South Pacific View of Hawaii's Role in the Pacific

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It was in 1950, at the first South Pacific Commission Conference held at the Nasinu Training College, Fiji, that Pacific Islanders met as a group on a formal basis for the first time in the twentieth century. Indeed the occasion could be regarded as the turning point in the annals of the Pacific islands; it was historic in the sense that they discovered, or perhaps re-discovered that they had a good deal in common.

This small beginning and subsequent conferences eventually led to the development of island politics. A point worthy of note here is that the meeting was convened and largely controlled by the metropolitan colonial powers during the first two decades after World War II. During this period, economic and social initiatives in terms of development, were by and large the domain of colonial powers. As such, Islanders did not represent their own country but only the capacity as members of the metropolitan delegation, and as advisers.

This was only to be expected as all Pacific islands were still under the tutelege of metropolitan powers during the period in question. As part of the metropolitan delegation, they invariably appeared in the list of participants as advisers, whether their advice was sought or invited during those early years was a matter of speculation.

Except for a vocal and articulate few, some idea of the extent of island participation during the early years of the conference can be discerned from a statement made by one of the observers, and he had this to say: "....usually well mannered, well dressed and not a button out of place, but silent."

Silent they might be, as it was possible that for most of them this could well be their first experience in an international setting, and furthermore, all Pacific islands were at the time still colonies, and as such they did not have much say or do. Nonetheless the opportunity offered a unique platform for them to meet on an informal basis, where they aired their views and compared notes on what was happening in their respective islands by way of development.

ISLAND COMMONALITY

At these meetings Islanders find that they have a good deal in common;

they share certain cultural characteristics and historical links. From these perspectives a feeling of island identity began to emerge as a cohesive political force, and due credit must be given to the South Pacific Conference for providing, perhaps inadvertently, the spawning ground for the development and growth of island politics--even though the Canberra Agreement, the charter of the South Pacific Commission, specifically prohibited discussions on political issues, Islanders met informally outside the Conference hall in hotel rooms and public bars.

Apart from these regional meetings under the auspices of SPC, additional contacts were made possible, not only with other islands within the region, but also outside at the increasing numbers of conferences and technical meetings arranged through the U.N. systems. Other world bodies also have their own meetings at which island presence has been invited and seen, thus expanding the Islanders' horizons and perspectives beyond their shores, in terms of regional and international politics.

Whether participants from the Pacific Islands got much out of these conferences which were relevant to island needs and of direct benefit to the people is debatable, but the experience gained from these no doubt proved extremely useful in the role they were to play later on, as they moved towards internal autonomy or independence. In these meetings they were able to observe at firsthand, behavior patterns of participants from other parts of the world whether developed or developing and from a wide spectrum of cultural and political backgrounds. It was in fact a learning experience for Islanders, particularly meeting delegates from the third world. Contact was timely in view of the fact that by then most of the African and Asian countries were either independent or on the road to independence.

Returning once more to the ideology of commonality, which began at the first South Pacific Conference, and which had been gathering strength since then, the notion of commonality found expression in statements made by a few of the Pacific Island leaders. Their argument is based on the belief and deeper feeling that there was indeed cultural affinity and historical links between islands which existed in the pre-colonial period.

Among the proponents of the ideology of commonality are Ratu Sir Kamesese Mara, the Prime Minister of Fiji, and Michael Somare, the first Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea.

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the South Pacific Commission in 1972, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara sent this message to the Secretary-General: "The Commission has also formed a focus to bring together again what might be called long lost brothers, and to remind us of our ancient historical links which have become weakened by the incursions into the region."

Independently, but in essence lending support to this regional consciousness, Michael Somare of Papua New Guinea had this to say when his country became independent in 1975 and was admitted as a full member of the South Pacific Forum: "Our accession here today only represents to us a further consolidation of ethnic and cultural links which have been developing over a long period."

On his first official visit as head of the Fiji Government to Papua New Guinea in 1974, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara reaffirmed island posture when he addressed students of the University of Papua New Guinea, "...There was an underlying affinity throughout the Pacific. This was only interrupted by metropolitan colonial expansion and rivalry."

This assertion by Islanders regarding commonality rooted in cultural and historical perspectives was rejected by Western scholars and writers as myth-making. They argue that in the light of such wide diversities in cultures,

languages and other factors, there is little evidence extant today of any regular contact between the islands. While there is such a wide divergence in cultures, languages also show similar trends. Papua New Guinea alone has about 700. For the total area, it is believed that there are about 1200 languages spoken in this region.

Among those western scholars who reject the ideology of commonality is Ron Crocombe, a noted Pacific scholar who has spent a good many years doing research in the area. He maintains that: "...contacts relatively small and sporadic. People had little contact with each other."

Independent of Crocombe's observations, Dr. Richard Herr, also a scholar in political science who has written a few publications on the island politics has this to say: "...there is little direct evidence extant today of intergroup identification among Pacific Islanders before the advent of European intrusion into the area, but indirect evidence suggests that such an awareness of commonality, if it existed, would have been very limited."

I have dwelt at some length in highlighting these two conflicting viewpoints on the issue of commonality. On the one hand there is the assertion by Island leaders that it existed before European intrusion, and on the other the repudiation of the claim by western scholars since there is little evidence to support it.

HAWAII'S PACIFIC ROLE

You may wonder what all this has to do with Hawaii's role in the Pacific. I feel that it is important and indeed helpful if we look at these factors to enable us to have an appreciation of the dilemma, or perhaps the difficulty in which I am placed in attempting to come to grips with an appropriate and honest answer--particularly as we address the question of "the South Pacific views on Hawaii's role in the Pacific."

In addressing future issues, we cannot entirely divorce the past, since Hawaii was, before separation, historically and ethnically a part of Polynesia.

Unfortunately the controversy over the issue of commonality will continue for some years since there are gaps in our knowledge of the Pacific islands' cultures, history, etc. and new scientific tools to extend our present frontier would need to be developed. So far fragments of pottery have given us accurate information concerning when some of these islands were settled. But I feel, however, that a lot of work has yet to be done to throw some light on this mystery before the vexed question of commonality would be settled with any measure of success.

It would be reasonable to expect, therefore, that both Western and Islander future social scientists and scholars would continue their investigation for solutions to some of these questions: (a) at what rate does a culture change in an environment completely isolated from any other community; (b) recognizing that acculturation is a process which would be influenced by forces working either from within or without, at what rate does a language change or deteriorate under similar conditions. In suggesting such an investigation I am also mindful of the fact that it would be difficult to replicate conditions prevailing up to the time of contact.

In retrospect, whether some measure of regular contact between the islands was maintained prior to contact is difficult to determine, particularly in view of the fact that the Islanders did not have a written language in the first place; and secondly, the products of their technology did not lend themselves well to prolonged periods of preservation. For cultural or historical links they have to depend heavily upon oral history, legends and myths.

DISMEMBERING THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

The first contact between European explorers and the Pacific islands was in the 1500's, but not much really happened

until the 1800's, when the metropolitan powers started carving up the islands and making them colonies under various shades of political affiliations; some were colonies and others were declared protectorates.

Dismemberment of the islands was analogous to a major surgical operation performed by colonial powers. Needless to say, the patients by and large had no say, nor were they given any choice. From the surgeon's viewpoint the operation was a complete success, but the end results were somewhat different: in certain cases there was a complete recovery, while in others the patients remained crippled for life.

If indeed the islands had little contact with each other in the pre-contact era, separation became virtually absolute during the colonial period. New values, new cultures, new languages and strange religions were introduced. A new system of education was established, not so much to help the Islanders but to help the Europeans.

While we speculate over the question of history up to the contact period and review events during the colonial era, there is one element in the whole equation which is worthy of mention. There can be no denying that Pacific Islanders were sailors endowed with high navigational skills and extraordinary stamina. With such essential attributes they were able to sail the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean and settle small scattered islands clustered around the ocean north and south of the equator.

They were able to achieve such feats by sailing on canoes and using natural phenomena as navigational aids, while Europeans were still pondering over the question of whether the earth was round or flat. They explored and in some cases colonized islands before they themselves were colonized by outside powers.

HAWAII, U.S.A. AND PACIFIC NATIONS

It is against this backdrop that we need to look at Hawaii's role in the Pacific. Earlier on, I made reference to the period of colonization and the meeting of islanders in the South Pacific Commission Conference. Since that initial meeting in 1950, there have been numerous events at which Islanders participated. Apart from the conference there have been regional activities such as the South Pacific Games and the South Pacific Festival of Arts, where the presence of Hawaii has been somewhat minimal or absent.

Because of these factors, it is difficult to determine what role Hawaii could really play in the development of islands in the Pacific. The difficulty is further compounded by the fact that Hawaii is now an integral part of the USA as its 50th State. As such, islanders are not well conversant with relations between the state and federal governments, nor do they understand how they operate. To what extent can a State act independently of Federal Governmental control, and so on.

Having said all that, there are encouraging signs of a change in attitude emerging from the recent statements by Governor Ariyoshi to the effect that the State of Hawaii should be paying more attention to Asia and the Pacific in terms of trade and other forms of assistance. Representative Fred Rohlfing also made a public statement suggesting that Hawaii should assist in the development of the Pacific Islands. These statements would appear to be indicative of the realization that Hawaii does have a role to play in the Pacific.

In March of 1980, a meeting of Island leaders was held at the East-West Center, coinciding with the Twentieth Anniversary of the Center. It was well attended by Island leaders regardless of political status and metropolitan affiliations. One of the important decisions made at this conference was the setting of a conference secretariat for the express purpose of coordinating relevant research projects and programs to assist Pacific Islands and the region in their development strategies.

Recently the Director of the Pacific Islands Studies Program at the University of Hawaii arranged a student exchange scheme with the University of the South Pacific. At the moment two students from the University of the South Pacific are spending a semester at the Manoa campus, while a student from UH is now at the USP and another would join him later--probably in one of the University centers outside Fiji.

So, indirectly the State of Hawaii has been giving assistance to the Pacific islands largely in the field of tertiary education, not only at undergraduate but also at graduate levels. Fiji alone for the last five years has sent to Hawaii 70 students for studies either at the East-West Center or the University.

Faculty from the University of Hawaii have acted as consultants for specific tasks in some of the islands which do not have and could not afford such an expensive commodity. Requests for such expertise are in most cases channeled through regional organizations such as SPC and others.

Such is the level of assistance already undertaken, and perhaps, in the light of the recent statements by Governor Ariyoshi and Representative Fred Rohlfing, the time is opportune for reflection on the next step.

I have already made reference to two institutions: the Pacific Islands Studies Program at the University of Hawaii and the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center. One is concerned with the much needed manpower training and the other with research. Although there is room for improvement, their activities are limited because of lack of funds.

I may be speaking out of turn here, but before the Legislature are two Bills initiated by Representative Fred Rohlfing purporting to assist these two institutions. However, in the light of President Reagan's budget cuts, we can only hope for the best; but I'm optimistic.

Since Hawaii is now the 50th State, I feel it could play an important role as a catalyst; it could be a bridge between the United States of America and the islands. Further, it is also at a vantage position to use its influence in persuading the U.S. to lower its telescopic sights so as to bring the islands and their problems into sharper focus, to view their problems with better understanding and consider their development in the context of disadvantaged small island states, with perhaps a little less rhetoric and a bit more action.