

# Forty-Five Years of Pacific Island Studies: some reflections\*

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## ABSTRACT

*Looking back on our own times, we have seen a rise and fall of interest in Pacific Island studies. Our careers, which have led us currently to the Centre for Samoa Studies at the National University of Samoa, retrospectively illustrate transformations in Pacific Studies over the past half century.*

Keywords: Pacific Island studies, Samoa, Pacific Studies Centres, developmental studies.

## LOOKING BACK

From 1972 to 1975, Penelope Schoeffel and I were students at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) where we met and married. Inspired by our undergraduate education there, we went on to devote the next 45 years to Pacific Studies in one form or another. Before starting at UPNG, Penelope had lived in Papua New Guinea for about 8 years and had been a health worker in the Sepik Province and later a volunteer newspaper co-editor for the nationalist Pangu Party. At that time I was in my early 20s. I was from a village where, as in other Samoan villages, knowledge of the past mostly had to do with our genealogies, which were not for men as young as me to know. At school I learned nothing about Samoa's history or other Pacific Island countries, but quite a lot about New Zealand which at the time was in the last days of its administration of Samoa.

UPNG in the final years of the Australian administration was very exciting. In those days the University was well-funded and we were taught by many great names in Pacific history, geography, anthropology, arts, and literature. The students were mostly from various parts of Papua New Guinea, but some were from Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Nauru, and Tonga. One was from Nepal and another from Thailand and at that time I was the only Samoan. We held forums outside the library several times a week, and enthusiastically debated the issues of the 1970s such as black power, women's liberation, and decolonizing our ideas about the past.

## CONTENTIOUS HISTORIES

Some years later we both joined the staff of the regional University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji. In the teaching program on Pacific studies, we emphasized how Pacific

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Islanders could own and record their versions of the past. Professor Ron Crocombe, who established the Institute of Pacific Studies at USP, not only published research by Pacific Islands scholars but also commissioned short social histories of Pacific Islands countries by indigenous writers, and he squeezed funds from various sources to make this possible. Penelope and I worked on one of these histories. It was organized by Albert Wendt, then Director of the USP Centre in Samoa, and we had about 20 Samoan writers contributing bits to the chapters. When we finally got it all together in English and Samoan and ready for the printers, to our dismay the government refused to authorize publication. They had the power to do so because the UNESCO funding for the history-writing project came to USP through the government. To this day we do not know for sure who we offended, if anyone. Some years later, Ron Crocombe published the history at the USP Institute of Pacific Studies (Meleisea et al. 1987), but only the English version, which has never been out of print since then.

What we learned from this experience is how contentious history and written descriptions of past events can be in small countries. These are places where ‘people’s history’ is all very well, but a bigger question is who wrote the history, and from whose point of view. ‘Insiders’ can disagree just as much as ‘outsiders’. In fact, insider disagreements are often more heated because narratives of the past carry implications about inheritance, land rights, and social rank. We might all be scoffing about ‘alternative facts’ at present but, as I learned many years later as a judge in the Samoa Land and Titles Court, Samoa is the land of alternative facts. It is probably the same in every other Pacific Islands country where kinship, status, and property are interconnected, and where authenticity is in the eye of the beholder. Another example of a problem with history is the efforts that have been made in Samoa to record and publish standard versions of oral traditions. So far, these efforts have not succeeded because of arguments about which version is the ‘truth’. The postmodernist argument that there are no truths, only discourses, has yet to gain ground in Samoa.

## PACIFIC ISLAND STUDIES

Pacific Island studies are multidisciplinary, regional, and mainly post-colonial. Centres for Pacific Island Studies have been established at universities in Hawaii and other parts of the USA, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, France, Holland, Britain, China, and Japan. Some of the work of these centres has been country-specific and some comparative, focused on similarities among Pacific Island countries and the sub-regions of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia. In the post-colonial period, many regional organizations have been set up and supported by international agencies and donors: the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, The Pacific Forum Secretariat, the USP, and many others. Although anthropologists have tended to focus on particular languages or cultural groups and on the sub-region where these are located, historical, political, and economic studies have tended to be more concerned with issues across Pacific Island countries.

There are also sub-regional studies centres in Pacific Island territories, such as the Micronesian Area Research Centre at the University of Guam, and seminar programmes at the University of French Polynesia and the University of New Caledonia. In some New Zealand universities, there is a general ‘Pasifika’ focus on diaspora communities and on their issues and discourses. Similarly, in Australia, New Zealand, and the USA there are centres for Aboriginal Studies, Maori Studies, and Hawaiian Studies. What these centres have in common is their major focus on the concerns of minorities about language, culture, identity, and representation. However, there are very few national studies centres in independent Pacific Island countries. The pioneer was the Papua New Guinea National Research

Institute, which was established in the late 1960s. Others include the Atenisi Institute in Tonga, the National Museum of Vanuatu, and the Centre for Samoan Studies at the National University of Samoa.

### SAMOAN STUDIES

I am now going to focus on Samoan studies, but I believe the points I make resonate with other Pacific SIDS (small island developing states, to borrow United Nations terminology). In the past I served as the Director of Centres for Pacific Studies in two long-established and fairly well-funded Universities in New Zealand. Now I am the Director of the Centre for Samoan Studies (where Penelope Schoeffel teaches development studies) in a much more recently established national university that is struggling on many fronts. When the Centre for Samoan Studies was first established in 1984, its programme reflected many immediate post-colonial anxieties about language and culture since Samoa became independent in 1962. While Samoans have consciously or unconsciously embraced religious, economic, and social changes over the past 200 years, more recent changes resulting from emigration have provoked a particular fixation on cultural identity as well as fears about culture and language loss.

Accordingly, Samoan Studies as founded and established by Samoans at the National University of Samoa has focused almost exclusively on teaching language and culture. The focus on language has been on teaching formal linguistic usages to our students. Built into this is teaching about Samoan customs, etiquette, and protocols, along with selected aspects of traditional knowledge such as formal oratory, the ancient Samoan calendar, cosmology, numbering systems, chiefly authority, and the social and political organization of villages and districts. Our research and outreach programme have run on similar lines. Every 2 years the Centre for Samoan Studies organizes the Measina conference. Measina means ‘treasure’ and the conferences have largely been about our treasured language (which our Head of State in his June 2013 51st Anniversary of Independence Address characterized as a ‘gift from God’) and our treasured culture. Papers at the conference are mainly presented in Samoan and they express various perspectives on language and cultural change in Samoa. Similarly, most of our publications, occasional books, and the *Journal of Samoan Studies* have had this focus as well.

One of the influences on the Centre has been feedback from diasporic Samoans who expect Samoa to be what Ilana Gershon has aptly called ‘a nostalgic utopian space. .. the site of authentic and properly enacted cultural knowledge’ (Gershon 2012:17). Gershon observed that Samoan migrants use this perceived reality to select, classify, and construct what they think their culture is all about, and what sentiments, obligations, and performances are integral to their identity as Samoans. Many Samoan academics have studied overseas and have taken these ideas on board, and also brought them back home: Concerns that Samoan language and culture are threatened and in need of preservation and that Samoan ‘culture’ can and should be taught to students in schools and universities. Some argue that only native Pacific Islanders should be allowed to teach this knowledge.

When we joined the Centre for Samoan Studies it seemed to us that the Centre’s focus might be too narrow, and that perhaps—after 50 years of independence—it was time to stop worrying so much about losing Samoan culture and language. While these are changing as cultures and language do everywhere, to me they did not seem to be in any danger although, as I and many other Samoan academics have written about, there are interesting contradictions or conflicts between custom and modernity, questions about the directions of change,

and disagreements about what is customary (see Kruse-Vaai 2011; Meleisea 1987; So'o 2008; Tuimaleali'ifano 2006; Va'ai 1999). I wondered whether it might be time to take a critical look at our culture, and whether it would be possible to encourage a more analytical and evaluative approach to social, cultural, and environmental change, government and politics, leadership, and land tenure. In particular I wondered if it might be time to pay more attention to our pre-Christian heritage.

### AMBIVALENCE ABOUT SAMOA'S PAST

Although we treasure our language and culture, it is commonly believed in Samoa that our culture – as we perceive and understand it today – is the way that it has always been since God created the world. For most Samoans, history began in 1830 with the arrival of the Christian Gospel. Our constitution declares in its preamble that 'Samoa is founded on God', and recently the Constitution of Samoa was amended by Samoa's Parliament, following a populist proposal by the Prime Minister to specify that Samoa is a Christian Country.

Many of us are somewhat uneasy about what Samoa was like in the 2000–3000 years of our history before the Gospel. Despite the treasured status of our language and culture, many have a strangely colonial mindset about the past. Although we tend to see Samoan culture as a kind of timeless 'now', untouched by history, many refer to pre-Christian Samoa as 'the time of darkness' (*o aso pouliuli*). In the early 1970s, one of my lecturers at UPNG, the late, great Dr Sione Latukefu, invited a visiting Samoa teacher to speak to his Pacific history students about the traditional view of Samoan history. The visiting speaker explained to our class that before Christianity came to enlighten Samoans, we engaged in continuous warfare over heathen issues, and practised the custom of eating the livers of our vanquished enemies. So much for the last 3000 years! Unfortunately, this view of the past is by no means unusual. In recent discussions about establishing a Cultural Heritage Board in Samoa, a government official mentioned to me that she saw no reason for preserving anything related to that dark era.

The paradox is that we Samoans, proud of our culture as we are, seem ambivalent about our history. We have not preserved many historical buildings from the modern period, nor any of the monuments from ancient times. Such preservation has been done in other Polynesian lands including Aotearoa, Hawaii, the Society Islands, Cook Islands, and American Samoa, but not in Samoa. The old German-built courthouse, a classic of colonial architecture, stands in ruins and was until recently at risk of demolition. Our original historical Parliament building, where deliberations on our constitution were begun 60 years ago, was demolished in 2016 because it was so dilapidated. Ironically, this was done to make space for the celebrations of 50 years of Independence. The government says it has no money to spare for preserving historical buildings, and these are rapidly giving way to large edifices made in China, funded by China, transported to us in containers from China, and built entirely by Chinese companies and labour.

Further, despite lobbying efforts by archaeologists over the years, our government has so far shown no interest in preserving or protecting the largest stone mound in Polynesia, one which was built over eight centuries at the heart of an ancient settlement containing about 3000 remains of houses and pathways (Martinsson-Wallin 2016). This extraordinary site is now covered in forest once more after being cleared several times in the past by visiting archaeologists. If it were not on private land, it might have been dismantled by now to build village house foundations, walls, and pig sties. Few Samoans know of its existence or historical significance, or about many other ancient stone monuments on Upolu, Manono, and Savai'i. The situation is different in American Samoa where, so far, US Federal

government policies and funds have preserved and protected Samoan cultural heritage sites. Our government does not yet perceive heritage preservation as a development priority.

One of the things we do at the Centre for Samoan Studies is to encourage and facilitate the work of visiting researchers. We have a project to record documented archaeological sites and heritage areas and associated data on a Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping system. Our aim is to record as many versions of oral traditions associated with these sites as we can find, and link them to each location. This is funded by the US State Department's American Ambassadors Cultural Fund. So far we have received no support for these efforts from the Samoan Ministry of Education, Sport, and Culture, or the Tourist Authority, but there are prospects for collaboration from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. The mapping of the remains of large inland villages is beginning to attract local interest because it suggests that Samoa must have had a much larger population in the past than the 30 000–40 000 people estimated by missionaries in the 1830s. We hope that this will get us more attention and that the data base we are creating will support the development of a national policy on heritage documentation and conservation.

### DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

We wondered if the original focus of Samoan Studies could be expanded to incorporate contemporary and sometimes difficult issues that go beyond 'feel good' topics such as the politics of identity, colonial impacts, language, and customs. We are encouraged by the strong start we have made with a development studies programme in the past 4 years. Originally the Centre offered a Masters of Samoan Studies but this has had very low enrolment, with only three graduates since it was established about 15 years ago. Perhaps this was because it was perceived as a language programme, or perhaps because it did not seem to lead to employment. So in 2013 Penelope and I replaced Samoan Studies with Development Studies as a contemporary-oriented Samoa and Pacific-focused Master's programme. Penelope's career in Pacific Studies has mainly been as a social assessments consultant on aid projects and she has worked in nearly all the Pacific SIDS for most of the major aid donors to the region. She had also taught development studies at the University of Auckland in the 1990s.

The new postgraduate programme was achieved by writing new core courses on development theory and on the international aid system. Other courses offered by the Centre covered the impacts of migration, and issues of governance and public policy. In addition, various electives were offered by the other faculties of the University on economics, environment, and education. Four years later it has become a very popular programme. This year, our first two PhD degrees were awarded along with three Master's degrees and our third batch of postgraduate diplomas. Most of our students are mid-career civil servants who are prevented from applying for scholarships for further study abroad because of their family commitments. They also struggle to find time to study while working full time, so we offer lectures and seminars after hours in the evenings to accommodate them. In a university with very limited finances, our self-funded students struggle to pay fees; even though these are low compared to other universities, they are high for Samoans on local salaries, and Samoa has no student loan scheme.

There are very few grant programmes accessible to universities in developing countries but one was the (sadly, now defunct) Australian Development Research Awards Scheme (ADRAS). Three years ago, the Centre for Samoan Studies won a research award of AU \$306,000 from it. Our proposal was selected from among 102 applications that made the peer reviewed short list and was one of about 50 that were finally funded. We designed the proposal to match the government of Samoa's commitment to women's equality and Australian Aid's

interest in women's economic empowerment. The research, now published on our website, identified obstacles to increasing the numbers of women elected to Parliament. We have now published a follow-up study of the 24 women who stood for 2016 national elections, and why only four of them won seats. We have also, with funding from Australian Aid (Meleisea et.al. 2015), organized Samoan language forums on national issues and televised round tables on electoral issues.

When the Centre for Samoan Studies (Fiti-Sinclair, Schoeffel and Meleisea, 2017) was externally reviewed in 2015 we were given a road map for the future; we will merge the language and culture programme with the archaeology and cultural heritage programme, continue to build development studies as a university-wide postgraduate programme, move on with research as much as funding permits, and continue our community outreach through newspapers, radio, and television, as well as the Samoan Language Commission and the Samoa Human Rights Commission. So far, we have been fortunate to have visiting lecturers join us each year. These have been academics on sabbatical or with research grants who have taught with us as volunteers, offering courses such as public policy, community development, research methods, and culture and development. Also, on the research side, we encourage overseas scholars interested in doing research in Samoa to build a component in their grant applications so the Centre can participate in their projects.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back on our own times, we have seen a rise and fall of interest in Pacific Island Studies. Interest was greatest in the decolonization period 1950–1980, before and after the island states came into being. From 1980 to 2000, interest focused mainly on governance issues in Melanesia after the Bougainville war, the insurrection in the Solomon Islands, and unstable Parliaments in Vanuatu. Development agencies such as the Asian Development Bank also sponsored research on the Pacific Islands in this period, in support of prevailing neoliberal development recipes for smaller government and a bigger private sector.

However a decline in the perceived importance of Pacific Islands studies is exemplified by the history of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) at the Australian National University (ANU) from the 1950s to the present. For many years it was a world centre of Pacific Islands research in history, anthropology, and geography. After a slow decline of interest in the Pacific Islands region (but a continuing interest in Papua New Guinea, and increased focus on Southeast Asia), the RSPAS was replaced in 2011 with the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific which has continued on a diminished scale with some existing programmes from RSPAS, and with growing attention to the Pacific Islands diaspora in Australia. On the brighter side of this trend, there is a renewal of interest in research within Pacific SIDS, and a shift to nationally focused research such as we have described for the Centre for Samoan Studies. The test of whether this shift of emphasis will continue will be the extent to which the governments of Pacific SIDS are prepared to sponsor research that is useful for policy development, and to tolerate critical perspectives.

The Centre's latest project will involve many local scholars who will work on the preparation of a standard Samoan-to-Samoan dictionary and grammar under the auspices of the Samoa Language Commission. The aim is to standardize the contentious spelling, meanings, and use of diacritic marks in written Samoan and, because it fits government policy to do so, it will be funded by our government. We are fortunate at the Centre for Samoan Studies in having two research projects on heritage and language which are likely to continue to attract small amounts of both local and overseas funding that will keep them going well into the future after we have departed.

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