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978-0-521-36956-5 - Prehistory in the Pacific Islands: A Study of Variation in Language, Customs,  
and Human Biology

John Terrell

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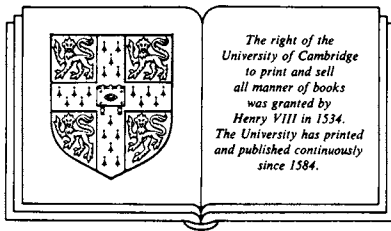
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# Prehistory in the Pacific Islands

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*For John Stowe*

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## Preface

I have written this book as an introduction – as an invitation – to a way of thinking about the past that I find exciting and promising. I have written it also to talk about a fundamental issue.

For many years I have been investigating the question of human diversity, that is, how to account for similarities and differences among people from place to place and from one time to another. To be more precise, how should we apportion human diversity?

What share should we ascribe to *chance*, to what some would call “accidents of history,” “free will,” and the like? For instance, to what extent are similarities and differences among people the inevitable result of physical limitations on how the world can be put together, limitations that happen to differ from place to place or from time to time? And consequently, traditional ways of life in some parts of the world are more elaborate than elsewhere because important natural resources (such as good land for farming or rich seas for fishing) are not everywhere equally abundant? And hence some people have more leisure time, say, for cultivating theatrical or visual arts than other people have?

Alternatively, how often do people differ because of *history*, because some people traditionally do things one way while other people go about achieving the same or quite similar results by equally suitable but historically different means? Because, as the saying goes, “There is more than one way to skin a cat.” And which way we go about doing it is mostly a matter of how we have been taught to do it?

Finally, how far must we ascribe similarities and differences among people to *adaptation*? That is, to change over time or from place to place that has improved people’s chances of survival or increased the effectiveness of their actions by helping them alter or adapt to local or new demands and constraints of their environment and life’s needs. For instance, do some people have dark skins while other people have light skins because sunlight in the tropics is more intense than at higher latitudes?

Why should the question of human diversity be important to us? Since I am an anthropologist who works in the South Pacific, let me limit my answer to this question to that part of the world, with the understanding that the full answer applies to all of us everywhere.

For more than two hundred years, Europeans and Americans have generally found it easy – too easy, I think – to look at the contemporary world of the Pacific Islanders and see there a number of races of humankind allegedly differing in physical appearance, temperament, achievements, and possibly

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even in intelligence. The conventional names for these supposed races are by now deeply ingrained in Western thought bearing on the South Pacific: Polynesians, Micronesians, Melanesians, Australians, Southeast Asians, and other labels for geographically more restricted groupings of people.

It has long been my conviction, however, that simple divisions of humanity such as these do not fit the facts, as we actually know them, of how people vary in biological heritage, traditions, and linguistic conventions. However “real” racial, ethnic, or geographic divisions in the Pacific may seem to us today, I think distinctions among people such as these add up to little more than a crude “snapshot” of human diversity in the Pacific: a picture that gives us little sense of time and a misleading sense of how contemporary variation among the Pacific Islanders came to be.

I have written this book to ask a fundamental question: how should a better picture of the sources of human diversity in the South Pacific be put together?

The answer to this question that I have drafted here is based on a way of thinking about the past that is grounded on several assumptions about how science works. In brief, these assumptions are:

- 1 When we talk about doing science, what we mean is setting up, or holding, a dialogue with Nature (including the world of human artifice). As discussed in chapter 1, such a dialogue can be thought of as a two-step process requiring both imagination and evaluation.
- 2 Any time we conduct a scientific dialogue, it is wise to remember that we will probably never be 100 per cent right on any question of real complexity and excitement. Moreover, human knowledge about any situation – past, present, or future – is rarely complete enough to rule out all but one of the plausible ways of answering even the clearest, most carefully defined question about the world and human events (Terrell 1982).
- 3 I think we also need to bear in mind that if science and prehistory are to be combined – that is, if we want to be scientific when we are studying the past to unravel the specific causal pathways that have led to the present – then we are obligated by basic canons of good science to put our intellectual cards on the table for all to see. This is just a way of saying that we must be direct, rigorous, and logical in what we think, write, say, and do. As explained in chapter 1 and illustrated first in chapters 2 and 3, one way we can put our intellectual cards on the table is to build and evaluate scientific models.
- 4 If we are to take a scientific look at prehistory, we must also decide what questions about the past are most worth asking. I have written this book, in part, to raise a number of questions I think are exciting and potentially illuminating.
- 5 Once we have asked a worthwhile question, we must use our human powers of imagination to identify the range of possible and plausible answers that such a question may have.
- 6 Finally, we must do what we can to weigh these conceivable answers against recoverable facts in order to narrow down the number of likely answers as far as humanly possible. (However, since the range of plausible solutions to any question – if we think carefully enough – can be wide, we should not be discouraged if we must stop, at least temporarily, before we have determined the most likely answer or answers.)

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This book is not a grand synthesis of all we now know, or think we know, about the Pacific Islanders and their past. Such a book, if it could be written, would be many times larger than this volume. I know some will find what I say controversial. Some may dismiss what I have written precisely because I have not tried to cover all the facts of human biology, language, and customs in the Pacific they think I should have mentioned, accepted, or rejected. Others may decide what I talk about is obviously true and hardly needed mentioning. I think controversy is useful. Neither total rejection nor total acceptance, however, is likely to resolve the issues raised in the following chapters.

One of the central themes of what I have written may be spelled out in simple terms: if we had a motion picture showing us what happened in the Pacific during prehistoric times, I think we would see a story of people moving out more or less gradually from island to island. We would probably also see the islanders changing over time and space: here and there, from time to time. We would see them creating new traditions, linguistic conventions, and ways of living together. I strongly suspect we would even see the islanders changing, over generations, in their physical appearance. An essential question, perhaps the central question of Pacific prehistory, is why such changes occurred.

It is also a principal thesis of this book that if we had such a motion picture, the story we would see unfolding before our eyes would probably be different from that usually told by archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists, and others concerned with the prehistory of this part of the world. Yet the proposition that the best account of Pacific Islands prehistory will someday prove to be a story of gradual, local change from place to place over the course of time rather than a dramatic story of great human migrations by different races or ethnic groups is decidedly not a proposition that I have invented myself. Such an idea has been at least a minor leitmotiv of Pacific scholarship for generations. No one I know of has taken an opinion poll of Pacific scholars to discover which kind of story they currently favor most. But I suspect many today would accept that much and perhaps nearly all of the presently observable diversity among the Pacific Islanders in custom and possibly even in language and human biology could have arisen locally and gradually over the course of time.

So I did not write this book to argue for a revolutionary idea that no one else has thought of before. Rather, I have written it as an invitation to you to ask and try to answer a difficult question: how should we account for the diversity of the islanders in biology, language, and custom?

I have been fortunate in being able to write this book while associated with three different and encouraging institutions of higher learning. I began the manuscript at Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago: a center for advanced study in the natural and human sciences with few peers elsewhere in the world. I took the work in progress with me to New Zealand in 1981 and continued my labors on it while I was visiting Senior Fulbright Fellow and Research Scholar within the Department of Anthropology at the University of Auckland. I completed the first draft while I was Visiting Professor of human ecology at the State University of New York at Binghamton during 1982–3. And

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the final draft was done once I was back in Chicago at my job as Curator of Oceanic Archaeology and Ethnology. My debt to these institutions is substantial.

Parts of chapters 2 and 3 were published in somewhat different form under the title “Linguistics and the peopling of the Pacific Islands” in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (vol. 90, no. 2, pp. 225–58). I am grateful to the editor of that journal, Geoffrey Irwin, for his continuing interest in my research ever since we first worked together in 1970, and for his willingness to publish the ideas expressed in these chapters in advance of their appearance here. Portions of chapter 7 dealing with settlement patterns and geographic regions on Bougainville Island were published earlier, again in somewhat different form, in “Geographic systems and human diversity in the North Solomons,” *World Archaeology* (vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 62–81). And much of the information on archaeology in Buin given in chapter 9 was first published in “Archaeology and the origins of social stratification in southern Bougainville,” *Publications de la Société Océanistes* (no. 39, pp. 23–43).

A number of people have helped me by giving needed information, by reading chapters and giving me their reactions, or in both ways. In particular, I thank Roberta Becker, Steve Black, Ben Bronson, Jay Callen, John Cherry, Jeff Clark, Janet Davidson, Jared Diamond, Tom Dye, Roger Green, Bill Grimé, Per Hage, Phil Houghton, Geoff Irwin, Ron Johnson, Susan Kaplan, Anne Leonard, Phil Lewis, Bart Lysy, Christine Niezgoda, Phyllis Rabineau, Moses Schanfield, Matthew Spriggs, and Ron Weber. Rob Welsch, my Pacific Islands colleague in the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University, read the final draft and gave me much useful advice, including numerous suggestions while I was writing the last chapter on which issues needed to be addressed at the end. In addition, three people have read all or nearly all of the manuscript in its several versions and have given me extensive and thoughtful reactions, objections, suggestions, and advice: Terry Hunt, John Stowe, and Bruce Winterhalder.

I have tried to say what I want to say clearly. If I have been at all successful, it is because of these friends and colleagues. While working for so many years on this book, it was John Stowe who day in and day out told me kindly but firmly where, and often how, improvement was still needed. I thank him for his honesty and frankness and for his willingness to put up with the crankiness and occasional despair of someone foolish enough to write a book.