

Book Review

Island Ministers: Indigenous Leadership in Nineteenth Century Pacific Island Christianity, by Raeburn Lange. Pandanus Books: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (ANU), 2006. 436pp., maps, endnotes, index, ISBN 1-74076-176-6, \$AUD 31.78

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Historians are quite familiar with the story of the Christianity in the Pacific that begins with the Spaniards in the Mariana Islands in 1521 to the unparalleled work of Islander missionaries in the 19th century, but what this book shows is how large and how important certain aspects of that story are. That ignoring certain aspects of that Christian story would mean ignoring important clues to understanding why the Islands and the Islanders are what they are today. Christian indigenous leadership in the islands in the 19th century is one aspect of that great story of Christianity that cannot and should not be ignored.

The book covers all of the Island nations of the Pacific including Hawaii and New Zealand, beginning in Tahiti with Auna, the first Islander holder of ministerial office in the Church. From Tahiti to New Guinea, in a somewhat chronological fashion, Lange paints a magnificent panoramic picture of 'Island ministers', both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The only disappointment of this survey, though, is that the Micronesian Islands remain insignificant in the study. Unlike the treatment of the Christian ministry in Melanesia and Polynesia, where adaptation and transference of roles and offices of the traditional religious leader to the Christian minister are fully discussed, in Micronesia it is merely

outlined and assumed. But Lange can be excused in his fleeting treatment of the Christian ministry in these small islands, for religion in these islands were still very much secrete family cults compared to the religions of the bigger islands of Melanesia and Polynesia which were quite public as district or Island religions.

Throughout the book, a common theme is unmistakable, narrated through the lives and activities of the Christian communities that came into being – Pacific cultures had been affected by Christianity, but so were the churches and ministries that come forth from those Island communities – they, too, had been shaped considerably by the social and cultural environment. But these churches, and especially the ministry that emerged, were not just composites or mergers of leadership in the traditional religions with those in Christianity, nor were they complete replacements of those found in the pre-Christian culture. The ministry that emerged was a 'synthesis of two traditions', the local and the one found in Christianity – a synthesis that was not only meaningful to Islanders but gave them a purpose as well in their own context. And though European missionaries contributed in some way to the new synthesis, it was really the Islanders themselves who began 'the process of translating the new concepts of ministry into Oceanic terms'.

Informed by an excellent choice of materials though I would have liked to see longer quotes on the point of view of Islanders regarding their work in their own words, the book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the contribution of Christianity to the entry of Islanders into the modern world. *Island Ministers* certainly change the way we look at the Pacific from now on; and it does dispel myths about Islanders as passive recipients of forces from outside, whose world is 'created by Europeans' and owned by same.

For policy makers and developers, for anyone seeking meaningful solutions to current problems in the Islands, they cannot afford not to read *Island Ministers*, for the Pacific Islands of today is one very much shaped by the work of 'Island Ministers' in the 19th century. The book provides the best background to understanding the make-up of Islanders, the basis for their actions or reactions; it sheds light on the socio-economic and political realities found today in the Islands.



Island Churches should be very grateful for this work of Raeburn Lange. And though many would complain that the book did not include theological and biblical assessments of the ministries that emerged, whether their form and focus were agreeable to the word of God, for instance, it does provide a scholarly approach and prototype for similar studies on other aspects of Christian history in the Pacific. At least most, if not all, of these ministries were agreeable to the understanding of the church traditions from which the missionaries came.

The last chapter of the book is a very helpful summary and conclusion to the study, a good place to start reading, especially for students who are easily put off by the size of their reading material, as well as for those people unfamiliar with the outline of Christian history in the Pacific.

Lange has handled a difficult and at times controversial subject with skill. His conclusion, indeed, raises many questions on significant contemporary studies on the Church and Christianity in the Pacific, and will continue to be discussed in years to come. For instance, if Island ministers in the 19th century had been successful in transforming the worldview of their fellow Islanders, resulting in Christianity becoming an inseparable component of Island cultures, why then do some studies conclude that 'Christianity is only skin-deep' in the Islands? On the terms of ethnic identity, how does one reconcile conclusions of studies that continue to claim that there was no emerging common Fijian consciousness until after the annexation of Fiji, when a Fijian Christian ministry had already established itself long before 1874?

Indeed local church congregations will continue to be the main sphere in which the Christian ministry will operate, but with Christianity being the dominant religion of indigenous Islanders in the Pacific, the impact of the Christian ministry that began with Island Ministers in the 19th century cannot be underestimated.