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European interests and ideas on the diversity of human cultures in the Pacific (1500s – 1870s)

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This chapter introduces the first of four sections of *Uncovering Pacific Pasts: Histories of Archaeology in Oceania*, covering European (including Euro-American) interests and ideas on the diversity of human cultures in the Pacific from the late 1500s to the 1870s. Forms of contact between Europeans and Pacific Islanders during this lengthy period ranged from the fleeting encounters of early Portuguese and Spanish navigators to the deeper understandings enabled by lengthy missionary stays. The five chapters in this section discuss artefacts acquired or produced in a variety of ways, reflecting the diverse expectations and hopes projected onto the Pacific by Europeans.

For the crew of HMS *Pandora*, Pacific artefacts were ‘artificial curiosities’ that could serve as ‘souvenirs of a journey to exotic locations’ or be ‘sold at the end of the voyage or exchanged for the patronage of well-connected persons’ (Mann, **Chapter 3**, this volume). However, *Pandora*’s primary mission was to hunt down the mutineers from HMAV *Bounty*, which prior to the mutiny had been engaged in gathering breadfruit plants from Tahiti and transporting them to the West Indies to be trialled as a cheap food source for slaves (Frost 2018; Largeaud-Ortega 2018; Maxton 2020). This fact points to the persistent European interest in

the Pacific as a source of natural resources and unpaid or poorly paid human labour, ranging from whaling and sealing to sandalwood, bêche-de-mer, pearl shell and copra, slave-trading and ‘blackbirding’, and the mining of phosphate, nickel and other valuable ores (e.g. Banivanua-Mar 2007; Le Meur and Banaré 2014; Newton 2013; Richards 2017; Shineberg 1967; Teaiwa 2014). Other reasons for European interest in the Pacific during this early period included scientific observation and public education (Dotte-Sarout, **Chapter 4**; Govor and Balakhonova, **Chapter 5**; and Scates Frances, **Chapter 6**, all this volume) as well as Christian missions (Haddow and Mills, **Chapter 7**, this volume).

Every Pacific Island community would have had stories of the origin of their people. Some were conveyed to visiting Enlightenment exploration expeditions as traditions that would be recognised as something approximating a historical narrative, what Patrick Kirch would later label as ‘of the genealogically based oral-history kind’ as opposed to ‘cosmogonic or mythological narratives’ (Kirch 2018:275, 306). These latter narratives, beginning with an act of creation analogous in their poetics to the biblical acts in Genesis, appeared incommensurate with European understandings and beliefs during the several centuries of sporadic contact addressed in this chapter. But as European visitors first encountered Pacific Islanders and were encountered in their turn by them in the sixteenth century, there was initially no language of subtle communication common to both beyond gesture. Clues as to how and why the islands came to be humanly inhabited were derived initially more from phenotype, later to be over-defined as ‘race’, and past experience of meeting similar-looking or similar-sounding peoples in what was then known as the Indies, today South and Southeast Asia.¹

Captain Pedro Fernández de Quirós, a Portuguese sailing for the Spanish from Peru on Mendaña’s second expedition to the Solomon Islands (1595), thought that:

It may really be that all the people of Santa Cruz and the Solomon Islands come from the archipelago of the Philippines. The Santa Cruz people dye their teeth red and black and use the *buvo* [betel nut], as in the Philippines. In the island of Luzon there are black men, who are said to be the aborigines of the land [...] the Moors

¹ In fact a whole range of criteria were being assessed beyond simple appearance, as noted by Thomas (1996:xxvii): ‘bodily form, complexion, vigor, disposition towards Europeans’, and later, things such as ‘civility and the status of women’ where these could be observed.

and other Indians occupy their lands, drive them away, and force those that remain into corners of the land where they now are. It may well be that, by reason of the invaders, the persecuted people have gone away to seek other settlements, until they came to New Guinea as the nearest place, and thence to the Solomons and Santa Cruz. The half-breeds and differences in colour among them proceed from intercourse between them. (Markham 1904:I:142–143)

The theme of darker-skinned autochthonous Asian people driven into the interior of large islands or east into the Pacific by invading lighter-skinned groups was to become an enduring trope of European understandings of the origins of the people of Melanesia (Douglas 2013:391–392). It was common from the time of the early Spanish explorers onwards to distinguish two major population groups, light-skinned and often straight-haired people first sighted on Polynesian outlier islands or islands with clear Polynesian influence, and darker-skinned people with woolly hair found on the larger Melanesian islands (Spriggs 1997:223–240). There were gradations between these two extremes and European explorers would often identify populations as representing mixed groups. Thus James Cook described the people of Balade in New Caledonia as being:

a race between the people of Tanna [in Vanuatu] and the Friendly isles [Tonga] or between Tanna and the New Zealanders or all three; their language in some respects is a mixture of all. (Beaglehole 1969:541)

The process of trying to fit the people encountered into previous knowledge of geographical variation among populations was not one-way, of course. The inhabitants of Melanesia seem to have equated the light-skinned European crews with earlier Polynesian visitors and settlers and presumed they had come from those more easterly islands. The Polynesian terms often used in an attempt to convey the needs of the Europeans were a further clue as to their supposed origin (Spriggs 1997:227, 249, 250).

Cook's remarks introduce a second line of evidence used to trace the origins of Pacific peoples, that of similarities in language. As we have seen this was exactly paralleled in the interpretations by islanders of the origins of the Europeans! Times of peaceful contact during Cook's three expeditions when local languages could begin to be learned, and closely related Polynesian languages across the eastern Pacific, made translation much easier than in the more westerly islands where linguistic diversity

made communication more difficult. Thus, for the first time, some access to local traditions of origin could be accessed by the savants who accompanied Cook's voyages.

The most detailed example of such work is Johann Reinhold Forster's *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World* (1996 [orig. 1778]), based on his experiences during Cook's second voyage and accounts by earlier European explorers. Although the geographical terminology is not his, he contrasted the inhabitants of much of what today would be labelled Island Southeast Asia, Micronesia and Polynesia with those of the Moluccas, New Guinea and Island Melanesia as representing two distinct populations with different histories:

The first enumerated race seem to come from the Northward and by the Caroline-islands, the Ladrões [Marianas], the Manilla and the island of Borneo, to have descended from the Malays: whereas on the contrary, the black race of men seems to have sprung from the people that originally inhabited the Moluccas, and on the approach of the Malay tribes withdrew into the interior parts of their isles and countries. The language of these two races in some measure proves the assertion, especially as it is evident that the first five branches speak only dialects of one *general language* preserving several words of the Malay-language; whereas the three tribes of the latter race, have not even a similarity of speech among themselves; and that none of these languages has the least or most distant reference to any American language spoken on the Western coasts of America. (Forster 1996:341–342)

This last statement was included on the grounds that, given the direction of the Trade Winds, it might be thought that the Pacific Islands would have been settled from the Americas more easily than from the west. This is something that Forster rejected, in part because he believed the Americas to have only been settled a few hundred years before European contact (Forster 1996:185–186). As well as linguistic comparison we see an early use of oral traditions as history, combined with the idea that the black race had originally inhabited all of the Pacific Islands but in many of them had been conquered by the 'Malays' and reduced to serfdom or servant status. Cannibalism was seen as a custom of the 'Papuas', and there was a 'faint tradition' of it found in Tahiti and in other

traditions of the Taheiteans, who know, for instance, in their neighbourhood, an isle called *Mannua*, occupied by men-eaters, which, according to this conjecture, is a proof of it being inhabited by the aboriginal black race of people, who are, as far as we know, all cannibals. (Forster 1996:228)

Together, these stories formed the basis for the idea of an originally Indigenous black population. Forster uses this form of comparative ethnography extensively as a means of linking particular populations in his section on ‘Manners Compared’. Thus the Malakulans in Vanuatu are seen to come from New Guinea and the Polynesians from the Caroline Islands and beyond that, Island Southeast Asia – conclusions not clear from any other kinds of evidence:

these islanders having no other than vague traditional reports in lieu of historical records, it is impossible to know any thing of their origin or migrations; and that no distant guess or conjecture could ever have been formed unless by paying a particular attention to their peculiar customs and manners, and likewise to their language. (1996:357)

Material culture was not particularly foregrounded in Forster’s analysis, but it quickly became a major means of comparing different Pacific populations as the trade in traditional artefacts to sailors and savants got underway. This is illustrated by the hoard of such artefacts, including stone adzes and pounders and wooden clubs, found among the remains of the *Pandora*, wrecked on the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef, northern Australia, in 1791 (Mann, **Chapter 3**, this volume). These form a wonderful ‘closed assemblage’ of artefacts collected in the Pacific in a particular year only a few decades after first sustained European contact and not rediscovered until some 190 years later by maritime archaeologists. Similarly, tracing early collected artefacts to particular exploring expeditions is also critical to knowing what early contact material culture was like. Mann, **Chapter 3**, this volume introduces the continuing value to researchers today of such early collections, using the latest chemical sourcing techniques to tell us about exchange relationships in the Pacific in the earliest stages of European contact. Michelle Richards, one of the PhD scholars associated with the Collective Biography of Archaeology in the Pacific (CBAP) Project, has been garnering much useful information on such topics from portable x-ray fluorescence (pXRF) analysis of such museum collections (Richards and Günther 2019). Her work has also demonstrated that claimed pre-contact artefacts can sometimes turn out to have been manufactured in

the post-contact period in what can fairly be described as ‘factories’ in the Pacific and elsewhere to feed the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum obsession with developing ‘representative’ collections of Pacific artefacts for comparative analysis (Richards 2021).

Such may be the origin of the Moscow *ki'i* originally attributed in the Moscow Museum of Anthropology to Urey Lisiansky's 1804 visit to the Hawaiian Islands (Govor and Balakhonova, **Chapter 5**, this volume). This was part of the first great Russian exploring expedition of the *Nadezdha*, under Ivan Kruzenshtern, and the *Neva*, captained by second-in-command Lisiansky from 1803 to 1806 (see also Govor 2010; Govor and Thomas 2019). Ingenious detective work by Elena Govor and Ekaterina Balakhonova of the Moscow Museum shows the *ki'i* rather to be associated with a visit by Alexandra Corsini, one of a very small band of female collectors, to Hawai'i in 1907. If not directly manufactured in the historic period to feed demand from collectors, the *ki'i* may date from the period of King Kalakaua's revival of aspects of ancient Hawaiian culture through his *Hale Nauā* Society of 1886–89, when traditional Hawaiian carving was encouraged once more (Karpel 1999).

Having discussed the early explorers and the opportunities and perils of making conclusions about contact-period practices from material culture collections of the period – or said to be from the period – the year 1800 is a good one in which to take stock of emerging understandings of what was being called ‘the natural history of man’. CBAP Research Fellow Emilie Dotte-Sarout (**Chapter 4**, this volume) illuminates this particular moment in the development of interest in the history of human settlement of the Pacific Islands, even then seen as the purview of ‘anthropology’ in its widest sense. Most of the Pacific Islands had been charted by Europeans by that time, the three apices of what we now know as the ‘Polynesian triangle’ – Hawai'i, Easter Island and New Zealand – had been mapped and their people and cultures described to some extent. The colonial settlement of Australia had begun, and Europeans were soon to spread into many islands of the Pacific; indeed, Spanish settlement on some of the Micronesian islands was already significant. Initial conclusions were being published on questions of how humans had been able to settle almost every Pacific island encountered on European voyages and whence they might have come. Dotte-Sarout shows how even by this time recognisable subfields of anthropology had come into existence: ethnography, physical anthropology or bioanthropology, and material culture collecting for museum display.

Before there was any recognisable archaeological practice within anthropology, the comparative perspective ranked the different peoples and subsistence practices found across the world to create an early evolutionary ladder from hunting and gathering to pastoralism to field agriculture to urban, 'civilised' society. As Dotte-Sarout notes, 1800 was, however, the year of John Frere's publication of what we can now recognise as an Acheulean hand axe from a clay pit in Hoxne in Suffolk, England, which he attributed to 'a very remote period indeed; even beyond that of the present world' (Frere 1800:205). This publication has been celebrated as 'one of the first facts in a prehistory based on archaeology' (Daniel 1962:34) and 'a landmark in the development of prehistory' (Evans 1956:203). But the way the French savants phrased their understanding of 'pre-history' (a term not yet coined) was by conflating space and time. Communities furthest away, in the South Seas for example, could stand in for knowledge of the earliest history of Europe. Questions of origins and migrations were in effect the only archaeological questions that could be posed. Time depth in the Pacific Islands was thought to be shallow and their history thus unworthy of independent study for its own sake.

This trope of space being seen as equivalent to time within a ranking of different types of societies grew in influence as the nineteenth century unfolded (Fabian 1983). One of the last of the great seaborne exploring exploits was the United States Exploring Expedition, 1838–42. It stands as transitional, looking forward to the new style of scientific expeditions pursuing very specific intellectual questions and aims. This can be seen in its massive publications, much larger in size and scope than any previous official expedition accounts and planned as 24 volumes, although not all were officially released. The ethnographic collection of some 4,000 artefacts was claimed to be the largest assembled by any single sailing expedition (Philbrick 2004:332). CBAP associate William Scates Frances (**Chapter 6**, this volume) details the research during the expedition of naturalist Charles Pickering, leading to his work *Races of Man* (1848). Using a synthesis of physical anthropology, material culture, botany, geology and linguistics, he saw Fiji, which the expedition visited in 1840, as the 'chief origin' of and staging area for Polynesian culture. The linguistic evidence was provided by Horatio Hale, another Harvard product, and published as the *Ethnography and Philology* volume of the expedition (Hale 1846). Hale locked in the idea of the Southeast Asian origin of what we now know as the Oceanic Austronesian languages.

Both Hale and Pickering were enormously influential in their day on ideas about the settlement of the Pacific: Pickering influenced the views of Charles Darwin, among others, and Hale later taught Franz Boas, a key founder of American sociocultural anthropology. Scates Frances (**Chapter 6**, this volume) considers that both Pickering and Hale were engaged in an early form of holistic anthropology, with Pickering in particular taking a specifically ‘archaeological’ approach blending studies of material culture, landscapes, architecture and botany to examine questions of Pacific origins. Hale’s research was narrower, limited much more to linguistic arguments, some of them providing a supposed chronology based on an early version of glottochronology and also involving a rather uncritical form of genealogical dating (Howard 1967:50).

Both of them broadly agreed, however, that Fiji was originally inhabited by ‘Melanesians or Papuans’, followed by Polynesians from an island called ‘Bulotu’, possibly Buru in Maluku, seen as the easternmost island ‘inhabited by the yellow Malaisian race’. Hale concluded that fighting broke out after a period of coexistence with the Papuans based in the east (Viti) of Viti Levu and the Polynesians in the west (Tonga):

The blacks (or Viti), jealous of the increasing wealth and power of their less barbarous neighbors, rise upon, and partly by treachery, partly by superior numbers, succeed in over powering them. Those of the Tonga who are not made prisoners, launch their canoes and betake themselves to sea [...] they reach the islands of the Friendly Group, which receive from them the name of Tonga. (Hale 1846:178–179, quoted in Howard 1967:51)

Finally, here we get a singular reversal of the usual trope as the Papuans defeat and exile the Polynesians! Hale has much more to say, using oral traditions and linguistic argument, on subsequent Polynesian migrations such as that from Samoa to Tahiti, and including the earliest argument for Hawaiian settlement having been from the Marquesas, although he dated this event to about 450 CE on his interpretation of the genealogies rather than the 1000 CE usually suggested today.

The eastward migration of Pacific peoples ultimately from Southeast Asia and adjacent areas was not the only theory current in the first half of the nineteenth century. The American origin, based on the prevailing Trade Wind patterns, had its adherents, among them the missionary William Ellis (1829) who, while happy to see a Malay origin for Polynesians, suggested bringing them via the Bering Strait to North America and to

Hawai‘i and then down to the rest of Polynesia. Alternately, he could envision Polynesians having travelled further south along the west coast of America and then peopling Easter Island and getting into Polynesia via this route. He was not the first to suggest the route from the east, dismissed in advance by Forster (see Martínez de Zuñiga 1803; Ballesteros Danel 2020). Ellis is also of interest to the history of Pacific archaeology as one of the first to describe and illustrate Pacific archaeological sites in some detail (Haddow 2017).

Another idea, as plausible at the time of its formulation as any other though now dismissed by serious scholars, was that the Polynesians were in fact autochthonous, having developed their relatively uniform language and culture on a now sunken Oceanic continent (Moerenhout 1837). Similarities with the Malay language were explained by settlement of Island Southeast Asia from Polynesia rather than the other way around. This idea continued to be debated in scholarly circles until the geology and formation processes of Pacific Islands were much better understood towards the end of the century, although the idea of ancient land bridges between particular Pacific Island groups continued to have some academic traction even later (such as invoked by Brown 1907).

If the period up to the mid-nineteenth century had been the time of the explorers and their scientific fellow travellers, the second half of the century was dominated by Christian missionary perspectives.² This is not surprising as missionaries were often the first permanent European presence on islands, and the first to learn the languages of those islands fluently and to reduce them to writing. Linguistic competence gave them privileged access to the oral traditions of the people among whom they lodged; often they made a point of recording them to look for biblical parallels.

This phase is recorded by the *nelcau-amōñ* and associated stories of the origin of the people of Aneityum in the New Hebrides (from 1980 the Republic of Vanuatu), the first successfully Christianised island in Melanesia, discussed by CBAP PhD scholar Eve Haddow and Andy Mills (**Chapter 7**, this volume). This ‘missionary archaeology’, as these authors

2 There were of course isolated missionary voyages to the Pacific before the mid-nineteenth century, notably that of the *Duff* to Tonga, Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands (1796–99). This was the first British missionary voyage to the Pacific. Although a disaster from the point of view of the London Missionary Society, it did result in valuable documentation of the missionaries’ interactions with Pacific peoples (Cathcart et al. 1990; Irving-Stonebraker 2020).

call it, was an extended phase of research with perhaps two opposite poles – one that sought directly to relate the origins of Pacific peoples to the biblical story and another where the linguistic evidence and oral traditions were less ideologically interpreted as complete in and of themselves without reference to biblical chronologies or narratives. This pole was therefore in many cases an extension and development of ideas derived from the earlier expeditionary phase, but with rich detail derived from greater familiarity with the people whose story was being discussed.

George Turner, however, as with many of the New Hebridean Protestant missionaries, was very much attracted to the former interpretive pole with its built-in division of races as deriving from Noah's three sons who survived the Great Flood: Shem the ancestor of the Semitic-speaking peoples, Ham from whom the black races were said to descend and Japheth, ancestor of the white races. Much was made of Hebrew being the original human language before the dispersal of the confusion of tongues after the collapse of the Tower of Babel. Ultimately, therefore, all human migrations across the world would be traceable back to the Middle East. The greatest Pacific effort in this regard was without doubt made by Rev. Daniel Macdonald, a Presbyterian missionary in the New Hebrides (Macdonald 1889, 1907). He demonstrated, at least to his own satisfaction, that the language of Efate in central Vanuatu was a Semitic language derived ultimately from Arabia and the Phoenician sailors and traders said to have been based on its southern coasts. Part of this idea was that to the extent that the New Hebrideans were considered 'savages', this was the result of cultural and moral degeneration from the more civilised roots of their 'Oceanic fathers' from Arabia (encompassing the biblical lands and ultimate derivation from Adam and Eve). The influence of this missionary biblical school of thought has been unjustly ignored or belittled. In the absence of other forms of chronology for world history, a biblical one was an available means to organise the new data of human distribution and difference revealed in European exploration voyages.

It is sometimes presented as if all of this line of thought was overturned in 1859 by Darwin's and Wallace's evolutionary theories, but there was a very long time lag between publication of *The Origin of Species* (Darwin 1859) and general acceptance of Darwinist tenets.³ There is no doubt,

3 The infamous Scopes 'Monkey Trial' of 1922 in the USA is an example of the afterlife of these Bible-based ideas, and they are with us still in the regular attempts by Creationists to gain equal time for their views in state education systems there. The Scopes trial is conveniently summarised in Wikipedia (retrieved 6 June 2020): en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scopes_Trial.

however, that by the second main period canvassed here, from the 1870s onwards (Spriggs, **Chapter 8**, this volume), missionary biblical views were starting to be on the defensive – or, as we shall see in the third period, even disguised or accommodated within less overtly religious theories of diffusion of culture from Egypt, as championed by Grafton Elliot Smith, William Perry and William Halse Rivers Rivers.

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