

5. Travelling Parties: Cook Islanders' Transnational Movement

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As in many Polynesian communities Cook Islander social networks are truly transnational. In 2006 only 12,000 Cook Islanders lived within the nation-state, approximately 58,000 Cook Islanders live in New Zealand and an estimated 8,000 in Australia (*Cook Islands Statistics* 2006; *Statistics New Zealand* 2006). Familial and community relationships are maintained through frequent phone calls, emails and travel back to the home islands for important occasions such as weddings and funerals, religious celebrations and sports competitions. The mobility of Cook Islanders who reside within the nation-state is also evident in the frequent travel undertaken for business purposes. Government employees and members of non-government organisations regularly travel to regional meetings and conferences. Tourism operators take dance groups on promotion tours to Europe and North America, and business entrepreneurs travel internationally to attract investment in agricultural and tourism projects.

In this paper, the term 'transnationalism' is used to refer to the increasing mobility of people, goods, information and technologies that characterises globalisation (Appadurai 1996; Kennedy and Roudometof 2002; Werbner 1999). I focus particularly on the ways in which social networks are sustained beyond the nation-state and maintained across multiple geographical sites, in order to argue that Cook Islanders, like many other diasporic communities, have responded to these global forces in a distinctly local manner (for other Pacific examples, see King and Connell 1999; Lee 2003; Macpherson 2004; Spickard 2002; Spoonley 2001, 2003). This paper examines a local style of travel called *tere pati* (literally travelling party), which involves large groups of individuals from extended family, church, village and island organisations undertaking travel to other Cook Islands communities.¹ Prior to European contact, *tere pati* were undertaken to neighbouring islands to forge and maintain social, economic and political ties. The increasing emigration of Cook Islanders has meant that the routes *tere pati* take have expanded to include diasporic communities abroad.

Guarnizo and Smith remind us that transnational relationships and actions must be grounded in specific times and places: 'Transnational practices, while connecting collectivities located in more than one national territory, are embodied in specific social relations established between specific people, situated in unequivocal localities, at historically determined times' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998, 11).

This paper examines the specificities of Cook Islands transnationalism in a number of ways. In the first section, I provide background to the contemporary Cook Islands diaspora and the influence of missionisation, colonisation and global forces on the movements of Cook Islands people. This is followed by an overview of the structure and purpose of *tere pati*, focussing on the economic, political, affective and aesthetic components of this travel. To conclude, I analyse a particular *tere pati* that involved groups travelling from New Zealand and Melbourne to the island of Aitutaki. This case study illustrates the ways in which this *tere pati*, as transnational practice, reproduces Cook Islanders' relationships.

Throughout the paper, I examine the successful maintenance of ties across the Cook Islands diaspora, however I do not want to suggest that this represents the totality of Cook Islanders experience of transnationalism. Understanding the efforts that Cook Islanders put into preserving connections to their home islands and other communities abroad is important to an understanding of transnationalism. Yet accompanying these practices of conservation are experiences of displacement and alienation that shape the lives of migrant groups in foreign countries. Additionally, Cook Islanders who remain at home keenly experience the results of emigration as loss—mainly of young, vital members of the islands—and as lack of opportunities and of income-generating possibilities for those that remain.

The Cook Islands and Migration

Over half of the Cook Islands residential population, around 9,000, live on the island of Rarotonga, the administrative capital of the group. The remainder of the population, approximately 3,000 people, are scattered across the 11 inhabited 'outer islands'. From the late 19th century, there has been a steady movement from these outer islands to Rarotonga and onwards. The movement was primarily economically motivated, spurred by the introduction of foreign trade and commerce during British and New Zealand colonial rule (1888–1965). After World War II, Cook Islanders, along with other Pacific Island migrants, provided labour for New Zealand's urban manufacturing sector (Appleyard and Stahl 1995; Connell 2002; Spoonley, Bedford and Macpherson 2003) and the flow of migrants to New Zealand and beyond has increased steadily since the Cook Islands achieved independence in 'free-association' with New Zealand in 1965. This relationship means—among other things—that Cook Islanders have dual citizenship, enabling automatic entry into New Zealand.

Cook Islanders now migrate for a variety of reasons; higher incomes, education and training opportunities are the principal motivations (see Wright-Koteka 2006 for an in-depth overview). Since the late 1990s, when the Cook Islands government introduced a neoliberal economic reform program, many have had little choice but to migrate. The economic restructuring involved halving public service employment and the removal of government subsidies for basic goods

and services. While some retrenched public servants relocated into tourism, the Cook Islands main industry, approximately six to eight thousand Cook Islanders have left in search of employment (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2005).

Like many small Pacific nations, the Cook Islands have been described as a MIRAB economy (Migration, Remittances, Aid, Bureaucracy) (Bertram 1999; Denoon, Mein-Smith and Wyndham 2000, 402; Poirine 1998). Certainly, migration figures attest to this characterisation, as do remittance figures. An NZODA (New Zealand Overseas Development Agency) report stated that money sent home from New Zealand totalled NZ \$2.5 million in 1986 (1997, 19).² This figure only includes money sent home (via money transfer services); it does not include money taken home as gifts. Nor does it include money spent by overseas Cook Islanders on airfares for kin, reverse charge phone calls from kin, or the cost of transporting items requested from home. Inclusion of these expenses would make remittance figures significantly higher (Loomis 1990a, 1990b).

While the assessment of MIRAB economies as inefficient welfare systems dominates aid policy research, there is a developing body of research that seeks to challenge this assumption through an examination of the worldviews of Pacific Islanders and their understandings of economic and social security (Hau'ofa 1994; Poirine 1998). Poirine (1998), for instance, suggests that the MIRAB system is actually a rational, stable and sustainable system (far more sustainable than the agricultural export and tourist industries), involving a complex system of loans across transnational family groups. As the introduction of economic reforms in the Cook Islands resulted in a decline in aid and the privatisation of government bureaucracies, remittances and migration have played increasingly central roles assisting those who reside within the nation-state.³

As I demonstrate below, a central aspect of *tere pati* is the exchange of money and goods between travelling and hosting parties, and as such can be viewed as an integral aspect of Cook Islands remittances. But while economic transactions play an important role, transactions that take place during *tere pati* cannot be reduced simply to economics. Helen Lee (2004, 138; this volume) makes the important point that the concept of transnationalism has been utilised in the Pacific primarily to understand economic relationships of diasporic communities and further, that this focus ignores other aspects of social relations. Following her insight, I argue that transnational relationships operate in multiple registers; they have economic, aesthetic, political and affective dimensions, and in order to grasp their significance one needs to explore these enmeshed components.

Tere Pati

Cook Islanders love to travel in groups. Group travel is undertaken primarily to visit friends and family residing abroad and is considered to be the most

enjoyable and economical way to travel. The movements of solitary Western tourists are often used as a point of comparison, as a tour operator suggested:

A lot of *papa'a* (Westerners) travel to 'get away from it all'. We don't do that, what is there to get away from? We want to see our family and friends! Anyway, we would be too lonely. Us Cook Islanders, we like company.

Aside from the fact that most Cook Islanders do not have incomes that allow them to partake in tourist-style holidays, travel is primarily viewed as a directed, purposeful activity. Western tourists are sometimes referred to, somewhat derogatorily, as *utu panu*, a phrase used to describe a type of aimless wandering: 'someone with no family, a drifter, like the seeds from the *utu* tree [*Barringtonia asiatica*] floating out to sea' a young woman explained to me. She went on to tell me that she once called her irresponsible father an *utu panu* during a heated argument: 'it is the worst thing you can say to a Cook Islander; it means they don't care for their family'.

Tere pati is the most formalised type of group travel. *Tere pati* usually consist of between 20 and 100 participants and are undertaken for a range of purposes. Family groups organise *tere pati* for family reunions many of which occur every four years. They are alternately 'hosted' by families in different countries. Church groups travel abroad to participate in celebrations for religious anniversaries or to raise money for church projects such as the construction of a new hall. Similarly, sports, dance and community organisations (such as the Boy's Brigade and Girl Guides) travel to fundraise, to participate in regional and international competitions and for educational purposes.

Cook Islanders today view *tere pati* as the reinstatement of a practice that was banned during the missionary and colonial periods. Pre-missionary contact between the islands that now make up the Cooks group is evident both in oral histories and archaeological records (Bellwood 1979). Trade links with the Society Islands and Samoa were also maintained. These economic affiliations were accompanied by a history of artistic exchange (Moulin 1996). Under missionary rule, one of the first laws to be instituted by the London Missionary Society (LMS) was the prohibition of inter-island travel in attempts to control island populations. Throughout the colonial archive there are records of correspondence between colonial administrators and islanders requesting passports and permits to travel. For these administrators, the fact that islanders wanted to travel in large groups was disconcerting and potentially disruptive to their governance.

Many *tere pati* travel in matching uniforms; island-print dresses and shirts or t-shirts with specially designed logos declaring the purpose of the trip (see figure 5-1). For instance, a family will have a T-shirt made up displaying their family

name, date and location of a family reunion. These T-shirts are sold to members of the *tere pati* as part of their fundraising.

Groups leaving from the Cook Islands, be they church, village, or family groups, will often prepare 'items' to perform for their hosts. Gifts are presented to hosts along with live music and dance. If the groups are from the Cook Islands they will present *tivaevae* (appliquéd quilts and cushion covers) and pandanus mats. These groups may also travel with large amounts of island food such as taro, which is distributed to hosts. In turn, individuals in the group receive presents (usually money and manchester items) from relatives and close friends who reside in the places the *tere pati* visit.⁴

Economics and Travel

Cook Islanders say that travelling in groups is the best and most economical way to see the world. As an example, a woman in the Golden Oldies netball team said she could not have afforded to travel unless it was as part of a group. 'It is a good system' she said, 'you go to places as a guest, they put on *kaikai* (feast) for you, organise your accommodation, your transport, you don't have to worry about anything. Then they come here and you look after them'.

Before a group embarks on a trip overseas, they often fundraise at home to pay for airfares and to cover other travel expenses. These funds are put into a joint bank account, usually in the name of the group leader or the person nominated as the group's accountant. The types of fundraising activities engaged in are raffles, sausage sizzles, selling plates of food and tending people's plantations. What is particularly significant about fundraising for *tere pati* is that individuals are not expected to contribute their own money but they are expected to contribute to raising funds for the group as a whole. On trips overseas, people may bring 'pocket money' for themselves but otherwise the group funds pay for accommodation and travel. Food and additional costs are generally covered by the host communities.

Many *tere pati* travel with the aim of making money for a particular community project, usually for materials to construct a church, village or island public building, such as halls, churches and schools. The primary way that *tere pati* make money is by putting on series of dance performances at nightclubs or village halls. Money is made from ticket sales and donations during the performance. A contribution bowl is placed in front of the performers, audience members get up and dance towards the performers waving money above their heads. They will place money in the bowl or tuck notes in the waist of a performer's costume. The figures I have been quoted for amounts earned through performances are sizeable. A family group that travelled to New Zealand had their children learn a series of 'items' to perform. They estimated that they made around NZ\$1,000 each time they performed. A priest from a Catholic *tere pati*

said that his group raised NZ\$60,000 on their Australia trip and a group from the island of Mangaia raised NZ\$100,000 for a new community building.

In 1997, I recorded three *tere pati* travelling to Australia and New Zealand from Rarotonga. These were the Rarotongan Golden Oldies netball team, the village of Tupapa-Maraerenga's dance group, and Arorangi village Boys Brigade. In addition, two groups from the islands of Tongareva and Mangaia passed through Rarotonga, performing at local bars to raise money, on the way to New Zealand. In terms of *tere pati* travelling to the Cook Islands, at least six community or family groups arrive in Rarotonga each year. At Christmas time, at least one or two overseas groups travel to the outer islands. The main difference between groups travelling from the Cook Islands and those originating from abroad is that the latter do not undertake fundraising activities but rather bring large amounts of gifts to the home islands. This reflects the fact that diasporic communities are usually wealthier than those at home. Nevertheless, many outer islands councils have limited the number of *tere pati* to two per year as they feel the groups put too much strain on the limited island resources, especially food and accommodation.

While fundraising is a central component of *tere pati*, other incentives are also important. The family group mentioned above formed to visit family abroad but also to teach their children 'old' stories, songs and dances. Before leaving Rarotonga, they rehearsed twice a week for four months before they travelled overseas. In this instance, *tere pati* are as much about maintaining cultural capital as about economic capital. Similarly, diasporic communities view *tere pati* back to the homeland as extremely important for children born overseas. They are considered to be a vehicle through which children can learn the Cook Islands Maori language and culturally valued skills such as husking coconuts, fishing and planting. Older members of the community spend evenings recalling their childhoods and instructing young ones on 'the ways things should be done'. Cultural and moral education, emotional connection, community service and fulfilment of economic obligations are all important to understanding the multiple ways in which Cook Islanders sustain relationships during *tere pati*.

Koni Raoni: Dance, Money and Movement

Many Cook Islanders who live abroad return home for a month or longer at Christmas time. Important events such as twenty-first birthday celebrations and weddings are often postponed until this visiting period so that as many extended family members as possible can attend. It is also the time when most *tere pati* are undertaken. In the following, I describe one such occasion that occurred on the island of Aitutaki in 1996.

Two *tere pati*, one from Melbourne and the other from Auckland, travelled to Aitutaki in mid-December. The Melbourne *tere pati* had 80 participants who

slept in the Amuri village hall (the village from which most of the *tere pati* members originated). At the hall, a roster was drawn up for cleaning and food preparation duties for all members of the group. Community groups and family groups linked in various ways to the *tere pati* brought fresh fruit and vegetables to the hall on a daily basis. Many hosted large feasts at surrounding church and village meeting houses. The *tere pati* sent four shipping crates of household and farming materials by sea to coincide with their arrival. The items shipped included packets of toilet paper, cartons of tinned food and frozen chicken pieces, a tractor, and 80 mattresses which the *tere pati* used to sleep on and then donated to the village of Amuri when they left.

The family I was stayed with during this Christmas period had one brother return with his wife and three children with the Auckland *tere pati*. In addition to contributing to this group's donations, he also brought goods for his immediate family living on Aitutaki. Their shipped crate included containers of food such as large quantities of frozen steak, minced meat and New Zealand oysters and mussels. It also contained a new washing machine for the family home, a grass cutter, an outboard motor, a plastic outdoor table and matching chairs, and two pushbikes for the male nephews. They told me that it cost NZ\$5,000 to ship the crate. In addition, both members of the *tere pati* and members of this particular family also gave sums of money to family members and to village organisations.

Tere pati are obliged to undertake community projects during their stay. The male members of the Melbourne *tere pati* rebuilt the hall's roof with funds raised back in New Zealand and Australia. During other years, *tere pati* have been involved in community projects such as fixing a sea wall and replastering a church. One member of the *tere pati* said 'we need to do these kinds of work to say thank you to the Aitutakians that stay here and look after our land and our village'. Similarly, at the family level, overseas members pay, with cash and goods, family at home to maintain their family homes and to clear and plant their land. Neglected land is considered a matter of shame and can also lead to challenges to ownership by other family members.

As well as these economic and political agendas, *tere pati* provide occasions for intensely pleasurable proximity between long-distance family and friends (see Alexeyeff 2009). Feasts, informal get-togethers and bar-hopping involve a great deal of drinking, eating, dancing and singing. Stories, laughter, tears, new dance moves and songs are exchanged throughout the trip. One important occasion that is held during the Christmas period on Aitutaki is the *koni raoni*: a day-long event held each December 26 and New Year's Day.⁵ *Koni raoni* means 'dance round' and refers to the event's structure, which involves one of the villages travelling around the island singing and performing choreographed dance numbers. The other villages reciprocate with gifts of money, food and by joining in the dancing and singing. Like many forms of group entertainment, the aim

of the *koni raoni* is to raise funds for the performing village. In 1996, the travelling village made special stops at the halls where the *tere pati* were staying 'to pay tribute' a performer told me, 'but also to get some money off those rich ones!'. At the Amuri hall, the Melbourne *tere pati* waited for the performing village. The sound of drums, trucks and motorbikes announced their arrival. After a series of speeches, prayers and listing of donations of money, the performers began to dance. On certain occasions, members of the *tere pati* dance with the performers and leave coin donations in the contribution bowl when they are finished. These interactions were accompanied by raucous laughter and screams of delight as dancers on both sides aim to variously show off their dancing skills or dance in humorous or deliberately provocative styles. After about an hour the performers are provided with food and drink before they move on to the next village.

For the *koni raoni* the Melbourne *tere pati* donned matching green t-shirts. On the front, a circular emblem featured the words 'Teupokoenua – Melbourne' (Teupokoenua is one of the Cook Islands Maori names for Aitutaki) and an emblem featuring a kangaroo and a palm tree. On the back was a map of Australia with Melbourne marked by a coconut tree. The map was surrounded by the words 'Melbourne-Aitutaki Tour 96-97'.

Figure 5–1: A *tere pati* T-shirt



These t-shirts make an important statement about the nature of Cook Islands diasporic communities and about transnationalism more generally. Both the emblem and the map visually represent the way these Melbourne Cook Islanders view their group's identity and place as dual: they are Aitutakian but also Melbournians. This twin state of belonging is a key aspect of transnational identities and Cook Islanders, like other Pacific Islander diasporic communities, have a complex range of investments in more than one country (Guarnizo and Smith 1998, 13; Lee 2003, 2004, 135; Spoonley, Bedford and McPherson 2003).

The sheer joy and excitement experienced during *koni raoni* epitomises the general mood of *tere pati* undertaken during the 1996–97 holiday period. It

contrasts starkly with the emotional tenor when the *tere pati* return home. The tropical food stuffs, island brooms, coconut oil and mats given to those leaving are exchanged quietly, with no formal ceremony. At the airport, long silent hugs between family members seem to amplify the distance that will soon separate them.

Conclusion

I end with that sombre image as a reminder that the process of maintaining and reconstituting transnational communities is also accompanied by loss and dislocation. While there is much to celebrate about the tenacious way that Cook Islanders preserve their community and familial connections across geographical distance, to complete the picture of these transnational relationships we must acknowledge that globalisation also makes these relationships potentially fragile.

Guarnizo and Smith (1998, 13) use the term 'translocality' to describe the local-to-local connections that migrants forge to their locality of origin and the place to which they migrate. Many Cook Islanders view migration as a temporary strategy in order to earn higher incomes that will enable them one day to return home and live comfortably. The reality is that many end up settling permanently overseas because of job opportunities, welfare benefits or simply because they become accustomed to life abroad. At the same time, many migrants retain an emotional attachment to their homeland. It is this attachment that older, first generation migrants aim to instil in members of the second and third generations through visits to the homeland. *Tere pati* are the primary way these trips are undertaken and this practice suggests that transnational communities will continue to flourish in the future.

The 'translocality' of Cook Islanders refers not only to their multiple locations of residence but also to the 'locality' of the travel they undertake. *Tere pati* is a culturally specific style of travel. While global economic forces have largely determined that many Cook Islanders cannot afford to reside at home, they have applied distinctly local strategies in their attempts to stave off the deleterious effects of globalisation on their kin and various community affiliations. This travel is not simply about economic sustenance but also the upkeep of the agendas, obligations and emotions that constitute Cook Islanders' social relationships.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The usual spelling of the phrase is *tere party*. I once saw a shipping crate on Aitutaki with the words ‘Aitutaki *tere pati*’ written in red paint; *pati* is a Maorification of the word party. I also adopt this spelling. The Samoan equivalent is called *malaga* and the Tongan version *malanga*.

² More recent figures are not, to my knowledge, available at the time of writing.

³ The movement of money is not always from the nation-state to communities abroad. The island of Manihiki had a prosperous pearl industry during the 1990s and money was regularly remitted from this island to relatives living overseas (see Marsters, Lewis and Friesen 2006; Newnham 1989). For an important overview of remittances in the Pacific see Connell and Brown (2005).

⁴ I discuss the significance of food exchange within the Cook Islands diaspora in Alexeyeff (2004).

⁵ The term *koni raoni* is specific to Aitutaki. Other islands in the Cooks (but not Rarotonga) also have Christmas celebrations that involve dancing, singing and fundraising between villages.