Ethnicity and Nation-building in the Pacific

Edited by Michael C. Howard

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THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

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Note to the Reader from the UNU

The United Nations University carried out a series of research activities on contemporary ethnic problems under its Ethnic Minorities and Human and Social Development Project. The principal objective of the Project was to shed light on the dynamic relationships between various ethnic minorities on the one hand and state and global society on the other. The Project also aimed at enlightening the public about the complex problems of ethnicity as well as at helping policy makers in formulating cultural and educational policies relating to ethnic minorities.

Ethnicity and Nation-building in the Pacific is the outcome of an international symposium that the United Nations University organized in co-operation with the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, in August 1986. The symposium, the first of its kind ever held, gathered together experts to examine ethnic issues in Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Western Samoa, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, Micronesia, and Indonesia, from both historical and comparative perspectives.

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Foreword

The processes of social development and modernization are based on the assumption that ethnic and cultural differences within nation-states will tend to disappear, and the broad literature on economic and social development has paid relatively little attention to the ethnic question. It is assumed that social cleavages and social mobilization centre around functional groups (social classes, occupational categories, urban-rural settings, political parties, and interest groups), and policies are devised for the solution of eminently "developmental" problems.

However, it is becoming increasingly recognized that many of the developmental "failures" of recent years cannot be traced merely to technical, financial, or economic shortcomings, but are due to the cultural and ethnic complexities involved in "nation-building." A number of countries have attempted to deal squarely with these problems; others have ignored or neglected them. Yet all over the world in recent years there has been a resurgence of ethnic and cultural demands by minority peoples and of social movements based on these demands. Indeed, many of the major political conflicts that the world has witnessed these past years (including violent ones) have a clear-cut ethnic dimension.

The United Nations University, to respond to this challenge, launched in 1983 a project entitled "Ethnic Minorities and Human and Social Development" which aimed at a better understanding of the relationship between ethnic minorities and their cultures on the one hand, and global society on the other within the framework of national and regional development processes. The project was co-ordinated by Professor Rodolfo Stavenhagen of El Colegio de México.

The fourteen papers included in this volume were presented and discussed at a symposium organized by the United Nations University in co-operation with the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, from 11 to 15 August 1986. Professor Michael C. Howard, then teaching at the University of the

South Pacific, assumed the organizational responsibility of the symposium and subsequently edited the papers which constitute this publication.

The symposium was, by all accounts, the first international meeting on the subject of ethnicity and nation-building in the region and attracted considerable attention. The present book will, it is hoped, contribute much to an "accurate understanding of ethnicity in the Pacific among scholars and the public," as one reviewer has put it.

The United Nations University wishes to express its deep gratitude to Professor Howard and Professor Stavenhagen, as well as to all the participants in the symposium for their scientific contributions to this important area of research. At a time when ethnic problems and conflicts are becoming increasingly serious in different parts of the world, may this publication serve for a better understanding of the problems, the first step in their solution.

Kinhide Mushakoji
Vice-Rector, United Nations University
July 1989

Contents

Foreword vii

1 Ethnicity and the State in the Pacific
Michael C. Howard 1

2 Discourses of Ethnicity: The Faces and the Masks
Susana B. C. Devalle 50

3 Ho'omauke Ea O Ka Lahui Hawai'i: The Perpetuation of the Hawaiian People
Davianna Pomaika McGregor 74

4 Myth of the Golden Men: Ethnic Elites and Dependent Development in the 50th State
Noel J. Kent 98

5 Aboriginality in a Nation-State: The Australian Case
Jeremy Beckett 118

6 Aboriginal Ethnicity and Nation-building within Australia
Robert Tonkinson 136

7 Colonisation and Development of the Maori People
Rangiuni J. Walker 152

8 From Race Aliens to an Ethnic Group – Indians in New Zealand
Jacqueline Leckie 169

9 Banabans in Fiji: Ethnicity, Change, and Development
Hans Dagmar 198

10 Race, Class, and Ethnicity in Western Samoa
Paul Shankman 218

11 Ethnicity and Nation-building: The Papua New Guinea Case
Ralph R. Premdas 244

12 Independence and Ethnicity in New Caledonia
Donna Winslow 259

13 Pohnpei Ethnicity and Micronesian Nation-building
Glenn Petersen 285

14 Indonesia: Nation-building, Ethnicity, and Regional Conflicts
Ernst Utrecht 309

Contributors 332

1

Ethnicity and the State in the Pacific

MICHAEL C. HOWARD

All the states in the Pacific today have two things in common: they are products of colonial rule and they are firmly entrenched in the capitalist political and economic bloc. Most have one other thing in common too: they have significant migrant populations. The principle question I wish to address in this chapter is the place of ethnicity within the context of the creation and maintenance of these nation-states. Linked to this are questions concerning the relationship of ethnicity to class formation and class struggle and also of the relevance and nature of their integration into the capitalist world-economy. The point is that ethnicity in the Pacific cannot be divorced from international capitalism, although the precise relationship remains to be explored.

Historically, analysis of ethnicity in the region can be divided into four phases: the precolonial, colonial, transition to political independence, and independent periods. Within each of these phases, ethnicity is conditioned by what went before and by the special nature of the period in question. Thus, ethnicity during the colonial era within a given state will be conditioned in various ways by the nature of the precolonial situation and by the act of colonial rule itself. Moreover, with the exception of the precolonial phase, the overall dynamic of ethnicity in any of these settings should be seen as an integral part of the dialectic between the evolution of the capitalist world-economy and the internal political economy. In broad outline, this is fairly apparent. What is perhaps less obvious is the manner and extent to which this is true in a particular setting.

The geographical scope of this chapter encompasses approximately 25 states or territories included within what is generally recognised as the Pacific – in contrast to the Pacific Rim. Most are extremely small states with very limited land areas and populations numbering a few thousand to a few hundred thousand. A few states or territories in the middle range include Fiji and Hawaii, which have populations of a half million to one million. And at the top is Australia, followed by New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and other large ones. Though a few smaller states (e.g., Tokelau, Niue, Tuvalu, and Tonga) have relatively homogeneous populations, most have populations with significant ethnic distinctions. Throughout all, however, ethnicity has at one time or another been of sizable political and economic importance. Thus, Tuvalu was created through separation from a larger colonial entity, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, and large proportions of Tongans and Niueans live overseas, where they comprise ethnic minorities. For those remaining behind, external immigration policies and the status of those living abroad is of great significance in their lives.

Also relevant is that the region as a whole has had a shared identity for some time, manifested in regional organisations such as the South Pacific Commission, and that within the region are significant cultural-political blocs, exemplified in the links that exist among the Melanesian states. Significant economic links are also evident. With the exception of territories falling within the American sphere of influence, Australia and New Zealand serve as economic points of reference through trade and other forms of economic transaction for the rest of the region. The chance of this pattern expanding to include several of those territories that are now within the American sphere is strong, and as a whole, regionalism within the Pacific has remained much more meaningful than in other parts of the third world. Such larger forms of identification are also an important part of the ethnic issue in the Pacific.

THE PRECOLONIAL SETTING

Interestingly, the largest single land mass in the region, Australia, was one with the least population. Elkin (1954: 10–11) estimated the entire Aboriginal population of Australia to be around 300,000, a figure that tends to have been accepted, but Jones (1970: 3) has argued for a much lower estimate of around 200,000, and others have sought to establish a larger figure. This population was divided into 400 to 500 tribal groupings, each with populations ranging from about 100 to sometimes as high as 1,500 (see Berndt and Berndt 1977: 28–37). Though different forms of economic and ceremonial exchange existed among tribes, by and large they were self-contained. Internal political organisation tended to be fairly weak, and though a sense of pan-tribal identity was sometimes found, in practical terms, identification was at the tribal or even subtribal level.

In close proximity to Australia are the islands that compose what is known as Melanesia, which can be divided into two sections: Mainland Melanesia, consisting of Papua New Guinea and West Papua, and Island Melanesia, consisting of the eastern islands of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and western Fiji. The precolonial population of Mainland Melanesia was probably relatively large – perhaps as high as 3 million – with some areas being very densely populated by the standards of reliance on horti-

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cultural production. Forms of social organisation varied throughout Melanesia, but in general, we can discern two patterns: relatively egalitarian units made up of a few hundred to perhaps a thousand or so individuals and more hierarchical societies that likewise tended to include at most a thousand or more individuals. The low level of political organisation is exemplified in the approximately 1,200 languages spoken in the region – an average of one language for every 200 to 300 people. Again, there was economic and ceremonial exchange among these diverse peoples, and larger confederacies would sometimes be assembled, but for the most part social and cultural identity was very narrowly defined.

The Polynesian islands were occupied by relative newcomers to the region, and for this and other reasons represent a much more homogeneous population. These islands include New Zealand, Hawaii, French Polynesia (Tahiti, the Marquesas, and others), Tonga, Samoa (American and Western), the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Niue, Tokelau, Wallis and Futuna, and eastern Fiji. The total land area is much smaller than that of Melanesia or Australia, but when these islands first experienced European contact, they were much more densely populated, with a total population probably in excess of 500,000. The two largest groups were in Hawaii (with around 200,000 people) and New Zealand (between 100,000 and 150,000 people). Socially, culturally, and linguistically, the Polynesian population was much more unified than those of Melanesia or Australia. Also, the largest sociopolitical units were found among the Polynesians: the "kingdoms" of Hawaii, the Society Islands, and Tonga. Not all groups, however, were so large. The island of Futuna, with less than 2,000 inhabitants, was divided into two primary kingdoms; the Cook Islands, with about 5,000 people, was divided into several autonomous political entities. The Maoris of New Zealand had about 40 tribes, but even these small units tended to be much larger than most political entities in Melanesia and Australia. Thus, whereas tribes and even subtribes in New Zealand often warred with one another, there were also loosely formed federations of tribes that recognised descent from a common ancestor. Tongan imperialism and Tongan raiders who established themselves in areas of the South Pacific also played an important role in creating a unity of sorts within their sphere of influence.

Micronesia consists of four groups of islands: the Marianas, Caroline, Marshall, and Gilbert islands. It includes a few larger islands, such as Saipan, Guam, and Pohnepi, besides a great many atolls (among the larger ones, Tarawa and Kwajalein). At initial European contact, its total population was a little more than 150,000. The people spoke a dozen or so distinct languages. As Alkire (1972: 14) points out:

> It is interesting to note that the languages with the widest geographic distribution were those associated with coral-island populations, that is, central Carolinean and Marshallese. Not only does this reflect, perhaps, a shorter period of separation, but also the intensive contact maintained between these islands of limited resources. . . . In contrast, most of the high islands of Micronesia were populated by groups speaking languages of

restricted distribution and whose inhabitants rarely took their canoes beyond the sight of their own coastline.

Nearly all Micronesian societies had systems of ranking and recognised chiefs, but the degree of hierarchy sizably varied. Great variation was also obvious in centralisation. The most common pattern was one of autonomous districts, which might encompass all of a smaller island or only a portion of a larger one, that were at times formed into interdistrict alliances. Kosrae, in the Caroline Islands, with much authority vested in a paramount chief from one of its districts, had the most centralised structure. During the years immediately before and around the time of initial European contact, as in Polynesia, significant moves were apparent to establish a few larger political units by local warlords.

THE COLONIAL STATE

The creation and intensification of the capitalist world-economy was accompanied by the creation of a form of political and economic organisation known as the colonial state. Modelled on the European state, it was significantly different from such states because its primary purpose was to serve the interests of wealthier and more powerful capitalist states elsewhere. Although colonial states sizably differed, depending on earlier structures of political organisation, the imperial power to which each was linked, and other factors, as Clapham (1985: 18) comments, these differences "only became significant within the context of the common features imposed by colonialism on the colonised territories and societies as a whole." At its most elementary level, the creation of the colonial state often meant the imposition of a boundary and the establishment of a territory where neither had previously existed. Quite commonly, disparate social groups were joined on the basis of imperial convenience. Beyond this were other, perhaps more profound, changes. A new economic order was established – a colonial capitalist economy. A new political and administrative order also came into being. Along with these changes evolved a colonial culture that took precedence over what had existed before.

Whereas securing control over resources in the face of competition from other imperial powers was an important element of colonialism, this was not the only, or even, it can be argued, the most important, consideration. Immanuel Wallerstein (1983: 39) places highest priority on the "search for low-cost labour forces." He points to the extent to which colonial policies sought to facilitate capital accumulation in accordance with this concern over cheap labour. This is seen most clearly in policies seeking to create structures of domestic organisation centred around "households in which wage labour played a minority role as a source of income" (Wallerstein 1983: 76; see also Smith, Wallerstein, and Evans 1984) that also were compelled to provide some of their members for wage labour and to expend some of their energy in production of goods for the market. It was a balancing act in which a "reserve army" of producers and labourers was created that minimised costs to the imperial power.

Local conditions, however, were not always right for transforming the population into a reserve army or to employ it in the production of cash crops. Under these circumstances, appropriate labour had to be recruited elsewhere – at first mostly from Africa, then, in growing numbers, from Asia. Under colonialism, massive movements of people took place to create a match between production desires and labour requirements to meet those desires. Thus, when the indigenous population of the New World proved inadequate to meet the requirements of the new colonial economy, millions of slaves were brought from Africa. This process thoroughly transformed the social, cultural, and political nature both of Africa and the New World. Later, huge numbers of Asians were sent to western North Amercia, the Caribbean, Australia, and elsewhere to work mainly in construction and on plantations.

The period immediately before the imposition of colonial rule and during its early years was often unsettled. The creation of political order was rarely a simple matter because the imperial power sought to establish an effective monopoly of the use of physical force. Eventually, conditions generally became more stable as the colonial administration intervened "in other spheres of social life. . . in order to reduce the need to use coercive power directly" (Thomas 1984: 7). This search for hegemony was seldom pursued far, and the colonial state usually continued to be characterised by "the relatively greater development of the coercive and judicial apparatuses of the state as compared to its other aspects" (Thomas 1984: 24). In this way, it fell far short of the developed capitalist state where the need for force was submerged beneath an array of other, more subtle, hegemonic devices.

An indigenous élite, linked to the imperial power while also possessing some degree of legitimacy within the indigenous context, was an important element in establishing political order within most colonial states. Webster (1984: 77) writes:

> The colonial system did not necessarily mean the complete destruction of local political and legal institutions; indeed, not only would this have been socially impossible but it would also have been regarded as foolish by many colonialists. They saw their task as being the introduction of the new capitalist rigours of production as quickly as possible without, however, encouraging the local population to become competitors to the colonial power by establishing their own enterprise. . . . It was also felt that the maintenance of local authority structures would help to check any threat from local ambition. A few indigenous structures were allowed to prevail so long as the capitalist interests of the colony (and Europe) were served.

Differing colonial strategies played a role in determining how the indigenous compradorial class evolved. The French advocated assimilation and centralisation, with "indirect rule" assuming a transitory nature. In this way, the initial structure of indirect rule gave way to one in which a Europeanised indigenous élite was incorporated within a centralised administration. British rule, in contrast, was less centralised and less assimilationist. The British were keen to create an indigenous colonial élite imbued with British values, largely to make administration easier and cheaper, but they held no illusions that an amalgamation of the colonial and British state was possible, even if it had been desirable: "For the British, the idea of assimilation was unthinkable, as a result perhaps of a view. . . which sees political culture in particularist rather than universalist terms, and partly of a racial exclusiveness which implicitly denied that any of the indigenous peoples of the empire could ever become really English" (Clapham 1985: 22). Too much can be made of these differences, however, and in practice one finds great similarity in terms of ethnic exclusivity and the role assigned to the indigenous compradorial élite. All European and American colonies were characterised by an ethnic hierarchy in which a white élite was at the top of the political and administrative spheres, even though things could become more ambiguous at lower levels.

Below the top horizontal line, colonial states tended to have important vertical divisions. The simple act of amalgamating formerly distinct social and cultural entities created ethnic categories from formerly autonomous indigenous peoples. But these divisions rarely proved transitional in the face of pressures toward homogenisation and the creation of a culturally and socially more unified state. In fact, just the opposite was true: they tended to become increasingly institutionalised. Moreover, the process was almost never fortuitous, but, as has been observed many times, was part of a strategy of "divide and rule." Wallerstein (1983: 76) argues, however, that it was more than a strategic device to ease colonial administration. He sees it as being firmly rooted in the colonial economic structure as a means of ensuring the maintenance or reproduction of cheap labour. In his discussion of the creation of household structures that supported and were in fact a key element of the overall colonial economy, he states (1983: 76): "One way in which such households were 'created', that is, pressured to structure themselves, was the 'ethnicisation' of community life in historical capitalism." He continues with a definition of ethnic groups specifically in terms of the labour process:

> What we mean by 'ethnic groups' are sizable groups of people to whom were reserved certain occupational/economic roles in relation to other such groups living in geographical proximity. The outward symbolisation of such labour-force allocation was the distinctive 'culture' of the ethnic group – its religion, its language, its 'values', its particular set of everyday behaviour patterns.

From this perspective, ethnicity becomes linked to, an imperative of, the colonial economy and to the development of the colonial class structure.

Ethnicity then became a key hegemonic device of colonial rule and a central component of the colonial economy. Ethnicity in this regard must be seen essentially as a product and vital part of colonialism and of the colonial state.

The Settler Colonies

Europeans began to settle in the Pacific, starting in Australia, in sizable numbers from the late 18th century onwards. Though in most of the islands of the Pacific the European population never assumed major demographic proportions, there were several exceptions. This was clearest in Australia, New Zealand, and to a slightly lesser extent Hawaii, where white settlers eventually overwhelmed the indigenous population politically, economically, and even demographically. A few other territories had fairly large white settler populations. In New Caledonia, a rough balance between Europeans and Melanesians was achieved, and in Guam and Tahiti, whites came to represent a sizable minority.

When the first 1,000 European settlers arrived in Australia in 1788, they were a small minority outnumbered by the 200,000 to 300,000 Aborigines. By 1901, when Australia became independent, the situation had drastically changed. The Aboriginal population had declined to some 100,000, while the European population had increased to almost 4 million. During the first half of the 19th century, the demographic balance had changed gradually, but after the discovery of gold in 1851, the pace of change increased sharply.

Although the colony almost constantly suffered from labour shortages, Burgmann (1978: 20) argues that "it was Aboriginal land that was wanted, not Aboriginal labour." Clearly land was wanted, but a closer look at the situation indicates it was not so much that Aboriginal labour was not wanted as it was that experience proved it unsuitable. Reynolds (1981: 115) points out that "The move from the bush into white society was much more than a spatial journey. It was among other things a transition from one economic system to another, from the domestic mode of production to the burgeoning capitalist economy of Colonial Australia." And one area where adjustment proved especially difficult was in developing labour discipline within a capitalist context:

> The historical record bristles with colonists' complaints about their problems in trying to get Aborigines to behave as 'voluntary labourers' for wages. . . . But it was not just the habit of labour that had to be induced but also those concomitants, the subordination of servant to master and the separation of the worker from the means of subsistence and production (Reynolds 1981: 117,118).

Having by and large given up on Aborigines as a reliable source of labour, the white settlers relegated Aborigines to the far corner of the colonial economy (and also of its political structure) and turned to other sources of labour.

European labour was sought through two means. From 1788 to 1867, about 130,000 convicts were transported to Australia from England and its neighbouring possessions. During the early years of settlement, this provided a vital supplement to the colonial labour force, without which many colonial enterprises would not have been possible. But increasingly, white migration to Australia was voluntary, especially after 1851. The numbers were not always sufficient, however, especially in areas of rapid economic growth. Moreover, local capitalists often felt they could do better by securing nonwhite labour.

A great many indentured workers were brought from China to work in the gold fields or on plantations. As Cronin (1975: 240) notes, "Although the Chinese were initially suggested only as a temporary solution for the early labour shortages, they soon became essential workmen in jobs considered badly paid or too menial or boring for Europeans." Their employers favoured them for the same reasons their presence was resented by members of the white working class. Both viewed the Chinese as "cheap labour and totally incapable of even desiring a higher standard of living, let alone fighting to obtain it" (Burgmann 1978: 25). From the 1840s, anti-Chinese sentiments grew among European workers concerned about the labour question and more generally about the threat posed by the great "yellow peril" of Australia being engulfed by Asians. The Chinese population in Australia grew to 42,000 by 1859 and to 50,000 by 1881. During this period, however, anti-Chinese settlers succeeded "in preventing the Chinese from obtaining occupational advancement and, consequently, upward social mobility" (Cronin 1975: 251). A few Chinese were able to start small businesses and become leasehold farmers, but their position was always insecure. It is worth mentioning that Chinese farmers sometimes employed Melanesian and Aboriginal labourers. (They preferred Melanesians over Aborigines and tended to pay them better.) Legislation was enacted in 1888 that prohibited further Chinese immigration, and by 1901, the Chinese population in Australia had declined to 32,000 (Willey 1978: 5).

From 1863 to 1901, about 61,000 indentured labourers were brought to Australia from the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands (see Parnaby 1964 and Corris 1973). They were brought primarily to work on plantations in Queensland. The planters favoured these workers, viewed as relatively servile and cheap, over whites who, they argued, "were culturally and physiologically incapable of sustained arduous work in the sugar fields" (Hunt 1978: 81). As with Chinese immigrant labour, a fierce debate soon erupted. White workers argued that Melanesian labour would deny whites a chance to work on plantations and also serve to lessen chances of improving working conditions in agriculture. To this was added the fear that they would "degrade community standards and endanger even the safety of Europeans in the sugar districts" (Hunt 1978: 80). Legislation was enacted in 1901 that prohibited the recruitment of additional Melanesian labour and repatriated most of those still in the country (only 1,854 were exempted).

When Australia gained independence in 1901, it was viewed by most of its citizens and, more important, by nearly all the leading political interests as a

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