

The Indigenization of Modernity

On the Relation between Culture and Development

Review >
Southeast Asia

A book not about Asia, not even about the Pacific Rim, *Culture and Sustainable Development in the Pacific* is instead about the Pacific region in the strict sense of the term. The strategic importance of the Pacific for Asia and, of course, for America has been abundantly clear since the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor during World War II. The central importance of the Pacific in modern world history is also portrayed in the relatively new concept of the Pacific Rim, which, remarkably enough, decentralizes Asia and America by defining them both in relation to the Pacific. At the same time, this importance is reflected in the increasing amount of investment in the Pacific, both by the US and the Asian economic tigers, especially over the past two decades.

tural make-up, since culture in the Pacific region is construed in ways that are quite distinct from that which is prevalent in the debate on Asian values.

Nowadays, it seems to have become a truism that the relationship between culture and development as it is conceived in the West and, recently, in many Asian countries, is not unproblematic. For that reason, culture was placed on the development agenda of the United Nations, which proclaimed the years between 1988 and 1997 as the World Decade for Cultural Development. The responsibility for implementing the Decade was given to UNESCO. The response of Pacific member states to UNESCO was formulated in a project entitled 'Vaka Moana'. 'Moana' is the common word for 'ocean' in the languages of the Pacific, while 'vaka' refers to a 'canoe', not only in the sense of a vessel, but also in the sense of a social group linked by migration, descent, and traditions. Indeed, as expressed by the leading Tongan intellectual Epele Hau'ofa in his contribution to this volume, the sea is a wonderful metaphor for the common

inheritance of the whole region and a potent symbol of a common 'Oceanic' identity. By the same token, the canoe is a useful concept that shifts the attention from the geographic isolation of the Pacific islands to the many connections between neighbouring islands, and the existence of regional exchange networks that tended to merge into one another, allowing the diffusion of cultural traits through most parts of the Pacific.

The articles in this volume were first presented at a conference held as part of this 'Vaka Moana' project. The aim of the conference was to resolve, at least conceptually, the contradictions between culture and development in order to achieve development goals, such as access to material goods, welfare, and amenities, without sacrificing traditional values that continue to provide material security and sustain diverse cultural and social identities. In this book the false dichotomy between culture and development is addressed by a great number of leading intellectuals and charismatic Pacific spokespersons, including Epele Hau'ofa, Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, Langi Kavaliku, Mala-

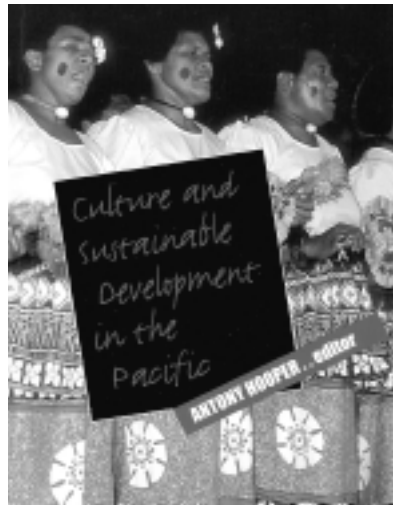
ma Meleisea, Marshall Sahlins, and Joeli Veitayaki. UNESCO experts include Richard Engelhardt, Russell Marshall, Edna Tait, and Mali Voi. Most eloquently, Marshall Sahlins expresses the view that culture does not necessarily disappear under the impact of development and modernization, as has been predicted and proclaimed by what he labels the 'Despondency Theory'. Instead, so he shows, in the Pacific, global homogeneity and local differentiation are developing together. The process of what Sahlins characterizes as the 'indigenization of modernity' echoes closely the distinction made by Kavaliku in his call for the modernization of local lifestyles as against homogeneity and a disabling westernization. He articulates this vision in terms of a beautiful image of Pacific countries as *lokua*: small fish living in reef ponds cut off from the sea at tidal lows, but periodically replenished by ocean waters.

The common denominator of the contributions to this interesting volume is that culture plays a much more significant role in national economies and national life in Pacific countries than it

does in most other regions of the world. As a result of the small scale of most Pacific countries and their lack of resources, culture impinges much more directly on their political and economic organization than elsewhere. In addition, every Pacific country hosts a large and vigorous traditional sector. In most cases, approximately 80 per cent of land resources are still held under customary tenure, while the traditional subsistence sector accounts for about 50 per cent of the national gross domestic product. Furthermore, culture also impinges on national politics. Pacific countries are democratic, but since the electorate derives a great proportion of its livelihood from the subsistence sector, matters of custom and tradition carry considerable political clout. Most Pacific countries have therefore also constitutions that assert national legitimacy in terms of their distinctive culture and traditions. One of the implications of this is that the national economies of Pacific countries cannot be adequately encompassed by standard macroeconomic analyses. For that reason, too, the region needs to be clearly distinguished from the larger Asia-Pacific conglomerate in which it is so often submerged. <

– Hooper, Antony (ed.), *Culture and Sustainable Development in the Pacific*, Canberra: Asia Pacific Press (2000), xv + 227 pp., ISBN 0731536274 (paperback).

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By Toon van Meijl

Foreign investments in the Pacific, however, have not yielded the returns anticipated and expected. Since many Asians have recently decided to settle permanently in the Pacific, particularly in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai'i, and since even more Asians are visiting the Pacific as tourists, Asian entrepreneurs have broken all investment records in the Pacific from the mid-1980s onwards. Asian business in the Pacific is based on the assumption that the Asian model of development can be expanded easily into the Pacific. It is believed that the growth of Asian economies can be emulated by Pacific island countries by getting people out of the subsistence economy, by introducing Western technology, and by simply engineering a transition to a dynamic monetary economy. *Culture and Sustainable Development in the Pacific*, however, aims to demonstrate that this assumption is false, since Pacific island countries are different from their larger Asian counterparts, not only in their scale and resources, but also in their cul-