

THE MIRAB PROCESS: EARLIER ANALYSES IN CONTEXT

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IN the last issue of *Pacific Viewpoint* (Vol. 26, No. 3) we presented the outline of a model of the MIRAB economy, which we believe can usefully be applied to the South Pacific to assist in explaining how some of the microstates of the region function and how the transition from the former colonial export economies occurred.¹ The model as a whole and its elements (Mi — migration, R — remittances, A — aid financed, B — bureaucracy) directs attention to a relatively new and largely exogenous set of factors, which do not merely supplement on-shore commodity production in the Islands but which have increasingly and decisively dominated the respective island economies and largely determined their evolution.

Although full recognition of what we describe as the MIRAB society, and the MIRAB effect on productive activity, has come only recently among observers and scholars, there are numerous references in the Pacific literature to the changing economic behaviour of Islanders and the breakdown of the colonial export economy. In this paper we briefly review some previous discussions of this transition. As in the earlier paper we refer primarily to the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Kiribati and Tuvalu, but also briefly consider Western Samoa.

As Figure 1 in the earlier paper showed² the transition from the former colonial export economies to the new MIRAB order occurred mainly in the period since 1950, and the fully-evolved system has been in existence for only a decade and a half even in Niue (the first of our case studies to reach a MIRAB steady state).

Models of Social Change

Of immediate interest is the theory of social change propounded by Firth on the basis of his Tikopia studies.³ Firth's approach is based on his view of societies as self-regulating systems, and he gives relatively little attention to issues of power and conflict. Social change in his view arises largely in response to changes in external circumstances, leading to "organisational change" within the local society. Such change

¹ Bertram and Watters (1985).

² Bertram and Watters (1985):509.

³ See especially Firth (1959).

can only proceed a certain distance before it reaches a point where it has structural effects — the original structure (e.g. of an institution) cannot be maintained, and structural change then occurs with the changing of established social roles and the emergence of new roles. This involves an alteration of the principles on which the society operates.

Firth's view is valuable because it provides a dynamic view of society, recognises the importance of external forces, and traces the ramifying influences of choice following a change in the pattern of expectations and the expansion of society's subjectively-perceived wants. He is aware also of the limited flexibility of such societies and the risk that their integration into wider systems may result in breakdown. But change is not forced from without; rather it involves choices among options by social actors within the small society.

A 1965 study by Finney traced such adjustment by comparing an outer-island of "peasant" copra producers in the Society Islands and a peri-urban "proletarian" community on Tahiti. Finney showed that rural decline was well underway and that there was a distinct preference for wage labour. "Fast money" in the town was more appealing than "slow money" earned from productive activity in the "countryside", since the former gave an immediate, regular and sustained return. Finney's analysis clearly captures a "MIRAB" transition occurring in French Polynesia: as military spending consequent upon French nuclear testing mounted, the old colonial economy ceased to exist, and society responded to new rent-type infusions of income coupled with the rise of tourism.

In research on rural social change in Eastern Fiji, Brookfield recognised the consequences of the incorporation of formerly autarkic systems into larger, world-wide systems. Brookfield criticised approaches to agrarian change (or lack of it) which tried to understand the agricultural sector in isolation from the wider context, on the assumption that farmers respond only to agricultural or rural incentives. Such analysis, Brookfield suggested, involved

asking why farmers do not, or cannot, respond to incentive or do not have incentive, but we are doing so in a context of thinking that assumes that they are only and inevitably farmers, and can be nothing else.⁴

In fact, Fijian farmers had at least two alternatives: to find wage employment locally, and to search for work and opportunity in Suva. Brookfield saw substantial outmigration from the "low productivity rural slums" to the more "developed" parts of Melanesia as a logical response to those external incentives.

⁴ Brookfield (1977):125.

Similar results were found independently at about the same time by Wellington geographers and anthropologists working in the 1972 Rural Socio-Economic Survey of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands.⁵ Villagers proved remarkably responsive to non-agricultural, non-rural incentives and often depended on three, four or five sources of income. In general their economic behaviour was highly situation-bound, and they showed a keen awareness of the new opportunities that were becoming available for the first time. In the 1960s the public service on Tarawa had been small and job opportunities accordingly few, but with the rapid expansion of British aid the bureaucracy expanded greatly in the 1970s so that a large proportion of families on the outer islands could formulate a strategy to secure government employment for a least one family member.

A significant step forward in understanding the contemporary Pacific and the MIRAB society was Marcus' 1981 paper on "Power in the Extreme Periphery". Although Marcus' argument is essentially based on elite strategies, he adopts a Wallerstein world-systems perspective that discounts the significance of nation-states as analytical units in peripheral areas, and concentrates instead on social classes and their geographical distribution. Tongans have for some time appreciated the offshore opportunities that exist for employment or business operations in New Zealand, Hawaii, California and Salt Lake City (the Mormon Church connection), as well as onshore wage work in the local bureaucracy and the church. Emulating their King Tupou IV, the commoner and elite families have become truly multinational in their scope, achieving success in "the mixing and playing of options internationally".⁶

The view of an evolving Tonga that Marcus presents is clearly very different from the classic colonial export economy based on onshore resource development. In particular, the widespread multinational diaspora of members of interacting Tongan kindreds makes nonsense of the traditional European concept of a unitary nation-state which was so influential during the era of decolonisation.

Recently Loomis has explored the evidence of declining homogeneity between Cook Islanders in New Zealand and those in the Islands (as well as the divisions evident within the New Zealand-resident community between those born in the Islands and those born in New Zealand).⁷ He sees Pacific Islander migration, remittances and return migration in the light of wider developments in the regional political

⁵ Watters and Banibati (1984), Lawrence (1984), Geddes et al (1982).

⁶ Marcus (1981):62.

⁷ Loomis (1984a, 1984b).

economy. Loomis follows Marcus in viewing the kindred or *kopu tangata* as a "family estate" and deals not merely with remittances between the mainland and islands but with a wide array of two-way exchanges which can be conceived of more generally as "investments". His current research on the Cook Islander community in New Zealand is exploring the issues of why *kopu tangata* maintain the flow of "investments" back to the Islands, the extent and durability of the kin corporations, and the dynamics of rank and decision-making in resource allocation.

Western Samoa

Although Western Samoa was not included in our data survey above, it bulks large in social science work in the Pacific, and has been affected by the emergence of MIRAB features since at least the 1950s (the last decade of New Zealand colonial rule). As early as 1954, V. D. Stace noted the falling productivity of labour in export production.⁸ His index of export volume per capita on base 1910-14 = 100 peaked at 120 in the period 1925-29, had fallen to 110 by 1945-49, and was back to 100 again by 1950-53. This underlying trend in production was masked by unusually high prices for export commodities in the early 1950s, and up until independence in 1962 the colonial administration, and most observers, continued to regard the country as a whole, including the export economy, as being in a sound condition.⁹ In retrospect, however, it is clear that the 1950s brought to Western Samoa the same sharp increase in migration to New Zealand, together with the same increased inflow of government budgetary support, expansion of government employment, and diversion of resources from local export production, that we have already encountered above for other New Zealand territories.¹⁰

In the 1960s two major studies of the Samoan village economy by Pitt and by Lockwood virtually ignored the external dimension and the new structure of incentives,¹¹ but subsequent work by Shankman gave full weight to migration, remittances and other external factors in explaining the trends in the village economy.¹² In particular, dramatic declines both in the land area under crops, and in average agricultural productivity, were documented in the 1970s.¹³ The trend in this direction had begun at least eight years before the end of New Zealand colonial rule.

⁸ Stace (1954):20.

⁹ For example see Corner (1962):142.

¹⁰ See Shankman (1976):Table 3.

¹¹ Pitt (1970), Lockwood (1970).

¹² Shankman (1976). See also Lewthwaite et al (1973) on Samoan migration to California.

¹³ Shankman (1976), Pirie (1976) and Ward and Proctor (1980).

The Cook Islands

In the Cook Islands, a local observer of the expanding welfarist bureaucracy remarked as early as 1947 that

The parent country, in her eagerness to do her best for this dependency, has sapped the native's initiative by 'spoon-feeding' methods. Kavamani, the Government, is now the thing to look to for any utilities and improvements.¹⁴

Similar points were made eight years later in the Belshaw-Stace Report.¹⁵ Their report expressed worry at the risk that the obvious financial benefits of a closer relationship with New Zealand would sap the self-reliance of the local people; they therefore argued for a determined *political* stance of decolonisation coupled with encouragement for local moves towards economic self-reliance, which they took as synonymous with onshore production of tradeable commodities — particularly agricultural products. Both Belshaw-Stace and Aikman¹⁶ recognised that self-reliant affluence was probably unattainable in the Cook Islands situation, so that New Zealand aid would continue to play a role; but both reports took it for granted that productive self-reliance should nevertheless be the guiding principle for economic policy, and both hoped that ultimately the level of dependence on aid to maintain local government services might be reduced or even possibly eliminated. Both recognised explicitly that so long as aid dependence remained a central plank of the economy, full sovereign political independence would be unattainable in fact even if formal moves in that direction were made.

At about the same time Cumberland was writing of the Cook Islanders' "neglect of their gardens" as people increasingly took up wage employment in the government, on the wharves, in the new knit-wear and slipper factories established to serve the New Zealand market, and overseas.¹⁷ Cumberland noted that over 2,000 Cook Islanders had taken passage to Auckland, that the export trade had diminished, and that with the neglect of food crops diet, health and housing had suffered.

In 1962 R. G. Crocombe documented what he called the "economic regression" of the Cook Islands.¹⁸ In calculations reminiscent of those of Stace in Western Samoa, Crocombe estimated that in the late 1950s the volume of export production of copra was 22 percent lower than in 1924-28, citrus was down 55 percent, and bananas 10 percent. Cro-

¹⁴ Davis (1947):213.

¹⁵ Belshaw and Stace (1955).

¹⁶ Aikman (1956).

¹⁷ Cumberland (1954):260.

¹⁸ Crocombe (1962).

combe attributed these long-run trends to paternalist colonial policies, which he felt had failed to promote economic development. He criticised the creation by New Zealand of a "disproportionately large administrative superstructure", which had not contributed to increasing output. He suggested also that the system of land tenure had inhibited productivity growth, and that since World War II there had taken place a marked change in Islanders' aspirations and values so that they now aspired to mainland consumption levels and social services. If transport were available at lower cost, Crocombe felt, "there is little doubt that the majority of islanders would shift to New Zealand".

With two decades of hindsight, it is evident that Crocombe correctly identified many of the emerging characteristics of the new order, and pointed to several contributory factors in agricultural stagnation, but that his analysis was cast within a set of assumptions which diverted attention from the MIRAB effect. By treating the Cook Islands as though they were (or should be) an autonomous economic unit, rather than an increasingly integrated annex to the New Zealand mainland economy, Crocombe was naturally led to emphasise the negative side of the MIRAB process (especially the decline of local productive activity), and hence to present as "economic regression" a process which was in fact more of a restructuring of the village economy as households diversified their activities in order to benefit from aid and remittances.

A similar focus on local productive activity, but with more tendency to downplay the roles of migration and the government sector, is evident in the economic analyses by Kolff.¹⁹ At about the same time, however, Johnston's study of village agriculture on Aitutaki was dealing more directly with these elements.²⁰

Johnston drew attention to the cumulative effect on agriculture of irregular shipping, insecure markets and consequent high wastage, all of which meant that cash cropping was perceived to be a high-risk, insecure activity. In addition, income from agricultural sources was low compared to that which could be gained from wage employment and the latter was greatly preferred.

Government policy gave precedence to social development and infrastructure (health, education, roads and the like) over agricultural development except in citrus growing, where the Administration had intervened to promote export production. As a result, citrus growing had become "an enclave of administration commercialisation", resulting

¹⁹ Kolff (1965a, 1965b).

²⁰ Johnston (1967).

in a dual agricultural economy.²¹ Growers had little participation in citrus growing because of the scale of input by the government sector; and the main success stories in citrus were Administration employees or commercial entrepreneurs moving in to take advantage of the government-subsidised programme.

Johnston correctly emphasised that village agricultural producers operated in a wider framework which was "none of their making".²² He viewed the problem of agricultural development in terms of a Myrdalian backwash situation created by the existence of the modern New Zealand metropolis. Social and economic opportunities within New Zealand were attracting youth and initiative away from the village in a tide of migration:

In drawing the objectives of many villagers away from the actual difficulties of internal development, preoccupation with New Zealand hindered the growth of village cohesion and a concern for community development.²³

Moreover, the provision of the New Zealand subsidy to government services had resulted in the erection of a structure of social amenities on a scale quite divorced from local productive capacity, so that a dependent society was created on the one hand, and a paternalistic Administration on the other. Johnston contrasted this with the situation in UK colonies where the level of social services was more closely tied to locally generated revenue — a contrast which, as already noted, was more apparent than real in the case of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony.

In keeping with the Myrdal model, Johnston focussed upon the prospect of a widening gap between the disadvantaged Cook Islands "periphery" on the one hand, and the mainland "core" of the New Zealand economy on the other. The only alternative to growing disparity between the two seemed to Johnston to be a situation in which "the islands became an integral part of this larger, richer economy and able to share in its growth".²⁴

The irony of Johnston's position is that, having thus conceded in passing the possible benefits flowing from increased economic integration with New Zealand, he did not question the logic of the 1965 move to self-government as the culmination of a process of decolonisation. In common with Kolff at the same time,²⁵ Johnston tended to see

²¹ Johnston (1967):110.

²² Johnston (1967):111.

²³ Johnston (1967):110.

²⁴ Johnston (1967):111.

²⁵ Kolff (1965b):124.

autonomous economic development as a desirable underpinning for a self-governing constitution, and thus to argue for an attempt to turn back the clock on the MIRAB process, rather than to analyse that process and attempt to come to terms with it. Like Crocombe, Johnston was strongly influenced by the prevailing mood of anti-colonialism in the 1960s, and tended to suppose that the blame for agricultural regression and the general stagnation of village production could be laid at the door of New Zealand paternalism and neglect. Because too much emphasis was thus placed on Administration attitudes and policy, and too little on market forces and macro-economic trends, neither Crocombe nor Johnston achieved a satisfactory explanation for the developmental "crisis" which they believed they had uncovered.

Referring back to Figure 1 in our original work and to the data from which it was drawn,²⁶ we find that in real terms the New Zealand budgetary grant to the Cook Islands more than doubled in 1951-55 compared to 1946-50. In response to this rising inflow of aid, many new public service jobs were created: non-private employment increased from 430 (a considerable number of whom would have been expatriates rather than Cook Islanders) in 1951 to 638 in 1956, 813 in 1961 and 1,464 in 1966.²⁷ The result was access to secure, regular incomes from paid employment for several hundred Cook Islands households; this in turn translated into the steep rise in consumption reflected in Figure 1, at a time of falling copra output and prices.²⁸

To this increase in government employment must be added the rise of the migration/remittance sector. Between 1942 and 1955 some 2,906 Cook Islanders were recruited by a French company to work the guano deposits of Makatea in the Society Islands. With a minimum yearly wage of about \$592 (a small fortune by Cook Islands standards) and a requirement that married men must remit at least two-thirds of their wages to their families, the Makatea scheme laid the foundations for the remittance economy in the Cook Islands.²⁹ Twenty percent or more of the male population aged 18-30 worked on Makatea at some stage, and many of these men migrated to New Zealand in the late 1950s. Curson suggests that the Makatea experience was a "dislodging" factor, initiating a process of step-wise migration and in the process "proletarianising" an important segment of the Cook Islands labour force.³⁰

The effects of the trends in aid and remittances sketched above have

²⁶ Bertram and Watters (1984): Tables 6-15, 6-18.

²⁷ Kelly (1985): Table 2.24.

²⁸ In 1952 and 1954-58 the copra price fell substantially below its long-run average — IMF *International Financial Statistics*, 1984 Yearbook.

²⁹ Hooper (1961): 12; Curson (1973): 16.

³⁰ Curson (1973): 17, 25.

been studied on the outer island of Atiu by Bollard. In 1930, wages formed only 16 percent of money incomes on the island, the balance being provided by cash cropping. By 1950 a dramatic reversal had occurred: remittances now provided 48 percent of all cash incomes, wages and salaries an additional 26 percent, and cash cropping only 26 percent.³¹ By 1974 wages and salaries (largely from government employment) had moved into the lead, with 65 percent; remittances were 32 percent, and cash cropping only 3 percent. The Atiu transition to a MIRAB structure was more dramatic than the average for the Cook Islands, but by no means atypical.

Urbanisation and Social Change

The externally-driven MIRAB process, moving the Islands from resources-based to rent-based economies and skewing the occupational structure towards bureaucracy and non-agricultural activities, has been mediated through the main town or island in each country: hence the transition to a MIRAB system was closely associated with urbanisation, involving the growth of what could be termed "colonial-bureaucratic towns". In all our cases the rise of overseas aid and the expansion of the bureaucracy was sudden and substantial, though occurring at different times (about 1950 in the Cook Islands; after 1970 in Kiribati). Since overseas aid generally has a heavy western and urban bias, and has to be mediated through the government structure, it was only to be expected that aid expenditure would benefit primarily the main island, and that outer islands would then seek to participate in the increased income flows by settling family members on the main island to seek jobs or run commercial operations, with the aim of channelling resources and opportunities back to their kin on the home island.

Lawrence has described this process in Kiribati as the growth of a "straddled economy".³² Rather than describing an outer island such as Tamana in isolation, he points to the need to take account simultaneously of developments in the government centre on Tarawa, and among the Tamana community on that island. The Tamana household operates in a wider environment, in which the old resources of land, coconut palms, *babai* pits and ocean are now supplemented and indeed partly replaced by the new rent-based employment and market opportunities of Tarawa. If the change is radical in an economic sense, it is equally revolutionary with respect to the perceptions and expectations of islanders. While important traditional concepts such as *tibanga* (their view of fate or luck) persist among Tamana people, and their desire to be *oinibai* (independent) is still essential in their lives, they see

³¹ Bollard (1979): 54-57.

³² Lawrence (1984, 1985).

themselves operating under a different system of fate in Tarawa and achieving independence in a new way by an alternative livelihood that did not exist a decade or so ago. Work such as that of Lawrence on expectations and perceptions is unfortunately rare in the literature.³³

The process of urbanisation in the South Pacific attracted a good deal of scholarly attention during the 1960s and 1970s, but most of the discussion was focussed on the process of population movement itself, with port towns or main islands (usually described as the "core") being seen to grow rapidly at the expense of the outer islands "periphery." Only a few studies went on to analyse the process of internal migration as a response to a wider process of social change³⁴ as the Islands became more closely integrated into the regional labour market,³⁵ especially with the New Zealand mainland economy.

Culturally, the rise of towns and migration was seen to be associated with the spread of individualism, the adaption of kinship principles to suit new situations, the growth of new institutions such as trade unions, political parties and voluntary associations. Incipient class formation was beginning, though it was usually not recognised locally. Villagers began to feel part of a larger society that they were "in" but not altogether "of".

Some scholars suggested that the urbanisation process involved social evolution of the Islander from "tribesman" through "peasant" to 'townsman'.³⁶ Such evolutionary schemas, however, are over-simple. The Pacific Islander living in Auckland is a townsman, but one who is not detribalised despite having left his home island. Linkages with the home kin group remain strong even though the migrant's commitment to the new lifestyle in the *papa'a* city is definite and unquestionable.

CONCLUSION

Over the last 30-40 years a transition has occurred from colonial export economies to MIRAB economies in a number of South Pacific microstates. While the nation state concept was emphasised in the process of decolonisation, recognition of social classes and their dis-

³³ See however Douglas (1965), Baddeley (1978) and Loomis 1984 a and b on Cook Islander perceptions.

³⁴ Cf Watters (1968) based on Kunkel (1961).

³⁵ Recently a major research project has been undertaken by John Connell who has produced country reports on migration, employment and development in the South Pacific on behalf of the South Pacific Commission. The research project which covers 24 countries has been sponsored by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). The reports are published by the South Pacific Commission, Noumea.

³⁶ Bassett (1969).

tribution internationally now appears to be a more realistic approach. Multinational kin networks have evolved through which resources have flowed and options have been mixed and played internationally. The choice of self-government as the constitutional model throughout the period of decolonisation required autonomous, self-reliant economic growth to underpin it, drawing attention away from the MIRAB process which involved closer integration of the islands' economies with that of the mainland. Negative aspects and economic regression have been emphasised in the literature, rather than recognising the MIRAB process which marked a restructuring of the village economy. Pacific Islander migration, remittances and aid flows were not always seen in the light of developments in the regional political economy. In the anti-colonial mood of the time, agricultural regression was blamed on paternalism and neglect by New Zealand and little attention paid to market forces and macro-economic trends. At the same time few observers noted the impact of a doubling of aid to the Cook Islands in the 1950s and a tripling in the size of its public service.

Many of the changes that have occurred in the South Pacific have been analysed as part of a process of urbanisation. The growth of "colonial bureaucratic towns" however reflect the workings of an externally driven MIRAB process that has turned the Islands from resources-based into rent-based economies and skewed the occupational structure toward bureaucracy and non-agricultural activities.

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