We just live our own lives here ... in the Pacific

M. Quanchi
Queensland University of Technology

Recommended Citation
Quanchi, M., We just live our own lives here ... in the Pacific, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 7, 1999, 131-136.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss7/11
To state that the mostly rural population of Pacific Islanders spread across 22 nations and hundreds of language and cultural groups are “just living their own lives”, acknowledging but not greatly affected by geo-politics and globalisation, is a reasonable assertion. This phrase is borrowed from Geua Dekure of Koiari in PNG when interviewed for the book Views from interviews: the changing role of women in Papua New Guinea. Geua acknowledged that missions, colonial rule and independence had affected her people, but she noted that “we just live our own lives here... we recognise each other’s strengths and traditional knowledge. That is why we are still happy” (Turner 1993: 8-9).

Although a drift to the cities and out-migration are on the increase, the village, clan, land and community remain at the centre of custom, identity and lifestyle for most Pacific Island people. While catchy and convenient, the phrase “just living our own lives” tends to underestimate the agency and control which Island peoples exercise over their own destinies. Indeed, Island leaders reject accusations that their socio-economic and political position is irreversibly precarious and that they cannot manage, govern and plan for growth on their own terms. It is also true that leaders acknowledge problems exist at all levels of politics and society in the Pacific.

But, the agenda for the annual meetings, for example, of the Pacific Forum or the Secretariat for the Pacific Community, suggests that the prime ministers, presidents and bureaucrats of the Pacific’s independent nations are actively engaging in developing appropriate policies on economic growth, the monitoring of logging, fishing, mining and tourism, infrastructure development and the ratifying of a variety of international conventions and treaties. Mismanagement, corruption, a declining resource base and overpopulation are problems that could certainly be added to the list. However, the agenda of these meetings also indicates that there is a confidence, determination and ability to
apply islander-solutions, grassroots initiatives and traditional structures and to not merely rely on guidance handed down from distant western agencies, former colonial powers and bigger neighbours.

Recently Palau hosted a month-long gathering of traditional leaders from across the north Pacific, and it is from this type of dialogue, rather than from the legislature, cabinet and public service that solutions will be put into place. This seminal event passed by without much media attention, but at this type of forum, Islanders are speaking out assertively, identifying solutions, offering expertise and sharing experiences with each other. International agencies, regional forums, non-government organisations (NGOs), aid projects and visiting foreign experts are not being ignored, but Island leaders have taken the local knowledge as well as the international expertise path towards the future.

This encouraging and inspiring picture, however, does not capture the interest of a front-page editor, an on-the-spot camera team or a major broadsheet foreign affairs editor. East Timor is news – but West Papua is not; Fiji’s Rabuka losing an election and his prime ministerial position is news – universal Tongan respect for the nation’s King is not; the corrupt awarding of logging licences to Malaysian companies is news – but a water tank for a village in Kiribati is not.

Another overarching and descriptive phrase, the “doomsday scenario”, has been promoted by Australian bureaucrats, academics and journalists, and it seems on the surface to resonate with the “just living our own lives” phraseology. Both phrases project an image of small nations of peaceful, smiling, disinterested, tradition-bound but dependent villagers. The trouble with this view is that while reasonable for some, it is grossly insulting to other Pacific Islanders. It also leads to reporting on the region which is driven by disasters, failure and conflict and which is not informed by a longer-view, postcolonial, culturally sensitive awareness.

The Australian media does give the Pacific a fair run considering that its nations and the region do not rate highly in the trade, security and foreign affairs debates which focus on more important neighbours, regions and blocs in Asia and Europe. Typically, the May 1999 Fiji elections attracted daily coverage for a few days, but elections, land disputes and political changes in Tonga, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia in the same period went unnoticed. Also worrying in the Fiji reporting was an emphasis
on the potential for conflict and racial unrest and a reliance on well-known past key figures (now irrelevant) as a focus for a story. Surely pursuing stories on new Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudry was more relevant than hoping for an angry and revengeful outburst for the departing Rabuka. In a similar case, the long struggle by pro-independence activists in West Papua has been ignored, but the sniff of recent imprisonments, murders and the misuse of a Red Cross helicopter were enough to attract TV crews to the Indonesian province. (Or did the conflict in East Timor turn an earlier West Papua tape in storage into a now useful story?). The Australian media has at times played a valuable role in exposing injustice in West Papua, and elsewhere in the Pacific, and television programs such as Four Corners, Foreign Correspondent and Dateline deserve our thanks. The general absence of material in the media is noticed by the few Pacific Studies academics in Australian universities waiting patiently for any regular, lengthy reporting on the Pacific to appear. But, other Australians want tourist “news”, getaway hints, local snippets of global campaigns, volcanoes and coups to be covered by their TV, radio, www sites, newspapers and magazines. Occasionally the Pacific provides this type of story.

Australia does have a long and wide-ranging historical relationship with the Pacific. It goes far beyond the well-known “Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels” who aided Australian soldiers in PNG in WWII, the Kokoda trail, the scene of bitter fighting between Australian and Japanese forces in 1942, and the kidnapped 19th century Melanesian “Kanaka” labourers, but many Australians are not aware of the closeness and longevity of this relationship. The relationship includes colonial responsibilities for PNG and Nauru, sub-imperialist ambitions in Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomons, settler migration and a domination of early trading, banking, postal, shipping, naval and tourist development.

Despite cutbacks, Radio Australia is everywhere in the region, and the voice of its correspondent Sean Dorney is easily recognised by Islanders spread across one third of the world. Churches, NGOs, trade unions, Australian Volunteers Abroad/Overseas Service Bureau (AVA/OSB), the Australian government’s overseas aid program (AusAID) and business and friendship associations maintain regular contact. There are 10,000 Islanders in Australia for short courses, training, degrees and post-graduate study and perhaps a quarter of a million Pacific Islanders temporarily or permanently residing here. For aware Australians, some prominent Rugby League and Rugby Union foot-
ball players, a pop group and a few sitcom characters are the visible evidence of this connection. Few Australians know that champion Rugby League footballer Mal Meninga and campaigner for Indigenous Australians' rights Faith Bandler, nearly always introduced as Australian Aborigines, are descendants of Melanesian indentured labourers who arrived in the 19th century. The 20,000 Pacific Island descendants of those "Kanaka" labourers were recognised finally in 1994 by the Keating Federal Government as a distinct immigrant, ethnic community. This recognition was not granted to Australian South Sea Islanders by Queensland's government until 1999.

Both state and federal governments maintain links in the north and south Pacific through bilateral, regional and international agencies, conferences and organisations. By invitation Australia was a founding partner, if not enthusiastically, in the 1971 creation of the South Pacific Forum, now the Pacific Forum. This membership continues, though Prime Ministerial visits to Forum meetings are only briefly reported in the Australian media. Under the previous Labor government, Australia also had a federal Minister for Pacific Island Affairs. Volunteer organisations maintain a small but regular short-term aid-worker program in the region, and, for example, Australian doctors have a long-running and invaluable visitor program to PNG through UPNG and Port Moresby's General Hospital. However, only the Sandline mercenaries, the Rabaul volcano eruption and the Aitape tsunami disaster have attracted media attention. Although the reporting of these and similar events is immediate and detailed, there are still huge unreported gaps in the relationship between Australia and the region.

Several Australian universities teach courses on the politics, history, literature, culture and environment of the region, although only one offers a course on Australia-Pacific relations. Unfortunately there has been a decline in the expertise that Australia was once able to boast in regard to the Pacific. From the leading-edge position of the 1960s and 1970s, Australian academics and experts on PNG and the wider Pacific are now a small, retirement-age, less-visible cohort. This scholarly, academic and consultation role has been taken up by Islanders. Independent, professional, educated, critical and rooted in their own cultures, Island leaders now seek out their own colleagues and their own indigenous solutions, with occasional help from some outsiders – including Australians.
None of this "just living our lives" or asserting agency grabs headlines. Yet there is plenty of good news in the region. Stories abound on grassroots solutions, the rising presence of women in decision-making, innovative entrepreneurship, active and investigative journalism and a questioning of the relationship between tradition, borrowed ideas and visions of the future. Western academics have shown that Island peoples exerted agency in their meetings with the west, and anthropologists and historians point to peoples who have accommodated, resisted and rejected more than they have been dispossessed, oppressed and alienated. Anthropologist Roger Keesing noted that the Malaitans of the Solomon Islands, in common with other rural Pacific Islanders far from the global and geo-political arena, are concerned mostly with feasting (food exchanges), fighting (rank and status) and ancestor worship – just living their own lives. Historians also ask that we remember that Island peoples are victims – the land groups who found their forest sold from under them by politicians, the Bikini atoll people who had their home devastated by nuclear testing, the Chamorro people of Guam and Saipan who nearly disappeared after a series of introduced diseases (and Spanish warfare), Nauruans who saw their treasured "topside" mined away for phosphate – and the list goes on.

Today, 20% to 60% of Pacific islanders live in urban centres and capital cities. Rural people, still in the majority, feel separated and troubled by a distant, Westernised, centralised and urban leadership. These doubts are expressed through the ballot box, as newly independent Island peoples, from Samoa (the first in 1963) to Palau (the most recent in 1994), regularly vote in and out those they think can best govern into the future.

For Island peoples, pressing daily issues relate to the Church, reciprocity and gift exchange, school fees, migration (internally and out-of-country), chieftainship, custom/kastom, rites of passage, clan and language group – these are the elements of "just living" and they are contested, defended, debated and argued. These are the "headlines" central to their lives. Island peoples also worry, as does everyone, about foreign debt, pollution, corruption, appropriate growth, the cost of living and rising or falling socio-economic indicators.

The Australian media, except for the odd, brief human-interest story or filler, tends to focus on big, splashy events, with previously known characters (or stereotypes), graphic footage or recognisable images. These events are not usually the crucial is-
sues that might indeed impact on Islanders ability to “just live their own lives”. It might be assumed that Australian media coverage of the Pacific and its peoples would be influenced by the region’s geographic nearness, its uniqueness or the many, diverse and important historical links. This is not the case, and media reporting on the Pacific is instead determined and limited by the nature of Australian media ownership, profit and programming.

NOTES

1 The Australian newspaper’s Marie Louise O’Gallaghan also reports regularly on the region, and in Fiji the Australian High Commission publishes an informative Australia-Pacific Newsletter. Both South Pacific news magazines, Pacific Islands Monthly and Islands Business, run regular features and shorter news items on Australia’s presence in the region. There is a rapidly expanding list of www sites and links on recent events.

REFERENCES

Turner, Anne (1993), Views from interviews; the changing role of women in Papua New Guinea, Melbourne, Oxford University Press.