Decolonisation and the Pacific

This book charts a previously untold story of decolonisation in the oceanic world of the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, presenting it as both an indigenous and an international phenomenon. Tracey Banivanua Mar reveals how the inherent limits of decolonisation were laid bare by the historical peculiarities of colonialism in the region and demonstrates the way imperial powers configured decolonisation as a new form of imperialism. She shows how Indigenous peoples responded to these limits by developing rich intellectual, political and cultural networks that transcended colonial and national borders, and connected localised traditions of protest and dialogue with the global ferment of the twentieth century. The individual stories told here shed new light on the forces that shaped twentieth-century global history and re-configure the history of decolonisation. Decolonisation is presented not as an historic event but as a fragile, contingent and ongoing process that continued well into the postcolonial era.

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Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire

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For Nisi and Jimmy

Contents

Preface

Bubu Taka was my great aunt. She was a regal figure when I met her in Melbourne in the 1980s on her first trip out of Fiji. She was small, frail and fierce with a shock of a white afro, a wicked sense of independence and the sharp tongue of a matriarch who had helped raise three generations. She died having lived in two, possibly three, centuries. No one was too sure how old she was as she had no birth certificate, but most of the family is content to say she was well over 100, old enough to remember when white men were a rumour. Not long after she died, the family dug up an old photo that was taken in the village on our island in the Lau Group, Fiji. It was blurry and scratched, but it has been reproduced many times, as one of the only known photos of some of our dearest relations. In the foreground, seated at a table laden with glassware and food, and in crisp white clothes, probably late Victorian or Edwardian, were a white man and a woman and presumably their children. In the background and standing were my relatives, my great grandfather in his prime and small children, among them Bubu's little sister Qalo. It is unclear who was serving who, or how the table setting, the seating, the Victorian delicacies of the seated family and the clean white cotton were maintained in the village setting. The trappings of empire, in this instance at least, were conditional.

Whatever her exact age, Bubu Taka was clearly a child around the turn of the twentieth century. She grew up at a time when she would have needed permission and a pass to leave the village, let alone the island. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, the Indigenous Fijian population appeared to be in terminal decline, as was the case elsewhere in the Pacific and Australia. In state-sponsored efforts, Indigenous mothers everywhere and especially in Fiji were being taught by well-meaning European women how to mother, how to clean and how to think and behave like civilised women. This even as the kitchens and nurseries of white families throughout the islands and many parts of Australia were staffed by Indigenous houseboys and housegirls. These were Bubu Taka's formative years, when she and her community were

being systematically recast as 'natives' in a period when colonialism throughout the world had reached its zenith. In the decades that followed, as distant world wars were fought and the twentieth century unfolded, the formal empires crumbled – partly self-inflicted, partly imposed by 'native' men and women sick of being infantilised by colonial governance. The reverberations of these global currents reached the Pacific and the islands, touching the beaches and rippling away again, inherently transformed in the process.

Bubu Taka, probably born a generation after Fiji was formally annexed by Britain, therefore lived to see Britain hastily leave again in 1970. If she ever internalised the smallness of colonialism's view of natives, by the time I met her she had kicked against it. She was a global citizen then, independently and seamlessly traversing village life in the islands, urban life in the Pacific's capital centres and international travel to Australia. This relative freedom of movement, to have a passport, to live independently in the village or city and even to work, is the tangible, measurable result of the era of decolonisation. But her sense of self, of being someone entitled to do these things – as any white man – was the product of a more complex, uneven and fragile process of unthinking and undoing colonialism. This book tells part of that story.

Acknowledgements

The kernel of the idea that would become this book emerged from countless discussions held with friends and colleagues in the University of Melbourne's Australian Indigenous Studies programme, and the History Department's irrepressible John Medley corridor gang of the early 2000s. One conversation in particular, with Gary Foley, about a photo of him at a meeting in Pohnpei in 1978 that I had come across in the Oxfam library in Fitzroy, was seminal. The story of his attendance at the conference is his to tell and does not appear in this book. But it remained for me a clue that hinted towards a deeper story of connectedness between Indigenous and colonised peoples in and around the Pacific, that was yet to be told.

Since then, the research for this book has been supported by many. The Decolonization Seminar, run jointly by the American Historical Association, the Mellon Foundation and the United States Library of Congress, made initial research possible. Funding from the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University supported some of this research, and so too, an Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP 120104928) supported research for Chapters 2 and 6. Elsewhere the tireless and endlessly patient staff at the National Archives in Kew, United Kingdom, and the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand, were invaluable. An extra special thank you is also due to the research assistance provided at various stages by Ben Silverstein, Gabby Haynes and, most recently and most intensely, Nadia Rhook whose engagement was invaluable.

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