

Opening remarks by the Honourable Meltek Sato Kilman, Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu at the opening ceremony of the Lapita Conference, Port Vila, 6–10 July 2015

The Honourable Meltek Sato Kilman

- His Excellency Father Lonsdale Baldwin, President of the Republic of Vanuatu
- Chief Tirsupe Sinemao, Head of the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs
- Ministers of the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu
- Members of Parliament of the Republic of Vanuatu
- Representatives of the Diplomatic Corps
- Distinguished representatives of the Pacific region
- Professor Don Paterson, USP Emalus Campus
- Professor Patrick Kirch and other professors/scholars from the region and around world
- Government officials
- Distinguished invited guests, ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure and honour to be with you at the opening ceremony of the Eighth Lapita Conference today.

The Vanuatu Government, through the Cultural Centre, is delighted and honoured to be a co-host of this important conference for the Pacific Island Countries and the world.

While taking this opportunity, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to delegates from our neighbouring Pacific Island countries, including Australia and New Zealand and those from other parts of the world who are present here today.

I would also like to convey to you all the best wishes of the people and the government of the Republic of Vanuatu for attending this important gathering this week. I realise that you are fully dedicated to the sessions of this conference, but I do hope you will also take time to enjoy the fascinating environment of this country which is slowly recovering from the devastation of Tropical Cyclone Pam and enjoy the company of our people during your short stay with us.

As you know, the aim of this conference is to know and trace back where the people of Vanuatu and the rest of the Pacific countries have come from. Archaeological evidence shows that first settlers of the Vanuatu archipelago arrived somewhere around 3000 years ago.

This historical root is wealth to all of us as it can be used to foster respect which can come with mutual understanding, care and responsibilities towards peace in the Pacific region and the world at large.

I hope that this conference will be a valuable opportunity for you all to exchange ideas, experiences and knowledge, to address some of the confusion surrounding the subject—Lapita—and its findings; so that this can be used in schools and universities around the region and afar, as well as in the public arena as a clear evidence of the migratory history and the origin of the people of the Pacific.

The Pacific Island countries have many cultures and languages which we believe have continued to impact on national policies and enforcement of our laws. We now also know that these cultures and languages apart from of the environmental influence, must have originated from one Proto-Oceanic Austronesian language, and it is the language of the ancestors of our ancient Lapita people. The interest groups and regional organisations—such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and others did not exist by chance. They existed because of the feeling of oneness.

We may be physically looking different but as far as archaeological evidence goes, we have the same ancestral history traced back to the Lapita people.

Thank you, Professor Jack Golson, for being one of the pioneers of the Pacific archaeologists, who from 1954 have engaged with Lapita studies. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Professor Patrick Kirch on this field of study from the University of California who is here today and who will be the keynote speaker of this conference. I would like to further extend our gratitude to co-directors of Teouma excavation project, Dr Stuart Bedford and Professor Mathew Spriggs from The Australian National University and the Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre for leading one of the larger excavations in the Pacific to find the first settlers of the islands of Vanuatu. This excavation occurred in Teouma, three to four kilometres from where we are today, where headless skeletons and the remnants of Lapita pottery were seen as evidence of the settlement of Lapita people here and across the Pacific region.

I believe the links and evidence of our origin can contribute to help us to work more closely in the years ahead and create a Pacific region that is a better place for our people—the Lapita people—to live, and for those who wish to come and live with us harmoniously.

I hope that this conference will be a fruitful one, providing ample opportunity for sharing new evidence and ideas as well as developing mutual understanding on the evidence and challenges raised before us in this great task and how we can address them to add to global knowledge and information.

I wish you all the best in your deliberations in this conference. With this note, on behalf the people and government of the Republic of Vanuatu, I would now like to declare that the Lapita Conference is officially open. Thank you for your attention.

This text is taken from *Debating Lapita: Distribution, Chronology, Society and Subsistence*,
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