, ‘great’, ‘historic’, ‘remarkable’ or ‘momentous’.<sup>8</sup> In their widely reported comments and confidential reports, they made it clear that, by ‘experiment’, they meant more than mere novelty. The impression was given of uncertain and even risky outcomes. The Australian observer Reverend Dr J.W. Burton,<sup>9</sup> in his report to the Australian Minister for External Affairs, referred to the ‘forebodings’ and ‘fears’ among ‘some of us’ prior to the conference;<sup>10</sup> Nancy Robson (a French–English interpreter at early South Pacific conferences and author of the only commentary on the conference outside newspaper reports) mentioned ‘the misgivings of the uneasy’;<sup>11</sup> and governor Freeston, in his concluding statement, was reported as saying that ‘when the conference began he had feared that it might be a complete failure’.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than a sense of tapping into a preexisting affinity, of building on ancient ties, the observers gave a strong impression that what was being attempted was social engineering on a grand scale. The sense of attempting something ‘against the odds’ is also suggested by the widespread surprise among observers when the conference seemed to be successful. Freeston declared that ‘never in his life had he been so happy to find out, how wrong he was’ (in predicting ‘complete failure’).<sup>13</sup> And for Nancy Robson, ‘the notion of a South Pacific synthesis seem[ed] more for the moment than a mere visionary dream’. She concluded:

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8 See, for example, ‘Pacific Native Chiefs Gather at Suva’, *The Age*, [Melbourne], 24 April 1950; ‘South Seas Experiment in Co-operation’, *Sydney Morning Herald*; ‘NZ Observer Reviews Aims and Results of Conference’, *Fiji Times and Herald*, 9 May 1950.

9 J.W. Burton had only recently retired as the General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Australasia and had also been General Secretary of the Methodist Overseas Mission for about 20 years. His missionary work had focused on the South Pacific and he had published extensively on the Pacific islands. See, for example, Burton, *Brown and White in the South Pacific*. Burton’s son was the head of the Department of External Affairs at the time of the Nasinu conference.

10 J.W. Burton, ‘The South Pacific Conference, held at Nasinu, Fiji, May 1950: Report by the Australian Observer, Rev. J. W. Burton (for the Minister of State for External Affairs and External Territories)’, Sydney, June 1950, Department of External Affairs, Series A1838/1, file 347/2/6, 1950, folio 79, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

11 Nancy Robson, ‘The Suva Conference of South Pacific Peoples’, *Australian Outlook*, 4(3), 1950: 179–85, at p. 179.

12 ‘South Pacific Peoples’ Conference: Successful Experiment’, *The Times*, [London], 6 May 1950.

13 *ibid.*

[P]erhaps the day will not seem impossibly remote when the vast scattering of disparate islands may achieve a sense of unity, and when there may at last take form some common will of South Pacific peoples.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that the creation of a sense of region among Pacific islanders was difficult and unnatural appears to fly in the face of a longstanding tendency for the Pacific islands to be thought of collectively in the European imagination, and sits oddly with claims by prominent Pacific islanders about ancient affinities and connections.<sup>15</sup> It also runs up against the naturalness of regionalism in the postcolonial setting, where, as a social science category, institution, political site or basis of organisation, it has taken on an unquestioned status. This chapter therefore explores in what sense, and why, this first gathering of island representatives was characterised as an experiment.<sup>16</sup> This in turn suggests a way of thinking about the origins of postcolonial regional identity. Accordingly, this discussion focuses on the way in which the Nasinu conference was represented by those organising, participating in and observing it, rather than on the substance of the discussions and outcomes on the key agenda items concerning mosquito control, village health, village education, vocational training, cooperative societies, fisheries methods, food and export crops.<sup>17</sup>

This exploration proceeds on the premise that several experiments were invested in this attempt to foster a sense of region, operating at different levels and sometimes pulling in different directions. Two ‘experiments’

14 Robson, ‘The Suva Conference of South Pacific Peoples’, pp. 179, 185.

15 See, for example, Mara, ‘Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Messages’; Sikivou, ‘Statement to the Twenty-Eighth Regular Session of the UN General Assembly’; Mara and Somare, ‘Joint Communiqué’; and Hau’ofa, ‘Our Sea of Islands’ (1994).

16 The main scholarly accounts, and accounts by former SPC officials, of the origins and development of the commission either do not mention or mention only in passing this first meeting of Pacific island representatives. See Herr, ‘Regionalism in the South Seas’; Smith, *South Pacific Commission*; Forsyth, ‘South Pacific’; and Maude, ‘The South Pacific Commission’. My earlier accounts of South Pacific regionalism also skate over this important meeting. See, for example, Gregory E. Fry, ‘South Pacific Regionalism: The Development of an Indigenous Commitment’, MA thesis, Department of Political Science, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1979; and Gregory E. Fry, ‘Regionalism and International Politics of the South Pacific’, *Pacific Affairs*, 54(3), 1981: 455–84.

17 For the official account of the conference, see South Pacific Commission [hereinafter SPC], *Report of the Secretary-General of the South Pacific Commission on the First South Pacific Conference, 25 April – 5 May 1950, Suva*, Wellington: Government Printer for the South Pacific Commission, 1950. There is no verbatim record of proceedings. The main points of debate were covered in newspaper commentaries, the most complete being those of the *Fiji Times and Herald* and *Pacific Islands Monthly*. The only account in an academic journal, that of Nancy Robson (‘The Suva Conference’), was brief and kept mainly to the broad significance of the event.

predominated in the leadup to the conference and during its deliberations: one was an experiment in overcoming what was seen as cultural diversity and different levels of development (which were usually distilled to a concern with whether Melanesians and Polynesians could work together in one entity); the other was captured in the question that David McNicoll, a Sydney journalist, reported being asked by ‘nearly everyone’ on his return to Sydney: ‘How were they?’ He goes on to explain:

‘They’ of course, means the native delegates. Obviously, my interrogators expect to hear amusing stories about the delegates spitting out betel nut during the proceedings, jangling outlandish earrings, thumping the floor with their war-clubs and dipping down behind their desks to scoop up an occasional bowl of kava.<sup>18</sup>

This was an experiment in whether island delegates were capable of the necessary standards of Western civilisation for the ideal of potential equality to be recognised. Indeed, in the day-to-day reporting from Suva, the conference represented an experiment in manners—an exotic spectacle for the European observers.

But these were ‘experiments’ within broader experiments. The Nasinu conference would not have occurred without a more fundamental concern about attempting a regional approach to the implementation of ‘trusteeship’ principles or ‘native welfare’ ideas. There were, however, different ideas among officials about what a regional approach to trusteeship might and should achieve; some believed it offered the best, if risky, chance of minimising UN interference in the continuation of colonial control; others saw it as a way of ensuring the ultimate demise of empire. The Nasinu conference, then, was for some an experiment in sowing the seeds of political development and self-determination while minimising international interference in the continued control of empire. Finally, the Nasinu conference has to be seen within a broader experiment in strategic planning and regional order-making in a postwar world. As early as 1950 the promotion of a sense of region among Pacific islanders was seen by some colonial powers as part of an experiment in keeping the region free from communist influence in particular.

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18 David McNicoll, ‘Better Days Ahead for the Natives of South Pacific’, *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 12 May 1950: 6.

## Which islands? Which islanders?

Just which island peoples would be represented in this experiment derived from a prior decision concerning the boundaries of the region made by the colonial powers at the South Seas Conference of 1947. As we saw in Chapter 4, this initially included all Pacific territories south of the equator—those of France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. American Pacific territories north of the equator were to join as soon as political settlements were concluded. The individuals who would take part in this experiment, and in what sense they could be said to represent their respective peoples, were rather randomly determined. It was left to territorial administrations to select delegates in whatever manner they chose. The only agreed constraint was that the delegates should be best able to represent the peoples of the territory. Only one administration, that of French Oceania, sent a European to represent the native people; all others honoured the intention of the 1947 conference to involve Pacific islanders in the process. The backgrounds of those chosen in terms of education, occupation and traditional standing, and experience of political affairs, varied dramatically, largely reflecting the very different levels of political development, educational opportunities and social organisation across the territories. But a major criterion affecting the choice of nearly all participants was proficiency in English or French, the official languages of the conference.<sup>19</sup>

At one extreme were American Samoa, Western Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji and Tonga, whose delegates represented not only the highest traditional authority, but also those highly placed in the political institutions of their territories. Tonga was invited as a special guest in view of its self-governing status. Its principal delegate, Prince Tungi, was already premier of the kingdom; his brother Prince Tu`ipelehake was Governor of Vava`u.

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19 The list of participants with a very brief description of occupation is contained in SPC, *Report of the Secretary-General*, pp. 10–15. More detailed sketches are provided in contemporary newspaper accounts. See, for example, ‘Pacific Talks’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 April 1950; Eric Ramsden, ‘The Pacific is on the Move: Personalities at First Peoples’ Conference’, *Auckland Star*, 20 April 1950; ‘Pidgin Editors for Suva Talks’, *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 21 April 1950; ‘More Delegates to Conference at Nasinu’, *Fiji Times and Herald*, 22 April 1950; ‘Kokoda Trail Carrier is Now Leader-Envoy for his People’, *Sunday Telegraph*, [Sydney], 23 April 1950; ‘Delegates Gather in Fiji for South Pacific Talks’, *Daily Mirror*, [Sydney], 24 April 1950; ‘Historic Gathering: First “Parliament of the South Pacific”’, *The Age*, [Melbourne], 26 April 1950; Eric Ramsden, ‘Sons of Stone Age Peoples Delegates to Fiji Conference’, *Auckland Star*, 27 April 1950.

Each of the American Samoan representatives—Tufele, Tuitele and Tuiaosopo—was a high chief and experienced member of the territorial legislature. Tufele was also a member of the governor's Advisory Council and Tuiaosopo was Speaker of the House of Representatives. Western Samoa was represented by two of the three *fautua* (paramount chiefs), Malietoa Tanumafili II and Tupua Tamasese Mea'ole. Along with the high commissioner, they also constituted the newly created Samoan Council of State. In addition, Tupua Tamasese had previously been president of the *Mau* (Samoan independence movement). They were accompanied by Faipule Anapu, chairman of the Fono of Faipule (advisory council) and one of a handful of chiefs providing leadership in the constitutional changes taking place at this time.<sup>20</sup> The representatives of the Fijian community—Joeli Ravai, Roko Tui Tailevu and Ratu Edward Cakobau, a district officer (and son of Tonga's King George Tupou II)—were members of Fiji's Legislative Council. The delegates representing the Indian community, Pandit Vishnu Deo and Mirza Salim Buksh, were very prominent political leaders as well as members of the Legislative Council.

The Cook Islands was also represented by members of the local legislature: Makea Nui Teremoana Ariki, a chief of Rarotonga (and the only female delegate), and Rongomatane Ariki, a chief of Atiu island. Their alternate was Albert Henry, who was then chairman of the Cook Islands Producers' Association. Dr Tom Davis from Rarotonga, who was at that time a medical officer, was part of the New Zealand observer group. Giving some sense of the status and trajectory of those chosen from Tonga, Western Samoa, Cook Islands and Niue (whose delegate was Robert Rex, a clerk in the Niue administration), among the delegates from these eastern territories were three who would become heads of state (Prince Tungi, Malietoa and Tupua Tamasese) and four who would later become prime ministers or premiers (Prince Tu'ipelehake, Davis, Henry and Rex).

In the absence of a local assembly in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the Ellice Islands representatives were presumably selected on the basis of their professional achievement. Penitala Teo was one of only two local administrative officers in the colony. He had been captured and starved by the Japanese forces on Ocean Island,<sup>21</sup> while Iosefa Lameko was acting headmaster of King George V School at Tarawa and had recently been awarded the British Empire Medal for his 'exceptional devotion to duty'

20 See Davidson, *Samoa Mo Samoa*, Ch. 6.

21 Penitala Teo later became the first Governor-General of Tuvalu.

during the Japanese occupation. The Gilbert Islands delegate, Tutu Tekanene, was a senior assistant medical practitioner (the highest medical office then available to Pacific islanders) who had studied at the Central Medical School in Suva. The recently restored Australian administration on Nauru selected Jacob Dagabwinare, a community leader and radio operator, and Raymond Gadabu, a government clerk. As senior radio operator on the island after the Australians withdrew in February 1942, Dagabwinare had been hit by machine-gun fire from strafing Japanese planes, and during the Japanese occupation was regularly tortured and imprisoned when Allied planes bombed Nauru.<sup>22</sup>

Of the Melanesian countries, only Dutch New Guinea had any form of political development. The two delegates, Nicolaas Jouwe and Markus Kasiepo, were members of an advisory council elected by Melanesians and were also working in the Dutch administration. They had been in the Netherlands for 'political future' talks the previous year.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the representatives of Papua, New Guinea, Solomon Islands and New Hebrides were selected by their administrations on the basis of language ability. Two of the New Guinea delegates, Eluida Ahnon and Aisolf Salin, were clerks in the Department of Education and edited pidgin newspapers (the *Rabaul News* and the *Kavieng Messenger*). They were accompanied by Kamono Walo, a master at Sogeri education centre, and George Kassi, a clerk in the administration at Rabaul.

The Papuan delegates were Miria Gavera, part-time manager of the Poreporena and Hohodae Co-operative Society and former carrier on the Kokoda Track; Willie Gavera, a clerical assistant; Aisa Gu'u, an agricultural assistant; Frank Aisi, who had been at the Central Medical School in Suva; and Bondai Pita, an assistant teacher. The British Solomon Islands Protectorate was represented by Michael Belade, a medical dresser, and Reverend Belshazzar Gina, a New Zealand-educated missionary; while the New Hebrides delegates were John Kalsakau, an assistant medical practitioner who had recently completed a refresher course at the Central Medical School, and Petero, a catechist at the Marist mission on Tanna. New Caledonia's delegates were Maou Djoel, a teacher from

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22 See Jemima Garrett, *Island Exiles*, Sydney: ABC Books, 1996, pp. 23, 43.

23 They later became important leaders in the organised opposition to Indonesian rule. See Robin Osborne, *Indonesia's Secret War: The Guerilla Struggle in Irian Jaya*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985, pp. 32, 35.

the Loyalty Islands, and Raphael Bouanaoue, a medical assistant at the Nouméa hospital who had served in World War I in France as part of the Mixed Pacific Battalion.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the experiment was the inclusion of representatives of the Indian community in the Fiji delegation. Although they represented the largest cultural and language group in the South Pacific at that time, the ambivalence which subsequently attended Indian participation in national or regional identity was present at the creation of this modern sense of the 'South Pacific'. At issue was the subtext of authenticity and the right to be regarded as a Pacific islander. This was evident during the selection process in the Fiji Legislative Council. Some European and Fijian representatives opposed the inclusion of Indian delegates.<sup>24</sup> Ratu Edward Cakobau reportedly argued that 'one Indian delegate could not be of help to the South Pacific Islands representatives'<sup>25</sup>—the implication from the context being that, despite the heterogeneity of the region, there was already a concept of 'South Pacific islander' defined in relation to Asian (and presumably European) identity. Australian officials were nervous about the inclusion of Indians because of their reputation for raising anticolonial questions.<sup>26</sup> One commentator described the representatives of the Indian community as 'a lonely group, keeping themselves to themselves'.<sup>27</sup>

Europeans were also present as advisers and observers. They included the representatives of the six colonial powers that made up the SPC. The Australian delegation was led by Dr Burton, and it was cause for comment that Australia, given its prominent role in promoting the regional idea through the commission, had chosen not to send a senior official.<sup>28</sup> Other colonial powers sent higher-ranking representatives (although the United States also included a well-known anthropologist, Felix Keesing). The Nouméa-based commission officials who had organised the conference included William Forsyth, the secretary-general and author of the first proposal for a South Seas commission in 1943–44 when he worked in the

24 See 'Fijians and Indians: How Should they be Represented at South Pacific Conference?', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, January 1950 [from a correspondent in Suva, 19 December 1949]; and 'Indian Problem Worries Fiji's Administrators', *The Age*, [Melbourne], 3 May 1950.

25 'Fijians and Indians', *Pacific Islands Monthly*.

26 Burton, 'The South Pacific Conference'.

27 'Historic Gathering', *The Age*.

28 'Leadership in South Seas: Australian Failure', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1950; and 'Our Opportunity in South Pacific', [Editorial], *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 1950.

Australian Department of External Affairs, and Harry Maude, director of social development and a former British colonial official known for his progressive views on localisation and self-determination.<sup>29</sup> Representing the Protestant churches was Reverend C.F. Gribble, General Secretary of the Methodist Overseas Missions of Australasia and former principal of Tupou College in Nuku`alofa. The media representatives included Robert W. Robson, the foundation editor of the *Pacific Islands Monthly* and, as we have seen, an early advocate of regional arrangements to serve the European settlers in the islands.<sup>30</sup>

## A cultural experiment

Much of the reported uneasiness in the leadup to the Nasinu conference related to the view—widely held among European observers—that this regional project was working against cultural heterogeneity. This, for example, underlay the governor's fear that the conference would fail ('because of the wide variety of races, national allegiance, language, and traditions involved').<sup>31</sup> Surprisingly perhaps—given the longstanding propensity of some Europeans to generalise about 'the native', 'the child races', 'the noble savage', 'the savage' or 'the islander'—there was clearly a dominant view among European observers at this time that this was an extremely diverse area culturally<sup>32</sup> so that no natural cultural affinity among 'the races' could be assumed. The task was seen as a battle to forge unity out of diversity. According to some observers, this task was made more difficult by the lack of any previous opportunity for representatives of these cultures to come into contact. One observer claimed that 'this was the first time that natives of the various territories had met one another';<sup>33</sup> and another claimed that 'Papua for instance, are as

29 See Robert Langdon, 'Harry Maude: Shy Proconsul, Dedicated Pacific Historian', in Niel Gunson, ed., *The Changing Pacific: Essays in Honour of H.E. Maude*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 1–21, at pp. 11–12, 16.

30 See Robson, 'Need for a Closer Relationship between Territories'; and Robson, 'Plea for Co-operation in Pacific Affairs'.

31 'South Pacific Peoples' Conference', *The Times*.

32 This recognition of heterogeneity was a central theme in several prominent regionwide academic surveys of the Pacific islands that appeared around this time. For example, W.E.H. Stanner, *The South Seas in Transition: A Study of Post-War Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Three British Pacific Dependencies*, Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1953, especially p. 418; Oliver, *The Pacific Islands*, pp. 20–1; and Keesing, *The South Seas in the Modern World*, p. 293.

33 McNicoll, 'Better Days Ahead for the Natives of South Pacific'. See also 'Delegates Meet in Suva to Discuss Broad Programmes for Native Welfare', *The Evening Post*, [Wellington], 21 April 1950.

complete strangers to Tongans as would [be] a delegation from Nigeria or the French Cameroons'.<sup>34</sup> This image of diversity and apartness suggested unnaturalness in the regional project as seen by at least some observers.<sup>35</sup>

There was only one departure from this image. This was the view put by Albert Norman, writing from Sydney for the *Christian Science Monitor*, in June 1949. While addressing the SPC more generally, his comments have relevance to the cultural meaning of the attempt to involve Pacific islanders in this region-building project:

Southern Oceania, that Pacific 'continent' which mainly is under water, is unique as a 'reclamation' project. Not an inch of soil will be reclaimed. The task is to reclaim something quite different, something that has been submerged by the chauvinistic policies of Europe. And the major item of equipment on the project is the new sense of international moral responsibility which has launched this vast social enterprise ... Separating each 'island' group are the waters of the South Pacific which tend to create the impression that this society is broken up and hopelessly separated from its essential parts.

This geographical illusion has been heightened by the occupying European nations who, over the centuries, have 'claimed' for their own the visible peaks of the land. It was thus that the political and meaningless divisions of Europe became arbitrarily superimposed on Oceania. The first step in 'reclamation' has been to free the land of these bonds, to restore the essential regional viewpoint and unity, to overlook the dividing waters, to see the land and its people as united ... It will be the task of the South Pacific Commission to ... promote the social reclamation of the world's seventh 'continent' and its people.<sup>36</sup>

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34 'Historic Gathering', *The Age*.

35 Although opportunities for contact between island groups were severely restricted in the colonial period, actual contacts between particular representatives of island cultures suggest that this extreme view was unfounded. Fijian soldiers, including Ratu Edward Cakobau, had served in British Solomon Islands during the recent war; relationships between Tongan and Fijian chiefly lines were very close (Prince Tungi was in fact the nephew of the Fijian representative, Ratu Edward Cakobau); the Central Medical School in Suva had brought many Pacific islanders from the British Pacific together, including two delegates at Nasinu—Aisi from Papua and Kalsakau from New Hebrides; and many Polynesian missionaries had spent time in Melanesian cultures. This extreme view also ignored the language and cultural links among Polynesians.

36 Albert Norman, 'The Reclamation of Oceania', *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 June 1949.

But the island delegates at Nasinu, at least in their reported statements, did not employ a rhetoric of reclamation, seemingly confirming the perception of the European observers that this was a novel development.

The cultural experiment was more particularly represented as whether ‘Melanesians’ and ‘Polynesians’ could bridge the gulf. This dichotomy was encouraged by the temporary exclusion of the islands north of the equator, which meant that the only Micronesians at Nasinu were Nauruans and Gilbertese. The Melanesia–Polynesia divide was seen as a question not just of cultural and linguistic difference, but also of different levels of development, reflecting substantial differences in opportunity for ‘Westernisation’. In a view owing more to the idea of ‘stages of development’ than that of innate difference, the Polynesians (or ‘the east’) were identified as ‘the advanced’ peoples, while Melanesians (or ‘the west’) were characterised as ‘the backward’ peoples. Interestingly, Fiji—usually classified by ethnographers as Melanesian—was in this context seen as part of the east and of Polynesia, based on social organisation, sophistication, level of education, political development and social links with Samoa and Tonga.<sup>37</sup>

Those reporting on the experiment at Nasinu appeared to find the Melanesian delegates more capable than expected. McNicoll, for example, reported that ‘the boys from Australian New Guinea and Papua acquitted themselves very well’.<sup>38</sup> Author and journalist Eric Ramsden went further. Reporting from Sydney, where he met the Papuan and New Guinean delegates en route to Suva, he claimed:

Those who expected these sons of Stone Age men to exhibit an educational standard that would perhaps not compare with Pacific Islands natives with a century and more of association with Europeans, were to be disappointed ... The visitors were, of course, hand-picked men. But all spoke English perfectly ... Intellectually, these young men from the jungles and mountain slopes of wild New Guinea, will compare quite favourably with the other delegates.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Although the labels ‘Melanesian’ and ‘Polynesian’ were used, it was clear that the island delegates being referred to as evidence for these generalisations were more specifically from Papua and New Guinea on the Melanesian side, and Fiji, Tonga, American Samoa and Western Samoa on the Polynesian side. This characterisation left out French Oceania, French and Dutch-speaking Melanesia, the Ellice Islands, the Gilbert Islands and Nauru.

38 David McNicoll, ‘Better days ahead for the natives of the South Pacific’, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 1950.

39 Ramsden, ‘Sons of Stone Age Peoples Delegates to Fiji Conference’.

Nevertheless, the observers were clear about the gulf they expected between the Melanesian and Polynesian delegates. Nancy Robson, for example, commented:

Most striking feature of the native representation was the vast gap separating eastern and western Pacific. Between the fluency and mental independence displayed in discussions by the hereditary princes of Polynesia, and the contributions, by comparison infinitely laboured and derivative, of Melanesians only just emerging from the horizon-bounded village community, yawned a gulf which the Melanesians themselves recognised with an emphatic and disarming humility.<sup>40</sup>

The *Fiji Times and Herald* asserted:

The conference has also emphasised the fact that the people of Samoa, Tonga and Fiji are much more advanced in many ways than the people of Papua New Guinea and the Solomons. As one observer put it, they seem to be about one hundred years behind the native people in this part of the South Pacific.<sup>41</sup>

Robert W. Robson wrote:

Most of the Polynesians are big men; all are sophisticated, dignified, carrying themselves with the easy assurance that comes with pride of race. In this respect, the Fijians, although formally classified as Melanesians, must go in with the Polynesian–Micronesian group.

The Melanesians, on the other hand, are all small men, and even those who are well-educated and accustomed to European contacts, seem shy and bashful.<sup>42</sup>

But these differences did not produce the predicted failure in creating a sense of region among islanders. The conference was in fact viewed as having unforeseen benefits. Nancy Robson concluded that the ‘revelation of the east to the west’—in the sense of the ‘awakening realisation’ among the Melanesians ‘of possibilities within themselves’—was ‘perhaps the most significant achievement of the Conference’.<sup>43</sup> For Dr John Gunther, Australian adviser to the Papua and New Guinea delegations, the Nasinu

40 Robson, ‘The Suva Conference of South Pacific Peoples’, p. 181.

41 Editorial, *Fiji Times and Herald*, 5 May 1950.

42 Robert W. Robson, ‘Sidelights on the South Pacific Conference’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, May 1950: 11.

43 Robson, ‘The Suva Conference of South Pacific Peoples’, p. 181.

conference demonstrated that the disparities between Melanesians and Polynesians could be useful in showing to white people in Papua and New Guinea what the indigenous inhabitants might achieve if appropriate development were instituted. For him, this was a compelling reason for Australia to hold the next conference in ‘Papua and New Guinea’.<sup>44</sup> In terms of overcoming the perceived cultural differences, the experiment was seen as successful. For Colonel F.W. Voelcker, the New Zealand observer, ‘the barriers of prejudice, isolation, and language among the Island native peoples were cracking’.<sup>45</sup> The Governor of Fiji concluded that ‘the conference had produced overwhelming evidence of the fraternal regard among the Pacific peoples, in spite of obvious but often superficial differences’.<sup>46</sup>

## An experiment in manners

The other experiment, which dominated day-to-day reporting, was whether Pacific islanders were sufficiently Westernised to engage in regional discussions of this kind. Public commentary focused almost obsessively on the minutiae of how the delegates behaved, dressed and walked. They reflected on the manners, the confidence, originality, style, bearing, ability to discuss and even length of speeches.<sup>47</sup> While the media commentary focused on dress and manner, the officials were focusing on the capacities exhibited within the meeting. Their concerns—indeed ‘fears’—were whether the islanders would be capable of meaningful discussion on the native welfare agenda. Would they speak at all? Would they have sufficient command of English? Would they be able to contribute away from the script provided by their advisers? Would they have the concentration and mental staying power, the diplomatic skills and the sophistication to carry on international discussions of this kind? These were seen as practical

44 J.T. Gunther, ‘South Pacific Conference: Preliminary Report by Dr J.T. Gunther, Advisor to Papua-New Guinea Delegation and Acting Chairman for Australia’, Department of External Affairs, Series A1838/1, item 347/2/6, folio 68, undated (attached to memo to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, dated 17 July 1950, from Secretary, Department of External Territories), National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

45 ‘NZ Observer Reviews Aims and Results of Conference’, *Fiji Times and Herald*.

46 ‘South Pacific Peoples’ Conference’, *The Times*.

47 See, for example, ‘Curious Mixture of Dressing at South Pacific Conference’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 1950; ‘Sombre Fashion at Talks’, *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 26 April 1950; Colin Simpson, ‘Native Conference in Fiji Opens Colourfully’, *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 26 April 1950; ‘Pacific Queen in Limelight’, *Melbourne Herald*, 29 April 1950; ‘Black-eyed Beauty Bosses Pacific Talks’, *Sydney Telegraph*, 30 April 1950.

problems in achieving a sense of region. Judged by the detailed reports on the capacities of delegates, this was regarded as an experiment whose outcome was unknown.<sup>48</sup>

In the officials' minds it was on such an experiment, together with the cultural experiment, that the possibility of an effective regional identity depended. These concerns were particularly focused on the Melanesian representatives, and especially on those from Papua and New Guinea. For Robert W. Robson, the level of education and language difficulties of the Melanesians suggested that an all-South Pacific gathering was premature: '[C]an the natives of Melanesia contribute anything of practical value while these enormous problems ... remain unsolved?'<sup>49</sup> There was a perception on the part of observers that what was expected in this forum was a level of diplomatic behaviour not experienced within the Melanesian territories, where political development and indigenous participation in decision-making had been minimal (a view that completely overlooked the schooling in diplomatic, negotiation and speaking skills common in Pacific cultures).

Implicit throughout the commentary is not just how the island delegates performed, but also what this suggested for the possibility of development towards a Western political and social style among Pacific islanders. Behind the experiment in manners was an experiment in the possibility of progress in Westernisation and civilisation. Underlying this, for some observers, was a belief in potential equality between Europeans and those they had colonised. The Nasinu conference was, then, an experiment in putting these beliefs into action. The normal colonial and racial hierarchy between the races was suspended for 10 days. The living arrangement was itself an experiment in tentative equality. Arrangements were made for all delegates, advisers and observers to sleep in the dormitories of the teachers' training college in adjoining cubicles. As it happened, while some Europeans slept at Nasinu, the Samoan delegates set up at the Grand Pacific Hotel, and the Tongan and Cook Islands representatives stayed privately. For those Europeans who stayed at Nasinu, it was remarked on that 'the unthinkable' was being experimented with in Suva against the colonial context of Australia's Papuan and New Guinea territories: white men and islanders sleeping in adjoining cubicles and sharing the same

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48 See Burton, 'The South Pacific Conference'; and Gunther, 'South Pacific Conference'.

49 Robson, 'Sidelights on the South Pacific Conference', p. 11.

dining table.<sup>50</sup> The governor even suspended the drinking regulations (making it an offence to serve natives alcohol) for the duration of the conference, following an incident at the Grand Pacific Hotel in which islander delegates were refused wine at dinner.<sup>51</sup>

This experiment in potential equality was generally seen as a surprising success. After the conference, Freeston concluded that ‘no longer can it be said that the natives of the Pacific sit in shade and idleness waiting for bananas to ripen and coconuts to drop’.<sup>52</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised that ‘native delegates greatly surprised observers by their grasp of the problems with which they were called upon to deal’.<sup>53</sup> Forsyth was reported as saying that he was impressed with ‘the fluency, clear thinking and poise of the native delegates’.<sup>54</sup> For the Australian observer, Dr Burton, ‘there is only one conclusion: the Conference was an outstandingly successful experiment’. He reported:

[O]ur fears proved to be dupes. We had thought that the native delegates would have been hesitant to express freely their views in the presence of Europeans ... for our experience of Pacific races had led us to think that it would take them long ‘to clear their throats’ and to orient their minds to deal with any important subject, especially in unfamiliar surroundings.<sup>55</sup>

McNicoll, reporting his answer to the question ‘how were they?’, reported:

[P]eople are obviously disappointed to hear that the native delegates sat around like any white men at a Rotary convention, discussing things quietly in excellent English and displaying perfect knowledge of rules of procedure.

My questioners are even more disappointed to hear that these natives, sitting at a conference which helped prepare a blue-print for their personal civilisation, were dressed—above the waist at least—in a completely Western collar-and-tie fashion.<sup>56</sup>

50 ‘Delegates Gather in Fiji for South Pacific Talks’, *Daily Mirror*.

51 See ‘Storm in a Glass at Suva: Native Delegates are Refused Drinks’, *Melbourne Herald*, 1 May 1950; ‘Here’s to the Governor’, *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 2 May 1950; and ‘Temporary Issue of Liquor Permits at Suva’, *Fiji Times and Herald*, 11 May 1950.

52 ‘New Era for South Seas’, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

53 ‘Our Opportunity in South Pacific’, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

54 ‘Praise of Natives: Pacific Talk’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April 1950.

55 Burton, ‘The South Pacific Conference’.

56 McNicoll, ‘Better Days Ahead for the Natives of South Pacific’.

But for the Australian adviser to the Papua and New Guinea delegations, Dr Gunther, most Melanesians (he particularly excluded the Dutch New Guinea delegates) ‘did not contribute, per se, originality being most guided by observers’ and ‘failed to sustain their initial concentration’. Nevertheless, ‘some Papua and New Guinea delegates showed they were able to prepare prescribed subject matter and deliver it without nervousness by reading’.<sup>57</sup>

The widely expressed surprise that the islander representatives had generally proven to be competent in terms of the criteria set by the observers seems to have reflected a turning point in European, and particularly Australian, thinking about Pacific islanders. The commentary seems to suggest a changing view of non-European peoples as potentially equal once development processes had their effect. This is captured in McNicoll’s comments:

The days are almost gone when we can think of the Pacific natives as ‘fuzzy wuzzies’, as simple, ignorant people too lazy to make anything but indifferent laborers and slipshod servants ... True, the bulk of the Pacific natives are still in the ‘fuzzy wuzzy’ stage; an enormous preponderance are illiterate; the work of raising their standards is prodigious.

But the South Pacific Conference was the writing on the wall, the start of better days for these natives whom we would do well to cultivate as our friends as well as our neighbours ... What once was a pipe dream—westernised natives in the Pacific—mightn’t be far from a reality.<sup>58</sup>

## An experiment in ‘regional trusteeship’ versus self-determination

There were more fundamental agendas underlying the attempt to forge a regional identity. The Nasinu conference could be seen as the playing out of the politics of the Canberra conference of three years earlier around the question of whether the Pacific island conference would serve as a vehicle

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57 Gunther, ‘South Pacific Conference’.

58 McNicoll, ‘Better Days Ahead for the Natives of South Pacific’.

for encouraging political self-determination or as a model of trusteeship. For those supporting self-determination, the Nasinu conference was seen as part of an attempt to deliver a 'new deal' to Pacific peoples.<sup>59</sup>

Here, then, were two countervailing experiments invested in the creation of regional identity among islanders: an experiment in maintaining empire against moves in world opinion, on the one hand, and a possible way of setting in motion ideas that would help to bring empire to an end, on the other. By the time of the Nasinu conference, it was clear that the balance had moved dramatically in favour of an experiment in maintaining empire or at least slowing the divestment of colonial power. In 1949, Labour/Labor governments in Wellington and Canberra had been replaced with conservative governments less sympathetic to a liberal interpretation of trusteeship principles. Thus, for all government observers, except possibly the United States, the first Pacific island conference represented a showcase for regional trusteeship rather than a move towards self-determination. In pursuit of this objective, Australia and the United Kingdom made an effort to keep a UN observer away from the conference and an Australian official briefing talked of the advantages of the occasion in terms of establishing anticolonial credentials.<sup>60</sup> The leader of Australia's delegation, Dr Burton, indicated that there were fears 'lest the Conference ... be used as a sounding board for political dissatisfaction, especially on the part of the restless Samoans and of the Indians in Fiji'.<sup>61</sup>

Although governments had changed in Wellington and Canberra, the experiment of the social democratic governments remained in the air. The very existence of a conference of representatives of island peoples was enough for their experiment to proceed. There are indications that some officials also represented this view. The Secretary-General of the newly formed SPC, Forsyth, had been Evatt's righthand man on Pacific island and trusteeship issues and was the author of the original study advocating a more progressive regional institution. Maude, the member for social development on the commission's Research Council, had been promoting ideas of localisation in his time in the British Colonial Service in the

59 See, for example, 'New Deal Talks in Pacific', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 21 April 1950.

60 Australian Department of External Affairs, 'South Pacific Conference, Brief to the Minister for External Affairs from South West Pacific Section, 27 January 1950', Department of External Affairs, Series A1838/1, item 347/2/1, folio 89, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

61 Burton, 'The South Pacific Conference'.

Pacific and, as we have seen, the adviser to the Papua and New Guinea delegations saw the conference as a way of moving white opinion in Port Moresby on the possibilities of political development.

For those seeing this as a politically risky event in which self-determination sentiment might be aired, the experiment may have seemed successful. The Samoan and Indo-Fijian representatives, each of whom had been actively anticolonial at home, had not used the occasion to promote their cause or to foster nationalism among others. Burton reported ‘only slight evidence of this’.<sup>62</sup> No-one had sought to move away from an agenda focused on health and social development or to interpret these issues liberally to include political points in the way so common at later conferences. Meanwhile, the conference suggested a powerful image of serious ‘native welfare’ programs involving participation by people of the territories that could help to assuage the critics of colonial rule (and especially the new Government of India) at the United Nations.

Nevertheless, the conference also looked successful for those who aimed to foster political development. Political development did not need to be on the agenda for this to be the case. For those interested in promoting processes of self-determination, the key was that Pacific islanders would find a basis for valuing the creation of links among themselves, that the less developed would gain inspiration from the more developed and that, through out-of-conference meetings, an exchange of experiences would encourage islander agency in the processes of change. We have already seen that the conference brought together a number of people who were already involved in self-determination processes in their own countries and that, for those who had not yet experienced this, it was judged to be a revelation. The very symbolism of a conference in which only Pacific islanders were speaking was not lost on participants—or journalists:

From the native point of view the main significance of the conference lay in the fact that Europeans for the first time, were officially recognising that the Pacific races would ultimately be able to look after themselves, economically, socially and in future politically.<sup>63</sup>

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62 *ibid.*

63 ‘S. Pacific Natives Find New Outlook’, *Melbourne Sun*, 4 May 1950. See also ‘Fires of National Ambition Burn in South Pacific’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 1950.

The commentary in New Zealand's *Daily News* suggested that the impact of the meeting had been in line with New Zealand's views on moving these territories to self-reliance and self-government—'the ultimate transfer of government to the Pacific races'.<sup>64</sup> For the New Zealand observer, Voelcker, a 'new era is dawning':

Seated at the conference table one saw the thoughtful faces of vastly differing races studying earnestly and intelligently the administrative, educational, health, and economic and social problems which have been the concern in the past of administrators, scientists and missionaries.<sup>65</sup>

## An experiment in anticommunism

Finally, the Nasinu conference represented an experiment in anticommunism. This was not made explicit by those who devised the idea of creating a Pacific island region in 1947, but the idea of a link between regional security, more generally conceived, and regional trusteeship was there from the beginning.<sup>66</sup> This was clear in the Anzac Pact of 1944, in which the Australian and New Zealand governments set out their proposal for a South Seas commission, as discussed in Chapter 4. It was also evident in Evatt's official statements between 1944 and 1945. The promotion of regional trusteeship was seen as developing the area for defence and meeting the needs of Pacific islanders that might otherwise lead to security problems in the form of an unsympathetic local population in time of war.<sup>67</sup>

Between the South Seas Conference of 1947 and the Nasinu meeting in 1950, the idea of promoting a region among indigenous inhabitants began to reflect the shift from the wartime conceptualisation of global and regional security to one governed by a concern about communism and its possible links to 'Asian nationalism'. Concerns about the spread of communist ideas to the island territories via anticolonial movements meant that regional trusteeship was invested with a new meaning—that

64 'The Suva Conference', *The Daily News*, [New Zealand], 6 May 1950.

65 'NZ Observer Reviews Aims and Results of Conference', *Fiji Times and Herald*.

66 The link between 'native welfare' and security in the formation of the SPC is well covered in Herr, 'Regionalism in the South Seas'; and Smith, *South Pacific Commission*.

67 See Australian Department of External Affairs, 'Australian–New Zealand Agreement', clauses 28–31; and Evatt, *Foreign Policy of Australia*, pp. 116, 132, 142.

of keeping 'the natives' satisfied and looking to each other, and to the West. This was seen as applicable to the native welfare programs of the SPC whether or not they involved Pacific island participation. A *New Zealand Herald* editorial, for example, in commending the work of the new commission 'in trying to improve the lot of native communities from Dutch New Guinea to Tahiti', argued:

In 1947 Asiatic communism was not the danger it has since become. The situation today has changed so much for the worse that the Pacific Powers can neglect no measure that will serve toward checking the red tide that may yet be found flowing south and east from the continental mainland.<sup>68</sup>

Also, for Maude, interviewed in the month after the conference:

[T]he trend of world events made it all too probable that the Pacific islands peoples would in the not too distant future, be the recipients of skilled and specious propaganda from their near neighbours to the north and west ... The best method of meeting this threat was ... for the colonial Powers to make immediate and concerted efforts to raise the islanders' social and economic standard of living.<sup>69</sup>

For those with a more conservative view of trusteeship, and who wanted to hold on to empire, the new concern with anticommunism contained a possible challenge to their position. Did the recent Asian experience of nationalism and communism suggest that to resist political development was to play into the hands of the communists or could their commitment to slowing the divestment of colonial territories also be seen as serving their desire to oppose communist influence? A slightly different ambivalence is captured in the *Pacific Islands Monthly's* coverage of the conference. The editorial, presumably written by Robert W. Robson, argued that in the face of 'communism sweeping across overcrowded Asia, approaching our northwest frontiers', meetings such as the South Pacific Conference diverted energy from the real task of integrating Western forces to contain communism. 'How', the writer asked, 'can we achieve such a combination when so many of our leaders devote so much of their time to the uplift of down-trodden races?'<sup>70</sup> This preoccupation with 'sociological planning' while communism was spreading was so 'much fiddling while Rome

68 'The South Pacific Commission', *New Zealand Herald*, [Auckland], 20 February 1950.

69 'Propaganda: South Pacific May Be Deluged by North-West', *Fiji Times and Herald*, 22 June 1950.

70 Editorial, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, May 1950: 1, 6.

burns'.<sup>71</sup> Although Robson's signed article in the same issue indicates the same preoccupation, it argued that 'in the circumstances, it is just as well that per medium of the SP Conference ... the Western nations should guide and direct the Pacific Islanders'. He concluded that 'perhaps in view of events in Asia and Indonesia, we may regard the SP Conference as an insurance'.<sup>72</sup>

A *Daily Mirror* 'special correspondent' pursued a similar theme:

The conference is being held in an area where there is plenty of potential tinder for the spark of Asiatic communism. For that reason, whatever the conference finally achieves, the gathering of races and colours here at Nasinu must in itself be socially valuable.<sup>73</sup>

And the *Auckland Star* developed a rationale for the connection between regional identity and anticommunism:

The conference should serve as tangible proof that Western democracy has something worthwhile to offer to the native peoples. It should prove a valuable antidote to the insidious propaganda of the Communist agents who are known to be at work in the Pacific ... In South-east Asia, where there was no such organisation as the South Pacific Conference, the Communist agitators have been able to use the upsurge of nationalism for their own purposes. Only by offering a future that is bright with promise can the various Governments hope to prevent the nationalistic aspirations of the native peoples of the Pacific from being misused in the same way. The South Pacific Conference is a positive move in the right direction. Admittedly, it is an experiment.<sup>74</sup>

Ultimately, however, this seems to have been a rather low-priority experiment for the Australian Government at this time, although regional identity and anticommunism were to be strongly linked in Australia's South Pacific policy later in the Cold War. While the South Pacific figured significantly in Canberra's interests in 1947, by 1950, attention was centrally focused on Asia, largely because of the Chinese revolution and developments in Korea.<sup>75</sup>

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71 *ibid.*

72 Robson, 'Sidelights on the South Pacific Conference', p. 11.

73 'Delegates Gather in Fiji for South Pacific Talks', *Daily Mirror*, 24 April 1950.

74 Editorial, *Auckland Star*, 26 April 1950.

75 'Leadership in South Seas', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1950; and 'Our Opportunity in South Pacific', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 1950.

## Conclusion

The meanings invested in the European experiment of creating a sense of regional identity among Pacific islanders were many. But they were all related in some way or other to the experience of the recent world war and to the hopes and interests involved in constructing a postwar order. The world war represented a turning point in fundamental ideas: from a wartime conceptualisation of security to the Cold War thinking that was to dominate the next 40 years; from notions of the natural inequality of races to principles of equality and ‘civilisability’; from a commitment to perpetual colonialism to the promotion of self-determination; and from diversity and partition within the Pacific to unity and common will. World War II also prompted a shift in the self-image of Australia and New Zealand, from dependency to independent leadership aspirations in the Pacific. While the newly created Pacific island region, like Spate’s broader Pacific region, was a ‘European artefact’, there was no general agreement among European observers about the meaning of the experiment. In particular, the modern South Pacific was born of a tension in the European, and particularly the Australian, mindset between ideas of indigenous self-determination and ideas of hegemonic control—a tension that has continued to underlie attitudes towards South Pacific regional governance ever since.

Pacific island representatives at Nasinu welcomed the experiment, with their enthusiasm couched in terms of a shared need to deal with the rapid changes occurring in their societies. The novelty of Nasinu, as the first regionwide meeting of Pacific island leaders, was reinforced by the lack of opportunities for Pacific islanders to meet each other across colonial boundaries over the previous 50 years. During the first half of the twentieth century, changing European economic practices and colonial control of movement and travel confined Pacific islanders to their territories. With colonialism came internal labour trades, whereby the colonial administrations restricted or banned foreign recruiters. This contrasted with the previous situation, where labourers were typically taken, or opted, to work beyond the confines of their own island group. Colonial restrictions on their mobility were reinforced by the more limited opportunities to join trading vessels. No longer were there the opportunities for long-range travel provided by the whaling vessels or by the large canoes still available in the nineteenth century. Opportunities to come in contact with more distant island groups were, from the 1930s,

limited to attendance at the Central Medical School in Suva or, for some Polynesians, mission activity in Melanesia.<sup>76</sup> Prior to the decolonisation period of the 1960s, regional networks were confined to colonial officials and even here were mainly *within* colonial empires rather than *between* them. So, it is not surprising that contemporary opinion viewed Nasinu as a watershed in Pacific history and, for nervous administrators as well as leading Pacific islanders, a social and political experiment of momentous significance.

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76 I am indebted to Doug Munro for his insights on these points.

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