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# The Pacific Islands: at the heart or on the margins of globalisation?

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When we talk about the Pacific Islands, they do not only include the large archipelagos on the Asian borders (Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia), but also all the small islands forming what is traditionally known as the Oceanian Islands, so as to differentiate them from the “great Oceanian lands”, Australia and New Zealand. These islands illustrate the paradox of being the most isolated lands in the world of Oceanian vastness, yet highly populated, well before the arrival of Europeans. Groups of “indigenous” populations are divided into large cultural areas, Melanesian in the southwest, Micronesian in the northwest, and Polynesian in the centre and the east. It is worth noting that this dispersion is witness to one of the greatest maritime adventures of all time; the Polynesians have been able to reach places as isolated and distant as the Hawaiian Islands, Easter Island and New Zealand.

The Europeans only discovered these Oceanian islands late in their expeditions. The few islands that were briefly spotted (and lost again!) by the Spaniards at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Solomon and the Marquesas Islands); the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Tasmania, New Zealand, Tonga and Easter Island) did not prevent the myth of a southern continent, with temperate and tropical latitudes of the South Pacific hemisphere in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from continuing. On the other hand, it only took about twelve years – between the discovery of Tahiti by Wallis (1767) and the Hawaiian Islands by Cook during his third voyage (1778) – for this idea of a Southern continent to be completely erased and the main islands and archipelagos to be put on the map.

The sudden opening up of the islands quickly resulted in the start of a demographic decline among the indigenous population, who fell ill due to the new diseases (“bacterial shock”). This decline continued throughout the

19<sup>th</sup> century, to the extent that the very survival of some groups seemed to be threatened (Hawaiian, Marquesans, Pascuans). Fortunately, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and since World War II, in particular, the population increased again, with birth rates among the highest in the world, this being the first classical step towards “demographical transition”.

The demographic crisis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century started well before the colonial divide of Oceania, which was rather late <sup>1</sup>, since it happened between 1840 (when Great Britain annexed New Zealand) and 1906 (the setting-up of the peculiar Franco-Anglo condominium in the New Hebrides). The English, French, Americans and Germans divided the islands among themselves under political and sometimes religious rivalries <sup>2</sup>, which sometimes led to crises, such as the Pritchard affair in Tahiti and the crises in Samoa. The war in 1914 led to the withdrawal of Germany, paving the way for Australia, New Zealand and Japan. In several archipelagos, from Tonga and Samoa to Solomon and the New Hebrides, this colonial rule barely changed the importance of traditional subsistence farming in spite of the addition of a small commercial plantations sector. In any case, it did not lead to any major changes to the population, which remained “indigenous” by an overwhelming majority with limited contributions from various expatriates (Western, Chinese etc.). On the other hand, in certain island groups, there were great changes to the population and therefore to society due to an intense immigration of labour force imposed by the development of a “modern” economy in a colonial style, based on large plantations (sugar cane, for example) or mining resources. In the Fiji Islands, British planters had successfully sought the annexation of the archipelago to Great Britain (1874) and gained entry to the main labour market of the Indian Empire. The arrival of several tens of thousands of Indian coolies and their rapid adaptation, due to the fertility rate of their women – despite being a small minority – thus created a community that juxtaposed itself, without in anyway mixing with the Melanesians, and which caught up with them in size to the point of even outnumbering them in the decades following World War II. British colonisers, for fear of seeing the indigenous population decline, as a result of the dynamism of the new arrivals, set up political and, in particular, land ownership safeguards. For example, a voting system per Electoral College

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1. With the exception of a few Micronesian islands that were colonised by the Spanish, on the Manila galleon route, from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Guam).

2. With competition between Catholics supported by France and Protestants by the Anglo-Saxons.

guaranteeing the majority to Melanesians was established and the Indians were not allowed to acquire land.

The case of the Hawaiian Islands is even more illustrative of the changes brought about by immigration. The archipelago, having become a major producer of sugarcane based on the Reciprocity Treaty (free trade) with the United States in 1876, then of tinned pineapple after its annexation to the United States in 1898, had to bring in an enormous labour force for the development of its plantations. Some 400,000 immigrants from a number of regions flocked to the Hawaiian Islands between 1860 and 1993. In order of size, there were the Japanese, Filipinos, Chinese, Portuguese, Koreans, Spaniards, Puerto Ricans, and even the Germans and Norwegians! The immigrants engulfed the indigenous population that consisted of only 38,000 individuals, following a terrible decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including many mixed-races in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the third case, that of New Caledonia, where, after annexation in 1853, France set out to create a colony with the untactful superimposition of a penal colonisation (penal colony from 1864 to 1897), and free colonisation (“Feillet colonists”, for example), while the indigenous Melanesians were confined to what was left. At the same time, the development of nickel mines made it necessary to import Japanese, Javanese and Tongking labour, and at the time of the nickel boom in the early 1970s, Tahitian and Wallisian labour, in particular. These three cases also led to the creation of multi-ethnic societies juxtaposing locals and immigrants, which contrasted to the “mono-ethnic” societies of most of the islands. This term, for example, did not take the dispersal of the ethnolinguistic Melanesian populations into account.

This varied and spread out group of islands was shaken up by World War II both directly by the battles that took place (from Pearl Harbour to Guadalcanal including Midway, Tarawa and many others), and indirectly, through setting up rear American bases (Bora Bora, Pago Pago, Wallis, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia). The small islands then grew in geostrategic (“unsinkable aircraft carrier”) and geopolitical importance that was maintained in later decades; the Cold War, made an issue of it and enabled these islands to practice the subtle game of bidding to guarantee what these young states were in need of. These Pacific Islands were also caught up in the decolonisation process in a peaceful and slow manner. The first archipelago to gain independence was Western Samoa in 1962, followed by the tiny island of Nauru in 1968 (21 km<sup>2</sup>, with 7,500 inhabitants at the time), whose viability seemed to be ensured by its very rich phosphate deposit. It was then the turn of Fiji and Tonga (1970), Papua New Guinea (1975), Solomon (1978), the former colony of Gilbert and Ellice, divided into Kiribati and Tuvalu (1978-1979), and finally

Vanuatu (1980), the only island where the divide between English and French-speaking communities and Protestants and Catholics caused serious trouble. In the 1980s, the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federal States of Micronesia were included in this group of islands. They gained an independence association with the United States. Other archipelagos, however, followed a different path. The Hawaiian Islands, which have been part of the United States since 1898, spoke out in 1959 in favour of becoming the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the United States. In 1965, the integration of West New Guinea as the Irian province of Indonesia clearly illustrates another logic. Like Eastern Samoa, Guam became home to widely autonomous territories, similar to the three French overseas territories: French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna. The first two, French Polynesia and New Caledonia, have experienced a major change in status, which have transformed them into increasingly independent overseas countries, until, in the case of New Caledonia, a referendum scheduled between 2010 to 2015 based on an electorate similar to that of 1998. The growing increase of states and territories gave rise to institutions that could bring them together, such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) based in Noumea, and more against “colonialist” France, the Pacific Islands Forum in Suva and the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

Having provided a brief background, we can now address the fundamental question that the title raises: what is the place of these small islands in a Pacific Ocean towards which, as one would say, the centre of the world has moved? Have they really taken advantage of this impressive economic expansion of the riparian countries, of the overwhelming progress in trade and the flow of people and goods? With these islands being small in size, the weakness of their resources keeps them away. With the exception of Papua New Guinea, none of these islands are a member of the APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Corporation, created in 1989). Apart from their potential touristic attraction and a few plantations and mines (Bougainville, New Guinea), these small states have little to offer – only the vastness of their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which had issued a new law of the sea (1982) and fishing rights that they could sell. It should not be forgotten that a microstate such as Kiribati (690 km<sup>2</sup>) has an EEZ representing 5,145 times its land surface! Moreover, they have lost their importance as a relay or stopover on sea and especially air routes. The Pacific is now crossed in one go. Honolulu is ranked among the 20 largest American airports; the Hawaiian Islands themselves generate remarkable tourism. The strategic role of the islands has not disappeared, and Pearl Harbour in Honolulu, and Guam, continue to be enormous naval airbases today, similar to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, the keystone of the

American military system. There is a focus, however, on a small number of points and, at a time when intercontinental missiles are prevalent, the increase of military sub-bases is losing its relevance. The difficulty for small Oceanian states to make their mark in the process of globalisation does not only stem from their economic weakness. It is also the serious questioning of their capacity to convey a credible image. In the early days of independence, people lived slightly on the illusion of a specific Oceanian approach to conflict; the infamous “Pacific Way”, based on a solution through discussion and unanimity. However, two facts have violently put this into perspective. Firstly, in 1984, when there was the Bougainville separatist uprising against the central government of Papua New Guinea at Port Moresby. It is the old “African” question of intangibility of former colonial borders that appeared here in the Pacific, and caused a civil war marked by harsh outflanking tactics of the Papuan peacekeeping forces. The current truce and the long-term prospects for a referendum on the future of the island have calmed the game down for the time being. In 1987, the changes in the situation of the Fiji Islands were dramatised all of a sudden – all the more serious perhaps due to the consequences in terms of the image of the small Pacific Island states. The young state (1974) had exerted political, military (police and army made up of Melanesians) and Melanesian land control of lands belonging to the Indians, including access to land even though it belonged to those who cultivated it. This “balance” was challenged by alliances among Indians and Melanesian dissidents in the April elections in 1987. The retaliation was brutal; the new “pro-Indian” Prime Minister, Timoci Bavarda, was toppled from his position by Lieutenant Colonel Rabuka to salvage the Melanesians’ privileges, risking breaking away from the international and Commonwealth authorities. Since then, the Fijian policy wavers between phases of appeasement and new *coups d’état*, the last being in December 2006 led by General Bainimarama. The military upsurges to safeguard a system, which some compared to as a form of apartheid, created a considerable impact in the entire Pacific and even resulted in a part of the Indian elite in the archipelago emigrating, resorting a majority (in terms of numbers) for the Melanesians.

Unfortunately, the structural weakness and the vulnerability of the states are only obvious in these two cases. In the Solomon Islands, the capital, Honiara, which was created in 1945 on the site of an American military camp, had been inhabited by a large number of immigrants from the neighbouring island of Malaita, to the anger and frustration of the Guadalcanal residents. They formed a militia, the Isaba Freedom Movement, which succeeded in driving away some 25,000 Malaitans in May 2000. In June, the Malaitans arrived in force with a “Malaita Eagle

Force” to regain power. The situation got so out of hand that the government had to appeal to an Australian peacekeeping force in 2003, while Goldridge’s oil palm and coconut plantations and gold mine were closing. This did not mean that order would be restored, for the 2006 elections, marked by the confrontation between parties, some supported by Taiwan, others by Beijing, led to an anti-Chinese massacre and the destruction of Chinatown in Honiara: a sad way of being integrated into the international community through escalating corruption in the battle over the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.

This inherited weakness of the Oceanian Island states is found through the two wounds that seriously impede their functioning: corruption and insecurity. The first is widespread, from Vanuatu and Samoa to Tonga and Papua New Guinea, and is partly based on political and ethnic or tribal vote-winning strategies, especially in the very tightly knit Melanesian world. The second has assumed a daunting presence in Papua New Guinea, both in rural areas and cities. Port-Moresby, invaded by migrants coming from inland areas, is also considered to be the most dangerous city in the world, with several tens of thousands of young “rascals” forming extremely violent gangs, that even the police sent by Australia, barely managed to control.

For a long time, it was considered that these Oceanian states benefited from being small, receiving particularly significant international aid per inhabitant, with emigrants providing a large income to the country of origin; a plethoric bureaucracy, the most important thing making up this “MIRAB” economy (Migration, Remittances, Aids and Bureaucracy) on which their development was based. This is running out of steam, however, and the search for new ways to encourage growth is proving to be difficult, and even dangerous. The temptation was attractive for some of them, and especially the smaller ones, to use their status as independent states, recognised by the international authorities (where, because of their number, their voice counts). Like in the Kingdom of Tonga, this improved status hardly had any effect on the selling of Tongan passports to Hong Kong businessmen who were worried about being sent back by China, the marketing of the initials “.tv” of the Tuvalu microstates, or the hosting of phone sex websites in Vanuatu. More serious effects include financial cover-ups and international crime, which have introduced certain states to globalisation through its shabbiest doors. For example, at the beginning of the 2000s, it was somewhat surprising to find the Marshall Islands ranked 12<sup>th</sup> place in the world’s merchant fleet, with 16 million tons of dead weight, ahead of the United States (11.4 million tons) and France (6.8 million tons)! Worse still, apart from this flag of convenience, there are some who participate directly in financial evasions and in suspicious or

dirty money circles. Many small Oceanian States were repeatedly denounced, even placed on the black list of organisations, such as the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, fighting against fraud and money laundering from all kinds of traffic. Vanuatu, Palau, Cook Islands, even Tonga or Western Samoa appear or disappear from the lists at the mercy of measures taken to win over international authorities, whose approval conditions the aid, which they receive. The most remarkable case is that of Nauru, which, after having embezzled enormous amounts of money from its now depleted phosphate deposits, became involved in the “recycling” of Russian Mafia money. The Central Bank of Russia advanced the figure of 80 billion dollars in 1999, having passed through about 400 banks that were “listed” in Nauru. Since then, the island has had to take the necessary measures to be reconciled with Australia, which provides almost everything it requires for living, and for this reason, it welcomes, for example, hundreds of illegal Iraqi and Afghans in a transit camp, coming from the island’s major sponsor.

Thus, the small island worlds of the Pacific, long considered as peaceful little tropical heavens, are today undergoing a sort of purgatory that seems to extend into the field of research, especially in the human and social science. They are inspired by the great perspectives of Asian development, which somewhat neglects these sometimes immobile and conflictual remote lands. Nevertheless, these islands deserve attention, owing to the wealth and diversity of situations that make them genuine topics of study.