

1 Background to the Study of Socio-Religious Change in the Pacific Islands

Over a fifth of our planet's discrete traditional religions arose among the Pacific Islands, between the Bird's Head (Vogelkop) at the far western reaches of New Guinea and Easter Island (or Rapanui) far out in the eastern Pacific Ocean. With interactions between violence and religion to the forefront, this Element surveys the repercussions of outside contact on this vast region during modern times, from the earliest landfalls of European explorers to the establishment of colonies by foreign powers, and on to the emergence of independent nations (see Fig. 1). In virtually all the 1,340-odd endogenous Pacific Islander cultures of the past, warriorhood was cultivated for group survival and became integral to total lifeways (Trompf 2021a). Over the last two centuries, however, massive socio-religious change has occurred, with more extensive foreign-generated trading networks, plantations, mining, capitalist development, urbanism and modern political organizations. Alongside these secular processes, and often ambiguously placed towards them, missionary activity has altered the whole region's religious profile, which is registered today as 92 per cent Christian. This immense socio-religious transformation is usually acknowledged to have brought a sustainable peace to Oceania; but matters to do with the human propensity for violence are never simple and this Element seeks to address the complexities. The many external impacts hardly came without brutal coercion and produced violent retaliations by Islanders in return. Colonial administrative rules and Church standards of behavioural conformity, intended to 'pacify' localized warrior ferocities, did not have their grip without reactivity (Rodman and Cooper 1983). Innovative religious responses, mixing tradition and Christianity, could entail violent 'reprisal', and eventually spiritual ideals bolstered anti-colonial 'rebellions' (Trompf 2008a: 162–232, 350–55). And local pre-contact impetuses towards violent solutions still hung on, especially in Melanesia – the most complicated ethnologic scene on earth – where the pace of adjustments was slower and where tribal warfare has been exacerbated by new weaponry.

While reckoning with forms of violence entailed by foreigners' impositions of change, this Element concentrates overwhelmingly on the religious

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-09404-7 — Violence and Religious Change in the Pacific Islands

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Excerpt

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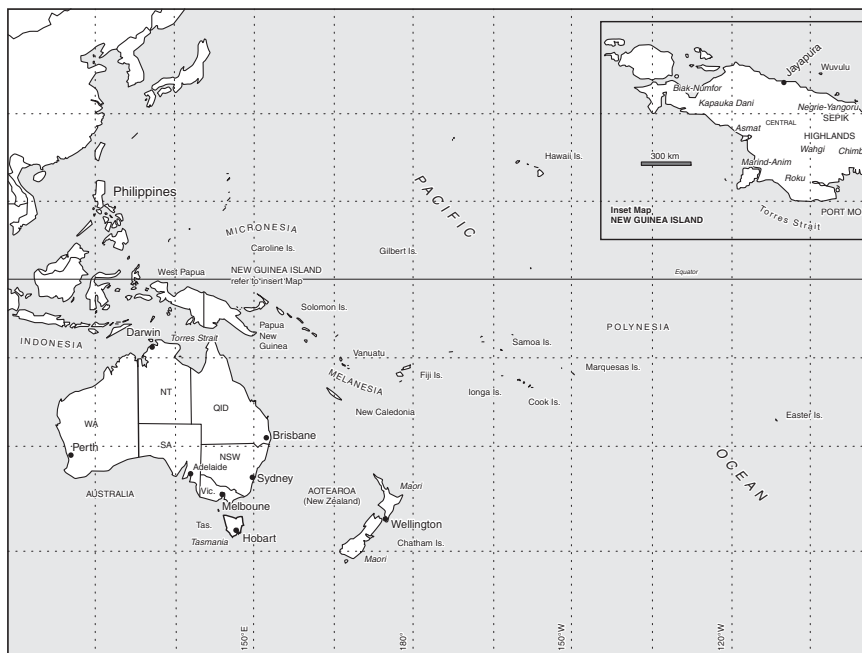


Figure 1 Map of the Pacific Islands

attitudes and acts of Pacific *Islander indigenes*, and (in building upon a companion Element, Trompf 2021a) focuses on their expressions of *physical* violence (rather than those psycho-spiritual or structural in nature) (cf. Stewart and Strathern 2002a). The author has to brave out the embarrassment of assessing measures of violence among peoples outside his own cultural inheritance, yet it will become plain that the key purpose is to offer a broad perspective serviceable for their better solving of present and future social problems. To acquire historical bearings is crucial for our task, and the Element will be organized diachronically, from contact to contemporary affairs, highly informed by the methods and writings of Pacific history. It will also tend to move from anthropological toward sociological concerns, yet remain multidisciplinary (with the history of ideas and religions always opening up possibilities to air ethico-evaluative, pastoral and missiological insights). General differences in social organization across the islands shall be borne in mind. Most of Melanesia is highly variegated in its languages and social structuring, but through widespread Austronesian (or Malay-Polynesian) culturo-linguistic connections, running along Melanesia's edges and into the broad Pacific, distinguishable features of social stratification or chiefly rule over commoners still affect religious life (Terrell 1988). In contrast, strict seniority systems such as those found in these regions (based on the first beachings by canoe) do not apply to hundreds of landlocked cultures, mostly in New Guinea's mountainous interior, where there were not only more egalitarian forms of social control but inclinations to image the cosmos horizontally rather than in Austronesian vertically oriented perspectives (Swain and Trompf 1995: 7–8, 140–5). After contact, Austronesian hierarchies of cosmic and social power have often determined formal religious change from the top, mostly in the nineteenth century, whereas the changes that have resulted from Melanesia's intensely tribal volalities, which are still going on, yield no easy generalization. Daunted by both awkwardness of focus and intricacies of data, the challenge still invites in its importance more than it deters.

How can we best orient ourselves to understand changing patterns of violence and religion among Pacific Islanders in modern times? By 1513, proverbially, *conquistador* Vasco de Balboa had waded into the great South Sea off Panama, and with a sword in his right hand and a Virgin

Mary pennant in his left he declared the waters taken for Spain. If through this pretentious drama the horizonless Mar del Sur was deemed a 'Spanish lake', eight years later, after a fleet from Spain under the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan had edged around the southern extents of South America and spent ninety-nine long days in calm waters before reaching Guam, 'Oceano Pacifico' became the preferred epithet (Spate 2004: 25–47). In common imagination, the immense region now generally lives up to its name, a zone without incessant tension, full of ideal holiday destinations, quiet towns lolling along to the pace of gentle string-band music or periodically calmed by uplifting surges of hymn-singing. While trouble spots are occasionally reported in worldwide press releases, and by-now-worrying instances of fearful cyclones, the general impression holds that Indigenous Pacific populations (10.65 million Melanesians, 2.2 million Polynesians, 535,000 Micronesians) inhabit 13 independent nations, and 17 special-relation, dependent-island or externally colonized territories, in relative stability and peace (Crocombe 2008). So decidedly Christian do the Islands generally present, albeit within frameworks of traditional lifeways, that those old European stereotypes of dangerous natives, headhunting and savagery have all but disappeared (Meijl and Miedema 2004). Missionary books about 'camping among cannibals' (St. Johnston 1889), or philosophic defences of a universal humanity because 'the Papuan is also a man, not a beast' (Husserl (1936) 1970: 290), are today few and far between. The 'New Time', as common village discourse goes, has obviously replaced the 'Old' (Tomasetti 1976). But still – who does not know it? – violence is an endemic human problem. In writing about religion and violence, how can one overlook the continuities of old mentalities in great religious transformations? Or the reality that enforced external takeover and modern social change aggravate violence in reaction, and huge disparities of technical power induce the choler of despair? As adaptations to state control and modernization have been taking place, of course, sublimations of directly harmful violence can see a redirecting of aggressive energies into useful rivalries (in sport and cultural competitions, regional and party-political contending), but they often need serious policing. If no ecumenical steps

are taken, confessional or denominational differences can also vitiate ideals of a higher religious unity that was meant to transcend massive tribal divisiveness; and keeping the lid on old physical clashes can drive traditional enmities underground to resurface through increases in sorcery (Trompf 2008a: 291–304, 334–74). In any case, the possibility of engaging in ‘modernized military activity’ has recurrently appealed, and in liberation movements and civil war we find old and new religious impulses combining to legitimize force.

From the middle of the sixteenth century an increasing minority of Pacific peoples came under different pressures entailed by Western exploration, with the steady opening up of new trade routes across from the Americas to the South East and East Asian islands and eventually to sea-bound Australia. In chronological order, impacts were felt in Micronesia (especially the Marianas, a Spanish colony by 1667), then central Polynesia (especially Tahiti, affected by James Cook’s British expeditions (1767–77) and the mutineers of the HMS *Bounty* (1788–90)), and by 1825 in eastern Melanesia; there, sandalwood traders brought disease and deforestation, before ‘blackbirding’ and ‘slaving’ started in the 1860s (that is, the recruiting of native people for labour by means of force or deception, mainly Melanesians being cajoled to work on the Queensland cane fields) (esp. Beaglehole 1966). The large island of New Guinea was ostensibly the world’s ‘Last Unknown’ (Souter 1963), considering great populous valleys in its highlands were not accessible to the outside world until the 1930s, with a few secluded pockets still untouched today.

Certainly, by the nineteenth century most of the Pacific had suffered very serious consequences from the unstoppable impact of the outside world: access to firearms and new technologies, depopulation from exposure to foreign diseases, colonial annexations, labour traffic and monetization, as well as expectations that villages alter their production modes. After 1900 came the effects of colonial/imperial control, capital investment (in plantations and mines), world war, postwar modernization and, in some important instances, such as Jayapura, Port Moresby, Nouméa, Honolulu, Wellington, Auckland and other New Zealand cities, intense urbanization and multicultural immigration (numbers of Indian labourers imported to

Fiji rising sharply, for example, and Chinese shopkeepers being successful across Oceania). The religious world of the Pacific, old traditions and converting groups combined, had to confront *Realpolitik* and secularization more abruptly than on Old World continents, and we need to ask sociological questions about the effects of modern ‘worldliness’ and political realism on contemporary Islander mentalities (Trompf 2004: 241–59) and about whether religion became less a motivator of violence than it had been as a result of these changes. The inflated virtue of bravery in arms, traditionally endemic to Oceania, did not remove itself from group memory overnight, and we know ‘mythic consciousness’ that glorifies strength can surge back even in a non-theistic ethos, particularly in the name of a new nation’s security (Schmitz 1960: 235; cf. Blumenthal et al. 1975: 195–232), and it is a vital part of the Pacific story that Islanders have achieved autonomous control over military instruments of violence at a national level.

A steady influence throughout modern Pacific history and in social patterns has been the Christian religion, even if through many different churches and at varying levels of comprehension, and this Element will have to account for the confusion, complexities and strains of religious adjustment that have entailed violent outbursts. There were pockets of resistance against colonially associated missionization (as evinced by such new religious movements as ‘cargo cults’), and in different strategic ways the Islanders held fast to long-inured local resources to offset the massive disruptions to their spiritual heritage (Campbell 1989; Denoon et al. 2004: 119–323). Oceania’s story, of course, is not mainly about negative reactivities. Apart from the remarkable acceptance of Christianity (esp. Forman 1982; Kruczek 2011), Pacific Island countries form a notable bloc among the United Nations. Most attainments of independent sovereignty came after World War II (five in Polynesia, four for Micronesia and at the moment four in Melanesia), with two other polities being member states of New Zealand and participating in UN agencies, and Bougainville now anticipating Independence Day. Eleven entities, however, are dependencies or colonies, and though New Caledonia recently voted to remain a *département* of France, West Papua (made up of the two sizeable Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua in easternmost

Indonesia) has only limited autonomy (e.g., Aldrich and Connell 1998: 55–9, 131–6; Firth 2006; and see Fig. 1). All these political rearrangements were accompanied by the growth of churches and local and national Christian leadership, engendering the sense of the Pacific as a sea of Christian countries.

Whatever the varied circumstances, the myriad cultural-linguistic complexes of Oceania, all still reflecting the endogenous religions in their mysterious inheritances, have undergone a mammoth change, and not without tense struggles and expected violence. We have already written about the conundrum of indigenous peoples' willing appropriation of Christian teaching, in spite of the accused complicity of 'Christianity' – nowadays frequently reified as an entity of violence – in European world-wide conquest; but this paradoxical choice revealed to their overlords the savageries they could not see in themselves (Trompf 2007; 2008b), and by concentrating on Islander behaviour we do not want this book to soft-pedal any of the forms of violence inflicted from the outside. It is tempting, of course, to accept a widespread stereotype that Pacific peoples were dragooned into submission or out-wondered by modern technology, or that missionaries duped 'natives' into 'ventriloquising' them and were coercive 'harbingers . . . of a moral economy' called 'capitalism' (V. Smith 1998: esp. 83, 90–2, 128–32; cf. Stipe et al. 1980). Although one can find useful theories of domination and pastoral power (Foucault 1980: 59), conceding also that indigenes' strange-looking experimentations and 'mimicry' might suggest their vulnerability, we would do sad injustice to proud peoples by effacing their power of agency and discrimination. Various missionaries may still send facile reports home of the Gospel's miraculously 'passive recipients', but by more careful documenting we find changes of belief were typically 'discussed and debated', albeit when pressures to convert, given inclinations among neighbouring tribes, were mounting (Neilson 2021: 320). A stress on 'acquiescence' might go some way to explaining a veritable social revolution – the depletion of tribal warfare – which signals a Christianizing Pacific, but why deduce from this a huge inauthentic cave-in or a slavish morality, when in fact inter-lineage decisions about the future involved resolute action and 'the will to change', or not (Fischer 2013: 174–274)? In the end, who did most of the implanting of Pacific churches if it was not the Islanders themselves?

Religious confusion and stress certainly pertained – ‘split-level’, ‘syncretistic’ and ‘dividualized’ behaviour patterns (Schiefenhövel 2009), with ‘moral torment’ (Robbins 2004) – yet working through intercultural tensions and power-structural hypocrisies has inspired in the Islands welcome new species of personal and social integration (Barker 2019). To try effacing all this, contentious as missionization has been, would be academically irresponsible (Douglas 2001) and nowadays likely to produce a native convert’s disgust towards rude innuendos (V. Smith 1998: 12).

On reflection, in writing a book about religion and violence in the post-contact Pacific, one runs the danger of warping history by isolating behaviour that belies both the continuance of traditional conflict-avoiding practices (e.g., Petersen 2014) and the enormous post-contact exertions to inhibit group-imbibed violence. Right from the start, potentials for peaceable relations with strangers were there. Famed Leo Tolstoy saw a key pacifist moment for humanity’s history in Russian explorer Nikolai Maklouho-Maclay’s daringly unarmed walk among the ‘most savage’ Rai Coast inhabitants of the Madang area (New Guinea) in 1871, they being awestruck at the white ‘moon man’ (Tolstoy 1885: 260; Webster 1984). Generally, though, diminishment of violence came in a double movement of complementarity and contradiction – by colonially imposed pacification (new services given for co-operation, yet with breaches of peace incurring punitive expeditions, coercive law enforcement and gaoling) and by propagating the new divine law (obeying the commands ‘thou shalt not kill’, ‘love your enemies’, etc. betokening security in God’s kingdom, and disobedience alienation from it). A coalescing of these methods might be found in agreements by Church and State that colonial offices ensure native peoples be ‘protected, civilized and Christianized’ (quoting the Anglican Melanesian Mission’s founder-bishop Selwyn (1893–4), upon Britain’s appropriation of the southern Solomon Islands), and certainly in-principle rulings and public excoriations against rape, cruelty, sodomy, infanticide and so on by any persons living under Western laws slowly affected even the most isolated rural courts (e.g., Inglis 1974; Stewart 2008). But on the ground there were many tensions over differences of approach, especially between the missionary’s protection of the flock and the urgings of officers or businessmen that economic results be hastened.

One should not exaggerate the aspect of progress. Right from the start, admittedly, a spirit of hope for social betterment including ‘civilization’) pervades the language of missionaries and administrators (not excluding entrepreneurs out to make a quick profit). As the pro-imperial Australian explorer-geographer James Thomson paternalistically reported (1892: 41), after punitive ‘social adjustments’ on Tubetube and Glenton Island and in other east Papuan contexts, these ‘people ... had long earned for themselves a notorious reputation for crimes of murder and rapacity’ – at that time against traders, not just enemy tribes – but government actions would hopefully have reduced the number of such obliquities, which had been a ‘frequent occurrence in the past’. He was more pessimistic about other places nearer the colonial settlement at Port Moresby, worrying that ‘vices previously unknown and inimical to life’ (meaning alcohol, tobacco and womanizing), introduced by ‘unscrupulous Europeans’, might not be easily forestalled by the London Missionary Society (LMS), because a ‘demoralising native priesthood’ (meaning sorcerers) could appropriate new ways to bolster negative energy against foreign settlers (54–5). In the long run, and overall in the Pacific, though, pressures and instruments to check violent behaviour became cemented as the means to greater social security.

For Australian soldiers and then journalists following the campaign against the Japanese on the north coast of Papua (1942), the fierce Melanesians were completely re-imaged in Western newspapers as crinkly haired carers or ‘fuzzy-wuzzy angels’ bearing the wounded to safety along the Kokoda Track (Wilson 2016). Instead of warrior chants, today Pacific choristers sing peaceful sacred songs and tour the world, and the Māori *haka* is used as therapy. Even by the end of the Victorian era, ‘young people’ in central Polynesia were reputedly ‘better acquainted with the Bible than the average Sunday School scholars in England’ (King 1899: 109), and nowadays the region exports arresting postcolonial theologies (e.g., Havea 2017; cf. Tomlinson 2020). The turbulent highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), beginning to be opened up in 1927, became the scene of intense (and ongoing) efforts at intertribal concord, the most durable results coming about through the efforts of longer-serving missionaries (e.g., Strathern and Stewart 2007). For the country’s present collective conscience it seems neatly encapsulated

by the National Day of Repentance, 26 August 2011.¹ This marked the four-hundredth anniversary of the early Spanish massacre of highly excited and armed (coastal Papuan) Mailu villagers by sailors under the explorer Luis de Torres, including the kidnapping of fourteen children, while inter alia acknowledging that Mailu headhunting raids into the hinterland came to an end in the 1890s through co-operation between the LMS and colonial government.

The shifts and counter-balances of religious valences and conflict have been uncannily multiform in the last few centuries in the Pacific, particularly in Melanesia, and I believe – all too anxiously about my own efforts here – that no learned study can do justice to the intricacies involved. Indeed, when 6 colonies were confederating into the modern nation of Australia (1901), there would still have been over 1,000 tribal wars being waged in the colonies ‘next door’, where most Islander inhabitants were living locked away. The Second Industrial Revolution had manifested. In 1901, when German steamships could enter Rabaul Harbour (Neupommern/New Britain), their hulls reinforced against bombardment with nickel from the mines of France’s New Caledonia (Black 2015; Firth 1983: 115), Europeans who approached the highest reaches of military technology were encountering New Guineans who were still slicing bone arrowheads. The whole enormous surprise already had apocalypse-like proportions (Trompf 1979: 135–6). Then, decades later, came ‘messengers from space’ – aircraft – and from Pearl Harbor in Hawai’i to Port Moresby, invaders’ bombs would also dramatically fall, with traumas of alien intruders, sometimes perceived as arriving in the form of UFOs, eventually showing in scattered psychiatric disorders (Gaisseau 1961; Trompf 1985). How relatively ineffective and utterly marginal the expressions of Pacific Islander violence might seem to be among global belligerencies; yet in its religious worlds, it holds telling, indeed extraordinary stories.

¹ First mooted by a group of churches with Samuel Abal, acting prime minister (incidentally the author’s former student), and ratified by his successor as prime minister, Peter O’Neill, in 2011. Cf. *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 30 Aug. 2011.