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Acknowledging 'Oceanic diplomacy'

A new perspective

GEORGE CARTER, GREG FRY, GORDON LEUA NANAU

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ARTS, CULTURE & SOCIETY | THE PACIFIC

16 SEPTEMBER 2021

The historical existence and contemporary significance of traditional Oceanic diplomatic principles and practices have been underexplored and undervalued, George Carter, Greg Fry, and Gordon Nanau write.

When practitioners and scholars think of diplomacy in the Pacific context they usually have in mind the diplomacy of the post-independent Pacific Island states or the diplomacy of larger powers with interests in the region. Both of these understandings refer to a form of diplomacy built on Western practices and protocols and focused on engagement between modern sovereign states.

However, just as important is a third understanding of diplomacy in the Pacific region, focused on the distinctive diplomatic practices and principles which come out of the long history and diverse cultures of the Pacific Islands.

These longstanding traditional Oceanic systems are still important in the conduct of relations among tribes and clans within the postcolonial states of the Pacific. These principles, practices, and protocols work alongside Western diplomatic practices in the performance of modern diplomacy by Pacific Island states and are sometimes employed in the region's diplomatic approaches to the global arena.

The focus of diplomatic studies on engagement between states takes the academic gaze away from the acknowledgement of diplomatic relations between pre-colonial forms of political community such as tribes and clans.

This state-centric bias of conventional diplomatic studies clouds the ability to 'see' the continued operation of these diplomatic systems – or adaptations of them – in the postcolonial era, both within states and across state boundaries. It misses the key point that while westernisation has added new layers of political community and diplomatic practice, it has not eliminated, or even marginalised, traditional diplomatic systems and their protocols of engagement.

It is important, therefore, to appreciate the value and significance of these practices in modern contexts within the state, between Pacific Island states, and in Pacific diplomacy in the global arena.

One of the leading scholars in this 'postcolonial turn' in diplomatic studies, Marshall Beier, [argues](#): 'What many may be accustomed to thinking of as "diplomacy" [Western diplomacy] is actually a very narrow slice of human possibility in the interaction between political communities.'

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China's military engagement with Pacific Island countries

through kinship or shared cosmology.

In modern times, there have been numerous examples of Oceanic diplomacy delivering positive outcomes for peacebuilding in the region. This can be seen in the [effective use](#) of Māori and Melanesian diplomacy at the Bougainville peace talks at Burnham, as well as in the [successful reconciliation](#) in New Caledonia between Jean-Marie Tjibaou's tribe and the Ouvea and Mare [clans](#) of his assassins.

This year another notable example of indigenous diplomacy was seen with the Aotearoa/New Zealand Government's use of the Samoan [ifoga](#) in seeking the forgiveness of the country's Pacific Islander communities for historical injustices.

Oceanic diplomacy has also played a core role in contemporary Pacific Island regional relations, such as in the Solomon Islands-mediated [reconciliation](#) between Vanuatu and Fiji in the Melanesian Spearhead Group in 2010.

An acknowledgement of Oceanic diplomacy allows us to broaden our understanding of Pacific diplomacy to include the relationships between sub-national political and cultural communities, not just between sovereign states.

Seen in this way, Oceanic diplomacy is a culture of engagement, a set of cultural rules, and norms that shape interactions between political communities. As we explore forms of this diplomacy, we should not look for the equivalents to, or early forms of, Western diplomacy – such as ambassadors, treaties or diplomatic immunity. Rather, we should look at the alternative ways in which Oceanic societies have resolved the governance of relations between political communities, and how these practices remain relevant and important – even central – to how relations are managed in the postcolonial era, both inside and between states.

This article is based upon a paper published by ANU Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) as part of its 'In brief' series. The original paper can be found [here](#).

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