

1 Introduction to Melanesia



Melanesia is a region in the South-West Pacific made up of a number of islands varying in size from the world's second-largest island, New Guinea, to small coral islets like the Solomon's Reef Islands (Map 1.1). Different writers put the region's boundary in different places; it is not easy to define precisely, on geographical, cultural, biological, or any other grounds, where Melanesia ends and the neighbouring regions (of Indonesia, Micronesia, Polynesia and Australia) begin. The 'Black Islands' stretch from the western tip of New Guinea (and in some senses include a few of the Indonesian islands here) to Fiji in the east and from the Torres Straits in the south to Mussau Island in the north, but there are a few small islands in the east, among them Tikopia and Ontong Java, which are customarily assigned to Polynesia on cultural grounds. The problem we have in defining Melanesia's place on the globe relates to a dilemma that recurs time and again in studying the region; drawing a boundary demands arbitrary decisions because any one part of the area fades into another without any abrupt linguistic, cultural, or other changes.

Given this albeit imprecise idea of what constitutes Melanesia, on what general grounds do we define it? It is, to start with, a historical category which evolved in the nineteenth century from the discoveries made in the Pacific and has been legitimated by use and further research in the region. It covers populations that have a certain linguistic, biological and cultural affinity – a certain ill-defined sameness, which shades off at its margins into difference. This sameness is, however, by no means cultural uniformity; Melanesia is one of the most varied regions, in almost every sense, on earth. 'It is literally impossible to make more than a handful of generalizations that will apply to even the majority of the societies' (Chowning 1977: 2).

The natural environment

The natural environment of Melanesia repeats the theme of variation, displaying a striking diversity over short distances. A useful initial

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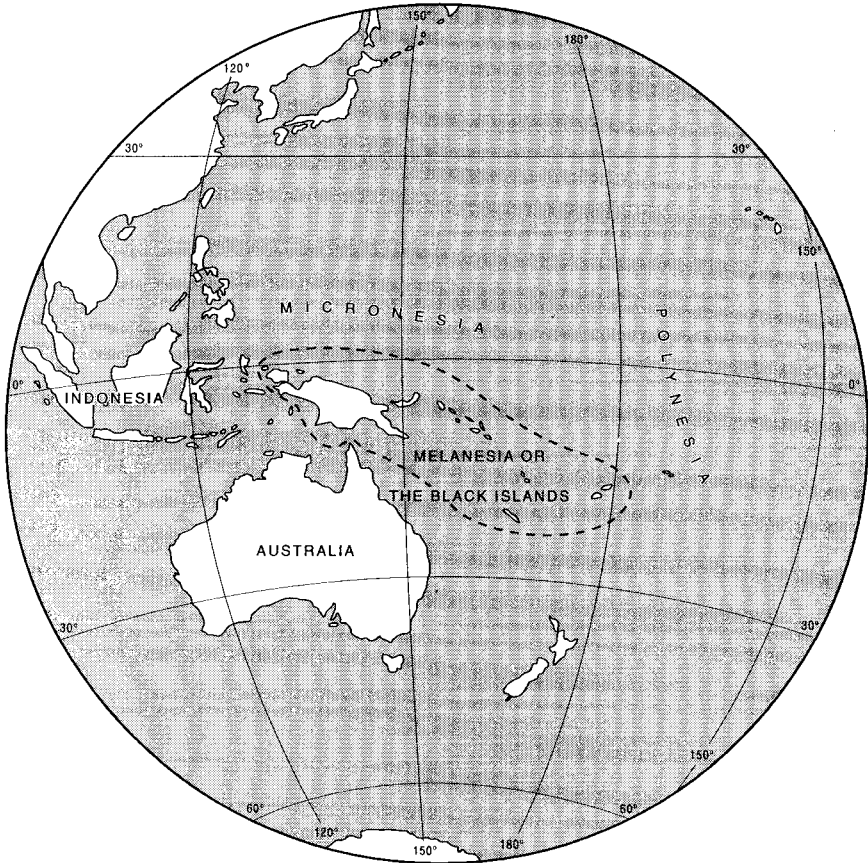
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Paul Sillitoe

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Map 1.1 Melanesia: geographical location. (After Brookfield and Hart 1971.)

distinction to make is between small and large islands. Some of the small islands are coral atolls, others volcanic peaks. They usually have a limited range of ecological habitats – some have the palm-fringed lagoons and beaches of popular imagination, others dense rain-forest cover, or, where populated, regrowth and grassland. The large islands, in contrast, are characterised by high, rugged interior mountain chains, far and away the largest and most spectacular of which is the central cordillera running spine like though New Guinea. Three gross regions are identifiable on these larger islands:

- (1) the coast (or, rarely, the lowlands);
- (2) the lowland plains of the great rivers; and

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Plate 1.1 The coast: the beach at Kaibola on the Trobriand Islands, with a man leaning against a canoe used in overseas *kula* exchange journeys.

(3) the highlands (particularly in New Guinea) or the interior mountains.

The **coast** varies from inviting beaches to impenetrable mangrove, from steep cliffs where mountains plunge into the sea to raised coral reefs and from equally inaccessible swamps to grasslands and bushy regrowth (Plate 1.1). The great **river plains** are less varied, characterised by large, meandering rivers, sometimes with islands of floating vegetation, enormous areas of swampland with isolated backwaters, and some savanna, grassland and forest (the river systems on the south coast of New Guinea flow through one of the world's most extensive swamps). The **highlands** are stupendous, with ranges of precipitous mountains

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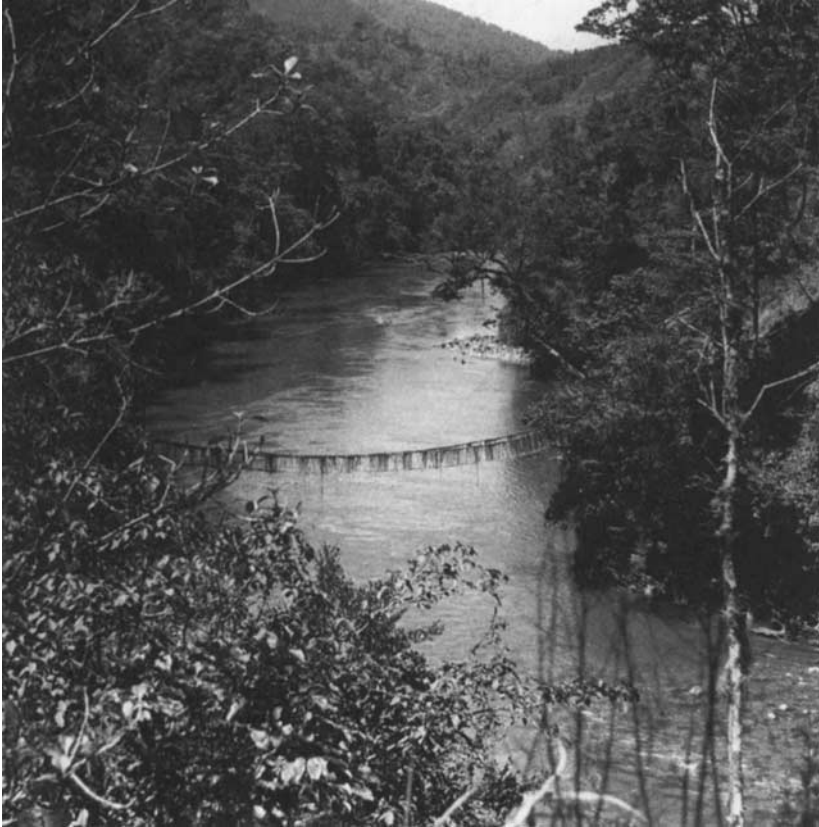


Plate 1.2 The highlands: a vine suspension bridge stretching across the fast-flowing Was River in the montane forest near Pinjip in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

clothed in majestic rainforest, the highest topped with alpine grassland and sometimes snow; the broad valleys running between them often contain wild rivers (Plate 1.2). The mountainsides support extensive areas of human-made grassland and secondary regrowth. One can do no better to evoke the nature of this country than to quote two of the New Guinea highland's first explorers: 'Take Switzerland drop it down into the southern ocean near the equator, overspread its peaks and gorges with a rank growth of tropical vegetation, put in a wide barrier of malarial swamps to guard its borders, pollute it with tropical diseases, add a malignant assortment of poisonous snakes and insects for variety' (Leahy and Crain 1937: 49).

Whereas the region's vegetation is like that of the tropics of South-East Asia, the wildlife is part of the unique Australian faunae complex. The animals evolved in isolation because of the deep seas separating the western tip of New Guinea from the Indonesian islands, divided by the so-called Wallace line (named for the naturalist Alfred Wallace). The sea never dried up here during the Pleistocene; Australasia was never connected to South-East Asia by a land bridge that animals could cross. The furry creatures of Melanesia are largely marsupials, animals that rear their young in pouches, such as tree kangaroos, wallabies, and possums, together with rats, dogs, and pigs introduced by humans. Pigs feature prominently in the lives of most Melanesians. The bird life, in contrast to the mammalian, is among the most colourful and varied in the world. The best-known are probably the majestic birds of paradise, while others include megapodes, brilliantly plumed parrots, hornbills and, largest of all, the flightless cassowary. In the seas there are many tropical fish, an important food source for coastal people including: tuna, barramundi, flying fish, various shellfish, sharks, turtles, dugongs and, in estuaries, enormous crocodiles.

Being almost on the equator makes Melanesia a hot place and one subject to monsoons, that is, characterised by two seasons depending on wind direction, one considerably wetter than the other. However this description applies only to a few places, with October to March being the wet season. Elsewhere the mountains break up the air masses, giving rise to less predictable local weather patterns. On the coast and at lower altitudes it is hot (mean maximum around 30 °C) and humid, and there are frequent and sometimes heavy falls of rain the year round. In the highlands and at higher altitudes it is warm (mean maximum around 25 °C), commonly sunny in the mornings, with cloud build-up and rainstorms in the afternoons and occasional frost.

The people

The inhabitants of Melanesia display considerable physical variation, making characterisation of their biological make-up difficult except in the broadest terms. They are short people, the average height for males being about 1.65 m and females about 1.6 m, although to call them pygmies (as some writers have some populations) is confusing and inaccurate. They are stocky and well-built, especially in the highlands. As the Greek-derived name 'Melanesia' for the region intimates, they are dark-skinned, ranging from almost coal-black to caramel-brown. Finally, the frequently heard name 'Papua' reminds us that they are frizzy-haired (*Malay papuwah*). Their features have been characterised

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Plate 1.3 A Non-Austronesian or Papuan woman: a Bogaia mother from the Strickland Gorge region carrying a screaming child on her shoulders.

as rugged – the nose generally broad across the tip, the lips prominent, the eyes dark brown. Men frequently have luxuriant beards. With regard to serological and other single-gene-marker evidence, there is little to tell because of the small amount of research undertaken in Melanesia. As one authority has dryly observed, ‘For distributions, and the precise description of populations and subspecies, certain species of Melanesian birds are far better known than Melanesian man’ (Howells 1973:161).

According to our current knowledge, it seems, for one thing, that significant numbers of Melanesians exhibit blood-group B. On the basis of this and other biological evidence, we can be sure that there is no direct connection between the so-called Oceanic Negroids of Melanesia and the people of Africa, whom they resemble physically in some regards. For distant relatives we must look to the small Negrito populations of South-East Asia and to the Australian Aborigines. It appears, on current evidence, that they evolved the characteristics they share with Africans (dark skins, tight curly hair, and so on) independently of them, perhaps as selective responses to similar tropical environments.

Some writers with an interest in the prehistoric peopling of Melanesia have tried to divide the population into racial types, corresponding to different waves of prehistoric migration into the region. These racial classifications usually propose three broad groups. The **Negritos**, remnants of the first arrivals, purportedly occur in isolated highland pockets and are short, muscular, heavy-featured and dark brown. The **Papuans**, descended from the next large prehistoric wave of immigrants, are slightly taller, a more coppery-brown, heavy-boned and reported sometimes to have hooked noses (Plate 1.4). The **Melanesians**, descendants of the last people to arrive, are supposedly the tallest and lightest-skinned of all Melanesia’s inhabitants, of gracile build and less woolly-haired than others. We need not bother ourselves over much with these distinctions, for whatever the differences among the various racial stocks involved in the peopling of Melanesia by immigrants from South-East Asia they have interbred extensively and blended with one another over thousands of years. As a result, examples of all three physical types can be found in the same community and – worse still for racial classifications – diagnostic features of all three types in the appearance of individuals! Different physical and genetic types flow imperceptibly one into another, and small local populations display a staggering internal variety in biological character and appearance which resists tidy-minded regional classifications.

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Plate 1.4 An Austronesian or Melanesian man: a Trobriand Islander renowned for his knowledge of garden magic, stacking up yam tubers for a harvest exchange.

Languages

Linguists study peoples' languages with a view to establishing and corroborating relationships and tracing origins. Here again we have problems regarding definitions. Linguists distinguish two major language groupings in Melanesia which they usually call **Austronesian** (sometimes called Malayo–Polynesian or Melanesian) and **Non-Austronesian** (or Papuan).

It is not known with any certainty where these two major groupings came from nor when they first appeared in Melanesia, but linguists agree that the Non-Austronesian was the first to arrive. The languages so classified today descend from those of the early immigrants from South-East Asia, but sufficient development has occurred locally over the thousands of years that they have been spoken in Melanesia to produce today's staggering range of languages, many of them unrelated linguistically to any common protolanguage speculated to have existed

Table 1.1. *Non-Austronesian and Austronesian languages compared.*

	<i>Austronesian (AN)</i>	<i>Non-Austronesian (NAN)</i>
Phonetics	simple	varied
Vocabulary	certain common words shared (e.g., <i>tama</i> 'father', <i>ika</i> 'fish')	varies greatly between languages
Word order	subject – verb – object	subject – object – verb
Verbs	simple structure	complicated with range of aspects, moods and tenses
Gender	not differentiated	nouns may mark elaborately
Pronouns	share common basic forms	no shared forms
Possession	expressed by 'of' (e.g., 'axe of man') or possessive pronoun (e.g., 'man his axe')	expressed by 's' equivalent (e.g., man's axe)
Article	present	rare
Counting	based on 5	bases vary: 2, 4, 8, or parts of body

long ago. The situation with the Austronesian grouping is less confusing because all of its languages belong to the same family. Nonetheless, where and when Austronesian originated is in dispute; suggestions include western Melanesia, where we find the greatest diversity in these languages (taken by some linguists as indicating the place of origin), but the more common view, which accords with the available archaeological and physical anthropological evidence, is that the prototype Austronesian language originated somewhere in South-East Asia and reached Melanesia with later immigrants. In any case, where we find Austronesian languages today they invariably show marked traces of Non-Austronesian influence. All of today's Melanesian languages are, to some extent and in significant regards, 'home-grown'.

The Non-Austronesian languages are found over a considerably larger area than the Austronesian ones. We find Austronesian speakers on many of the smaller islands, but they do not penetrate far into the interior of the region's largest island, New Guinea (which many take as clear evidence that they arrived later). The implication is not, however, that Austronesian languages have a limited global distribution: they are found in Indonesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and even Vietnam and Taiwan. Secondly, there are the considerable structural differences between the languages in each grouping (Table 1.1): briefly, Austronesian languages have simple structures, whereas Non-Austronesian ones have complex ones (such that, for instance, in some languages an elaborately conjugated and conditioned verb can comprise a whole sentence).

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When we refer to these two major linguistic groups we are talking on a high level of abstraction. The actual languages comprising them and spoken today in Melanesia vary greatly. Indeed, the large number of different languages spoken across the region (some writers calculate that nearly half the world's languages occur here) has led some to call it the modern Babel. There are at least several hundred languages, and some authorities think there may be more than a thousand. It is difficult to know for certain, not only because many of the languages have yet to be described, but also because of the problems we have in deciding when one language ends and a new one begins – that is, distinguishing between dialect and language. We face similar difficulties regarding cultural traits, deciding where one culture or society ends and another starts. These problems illustrate again the difficulties we encounter when we try to classify; instead of becoming clearer things can become murkier.

The people themselves often make no attempt to make these distinctions among themselves, often having no names for what we perceive as different linguistic or cultural groups. The names given to these entities and now prominent in the anthropological literature are often contrived and sometimes comical in their derivation. Those who have christened these linguistic and cultural groups have often seized upon some frequently heard but unintelligible word to label them. The patrol that discovered the Wola called them the Wen, having heard them say '*wen, wen*' (soon, soon) as they walked along, trying to tell the strangers that they would soon reach the next place on the path. The Gnau of the Torricelli Mountains were named for their word *gnau* ('no'), presumably they were expressing negative feelings about the newcomers. The nearby Arapesh were more welcoming, perhaps; their word *arapesh* means 'friends'. So too, apparently, were the Siane of the Eastern Highlands, their word *siane* being a greeting – although it also means 'there are buttocks', suggesting a possible insult to the outsiders. And among the Orokaiva the word *orokaiva* means 'peace', suggesting that they feared attack.

A hypothetical cultural and linguistic model illustrates the problems that attend the drawing of boundaries around these groups (Figure 1.1). We can imagine a series of sociocultural and/or speech communities (A to J), the differences between which relate to geographical distance between them. The people in group D can understand and relate readily to those in C and E, for although they speak different dialects and have somewhat different customs the differences between them are not large (similarly, G can easily comprehend F and H); D can understand and relate to B, and with some effort, F, too, for there are several differences