

# RESPONSES

*Pasifika thought in modern Australia*



## An Australian in Honiara

*Anouk Ride*\*

**Dr Ride, you have a long association with Solomon Islands, including over a decade working as a social scientist in Honiara. How did your interest in Solomon Islands begin?**

I lived a fairly nomadic life before coming to Solomon Islands, and I went there thinking I might be there a year or two in order to do my doctoral research. It wasn't something planned, but I did end up staying a long time, for family reasons and also for my own curiosity.

Solomon Islands is a fascinating place. It is a melting pot of Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian peoples as well as being in the process of rapid changes from subsistence to cash economies, from old to modern technologies, from tribal ways and languages to more interactions with foreign migrants and the outside world and, increasingly, political and geopolitical changes.

In the international development sector in particular, staying in one place is often seen as a bad thing for your career. But in terms of being able to get stuff done, I've found the opposite: building relationships and layers of knowledge over time allows you to be a part of change.

---

\* Anouk Ride is a social scientist for WorldFish. She holds a PhD from the University of Queensland and is affiliated to the University of Melbourne and Australian National University. She lives in Honiara, Solomon Islands.

**Your PhD reframed the causes of conflicts in Solomon Islands by de-emphasising ethnicity and drawing attention to tensions between society and its elites. Has your thinking evolved on this question?**

A few years after I finished the PhD conflict conditions worsened, there was unrest over the election of the current prime minister, the switch in bilateral relations from Taiwan to China, and relations and power-sharing (or lack of it) between provinces and the national government. All this unrest and these frictions have an underlying cause of disconnect between the elites in control of parliament and government and the people. So, if anything, my hypothesis that elite capture of the state is a fundamental cause of conflict has been proven right, but ethnic links are still important in how this cause manifests.

For example, leaders of, and dissenters from, the current government will try to rally supporters based on ethnic links. Psychology tells us people look through the lens of ‘us’ versus ‘others’, but researchers are not necessarily aware of ethnic stereotypes and lenses to the study of conflict in other countries. Researchers need to be more reflexive about their own biases and look for the evidence before presenting analyses that frame ethnicity as a cause of conflict. Some of the writing by academics outside Solomon Islands suggests that ethnicity divides Islanders, whereas there is far more peaceful coexistence and melding of ethnicities than conflict overall in its modern history.

**Solomon Islands has made world news in recent years, including during the 2021 riots which you lived through and wrote about. In a 2020 article, you predicted that riots could soon break out from causes you could observe.**

The 2021 riots were severe, caused widespread damage, a few deaths and were terrible for all who saw them. To add to that, I was disturbed because I thought the events were preventable and predictable and I had predicted a similar pattern of violence in an article

for the Australian National University in December 2020.<sup>1</sup> It was sort of like seeing a nightmare you envisaged coming true, but at the time I was too tired and sad to write about it.

A friend called me and said, ‘You *have* to write about this now, what has happened is exactly what you said would happen.’ After that call, I wrote a piece for the Lowy Institute, which I hope was helpful in interpreting events.<sup>2</sup> We have to look beyond the day of the riot to understand how these processes happen, and what we can do to prevent them. Learning from history is our only hope for the future.

**You have argued that writers outside Solomon Islands should not be too quick to reach for geopolitical explanations when analysing local events. Does this habit reflect a thin understanding of realities on the ground?**

Up until recently, Solomon Islands was rarely in the news. Then it was the front page or leading story, and it was funny seeing all the commentators come up. I would estimate that around 90 per cent of the researchers interviewed were not in the country when events unfolded and had not been for some time, as Solomon Islands closed its borders for two years during COVID-19.

The political discourse was also extreme and did little to increase understanding of what was happening, something I and Initiative for Peacebuilding colleagues were very concerned about.<sup>3</sup>

So, few commentators had an idea of internal conditions and the geopolitical angle was an easy reach, simply assuming that local actors acted primarily because of geopolitical allegiances. However, people’s motivations are complex, and this is certainly the case in Solomon Islands.

The prime minister might be “pro-China” but this is also linked to an idea of maintaining his centralised control of the country, a more authoritarian approach to governance and the like. Malaita province might be “pro-West” but this is positioning to try to maintain or strengthen their freedoms and abilities to govern their own affairs.

There is a fundamental power struggle within the country over inappropriate governance systems in need of reform, as Dr Transform Aqorau has pointed out.<sup>4</sup>

Structural change to governance needs to be addressed. That has nothing to do with geopolitics and everything to do with Solomon Islanders needing to decide what system of governance they want and can maintain themselves.

**In 2021, the Australian Defence Force was invited by the government to help restore law and order, as it was during a period of civil conflict in 1998-2003. What is Australia's image among locals and does it affect your experience?**

When I first went to Solomon Islands back in 2008 and started interacting with Solomon professionals and visiting communities, a comment I would get a lot is that I was different from other Australians. It took me a while to figure out what that meant, but I think there was this idea that Australians would come in and “run the show”. They were known to have specific ideas about things, to be somewhat bossy, socialise largely among themselves, eat different foods, and behave differently and then leave.

Generally speaking, New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders who were part of the intervention known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RASMI) had a better image in the eyes of local people. This was a huge wake up call to me in terms of influencing how I behaved and seeing how other Australians behave in the Pacific more critically. I think Australians have this idea that they can walk into a room and be “mates” with anyone, but when you have history and huge power and cultural differentials between you and others, it's not that simple.

The Australians who worked well and were well liked were ones who listened, took their time, could work with different perspectives, and devolved power. This is particularly important now in relation to the security sector,<sup>5</sup> otherwise there is a danger at some point that Pacific countries will opt not to work with Australia on security matters.

## *Synkrētīc*

**Australians' engagement with Solomon Islanders seems quite top-heavy in the sense of being driven by the government and development sector.**

I am not sure I have much to say about this, except some colleagues have pointed to the need for more Australians to be more literate about the Pacific. And this is something I would support, but to be literate based on Pacific teachers and literature written by Pacific Islanders in order to break through our cultural biases and frames.

**Do you think the bottom-up, that is social, cultural, religious, and private sector ties between Australians and Solomon Islanders are under-done?**

One immediate concern I have at the moment is the increasing restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly in Solomon Islands. Several people in the NGO and religious sectors have been threatened by the police or by court cases, pursued by the government simply because of what they said in public or online forums.

I would hope to see more support by Australian civil society to Solomon Islands civil society, including local NGOs, the arts, youth and women's organisations and networks. Not just financial support but the support of friendship, exchange, prayer, even refuge if required. These ties can be powerful in more ways than one.

***Synkrētīc* has a strong interest in the oral forms of Pacific thought. Should the local concept of *tok stori* be seen as a method of philosophising?**

One of the exciting things about working in Solomon Islands at the moment is engaging with its leading scholars on indigenous methodologies, epistemologies and research. These discussions have always been around but are getting much more attention, and I would say even reshaping mainstream research in many fields.

I would love your readers to become more familiar with the work of Dr David Gegeo and Dr Kabini Sanga who are both leaders in this domain. They also have lectures and papers online as resources.

My friends and colleagues currently doing Masters and PhDs are mostly engaging with local research methods, sometimes in addition to other methods such as marine science, and I find this very exciting.

*Tok stori* is a method of philosophising but it is also a way of being, of relationships and relation not just to thoughts and concepts but to each other. This is one of the things that has been missing from mainstream science, to its detriment in my opinion. There is still much to be learnt across cultures, across methodologies, across the region.

**What sources, writers, and thinkers could you recommend for readers wanting to explore Solomon Islanders' perspectives?**

Some of those great academics I have mentioned: the writings of Dr Transform Aqorau, Dr Kabini Sanga, Dr David Gegeo and also Dr Alice Pollard and Dr Jack Maebuta. Also, the creative works of younger people, particularly film, such as Dreamcast Theatre productions, the films of the Lepping sisters, Chai Comedy and the works published by the Solomon Islands Creative Writers Association, which are mostly available at the University of the South Pacific. There is a lot of dynamism in the arts, women, and youth sectors and by tribal associations that reveal the thoughts and experiences of Solomon Islanders.

**You have studied the sources of conflict. What are the sources of peace in Solomon Islands that give you and locals hope in the future?**

Peace is about making peaceful choices at the individual, community, or national level. Australia can do what it can to ensure the next election is free and fair, to make sure its policing support is accountable and encourages accountability in the police force, and to learn more from past experiences of conflict, including its own role in shaping current conflict conditions.

Solomon Islanders have a number of ways to resolve the conflicts they have peacefully: through dialogue between people with



## *Synkrētic*

different perspectives, through greater accountability of the state to the people, through decentralisation of governance, through increasing the transparency and accountability of the police force, and through community-led initiatives to prevent crime and conflict.

And as I said, women, youth, tribal and local leaders have the dynamism to keep pursuing peace and so they deserve support from Australian and Solomon leaders alike.

## Notes

- 1 Anouk Ride, 'Solomon Islands' long summer of discontent: Security challenges', in *Development Bulletin*, eds. Pamela Thomas and Meg Keen, No. 82 (Feb. 2021): 156-158. Available at <<https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/DB82-final-manuscript-23-02-21.pdf>>.
- 2 Anouk Ride, 'Honiara as the smoke subsides', *The Interpreter*, 26 November 2021, available at: <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/honiara-smoke-subsides>>.
- 3 Tania Miletic and Anouk Ride, 'Tensions are high between China and Australia over Solomon Islands, but it's in everyone's interests to simmer down', in *The Guardian*, 5 April 2022, available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/05/tensions-are-high-between-china-and-australia-over-solomon-islands-but-its-in-everyones-interests-to-simmer-down>>.
- 4 Transform Aqorau and Anouk Ride, 'Solomon Islands: a blueprint to stop a cycle of strife', in *The Interpreter*, 29 August 2022, available at: <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/solomon-islands-blueprint-stop-cycle-strife>>.
- 5 Anouk Ride, 'New Australian Government Must Draw "Red Lines" In Solomon Islands', in *Australian Outlook*, 23 May 2022, available at: <<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/new-australian-government-must-draw-red-lines-in-solomon-islands/>>.

## Listening to Pasifika voices

*Jioji Ravulo\**

**Professor Ravulo, last year you became the first Pasifika professor in Australia. Was it a surprise to you that you were the first?**

Very much so! I had no idea that this was the case until a Pasifika colleague, Pefi Kingi based in Victoria, posted about it on her social media platforms. I was genuinely surprised!

For me, it is a true honour and privilege to be noted as this. It is a shared achievement with and for our Pacific communities. However, many questions which prod and provoke my passions were raised. One question I had in particular was: ‘Why? Why has it taken so long for universities in Australia to appoint a person from a Pasifika heritage as a professor?’

Traditionally, universities have been characterised as being very white and Westernised spaces that Pacific people may not be able to picture themselves in. We need to disrupt these perspectives and create opportunities to reshape the culture within to create environments and settings that are intentionally inclusive.

Everyone is involved in this conversation in which we can learn to embrace diverse perspectives and practices that support inclusive learning and teaching, and research and leadership.

---

\* Jioji Ravulo is Professor and Chair of Social Work and Policy Studies in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at The University of Sydney. He holds a PhD from Western Sydney University and lives in Sydney, Australia.

**Your research spans a broad range of social work issues, including the mental health of Pacific communities and NRL players of Pacific heritage. Was there a gap in the literature that led you to research Pasifika topics?**

Yes, yes, and yes! The reason why I went into my doctorate was to help create empirical data on why there is an overrepresentation of Pasifika young people in the youth justice system. My social work career, before becoming an academic unintentionally, involved supporting young people who offend and their families, which included a large proportion of Pasifika in western Sydney. We didn't have any research on the reason why this may be occurring.

From this initial foray into research, I fell in love with the idea of being involved in supporting other Pacific-focussed research projects that would further assist our communities, whilst holding social systems and structures accountable for their interactions with us.

In essence, it's a shared solution where individuals, families, and communities help shape such service models of delivery and provision, rather than becoming vilified and victims to it. This includes health, education, legal, and welfare systems that can be designed to help diverse communities thrive.

**At Western Sydney University, you have worked on programs to encourage students from a Pacific Island background to pursue tertiary study. Are they currently underrepresented in Australian universities, and if so why?**

I started my first academic role as a Lecturer at Western Sydney University in July 2011 and was perplexed about why we didn't see many people from a Pacific heritage involved in this space. It led to the creation of Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education (PATHE), which celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2022.

In essence, the answer to our underrepresentation lies in the systems and structures that we implement within educational settings in Western societies. This includes the way we create and curate di-

verse learning styles and approaches that lead to meaningful educational engagement across all levels: early childhood, primary and high school, vocational and tertiary.

If we don't promote critical pedagogies and practices that enable diversity to be inclusive in teaching and learning, then we won't effectively support retention and progression towards further education and training. And this can mean ensuring Pacific epistemologies and ontologies are included in the scope of curricula, and that these harness our own narratives and lived experiences to support our educational involvement.

Through this approach, we can capture and enhance positive attitudes towards lifelong learning, which can further produce educational attainment towards social mobility and inclusion.

**A news article noted that your father is Indigenous Fijian and moved to Australia in the 1970s where he met your mother.<sup>1</sup> How did being bicultural and the tensions of trying to negotiate two cultures shape your identity?**

I was constantly challenged by the way in which other people were putting certain labels and binary perspectives on my identity.

This is captured (cheeky plug ahead) in a recent talk I did for TEDxSydney in August 2022 called 'Living beyond the binary'.<sup>2</sup> It is through my own lived experience of being biracial, bisexual, a person of colour and growing up in public housing in western Sydney that my ability to see the world beyond the binary was developed. In white, Western societies, we are obsessed with these binaries which create an us-and-them mentality and limit the opportunity to create safe spaces for everyone.

We need to move together towards a shared goal where our cultural diversity and its differences are seen as a source of celebration and help shape the communities in which we live.

**Before becoming a professor, you trained as a singer and actor, and you still weave performance into your classes and participate in**

**comedy gigs in your spare time. Who were your artistic and intellectual influences growing up?**

The performing arts continue to be of keen interest to me, and I've been fortunate enough to have had opportunities to be involved in various activities over the years. It's through these skills and attributes that I have been able to implement social work projects that support young people experiencing vulnerabilities to engage socially and therapeutically.

My artistic influences have been Pasifika people who have pioneered artistic spaces across the region. This includes Jay Laga'aia, who I first saw on the Australian TV show *Water Rats* back in the 1990s. He represented the possibility for people like us to be involved in these spaces.

Intellectually, Dr Epeli Hau'ofa has been a big influence through his insights, humour, and wit across poetry and stories that reflect our presence across Oceania. I'm also enthralled by the works of bell hooks, James Baldwin, and Paulo Freire.

**You co-authored a 2022 article on the Sydney-based drill rap group ONEFOUR.<sup>3</sup> The Australian drill scene is notable for its many Polynesian rappers. What role does Pacific culture play in drillers like ONEFOUR?**

The lyrics and sounds produced by groups like ONEFOUR are a reflection of our collectivist ideals and values as Pasifika people. Our identities are connected with community and reflect the spaces and places we traverse.

Certain themes may come across as being abrupt and challenging—but so they should. As a Pacific diaspora in Australia, we continue to be located in socioeconomic, socio-geographic, and socio-political contexts that reflect our marginality.

We should reflect on these narratives and see them as a source of knowledge that can be utilised to further support a shared understanding of our struggles, achievements, and all that is in between.

Additionally, ONEFOUR provides visibility to our existence within the Australian landscape, and moreso to our unique capabilities and strengths.

**The article concludes that criminalising Pacific drillers counter-productively undermines important role models for their communities, who you note are over-represented in Australian prisons. Can music reverse that trend?**

Music is part of the solution. In my own work with young offenders, we ran music projects to assist in their ability to share their lived experiences through song.

As Pasifika people, music has been used as a form of oratory and the passing down of our stories over generations. By learning from these experiences, we can create solutions that support the meeting of certain social and welfare needs that contribute to criminogenic factors that lead to offending.

At the same time, we need to decolonise the punitive nature of carceral spaces and reinvest in resources that support our communities. Failure to do this will continue to perpetuate our overrepresentation, leading to ongoing deficits and the dehumanisation of our peoples.

**Australia's diplomatic, economic, and social ties to the Pacific have been receiving more mainstream media attention in recent years. While long part of the Pacific region, is Australia's sensitivity to its cultures improving?**

I would like to think so. However, if we continue to operate within a context of paternalism, in which we view our interactions as being in the vested interests of the Pacific nations, then we continue to perpetuate neo-colonial and neo-imperial ways.

As the world is driven by its obsession for neoliberal leanings that enable consumerism and individualism to run rampant, Indigenous Pacific worldviews are further diminished and demoralised.

## *Synkrētic*

If Australia wants to play a leading role in the region, then it needs to learn to understand our cultural views and values, and how this can shape collaborative cooperation across Oceania.

This can include consulting with the growing Pasifika diaspora in Australia, who continue to interact with and support families in our Islands of origin. We can help shape foreign policy in the Pacific and support the economic and social development of our countries of origin.

**At a time of national soul-searching on the recognition of Indigenous Australians' identities, do you hear the voices of Pasifika, South Sea Islander and other Pacific communities also getting stronger in Australian society?**

I believe our voice continues to evolve. I'm keen to ensure our ability to be involved across different sections of society is part of this picture, and that our perspectives and practices pervade the workplace resulting in culturally nuanced and safe spaces. We are greatly capable of being across all workforce sectors and industries, which will result in our ability to be represented.

However, for this to occur we need to create a shared approach to enshrining First Nations Australians as being key to everyone's success. We need to ensure that our culture as a country is constructed from a foundation that esteems Indigenous Australian voices, a treaty, and their truths. From this, I believe other ethnically diverse communities can be valued for their differences and help shape a national narrative driven by this context.

The 'West is best', 'white is right' discourse continues to be of disservice and creates disunity. We can learn so much from each other, if we learn to just get over ourselves individually, and practice collectivist view and values that are embedded within Indigenous paradigms.

**As the first, what issue do you hope the fifth Pasifika professor in Australia will find resolved in their day that is still a challenge for you in your own?**

At the time of writing, there are now three Pasifika professors in Australia— Professor Katerina Teaiwa, Professor Tu'uhevaha Kaitu'u-Lino, and me—so I'm confident the fourth and fifth are not too far off!

I would love to see a region where Indigenous Pacific people are at the table where conversations are being had about them as a people. Too often, we as Pacific people are being told what to do based on other people's decisions and determinations for us as population.

I envision an Oceania that promotes Pacific autonomy, determination, and agency that is not negatively impacted by the need to perceivably keep up with the West.

I know this sounds grandiose. However, if we could incorporate our Pacific perspectives within our modern social structures, systems, and settings, we would have much better health, educational, legal, and welfare outcomes. It's achievable, and we need to work together to create policy across all realms that can make this difference.

And having Pasifika professors in Australia is one part of this shared approach and solution.

## Notes

- 1 Jordan Baker, "It's been a journey": Meet Australia's first Pasifika professor', *Sydney Morning Herald*, available at: <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/it-s-been-a-journey-meet-australia-s-first-pasifika-professor-20210329-p57evh.html>>.
- 2 Jioji Ravulo, 'Living beyond the binary: decolonising Queer communities', *TEDxSydney*, 31 August 2022, available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nUXX-Td8EA>>.
- 3 Murray Lee, Toby Martin, Jioji Ravulo, Ricky Simandjuntak, '[Dr]illing in the name of: the criminalisation of Sydney drill group ONEFOUR', in *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 8 August 2022, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2022.2100131>>.



## The ripple effect of blackbirding

*Amie Batalibasi\**

**Between 1864 and 1904, an estimated 60,000 Pacific islanders were abducted, deceived, and forced into working in Queensland’s sugar plantations and in cotton farming. As an Australian Solomon Islander, is this history personal?**

This history still very much remains under-acknowledged, yet it is a history that has had a ripple effect throughout the Pacific, Australia, and the world.

My heritage lies in the Solomon Islands, specifically Malaita Province. Estimates state that around 10,000 islanders came to Australia from that region alone. This had an impact of not only depopulating the islands, it also contributed to a severe loss of family, connection, and culture. Others were taken to island nations such as Fiji.

Most definitely this history is personal, especially because I have ancestors who were blackbirded and never seen or heard from again.

**You produce *Australian South Sea Islander Stories*, a repository of family histories, photos, and sources on the legacy of “blackbird-**

---

\* Amie Batalibasi is an Australian-Solomon Islander filmmaker and founder of Colour Box Studio. She holds a Master of Film and TV from Melbourne University VCA and lives on the lands of the Kulin Nation, Melbourne, Australia.

ing”, *i.e.* the enslavement of Pacific islanders in Australia. How did this project begin?

Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) Stories started as a one-off project funded through the Australia Council for the Arts in 2014. I was the creative producer working in collaboration with the Australian South Sea Islanders Secretariat Inc. in Brisbane.

Throughout the year-long project, ASSI community members participated in filmmaking workshops and were supported to write, direct, and edit their own short films to present at a public screening. It was such a nourishing process of sharing, laughing, and learning together along the way. When the project ended, I voluntarily kept the website and socials<sup>1</sup> running because the response online has been amazing.<sup>2</sup>

Every August, I share archival materials, official documents, articles, ship records, name search indexes, videos, and photographs as part of the ASSI Stories project initiative, ASSI History Month. A lot of the information is in the public domain already, but the idea is to make it more accessible to our communities. People from around Australia and the Pacific follow along, comment, and connect.

Sharing these histories is a reclamation of these stories, connecting them back to the community when they have previously been held by institutions for decades or in some instances over 100 years. It’s an attempt to shed some light on a dark part of our collective history.

**You have also been involved with Pacific Community Partnerships Inc. (PCP), an association set up to connect Pacific Islander communities and which has facilitated projects in Solomon Islands. What does PCP do?**

Initially we set up PCP with a small group of friends to embark on community projects in my village. Since 2009, we’ve supported projects around small gardens, disaster management, health and nutrition training, water tanks, sanitation projects as well as solar power training.

## *Synkrētic*

We're now a registered incorporated association and this year, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the Solomons really hard, we were able to fundraise for some emergency food and medical supplies to help those in need. We work with local groups in the village to make sure the projects are community-driven.

At the moment, we're developing projects to address the rising high tides and issues caused by the effects of climate change.

**In 2010, you released *Tide of Change*. Filmed in Malaita, Solomon Islands, it is a documentary about climate change on this island. Climate change has become such a central issue in the Pacific. What inspired you to film this?**

I made *Tide of Change* when I went back to my village to visit my *Koko Geli* (grandmother) who was very ill. It was a time when the high tides were ever-present, literally lapping at our feet.

After her passing and through our mourning, I was compelled to film what was happening in my village. It became a personal documentation of my family but also showed the effects of climate change.

Since then, the film has travelled around the world and I'm so grateful that we were able to connect with audiences and encourage dialogue around climate change in the Pacific.

**You directed the award-winning *Blackbird* (2015), which was screened in 40 regional countries and at 17 festivals such as the 69<sup>th</sup> Berlinale International Film Festival. How has this moving film shaped discussion of blackbirding?**

There are so many wonderful ASSI community members and organisations who have put in the hard yards to fight for recognition and respect here in Australia. I feel honoured to have had the opportunity to collaborate with various ASSI and Pacific Islander communities as well as my own family in order to acknowledge the history of blackbirding through community projects.

The impact of *Blackbird* is difficult to measure. But I can say that for a short film of 13 minutes made 7 years ago, the film continues

## *The ripple effect of blackbirding*

to screen around the world. Our next festival screening is in Greece this year. When I've been present at screenings, people come up to me and say: 'I didn't know.'

When I took the film back to the village people asked to watch it over and over again. There is a curiosity around this subject matter and there is a hunger from the community to see themselves represented on screen.

I think that *Blackbird* is one story in a sea of so many to be told. Moving forward it's important that we, the community, are given the opportunity to tell the story from our own perspectives because for so long the narrative has been held by others.

**In 2017, you co-directed *Ka Puta, Ko Au* with fellow Indigenous filmmakers Renae Maihi and Kelton Stepanowich for the Māori-land Film Festival. What was it like to work on this film set in pre-colonial Aotearoa New Zealand?**

We made *Ka Puta, Ko Au* as part of a 72-hour film challenge for the festival. So, we wrote the story, had consultations, filmed, and edited the whole thing extremely fast. It definitely was a challenge but for me it was an honour to be working with Renae, Kelton, and the team.

The timing was just after I had received the Sundance Merata Mita Fellowship for that year. Merata Mita was the first Indigenous woman to solo direct a feature film in New Zealand, so it was so special to be there on the ground in Aotearoa because she clearly left a legacy, one that has impacted me as well.

***Synkrētic* features the stories and philosophies of Pacific cultures, which often take the form of oral history. Can readers access resources on the oral history that South Sea islanders brought to Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?**

In my experience, oral histories have been accessed through my own curiosity sitting with my elders, drinking *bora* (tea) in the islands. Through my project work in Australia, I've been honoured to be included in conversations that are safe spaces to share.

## *Synkrētic*

In terms of the archives, if you dig deep our stories are there between the lines and behind the black and white images. The research process can be quite an emotional journey, particularly when this history is embedded in racist government policies. But it can also be enlightening at times because, truly, knowledge is power.

I created a Resource page on the ASSI Stories website and when people contact me wanting to search for ancestors that's where I send them.<sup>3</sup>

### **How do Australian South Sea Islander stories continue to inspire your work?**

I'm constantly inspired by our Australian South Sea Islander and Pacific Islander communities. Our stories, past and present, empower us. They demonstrate our resilience. That's what keeps me going.

## **Notes**

- 1 Australian South Sea Islander Stories (ASSI), available at: <<https://assistories.org/>>. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts available at the handle: <[@assistories](https://www.instagram.com/assistories)>.
- 2 See also Amie Batalibasi's website: <<https://amiebatalibasi.com/>>.
- 3 'Resources', ASSI, available at: <<https://assistories.org/resources/>>.

## On Pacific logic

*James D. Sellmann\**

**Professor Sellmann, you are Professor of Philosophy and Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam. How do both of these fascinating fields intersect, and do you teach Micronesian philosophy in your dual-hatted role?**

I studied Euro-American, Asian, and Comparative philosophy at the University of Hawaii. In 1992, when I was hired at the University of Guam, the contract asked me to bring CHamoru studies into my discipline. So, I developed a course on CHamoru philosophy. Then I expanded the scope of my research to include other Micronesian cultural philosophies. I developed and taught a graduate course on Micronesian Philosophy.

My motivation is to bring the cultural philosophies of Micronesia and the greater Pacific into the academy for further study and benefit for all people. I also wanted to delve into the roots of Pacific philosophy by examining the logic, the ways of reasoning, which inform islander cultures and thinking.

**At *Synkrētic*, we're focussed on the cultural philosophies of the Pacific and are sensitive to the oral forms they often take. Is it fair to say that Western academic philosophy struggles to see it as on par with Kant and Hume?**

---

\* James D. Sellmann is Dean and Professor of Philosophy and Micronesian Studies, University of Guam. He holds a PhD in Chinese philosophy from the University of Hawaii and lives in Talofofo, Guam.

## *Synkrētic*

In our global context, I think “we” ought to get beyond the East/West distinction because it is based on a Euro-centric colonial perspective, and from our Pacific perspective the cultures referred to are in the opposite direction. One of the reasons why institutionalised, academic philosophers are leery of cultural philosophy from an oral tradition is twofold.

First, because oral philosophy is not written down, it is difficult to ascertain its content.

Second, it is difficult if not impossible to see or read the development of that oral tradition’s “grand conversation”, also known as the historical changes of the tradition. Part of my motivation is to bring Pacific Philosophy into the academy to record its history.

I am aware that there are cultural experts who disagree and prefer to preserve the oral teachings without recording them to maintain the fluid character of the teachings, allowing the impermanent past to disappear by integrating into the present.

**In 2021, you published a thought-provoking paper in *Pacific Asia Inquiry* on Micronesian philosophy and ‘correlative thinking’ which you distinguish from scientific logic.<sup>1</sup> What are the defining traits of this type of thought?**

One characteristic of correlative thinking is to avoid stipulative definitions. Definitions give the impression that the defined object is locked into a category, especially the classical, scientific approach of definition by genus and species. I’d propose that correlative thinking looks to identify family resemblances.

Modern logic is based on the three principles of identity ( $A=A$ ); the excluded middle ( $A$  is true or  $A$  is not true); and non-contradiction (not both  $A$  and not  $A$ ).

Those three principles do not exactly apply in correlative thinking.

Correlative thinking acknowledges a dynamic process ontology, embracing change. The change is radical such that things transform, obscuring their identity. Inanimate objects are simultaneously gods. Certain Gods are humans, and certain humans are gods.

Rather than an excluded middle, an inclusive middle is emphasised such that the changing nature of things allows them to be and not to be at the same time. The interrelated character of the correlated opposites leaves one's thinking open to a more complex arrangement of "both A and not A and something else". Relationality and relationships are more important in correlative thinking than independent substances.

In correlative thinking there is room for not only inconsistencies but even direct contradictions to be accepted. This kind of thinking leaves open the possibilities for changing truths and knowledge; it is not based on the pursuit of absolute, precise, unchanging knowledge claims.

Modern logicians would label correlative thinking as fuzzy logic.

**You write that ancient Micronesians did not develop monistic or dualistic philosophies as in Western tradition, e.g. theories that the world is made up of one or two substances like body and spirit. Is this true across the Pacific?**

I know that I do not know the correct answer to this question because the Pacific covers more than one-third of the surface of the globe. I have not been able to study all the cultures of the Pacific and their histories. Given the unknown past of Pacific oral teaching, it could be possible that there were ancient monists or dualists in the Pacific.

Part of the claim that ancient peoples used correlative thinking is grounded in brain science (see the paper's Appendix IV, "The Correlative Character of Human Cognition"). The idea is that correlative thinking dominated ancient human cognition globally. Over time, correlative thinking was replaced by other forms of cognition.

As the ancient cultural philosophies in South, Southeast and East Asia continued to change over time, creating monistic and dualistic philosophies, they too entered the Pacific. First Hindu and Buddhist philosophies entered the Pacific, and later Islamic and Christian philosophies came, bringing in monism and dualism.



## *Synkrētic*

Pacific islanders seem to reject a principle of logic established by Aristotle: that a claim must either be right or wrong, never both. You say that Pacific islanders think in terms of true-and-false. Could you provide an example?

Last week the university launched our Certificate in Traditional Navigation program. Part of the ceremony was the enactment of the *Pow* (to pound) ritual to initiate new navigators. A palm frond is used to symbolically beat arrogance out of the initiate while pounding in humility. In the process, the initiates become possessed by ancestral spirits.

Traditionally, the initiates would go into isolation for four days and be given a different herbal medicine each day until they may return to community life. The initiates are both bodily-humans and spiritual-ancestors at the same time. There are many stories across the Pacific of gods and goddesses presenting as humans or inanimate objects. They are both true spirits and not true spirits, but physical at the same time.

In Belau, a drunk driver killed a pedestrian. The Justice Department wanted to put him on trial for, clearly, he was guilty. The victim's family wanted to adopt him to replace their son. He was truly guilty and truly not guilty as the adopted son. When everything is understood to be interconnected, hard and fast categories melt and blend.

**In the Pacific and in other regions, ancestors do not leave but live on after death in the same world as us in a nearby village, valley, or cave. Hell and heaven are on earth, not another realm. This is an ancient concept, isn't it?**

I agree. Globally, across ancient cultures the deceased ancestors were still nearby. They could continue to assist or punish their relatives. The idea that the dearly departed reside in transcendent realms, such as heaven, purgatory, or hell, far beyond and very different from the physical world is based on a dualism that separates the material world from an abstract pure spiritual realm.

As you point out, in many Pacific cultures like the Chuukese of Micronesia and CHamorus of Guam, gods become people and vice versa. Does this remind you of ancient European traditions, for example Greek myths?

If the brain science is correct that human cognition is correlative in character, then it is not surprising to find ancient cross-cultural universals. The god becoming human, the personal relationship with the saviour, and the human blood sacrifice motif are some of the elements that make Christianity so popular and easy for folks to convert to.

**You write that many moderns identify with abstract belief systems, *i.e.* with a religious, political, or scientific worldview, while Pacific traditions identify with their ancestors. How do Pacific islanders strive to balance both worlds?**

That is a complex question. The practice is not to balance two different things or approaches but to integrate them in a “both and something more” perspective. In politics, some Pacific nations’ constitutions give cultural-political capital to village leaders or chiefs. Extended families form political parties and vote accordingly. In the church or temple, we express our hopes, values, and beliefs in our own cultural modes.

The human brain learns by making mistakes and by drawing analogies from past experiences. Drawing analogies is part of correlative thinking. In practice, scientific approaches were always part of island wisdom. Islanders have always quickly adopted and integrated technology into our lives. The modern Pacific scientific laboratories contain island wisdom.

**You conclude that non-Pacific islanders too need not choose between the monist and dualist philosophies that underlie modern technology. What can Westerners learn from Pacific philosophies?**

Some of the topics that modern peoples across the continents can learn from Pacific philosophies are the importance of relationality and relationship in both the social and natural realms.

## *Synkrētic*

The climate crisis is in part due to a lack of understanding and appreciation for how human actions and consumption effect the environment. The heart of Pacific philosophy is the beat and rhythm of the environment. Pacific philosophies are first and foremost environmental philosophies.

The rest of the world needs to tune into indigenous ecological thinking because the dualistic model of humans dominating a wild nature is not working well. Human society is part and parcel of the environment. Social and political harmony are rooted in environmental resources.

The onto-cosmic relationality between all life, including human life and the environment, is sacred. As such, human relationships are also sacred. The fragmentation of modern social life would be better informed by the importance of maintaining relationships.

**Ancient Hindu creation stories, you explain, travelled the world as far as Ireland and turn up in Pacific stories. As a student of both Chinese and Pacific philosophy, do you see much overlap between these traditions?**

The strongest similarity is the use of correlative thinking. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Sinologists mistakenly claimed that yin-yang (correlative) thinking was unique to China. A.C. Graham first exposed the universal nature of correlative thinking. W. Goodenough noted the numerology connection between the Chinese Yijing 易經 (*Book of Changes*) and Chuuk divination practices. So, we can say there was some direct transmission from the China mainland into the Pacific beyond Taiwan and Japan.

Thank you for this opportunity to dialogue with you.

## Notes

- 1 James D. Sellmann, 'Correlative Thinking in Pacific Island (Micronesian) Cultural Philosophies', in *Pacific Asia Inquiry, Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Fall 2020): 153-175.