



EAST-WEST CENTER

## Pacific Transitions: Population and Change in Island Societies

PETER PIRIE

# Asia Pacific

I S S U E S

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**SUMMARY** Despite some well-publicized pessimism about the future of the Pacific islands recently, the population and societal transitions now underway can provide grounds for optimism. The high death rates that followed European contact and almost wiped out several island populations have continued to drop sharply. More recently, birth rates have also been dropping, easing fears of population pressures. Transitions in employment and mobility are also reshaping island societies. Fewer islanders are working in agriculture and more are in higher paid urban jobs, especially in the service industries. Even though many people are migrating from village to urban areas, from outer islands to main islands, or even to other countries for work, they often send money back to help their home communities. Greater educational opportunities are also available to islanders. While some decry the loss of traditional institutions and see Pacific islanders as the victims of exploitation or dependency, others view them as taking maximum advantage of the wide variety of opportunities now available to them.

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### **Pacific Islands and Their Societies**

The Pacific islands include a range from low coral atolls with few resources to large islands with significant populations that are relatively well endowed with natural resources. Beginning about 40,000 years ago, Papuan-speaking peoples moved into Melanesia, followed about 7,000 years ago by Austronesian-speaking peoples who moved through Melanesia and on into Micronesia and Polynesia. The Pacific population is now marked by diversity and isolation; even those in the same country are often isolated by the vast distances between islands or, on larger islands, by rugged terrain and dense forests. As of 1990 about six million people lived in the Pacific islands, 3.7 million in Papua New Guinea and about 800,000 in Fiji, with the remaining 1.5 million spread among the other islands.

Traditionally, the societies and peoples of the Pacific have been divided into three major cultural areas: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Melanesia is most populous and largest in land and natural resources; Micronesian and Polynesian islands are by comparison small, scattered, and generally have few natural resources.

- Melanesia consists of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji (Melanesian but with Polynesian cultural influences). With about 1,200 languages, Melanesia is marked by diverse and culturally fragmented societies (although in recent years a Melanesian identity has developed) with a generally egalitarian social structure.
- Micronesia, marked by somewhat diverse but hierarchical societies, consists of Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Guam, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas. All except Kiribati and Nauru have been under U.S. jurisdiction, Guam as a territory and the others as a UN trusteeship, with heavy dependence on external aid.
- Polynesia, more culturally homogenous than the other areas but also traditionally marked by hierarchical societies, consists of the Cook Is-

lands, French Polynesia, Niue, Western and American Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna. People on the larger island groups such as Western Samoa and Tonga have adequate land and marine resources, but those on resource-poor atolls are heavily dependent on external aid.

The Pacific, like much of the rest of what is now the Third World, was colonized by Western powers, mostly by France and England, although Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands also had an early role and the United States, Australia, and New Zealand a later one. Today the islands are divided into 21 political entities: nine independent nations; five self-governing in free association with former colonial rulers; and seven continuing as dependencies of France (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna), the United States (Guam, American Samoa), and New Zealand (Tokelau). The former colonial connections are still reflected in patterns of commerce, transportation, communication, foreign aid, and higher educational opportunities.

The penetration of Pacific island cultures by Europeans has fundamentally altered island societies. This history has negative and positive aspects—devastating epidemics and loss of traditional lifestyles on the one hand but introduction of health-improving and later reproductive-controlling technology on the other. Some of the changes are similar to the “demographic transition” seen elsewhere around the world over the last few centuries, with modernization resulting in a fall in mortality and, a decade or two later, fertility toward the low levels typical of developed countries. This view applies largely to the Pacific but does not explain the degree to which these two trends will vary among parts of nations, or even islands, and among different cultures, classes, and occupational groups.

### **Changes in Rates and Causes of Death**

When Pacific peoples moved out into their islands, they left behind them most of the diseases that scourged populations elsewhere and their mortality levels were probably moderate to low. Contact with

*Some Pacific changes resemble the “demographic transition”—lower death rates followed by lower birth rates*

the West brought devastating epidemics such as smallpox, measles, influenza, and dysentery, as well as diseases that became endemic such as tuberculosis, which almost exterminated some island societies. Modern medical advances (such as antibiotics) and public health measures (such as improved sanitation) are restoring low mortality and allowing more to survive the dangerous early childhood years. Life expectancies have ranged from less than 40 years for countries before the transition to more than 70 years where the change is nearly complete. The trend is toward continued and often rapid improvement, although unhealthy environmental conditions that could be easily rectified persist, and mass campaigns against specific diseases such as malaria are still necessary in some areas. Wider application of health care, which buys lowered mortality, has been limited by cost. Those countries with the lowest mortality tend to be those with close fiscal association with a metropolitan (former colonial) power, while countries that have had to fend for themselves tend to have higher mortality.

In conjunction with the mortality transition seen in most island societies has been a transition in morbidity, or kinds of illness. High-mortality populations tend to have more deaths from environmental diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and diarrhea that especially affect the young. As mortality drops, more and more people survive long enough to die of so-called degenerative or chronic noncommunicable diseases such as heart and circulatory diseases and cancer. In the later stages of the transition, other causes associated with changing lifestyles—violent death, motor vehicle accidents (an unwanted consequence of paved roads), substance abuse, and obesity—may become important. Nauru, with its unusually high per capita wealth (based on sales of phosphates) is proving to be an unusually dramatic example of this. Such problems have more to do with excesses bought with money than with money as such (though perhaps they are aggravated by a lack of a tradition of urban culture), and their solution has more to do with education in healthful living than with restoring a village lifestyle. Most Pacific islands are likely for the foreseeable

future to have some persisting communicable and hygiene-related diseases but they will be brought down to tolerable levels for most of the population. They are likely to experience infant mortality levels several times as high as those possible in well-developed health systems, and diseases requiring costly and complex methods of diagnosis and treatment will continue to be neglected, especially among the elderly.

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### Changes in Childbearing

Classic demographic transition theory expects high fertility in traditional societies to compensate for punishing levels of mortality. But assuming this was the case in the Pacific is questionable since mortality levels there were not especially high. Instead, the small area and constricted resources of atolls is likely to have encouraged control of family size. Studies of Tikopia and later Nukuoro and Eaurapik in the Federated States of Micronesia indicate that low mortality and controlled fertility were the rule up to the first decades of this century. It seems more likely that Pacific islanders have had a long history of controlling their population size through such methods as premarital and postpartum (after childbirth) sex taboos, prolonged lactation, abortion, and infanticide.

Control over fertility weakened with the decline of traditional social systems following contact and colonization. To combat the resulting high fertility, governments instituted family planning programs. Some areas—Guam, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Tuvalu—have experienced a strong fertility transition and now have levels similar to Western nations. Even the high-fertility groups—Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea—all show some recent decline in fertility, which suggests that their peak has been reached and passed.

Conventional demographic wisdom identifies increasing levels of education, participation in paid employment, increasing affluence, and greater urbanization as the major catalysts for fertility transition. Former East-West Center researcher

**Traditional Pacific cultures could probably control the size of their populations**

**Agricultural production is falling largely because people have found better ways to use their time and energy**

Margaret Chung, however, found that among woman on the Fijian island of Kadavu the crucial factor was not education but the opening up of alternative opportunities, especially the possibility of living elsewhere than in the rural village. Family planning programs played a role in some cases such as Fiji and Tuvalu, while in others the rising standard of living seems to have had most effect. Some areas—New Caledonia, Northern Marianas, Guam, and French Polynesia—have gone far in fertility decline with little or no formal program; instead women with good access to education, jobs, and mobility, consulting with doctors and pharmacists of their own volition, have managed the transition. Even in Tuvalu and Fiji, the sites of the earliest programs, the rate of women accepting family planning services has never exceeded 40 percent of those eligible.

As more children survived, the population of many island groups became distorted with up to half the population under age 15, and this is still the case for countries such as the Marshall and Solomon Islands and Federated States of Micronesia. Other countries such as Tonga and New Caledonia have seen a drop in the proportion of youngest children, but the bulge of teenagers and young adults is still moving through the demographic profile like a goat swallowed by a snake, placing heavy strains on education and land systems, job markets, and the social fabric.

#### **Changes in Employment and Education**

The almost totally rural, agriculture-based populations of traditional societies are becoming a rarity in the Pacific, and the proportion of people involved in agriculture in most nations is dropping (although there are exceptions). In Melanesia, only 13 percent of the value of exports is derived from crops, and even Fiji, where much agriculture is commercial and technologically sophisticated, saw agriculture's proportion of the economy fall 10 points over two decades to 44 percent in 1986. During the early 1980s, John O'Meara found that on Savai'i in Western Samoa the villagers' return on making copra was so low that only children were sent out to

gather nuts. The primary reasons for low production of this and other crops were not that villagers were unwilling or inefficient, oppressed by their social system and rapacious chiefs, or lacked the incentive of individual land ownership, but simply that they had found more attractive things to do with their time and energy. It seems clear that the only types of agricultural development worth planning, much less funding, are those that have some prospect of generating returns comparable to those available from urban paid employment. Not all agricultural activities are doomed; some enterprises have succeeded, including cacao in Western Samoa in the 1950s, coffee in the New Guinea highlands in the 1960s, and the recent boom in Tongan squash. Sugar has served Fiji well over the years and even the case of coconut is not entirely negative, since the palms produce for 70 or 80 years whether they are harvested or not, and production can rise rapidly once conditions are favorable. And there clearly remains a role for subsistence agriculture to grow the staples of island diets, on health and dietary grounds alone or for profit, as evidenced by thriving export trades of these staples from island producers to the metropolitan populations.

Some Pacific islands, especially in Western Melanesia, have other resources of value; Papua New Guinea, for example, is becoming one of the world's top gold producers, and the area also has petroleum, natural gas, copper, nickel, manganese, and other minerals. Other areas such as Vanuatu, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea have tropical rain forests that provide products of value. But the dramatic job increases so far have not been in the mining or manufacturing sectors but in services, trade, and industries such as transportation and construction. Resources in Polynesia are less tangible—climate, scenery, and culture that will allow carefully managed resort and ecotourism development—but may be of increasing value in a shrinking world. Tourism jobs may not seem appropriate pinnacles of ambition for proud people, but many Pacific islanders seem to prefer them to making copra, and some rise far higher than menial service levels. The communications revolution,

besides helping Pacific islands overcome their traditional isolation and internal fragmentation, may benefit them with an influx of "knowledge workers" able to live where they want and work by computer and telecommunication.

Parallel with this employment transition is another that feeds into it—an education transition. In most Pacific island communities, it is no longer acceptable for young people to be illiterate or not to have attended school in some form. School attendance, however, is not compulsory in most island communities, and, particularly among the independent nations, significant proportions of school-age children are still not attending—up to or more than 65 percent in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and increasing, with only half of adults literate. Even in relatively well developed Fiji, where adult literacy is over 80 percent and most children attend at least some primary school, one-third of all school-age children are not attending school at any given time. Attendance is free and compulsory in the American territories of Guam and American Samoa and in the Micronesian states. Attendance is also virtually universal in the Polynesian areas of the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Niue, Tokelau, and Tonga, and high in Western Samoa, as well as in New Caledonia and in Micronesia. Again, those countries with higher incomes are able to provide universal education free or at low cost. Possibilities for higher education either at home or abroad have also increased dramatically in the past two decades. But too many young people, particularly in Melanesia, will enter the next century unschooled and illiterate.

The spread of education and the move to paid employment have produced social changes, as these jobs required more people than the traditional elite could provide and they began to be filled by those who could survive the educational systems. The traditional two-tier social structure in which a small elite presides over the mass of people is giving way to a three-tier structure with a middle class composed mainly of people in paid employment. In the area of private enterprise, Pacific islanders have not so far prospered, with problems of amassing capital,

learning alien techniques, and isolating an essentially private activity from an essentially public family milieu. In most island societies this has proven easier for immigrant groups, such as the Indians in Fiji. But with their example and the experience of relatives overseas, there is every reason to expect more and more Pacific islanders to seek and succeed in business opportunities.

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### **Changes in Mobility**

The move out of agriculture has expanded service industries in some areas, but where this has not been possible many have migrated to places with jobs. This has been largely the case for Polynesia and increasingly of Micronesia, although less so in Melanesia. Migration has been especially characteristic of Polynesia, giving rise to large Polynesian communities in Pacific rim cities such as Auckland, Los Angeles, and Honolulu. Niue is the extreme example of outward migration, but the Cook Islands, Tokelau, Western Samoa, and Tonga are also affected in this way. As Te'o Fairbairn recently noted, more than 100,000 Samoans and 40,000 Tongans live overseas, and more Niueans, Tokelauans, and Cook Islanders live abroad than on their home islands.

Pacific islanders have not only migrated among Pacific countries, but their own countries have received other significant migrant groups. Europeans are concentrated particularly in New Caledonia and Guam but can be found in every island country, dating back to the colonial era or on short-term employment in government or business, and most recently for international technical assistance agencies. Most controversial has been the Indian population of Fiji, estimated at 350,000 in 1992. Significant numbers of Chinese have settled in French Polynesia (9 percent of the population), Guam, and Papua New Guinea, and Koreans have gone to Guam and American Samoa recently, while there has also been an influx of Filipinos to Guam, Palau, the Northern Marianas, and Papua New Guinea. Small pockets of Vietnamese remain in New Caledonia and Vanuatu (and Javanese in the former) dating from the colonial era. Japanese migration,

***Some island groups have more of their people living overseas than at home***

extensive between the world wars, is again occurring to Micronesia, although usually for short periods.

While it might seem a tenuous practice for islanders to migrate elsewhere and send money back to keep the home islands viable, it is surely no more uncertain than the wildly fluctuating export commodity prices upon which the islands have previously depended. The "transnational corporations of kin" that have developed allow extended families to exploit the resources of a variety of environments. The rural village does not inevitably suffer; its perpetuation and the comfort of the inhabitants may be the major objective. Some have alleged that remittance money does not benefit the sending community because little is invested in commercial or agricultural development, but ignores the fact that money is heavily used to finance education for younger kin and for improved housing. Once these priorities are served, families may be more enterprising with their investments. Future Pacific households may resemble those former East-West Center researcher Yvonne Underhill found on Manihiki Atoll in the northern Cook Islands, where some members stay on the atoll to use and further develop local resources (mainly the oyster shell and pearl industry) while others range over the "household region"—stretching from neighboring atolls, other Cook or French Polynesian islands, to New Zealand or even Australia and the United States—for education, jobs, and technological resources.

#### **Changes in Urbanization**

The urban center seems to have been the most successful of the institutions introduced by foreigners in terms of both proliferation and growth. In the beginning, Pacific towns were places to visit or work on a short-term basis, but certainly not a place to live permanently. Instead, they were inhabited by foreigners—Europeans, Chinese, Indians, people of mixed race or from other island groups—or people who were different in some way, a small educated elite, speakers of the colonial language, the mission-sponsored, those who provided a bridge between the indigenous and the alien. Over recent decades, the town has developed into an authentic alternative to

the village settlement, and urban growth is now mainly derived from an influx of indigenous people and from natural growth of the existing population. Urban living brings the advantages of water and power services, education, and medical care, and quick access to goods, services, amusement, and other people; on the other hand, paid employment must be found for at least some family members, and there are sometimes squatter settlements and lawless, unemployed "rascals," as well as pollution.

Some Pacific island towns have been affected in recent years by slow growth or actual decline as their populations have migrated to a metropolitan country. Internal redistribution is also having an effect in some countries, with the "deserted village" becoming a feature of the more inaccessible parts of the Pacific. Often the movements are of a peculiarly "Pacific" kind, designed to retain a foothold in both places and have the best of both worlds. Another type of urbanization has come to some of the more affluent islands, marked less by people living in a definable town than by the virtual absence of a rural population; Nauru is the outstanding example, but Guam and Saipan have developed along similar lines.

#### **Views of the Pacific**

All Pacific islands are well into the mortality transition and some have completed the change. The fertility decline, while not as advanced, is now well established and is likely to intensify rather than diminish since the forces that temporarily promoted large family size are in retreat. Transitions in education, employment, and migration (in particular to urban areas and overseas) are being embraced with considerable enthusiasm; only the cost involved prevents these transitions from moving forward even faster than they already have. Some researchers, advisers, and indeed many reflective and articulate Pacific islanders (including many island leaders) regret these transitions (except mortality and morbidity) and feel Pacific island development may be moving too fast and in the wrong direction. They worry about the decline in agricultural production, rural depopulation, and the abandonment of marginal locations, as well as the decay of traditional

**The "Pacific" brand of urbanization allows people to keep a foothold in both town and country**

institutions and the frantic pace of change. Some echo the view of the first entranced European visitors in seeing the Pacific of the past as a latter-day Eden, although it is not clear whether this view springs from traditional appraisals or from media and tourist publicity.

**Some feel Pacific island development is moving too fast and in the wrong direction**

There are several different ways of looking at these changes. Some islanders and foreign observers, saddened by the traumatized condition of traditional subsistence systems, are receptive to viewing the state of the Pacific in light of "dependency theory." This view, most associated with John Connell, describes an exploitive world system in which metropolitan countries benefit from unequal terms of trade and exchange with their former colonies, which suffer from persistent underdevelopment and economic stagnation. The metropolitan countries also are blamed for the cultural erosion, monetization, and increasing "individualism" of island culture, including trade that induces technology transfer, capital investment, and development aid; media that carry messages subversive of traditional culture; and nonindigenous educational systems. Another view is provided by I. G. Bertram and R. F. Watters, who describe a system of migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy (for which they have coined the acronym MIRAB) centered on the idea that aid, although called "development," is in fact "welfare state colonialism." Aid money, although ostensibly given to finance economic development and self-sufficiency, finances a disproportionately large public sector (which becomes the main source of employment and a conduit for income redistribution) and the migration/remittance system. The MIRAB model implies that this is all that can be expected, given poor development prospects, and that donor governments and agencies should give up on self-sustaining development, which is unlikely to succeed but in the attempt might cause social and political instability. Islanders are understandably not pleased with being cast as international welfare cases; donor governments are no happier to hear that their obligations are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. A third and even more pessimistic recent view is *Pacific 2010: Chal-*

*lenging the Future* (Cole 1993) published by the Australian National University's National Centre for Development Studies. This study, concentrating on the fertility and mortality transitions, suggests a "demographic doomsday" as island growth rates careen down unknown trajectories and socioeconomically explosive pathways.

The dependency theory of exploitation and the MIRAB theory of "welfare state" colonialism have their points but present an incomplete picture. Rather than being overrun by Western culture and the money economy, Pacific islanders often adapt new ideas and technology to their own culture. A Samoan, for example, may still make a presentation gift of a pig and a fine mat, but is also likely to include a \$20 bill. It is true that, with prices for agricultural (and sometimes mineral) exports so insecure, annual appropriations by metropolitan governments become habitual and immigration flows gain momentum no matter how unpopular they are among the receiving domestic population. But since the islands, except those with minerals and forests, do not on the whole have enough resources for self-sufficiency (barring the unlikely return to pre-contact technology and lifestyles), migration may help preserve life on the home islands through remittances rather than leave it behind. And far from helpless dependents, islanders have proven adept at exploiting niche markets, from Kiribati's maritime school to train ship crews to the steady supply of professional sports players going to teams in the United States and now New Zealand and Australia.

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**Conclusion**

It is possible to view the contemporary situation in the Pacific islands more charitably than either the dependency theorists or the MIRAB advocates have done—to say that the people have reappraised the resources available to them and restructured their economies to take advantage of them. Colonial oppression has given way to the possibility of the liberation of individual Pacific islanders by the opportunities offered by the labor markets, educational institutions, and social welfare systems of

**Pacific cultures  
appear able to blend  
traditional and  
modern ways**

their former overlords. In the process of reappraisal some components of the traditional systems have been downgraded or even abandoned, but most have not. The picture that emerges is not of island peoples submerged in a baffling sea of change, forced to abandon long-treasured traditional forms by external and malevolent forces manipulating them into continued dependency; nor of people dumped by forces out of their control into a continuing "welfare-state colonialism"; nor uprooted from idyllic villages and forced to seek subsistence on the periphery of the inhospitable cities of their ex-colonial rulers. The picture is rather of people at different stages of a deliberate reappraisal of their options, which they see as having been dramatically widened, and with new enterprise and determination striking out in new and stimulating directions. Some ambivalence over the rate and direction of change is natural, but Pacific cultures show every sign of being able to evolve a blend of their traditional forms and those required to survive and prosper in the modern world.

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### About the Editors

**Peter Pirie**, a former University of Hawaii geography professor, East-West Center research associate, and demographer for the South Pacific Commission, is a consultant for the East-West Center's Pacific Islands Development Program.

Telephone: (808) 944-7783

Facsimile: (808) 944-7670





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## Demographic and social change in the island nations of the Pacific

*Dennis A. Ahlburg*

*Dennis A. Ahlburg is professor of industrial relations and public policy at the Industrial Relations Center, Carlson School of Management, and the Center for Population Analysis and Policy, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. His area of specialization is the Pacific region. He prepared this Research Report while serving as a visiting fellow at the Program on Population of the East-West Center.*

*The report is an updated and expanded version of a lecture that Professor Ahlburg presented as part of the Distinguished Lecturer Series commemorating the Program on Population's Twenty-Fifth Summer Seminar on Population, held in Honolulu and Taipei during June-July 1994.*

Most Pacific Island nations have small populations. Several of those populations are growing rapidly as a result of high fertility rates, young age structures, and low or declining mortality rates. International migration relieves population pressures caused by rapid population growth in some Polynesian and Micronesian countries. Nevertheless, rapid population growth may be hampering the region's development efforts. Although urbanization levels are generally low, in several countries population growth has led to high levels of population density, which may be placing stress on the land and other resources. Pacific nations spend more of their national budgets on education and health care than do developing countries in general, but their educational outcomes are poorer and in some cases their health outcomes are also below those of the average developing country.

Projected declines in fertility, mortality, and migration will slow the region's rates of population growth over the next 35 years. Nevertheless, all countries of the Pacific will experience substantial population increases, and growth rates will remain high in several Melanesian and Micronesian countries. Accommodating the additional numbers of people will pose major challenges to their governments and societies.

**T**he island nations of the Pacific are undergoing population growth and other demographic changes that are affecting the region's societies, economies, and natural environment. Some of the effects of population growth can be positive—for example, creating a larger home market for Pacific Island producers and giving a nation a more prominent voice in regional and international affairs. Many observers, however, now believe that rapid population growth in the Pacific

is causing or exacerbating a variety of social and economic problems. Among those problems are high unemployment and delinquency, environmental degradation caused by urban growth and the expansion of agriculture and natural-resource extraction, and strains within families. Throughout much of Polynesia, population growth is thought to be responsible for a significant degree of overseas migration and a decline in the observance of traditional family obligations.