**The Pacific Islands**

The Pacific is aptly described somewhere as “lots of ocean, little land.” The ocean that covers over a third of the earth’s surface contains 25,000 islands, but the total land area is only 376,000 square miles–and the single island of Papua-New Guinea accounts for almost 90 percent of this area. The rest of the land would comfortably fit into New York State.

Pacific islanders are a polyglot group. Over a thousand languages are spoken in the islands, more than 700 of them in Papua-New Guinea alone. The Austronesian language family, to which the languages spoken throughout the Pacific belong, is one of the largest language families on the globe, extending from Madagascar to Easter Island.

Human settlement of the islands began about 10,000 BC and continued into the early Christian era. The Pacific was settled at a time when Europeans were still hugging the coastal shores and the peoples of the Americas were paddling dugouts. Oceania is divided into three geographic-cultural areas: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. “Many islands, small islands, dark islanders”. . . each of the names fits all of the groups pretty well.

The Pacific peoples first encountered Europeans in the 16th century, when Portuguese sailed from the west and Spaniards from the east in search of the treasures of the Orient. For a couple of centuries after this, the islands were, if anything, a stop-off en route to lucrative trade markets in east Asia. By the 19th century, the islands began to develop a commercial value of their own in the eyes of Westerners. First as sources for produce–like beche-de-mer, turtleshell and sandalwood–that could be traded with China for its tea, silk and ceramics. Then as a stopover for whalers scouring the tropical waters. Later as a source of copra and plantation products, and for the minerals that could be mined there, not to mention the labor for these ventures.

But where Western traders ventured, naval vessels soon followed, imposing Western justice on the islands. Long before the end of the century, European powers partitioned the Pacific into various spheres of power, annexing all the island groups except Tonga to magnify their empires.

With the end of World War II, some important changes began to be felt throughout the Pacific. Decolonization, which began there a decade later than in Africa, was one of the biggest; during the 1960s and 1970s most of the islands gained independence. Only the French possessions, notably New Caledonia and Tahiti and nearby islands, and some of the US possessions–Guam, the Northern Marianas and American Samoa–remained dependencies. So did Easter Island and Irian Jaya, which are under Chile and Indonesia respectively.

The post-war years, for independent nations and dependencies alike, brought rapid cultural change. For centuries the bedrock of the island economy had been the land and sea and the products they yielded. By the 1960s, as the islands committed themselves to a Western economic system, cash began to supplant land as the main resource. This, in turn, produced other social changes.

Family and land tenure are two of the most fundamental examples. Land, which was nearly always owned by a kin group in the past, came under the control of a single person more frequently. Often land parcels were passed on to a man’s own children rather than following the traditional tenure routes.

Although the extended family remains a feature of most island societies even today, deep fault lines have appeared in the traditional social structures. Over the years the importance of the extended family has waned, while the nuclear family has taken on many of the functions that the larger family once held. In many islands the smaller family has become the central social and economic group, something that would have been unthinkable in the early post-war years. Care of children, which was once shared widely in the extended family, has devolved onto the nuclear family. At one time it may have indeed taken a whole village to raise a child, but the village these days is declining to do so. The community and larger kin groups are abdicating their responsibility for childrearing in favor of the nuclear family. In recent years, the multi-parent family has been transformed into the two-parent family, and in some cases even to a single parent unit.

With the rise of the modern nation state in the Pacific, political systems in the islands are a mixture of democratic government systems and traditional chiefly authority. Chiefs continue to command respect in many places, although their actual power seems to be decreasing. The new breed of government officials often seeks legitimation from the traditional chiefs, while the chiefs have come to depend on the former for a share of cash resources.

A few of the Pacific islands have prospered in recent years. New Caledonia and Nauru have done well in mining, and a few other islands have major logging industries. Fiji has developed its commercial agriculture, while Guam and the Northern Marianas have a thriving tourist industry. For most islands, however, limited resources have meant slow-paced economic development. MIRAB is the term coined to describe the way most of these economies function. (show slide on MIRAB) Foreign aid to the Pacific countries helps sustain a government bureaucracy that employs many islanders. A second source of support is remittances from those who have emigrated to the US, Australia or New Zealand. These remittances account for 15 to 20 percent of the import financing in the Cooks, Kiribati, Tokelau and Tuvalu, and perhaps even a higher percentage in Samoa and Tonga.

For years now many of the islands in Polynesia have been sending off a large percentage of their population abroad in search of jobs and a brighter future. Recently Micronesia has begun to do the same. There are now 25,000 Micronesians (that is, people from FSM, Palau and the Marshalls) living abroad, or about one of every eight people. Thousands of people from Guam and the Northern Marianas have been emigrating for years now. In fact, there are more Chamorros living in the mainland US than on Guam. Melanesia, on the other hand, is without the same destinations and so it generally retains its population.

As the race for economic development accelerates, islanders find themselves drifting away from some of their traditional ways. Developing industries may be an economic necessity for a new Pacific nation, but it threatens to undermine the very customs and values that were cherished as bedrock in the island community. This constitutes what could be called the “cruel dilemma” for islanders today. Once they have surrendered to the forces of a modern economy, can they ever regain a measure of control over their own changed societies?

All over the Pacific we are seeing the rise of what could be called the “new elite.” These are the power brokers in today’s modern societies–the individuals who have achieved prominence and wealth through business or government service. They have considerable control over money, the new source of wealth and prestige in the modern Pacific nation-state today.

The Pacific, which has fed European myths of noble savages and voluptuous women living in unspoiled freedom for two or three centuries now, is still relatively unknown to the West despite it all. The century of the Pacific, as the 21st century was once prophesied to become, may bypass the islands in favor of the rim nations, as has happened before.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

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