The 80s saw a revival of traditionalism in the Pacific. Western values came under attack from Right and Left alike. In the lead article of our Pacific feature, Rowan Callick argues that the new traditionalism is a dead end street. The Pacific has to find a political response to the inevitability of change.

The French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who arrived in Tahiti in the 18th century, wrote, “I felt as though I had been transported to the Garden of Eden. Everywhere we found hospitality, peace, innocent joy and every appearance of happiness. What a country! What a people!”

French Polynesia has already hosted its fifth nuclear test this year. And the island named after Bougainville himself continues to suffer from the nastiest violence witnessed in the South Pacific since 1945.

Is this indeed Paradise Lost—as the introduction to the recent stimulating Four Corners TV program on Bougainville claimed, using the first and ultimate South Pacific diché?

The very notion of the Noble Savage, which Jean-Jacques Rousseau had freshly stated (“Man in his natural state followed the impulses of an instinct which remained sure because it had not yet degenerated into reason. Men were meant to remain in this state, which was the true youth of the world”) was seen to be confirmed by what the early European explorers discerned in Polynesia. These islanders were Adams and Eves before the Fall. Original Sin had met its match! And revolutions followed. English Poet Laureate Henry James Pye wrote, “Amid the wild expanse of southern seas/Where the blest isles inhale the genial breeze/The happiest native in the fragrant grove/Woos the soft powers of Indolence and Love.”

Such seductive notions of ‘free love’ appeared confirmed by the later journeyings of European drop-outs such as the
artist Gauguin, and then by a whole tribe of anthropologists, Malinowski and Mead to the fore.

The extraordinarily powerful masks, carvings and other artefacts of South Pacific cultures also made a remarkable impact on the course of 20th century European art and design—celebrated in 1984 by a blockbuster exhibition at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art which juxtaposed such works with their echoes in those of Picasso, Brancusi, Modigliani, Klee, the German Expressionists, Moore, Matisse and the surrealists.

If these islands really did constitute a paradise, was the serpent always there, or did he only enter with—or indeed as—the European? Alan Moorehead, the Australian historian/journalist, wrote in The Fatal Impact, “It is the fragility of [Tahiti] through these years that strikes one. With the protection of its isolation gone and its whole way of life turned upside down, it was at the mercy of any intruder.” The rest, as they say, is history. And since then, since the fatal impact, well-intentioned Westerners have tended to treat the South Pacific apologetically, as if material development since offered, has been by way of compensation. Some would go further, and argue a restoration of traditional cultures and outright rejection of those sometimes tawdry aspects of modernity that have been on offer.

This is hardly a new debate. Boswell argued, before Australia was ‘discovered’, the case for preserving Tahitian culture. Sam Johnson replied, “When you tell men who live without houses how we pile brick upon brick, and rafter upon rafter, they would laugh heartily at our folly in building; but it does not follow that men are better without houses.”

In a book (Black Bonanza) exploring the extraordinary gold rush that has only recently petered out at Mount Kare in Papua New Guinea’s central highlands, the former publisher of Melbourne University Press, Peter Ryan, wrote,
"A brief description may seem to do less than justice to the marvellous ingenuity, patience and labour of the people in mastering a harsh environment. It is not meant to underrate their wonderful achievements.

"Sometimes, say on a calm day towards evening, one may sit quietly and contemplate the Highland scene: wild mountains of amazing blue, softened and domesticated by the regular patterns of the sweet potato gardens where the warm red earth glows with fertile promise; blue smoke smudges of cooking fires rising from picturesque houses clinging like swallows’ nests to cliff-tops; roar of white water from mountain streams. Heaven might look like this, and one wonders briefly why people so lucky as to live there would ever want to change their way of life.

"Alas, it is a romantic illusion. The Highlanders were at the mercy of natural disasters, of hunger, of real disease and almost equally real sorcery, of sudden and treacherous murder, and of a system of law whose final arbiter was the axe. They were proud and able people, but they were poor, and mere subsistence was a struggle."

'Paradise' is in the eye of the beholder. And the same isolation that protected the fragile societies of the South Pacific, also imprisoned them. Today, the tension persists between the traditional and the modern, though the absolutes are at either end of a continuum; there is no clan break. Sarcely an islander has not been preached to, or bought from a trade store, or been told to pay tax.

Indeed, it is arguable that the concept of a Pacific paradise is more important for the western outsider than for those who live within the region—especially for those Westerners seeking models that appear to fit (or that they can somehow massage, albeit caringly of course, to fit) some of their own ideals, those that appear unobtainable within their own pluralist, capitalist societies, like Australia.

For those who live their daily lives on an atoll or a highlands ridge, 'scenery' and, indeed, the flora and fauna which surround them hold no discrete aesthetic value beyond the use to which they can practically be put. A deep gorge deters enemies; a bird of paradise can be killed for its smudges of cooking fires rising from picturesque houses clinging like swallows' nests to cliff-tops; roar of white water from mountain streams. Heaven might look like this, and one wonders briefly why people so lucky as to live there would ever want to change their way of life.

This capitalism-without-tears is not, of course, a success. There can be no capitalism without tears. Thus—alongside the key roles of aid and therefore the bureaucracies, and also of remittances from islanders living abroad, in many islands economies—the region’s private sectors have remained both sluggish and dominated by foreigners. Few islanders entrepreneurs have emerged to emulate the dubious examples, say, of Australian luminaries such as Alan Bond who parted so much of his temporary fortune in the region, in the Cook Islands.

Wolfgang Kasper, professor of economics at the Australian Defence Forces Academy in Canberra, puts the case for change thus (in Aid and Development in the South Pacific):

"Recently liberated entrepreneurs in many developing countries are now rapidly creating productive jobs where bureaucracies and central plans previously failed. The South Pacific could also benefit from relying much more on individual or co-operative initiative and the market place...

"When the outsider raises such ideas, the answer is likely to be that this is against the 'Pacific Way'. The outsider will be told that those South Pacific people who have been fully exposed to individualistic societies, such as in Hawaii, Tahiti or Guam, have lost their identity.

"One hears pleas that the rat-race of the mass societies should not be imported into the South Pacific. And the belief is widespread that small, remote societies could not possibly compete in a modern, anonymous world. One also hears that individualism and rivalry have no place in small, intimate societies. The deeply religious people of the South Pacific also tend to invoke Christian reservations against the self-interested egotism of the market place. Instead, they advocate the fraternal community spirit of collective solutions.

"However, one soon realises that such objections invariably come from members of elites who have a personal, material stake in the status quo, including self-appointed Western experts who specialise exclusively in South Pacific affairs."

Kasper fails, though, to tot up the costs of rapid 'individualisation' of the region, among them the need to introduce a new welfare safety net, and to transform land ownership patterns to permit the use of land as collateral in capital raising. And he might have added that, in social as in economic organisation, there is no truly indigenous model that fits the region's growing and changing aspirations. Rather, as people seek more material choices, so they are seeking more involvement in decision making. And, of course, the faster the enhancement of education to facilitate participation in the modern economic sector, the greater the demands for such participation. Yet many island leaders, even those who played a prominent part in leading their nations out of colonialism, are fighting a rear-guard action to quarantine economic change lest it threaten their privileged positions in both traditional and modern sectors.
In Fiji, a constitution and a new electoral structure have been imposed through which President Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau and Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (and how significantly paradoxical that these ageing aristocrats maintain both traditional Fijian and imperial titles in a republic claiming to be the economically thrusting ‘little tiger’ of the South Pacific) expect to maintain or even tighten their hold over the country. At the same time, General Sitiveni Rabuka appears to be at last waking up to the way in which he has been manipulated to maintain the hierarchical status quo—whereas he, a commoner, had hoped, however misguidedly, to be an agent of change, establishing a new path for the ordinary Fijian. In fact, the coup and their aftermath had far more to do with the struggle for power, in class and regional bases, within the Fijian community than with racial antipathy to the Indians. Rabuka and the Fiji Labour Party remain unlikely bedfellows. But stronger configurations have been seen in the South Pacific. He has been unusually supportive this year of strikes by miners and farmers, and earlier by nurses.

Indeed, unions are re-emerging in the region after a largely passive period in the 80s, as major forces for change. Yet all their leaders’ mental agility will be required to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the old established islands political leaders who, to the applause of the World Bank and other international institutions, donors and investors, are attempting to infiltrate a Thatcherist economic strategy while wrapping around themselves the smug flag of the ‘Pacific Way’, and denouncing critics or opponents, including unionists and journalists, as foreign dupes.

It is instructive that, in several countries, including Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, smart modern buildings were constructed for central banks before parliaments (which are only now being built in the latter three countries). At the same time, warnings should be posted about accepting at face value the rhetoric of many of those islands leaders who would denounce ‘capitalism’. The signals the islands ‘radicals’ send to their foreign supporters are not always those which are heard at home.

Today, for instance, Vanuatu’s Barak Sope is, by most measures, a moderate politician with conservative leanings on foreign affairs. Most South Pacific nations, for historical reasons based on the failure of the colonies to attract significant private sector investment, depend heavily on their public sectors for employment and other economic activity—yet in two decades or so of independence, no thoroughgoing socialist has been elected to a parliament (nor, might Kasper and Co add, has any thoroughgoing capitalist).

And on Bougainville again signs have been extraordinarily misread. Mining has been widely blamed for the tragic train of events. However, only months before fighting broke out on the island its provincial premier, Joe Kabui, signed enthusiastically a deal with Sydney business people Marty Dougherty (he of the Fairfax farrago) and Benedict Chan to allow their company to explore all Bougainville. Marty Dougherty (he of toe Fairfax farrago) and Benedict Chan to allow their company to explore all Bougainville.

Although Bougainville might appear simply a story of a heart return to tribalism in horror of modernity, a longer-term perspective will identify a different trend. Many—almost certainly most—Bougainvilleans seek a suitable blend, but have not yet been offered it. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army certainly does not offer it. Tribalism, especially for women, today offers a blank future, both in practical terms—it cannot produce a pump to supply water, or kerosene for cooking and lighting—and in terms of participation. Some areas of Bougainville have traditionally arranged the passing on of land through the woman’s line, matrilineally, but this has never offered women anything approaching an equal role in decision making in tribal affairs.

It is inevitable that the PNG government will offer Bougainvilleans a degree of autonomy, or even a vote on independence, ideally worked towards over a year or two—as were the Matignon Accords arranged for New Caledonia. But it cannot responsibly do so while the island is yet controlled, in a manner, by armed gangs loosely owing allegiance to unelected leaders who to date appear to have provided scarcely any services to a population increasingly anxious about schooling and health supplies in particular. Francis Ona and his advisory council of 30 (‘Francis and the Supremes’, as they are known locally) may be the leaders the people would choose. But that remains to be tested.

Over on Vanuatu, Fr Walter Lini, Prime Minister since independence 11 years ago, had sought to shore up his crumbling authority by adapting the constitution to grant traditional chiefs a greater role, for instance in controlling the movements of clan members to overcrowded urban areas. Yet on 7 August, at a party meeting, Lini is almost certain to be replaced as Vanua’aku Party president and therefore as Prime Minister, by Donald Kalpokas, one of the party stalwarts whom he dumped from Cabinet this year. Again, a leader of the modern sector has returned in the South Pacific to seek a legitimation of his fraying authority by a traditional structure whose own waning power he himself has helped undermine.

Such manoeuvres will persist across the region during the 1990s. And, indeed, some may at first succeed—especially those that relate intimately to lifestyle, such as the fight-back by kava, the traditional narcotic, against largely foreign-owned brewers of beer. (In Vanuatu’s capital, Port Vila, there are today 134 ‘nakamals’ or ‘kava bars’—despite the power-campaigns of the opposition, which uses slogans such as ‘Mi filim Forex i lcam along’: ‘I feel a XXX coming on’.)

But the longer term prognosis must be for continued change, and not necessarily for the worst. And the more honest and less emotive the domestic debate, the more clearly the alternatives are enunciated, the more participation in the process the better; this is not the traditional ‘Pacific Way’ (which was, in truth, an often bloody process)—but it may prove a more positive one.

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