Pacific Worlds: Indigeneity, Hybridity, and Globalization

RDK Herman

The title of this essay today draws on my web-based indigenous-geography project Pacific Worlds (http://www.pacificworlds.com). Created in 2000, this project works to portray Pacific Island communities through the words of community members themselves. The premise is that, despite climatic, linguistic, and material-culture similarities, each Pacific Island culture presents a complete and distinct worldview. And these worldviews developed in situ, through generations of interactions between the people and the environment.

This kind of locally developed human–environment knowledge is the cornerstone of what I call “indigeneity.” By this term, I am not referring to Indigenous Peoples as defined by the United Nations or other scholars or bodies. As I have stated elsewhere, all of our ancestors were Indigenous once, somewhere. Rather, my focus here is on a way of being in the world: being indigenous to a place means having a depth of knowledge, understanding, and connection to that place (Herman 2008). Indigeneity also includes a sense of stewardship and responsibility for managing that place and working respectfully with its nonhuman inhabitants. This included holistic and spiritual engagement—both an extraordinary awareness of environmental conditions and, through that, a sense of consciousness and connectivity with the natural world and all its inhabitants. Prior to the onset of modernity, most people on this planet retained some degree of Indigeneity under this definition.

I contrast indigeneity with modernity, the mode of human–environment interaction based on industrial capitalism and characterized by commodification and exploitation of the environment. Capitalism fosters individual gain blind to consequences for other people, animals,
and the natural world. And this approach has been spread across the planet through globalization.

So today, we do not see unadulterated Indigeneity. The forces of modernity have penetrated nearly every corner of the globe to one degree or another. But we must acknowledge that cultural change does not equate with culture loss. To the extent that Pacific Islanders appropriated aspects of, shall we call them, the “visitor cultures” results in a hybridity still rooted in place, to greater and lesser extents. And that transfer went both ways.

The conflation of Asians with Pacific Islanders has been a clumsy and heavy-handed tool for people and institutions that are not willing to allow Pacific Islanders their own distinct cultural sphere. At the Smithsonian Institution, where I work, there is no distinct place for Pacific Islanders among the peoples represented. The National Museum of the American Indian covers the Hawaiian Islands, but none of the other U.S. Pacific Island territories (Guam, CNMI, American Samoa, at the least). The Asian Pacific American Center covers only Pacific Islander Americans, which does cover these entities but not the rest of the Pacific Islands. And as in other such units, the focus on Asian Americans far outweighs that on Pacific Islanders. There are two Pacific Island–focused scholars in the anthropology department at the National Museum of Natural History. The Smithsonian has a number of physical scientists working in Hawai’i (and, to a far lesser extent, the rest of the Pacific) and recently looked into establishing a small center there, but to date, Pacific Island studies at the institution remains scattered and fragmented.

A major feature of the Pacific Island cultural sphere—one that distinctly contrasts with the less clumsy but still heavy-handed “Asian identity”—is that these peoples live on remote islands, remote enough that regular intercourse between them and the peoples of the greater Asian region (or any other continent, for that matter) did not exist. True, there are plenty of Island peoples within Asia itself, including all of Indonesia and the Philippines. But these have,
to varying degrees, been in regular commerce and communication with each other and with peoples of the Asian continent. And true, some Pacific Islanders have had regular contact with their neighbors. But the severance from Asian roots was otherwise pretty complete. As Crocombe states, “Pacific Islanders evolved and diversified their Asian-derived cultures and controlled their own destinies. Their early origins from Asia were of no significance to Asia/Pacific Islands relations, for the vast majority had no further contact with Asia” (Crocombe 2007, 4).

Instead, we are talking about peoples occupying an ocean that covers at least one-third of the planet, and whose cultures developed in increasing isolation the further one moves from Southeast Asia. Not giving Pacific Islanders their due apart from Asia is based on the relatively small size of the Pacific Islander population and the composite land area, not the spatial extent of the realm (again, one-third the surface of the Earth) and the cultural diversity of the region.

The geographic context of Oceania leads to the evolution of cultural forms quite distinct from Asia. In the first place, throughout most of Oceania, there is no usable metal, so they constitute what might be called a Neolithic culture realm. Second, the biological resources are different and more limited due to distance decay from the continents. Hence Oceanic peoples brought their most important plants with them, thereby also ensuring a certain material culture base shared across the region. Third, the mostly small size of the islands means that all resources are limited and need to be managed carefully to ensure survival. Fourth, most of these islands share tropical climates, while the climates of Asia are far more varied. Finally, the legacy of voyaging is shared among those Pacific Islanders who ventured beyond the continent-hugging islands of Melanesia, and this too has had profound cultural ramifications.

But across these shared characteristics there is also extensive diversity. The various
migrations of peoples into Oceania—first into the island of New Guinea and the nearer Melanesian islands, some forty thousand years ago, and then a second wave out of Asia starting about four thousand years ago—produced culture realms that Western science has divided into three regions: Melanesia, closest to Asia and Australia; Micronesia, in the north Pacific but remote from Asia; and Polynesia, the great triangle of the remote central Pacific from Aotearoa/New Zealand to Rapanui (or Easter Island) and the Hawaiian Islands, along with some outliers near Melanesia. These are the Indigenous Peoples of Oceania. It has been said that if we were to use the fifty United States to represent cultural diversity across Oceania, it would look like this: Polynesian would be the state of Maine, Micronesia would be the rest of the New England states, and Melanesia would be the rest of the country.

Then there is what we might call the second colonization of the Pacific: the peoples of modernity. These also came in waves, and from different directions at different times, but all within a period of the past five hundred years. Colonial forces from Europe, Japan, and the United States swept over the islands, sometimes in sequence, and brought about a new division of the region: the French Pacific, the Australian Pacific, the New Zealand Pacific, and the American Pacific—most of which was formerly the Spanish, then the German, and then the Japanese Pacific.

And then with each of these, we get other migrations into and around the region, including Asian merchants and plantation workers. Through these migrations and colonizations, the formerly remote islands of Oceania were brought into the global system. And with the introduction of new ideas, technologies, and social and political forms, island cultures have been changed. So now we have a tension of sorts between indigeneity, hybridity, and globalization. And these play out differently in different places. Three places where I have seen quite different
outcomes include Guam, the Hawaiian Islands, and Palau.

When the rest of the German Pacific went to the Japanese at the outbreak of World War I, Guam had been seized by the United States at the beginning of the Spanish–American War in 1898. Guam and the Mariana Islands had been conquered by the Spanish in the seventeenth century, and all the islanders were brought to Guam and located in new villages under the watchful eyes of Catholic priests. As a result, they lost their millennia-old connections to the land and its stories. The Chamorro language is said to consist about 55 percent of borrowed Spanish terms. These terms, however, were reshaped into the Chamorro sound system, and Chamorro grammar remains intact (see Topping 1980, 6–7).

So here, when I went to work with community members to explore and document Indigenous culture, the first answer I got was about the church. The second answer was about funerals and cemeteries, and the third was about marriages. All of these are conducted within the framework of Catholicism. Yet, in each of these, my Chamorro guides saw their distinct island culture manifesting. Each of these embodied important Chamorro values, such the chenchule’ reciprocity system, or inafa'maolek, the need to have respect and balance.¹

American rule on Guam, unsurprisingly, has done little to uplift the indigenous culture over the past century. As Camacho (2005, 45) notes, American loyalty in Guam was cultivated through American colonial education, health policies, and economic projects attempting to earn the loyalties of Chamorros. “The American Naval government specifically sponsored various activities, such as speech contests and village parades, to acculturate Chamorros to American overseas rule” (Camacho 2005, 45). Yet, as I have discussed elsewhere, there is a long tradition of the United States framing Guam as “American-yet-not,” leaving this island in political limbo as one of the remaining non-self-governing territories left in the world (Herman 2008). The
proximity of Guam to the Philippines (another former U.S. colony, briefly) and Guam’s role as the major U.S. territory in that part of Micronesia have led to significant in-migration from those countries. Today the population is 37.3 percent Chamorro and 26.3 percent Filipino, with whites, Chuukese, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Palauans, Pohnpeians, and other Pacific Islanders and Asians composing small minorities (Central Intelligence Agency 2017).

Then there are the Hawaiian Islands, an independent nation from 1810 to 1893 and afterward a U.S. occupied territory. Hawaiian monarchs had appropriated ideas, technologies, and governmental forms from outside—mostly the United States—but remained distinctly Hawaiian. They embraced a degree of hybridity that suited their needs. At the same time, the huge influx of Asian plantation workers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also influenced the culture. In 1854, Prince Liholiho spoke favorably of bringing in Chinese as a desirable admixture with Native Hawaiians, whose numbers had been decimated by epidemics. My own mentor and then head of Hawaiian studies, Abraham Pi’ianai’a, was part Chinese.

And with the later arrival of Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos mixing with Chinese and Hawaiians, a plantation culture emerged speaking a new language: Pidgin, or Hawaiian Creole English. This is a language using mostly English words but also words from Asian languages. The grammar, however, is comparable to Hawaiian. And at least until recently, native speakers could distinguish the ethnicity of the speaker by his or her accent and use of Pidgin. For Hawaiians in particular, who nearly lost their language under American rule, Pidgin became a badge of identity in the face of American culture.

Here also foodways and other cultural habits, such as taking off one’s shoes before entering a house, were adopted from Asian immigrants, who make up 56 percent of the population. But at its core, Hawaiian culture remains distinctly Hawaiian. And that is rooted to
the place itself. Unlike the Chamorros, they never lost all their stories and place-names. In fact, their highly literate ancestors wrote them down.⁴

Palau had been nominally under the Spanish and then the Germans before Japan took Germany’s Pacific possessions with the First World War, though Japanese had been settling there since the 1830s.⁵ The subsequent settlement of Japanese in the islands was mostly merchants, farmers, and fishermen looking for new opportunities. By 1935, Japanese people constituted at least 60 percent of Palau’s population. Despite a segregated school system⁶ and a paternalist approach by the Japanese empire toward islanders (Leibowitz 1996, 14),⁷ Japanese and Palauans lived side by side and had regular interactions (Matusumoto and Britain 2003, 329).⁸ A great number of mixed families evolved. A 2005 study estimated that about 25 percent of Palau’s populace has some Japanese ancestry (Fujita 2005 [1]). Palauans make up 73 percent of the population, with 25 percent being Asian, plus tiny smatterings of others (Central Intelligence Agency 2017).

Postwar, many Japanese Palauans became prominent businessmen and politicians. In Palau especially, economic success is linked to the Japanese Palauan community.⁹ The persistence of Japanese language skills also plays a role (see Kai 2012). One study found that among younger Japanese Palauan women, the use of Japanese is highly valued in the economy as essential for the promotion of tourism and trade (Matsumoto and Britain 2001 [2], 80). Norms of living, eating, and drinking vigorously incorporated Japanese practices, and these remain part of island culture. But it is island culture, not Japanese culture.

The two-way cultural appropriation is seen in the story of Chief Uong of Ngiwal village, who returned from a cultural tour of Japan and created a Japanese-style “Ginza road” in his village. He was praised—and secretly mocked—by the Japanese as a successful assimilation but
is seen differently by Palauans even today. As Itaka (2011, XX [3]) writes, “their narratives about the Ginza Road recover the agency of chief Uong and reverse the hierarchical relationship between Japanese and Palauans. . . . Chief Uong is remembered as a man of vigorous action, who wisely appropriated civilization and minimized the powers of Japanese administration. He is regarded as a prominent leader, rather than as a passive, obedient, amusing, or provincial figure. . . . People in Ngiwal are proud that chief Uong guided villagers with strong leadership and constructed the most beautiful and well organized village in Palau.”

Susan Falgout argues that for the aging Micronesian, stories of the war and of the Japanese era are often told as morality tales, “meant to teach younger generations important lessons learned from working together, overcoming hardship, and living through an era far less marked by materialism and individual freedom and more devoted to community service and honor to chiefs than the present day. . . . While these stories are ostensibly about the past, for those who tell them they also bear direct relevance to the current day, and particularly to new directions regarded as unsuitable by the elders who learned valuable lessons from the World War II era” (Falgout 2007, 34; see also Poyer et al. 2001).

Palauan Rubak Ubal Tellei stated that “the best thing about education during the Japanese time was that it gave weight to good morals. Honesty was valued above all. Punctuality and industriousness were also emphasized. . . . Some Japanese customs were similar to Palauan customs; for example, respect for elders.” He went on to say, “I think that the American way of democracy does not fit the Palauan way. Now, people will not work for the community, but only work for money” (Mita 2009, 88–89). Other elders shared similar sentiments. For many of them, the Japanese period was the “good old days,” a golden era of prosperity and possibility, when traditional values remained intact and in operation.
These are three stories of hybridity—of borrowing from introduced cultures and making things one’s own. But in the end, island culture remains island culture. The indigeneity that developed in situ has not gone away or been eradicated. It has simply taken new forms in response to all that has come in on the tide.

Today, the impacts of modernity are manifesting in a different way: climate change and environmental degradation. These crises ask us to reconsider the path that the dominant society took away from its indigenous roots. Pacific Islands—small and highly vulnerable to environmental changes—are on the frontline. And here is where indigeneity—in all its contemporary forms—offers an alternative. Indigeneity is rooted in the Earth itself. And from what I have seen, indigenous cultural resurgence is linked with protecting local environments. This can be done using the tools of modernity: science, technology, research. These are merely tools. What matters is how we use them, and toward what end.

Where modernity fosters selfishness, Indigeneity—especially the forms found on small remote islands—fosters collectivity. Just like the voyaging canoe itself, we are all in the same boat. It’s called an island, and our ancestors taught us how to take care of it and ensure that we survive and flourish within its parameters. The lessons of those voyagers, and those cultures that taught us how to live sustainably on small islands, are what we need now to survive on Island Earth.

So I return to Pacific Worlds: my small role in all of this is to document traditional island culture and knowledge, as told by the people themselves, and to help promote education for them—and for us—that keeps those worlds alive and informative of how we may better walk softly on this planet.

RDK Herman is senior geographer for the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. He holds a doctorate in geography from the University of Hawai‘i, and
in addition to his work at NMAI, he is the director of Pacific Worlds, a web-based Indigenous-geography education project for Hawai‘i and the American Pacific. He serves on the board of the journal *IK: Other Ways of Knowing*.

**Works Cited**


Crocombe, Ron. 2007. *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West*. Melbourne: IPS.


Berlin: Mouton.


Notes


3 Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders make up 26 percent, and whites about the same, with a great deal of mixed-ethnicity people across all groups (State of Hawaii 2015).
4 See Nogelmeier’s (2010) work on this topic.


6 Peattie (1998, 90) called the educational system for the islanders “education for dependence”—aimed “to perpetuate Japanese rule and to keep the indigenous population in a state of perpetual dependence.”

7 Ballendorf (2011, 22) states that for the village chiefs and headmen, “their positions in the Japanese political system were no more than as minor, subordinate officials of the government. In the case where these appointed councilmen were also traditional native chiefs, their power was much reduced under the Japanese. When the Japanese administration wanted to mobilize laborers for public works projects, they would explain to the village councils what was needed, and then leave it to the islanders to carry out the work. This method was seen by the Japanese as smooth ‘indirect rule.’ In fact, it undermined and weakened the traditional Micronesian systems.”

8 Yoo and Steckel (2010) and Peattie (1998) state that Indigenous land rights and ownership were largely protected and maintained, at least in principle.

9 Yuping (2012, 87) states that “the rise of entrepreneurship in Palau is related to the Japanese colonial legacy and to those biracial people whose fathers are Japanese, Okinawan, or Chinese who came to Palau during the war.”

10 See the rest of Iitaka’s (2011) article for a discussion of Japanese Culture Tours for Micronesians.