

The Pacific way?

Connecting stories and science

Pacific islanders have long traditions of stories, dance and decorative patterns used in carvings, tattoos and other artefacts that tell the story of their creation and journeys to their current lands, describe their identity and provide guidance for living in harmony with each other and the environment. Pacific islanders read the past from symbols in the same way that we can recognise people from the uniform they wear. Scientists and archaeologists use methods such as carbon dating, DNA testing and linguistic evidence to 'read the past' and tell the story of migration patterns. Over the centuries, Pacific islanders who were separated by sea and mountains developed into hundreds of micro-cultures with many different languages. These cultures have been roughly grouped as Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian.

Whether we follow the traditional stories or the scientific evidence, the history of the settlement of the Pacific islands is a fascinating and intriguing one of great treks and ocean voyages.

Key words and concepts

archipelagos, deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), radio carbon dating

Where did the people of the Pacific come from?

In traditional Maori families, the parents often say to their new babies:

E taku pōtiki, kua puta mai rā koe i te toi i Hawaiki.

My child, you are born from the source, which is at Hawaiki.

Stories and songs of the mythical island of *Hawaiki* tell the tale of how people believe that the first Polynesians sailed in open canoes from Hawaiki across the oceans and arrived on new islands. Hawaiki is their spiritual home, the source and origin of life, the homeland of mystical power and place people will return to when they die.

Ehara i te mea poka hōu mai: nō Hawaiki mai anō.

It is not a new thing done without proper cause: it has come to us all the way from Hawaiki.

All across the Pacific, there are variations of this and other traditional stories that explain the origins of the people. The fascinating stories, music, song, dance and patterns in carvings and tattoos help people 'read the past' about how they came to be on the islands, where they came from, and about their societies, cultures and values



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Te Rerenga Wairua

Cape Rēinga, known to Māori as *Te Rerenga Wairua* the leaping place of the spirits, is a windswept promontory in the far north-west of the North Island of New Zealand. It is believed to be the place where the spirits of the dead gather to depart for the homeland of Hawaiki.

Source: Te Ahukaram Charles Royal. 'Hawaiki – The significance of Hawaiki', *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 4 Mar 09.
URL: www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/hawaiki/1

Thinking about

1. Why is Hawaiki such an important place for Polynesians?
2. How might these stories that centre on the sea and long voyages influence the daily life of Pacific islanders?
3. What does it mean to 'read the past'? Contrast the methods Pacific islanders use to 'read the past' with those that you and your family use.

Interpreting the evidence

Historians have different theories about the history of the Pacific and use a range of methods to interpret the evidence.

Cultural evidence

Artefacts, or everyday items left behind, show how people lived, but they can also show us the sequence of how groups migrated across the Pacific. Distinctive red pottery with raised circular patterns was discovered at Lapita on the coast of New Caledonia in 1952. Measuring the amount of Carbon 14 left in the pottery, archaeologists estimate that Lapita pottery was produced 3,500 to 2,000 years ago. Because the pottery has been found in many places in the Pacific, historians say that this indicates the pottery travelled with the people as they migrated. The pottery has been found on the coasts as far west as the Bismarck Archipelago (a group of islands off the coast of Papua New Guinea), north to Hawaii and as far east as the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia. By dating the different finds of pottery, archaeologists can estimate the timeline of migration of people across the Pacific.

Biological or genetic evidence

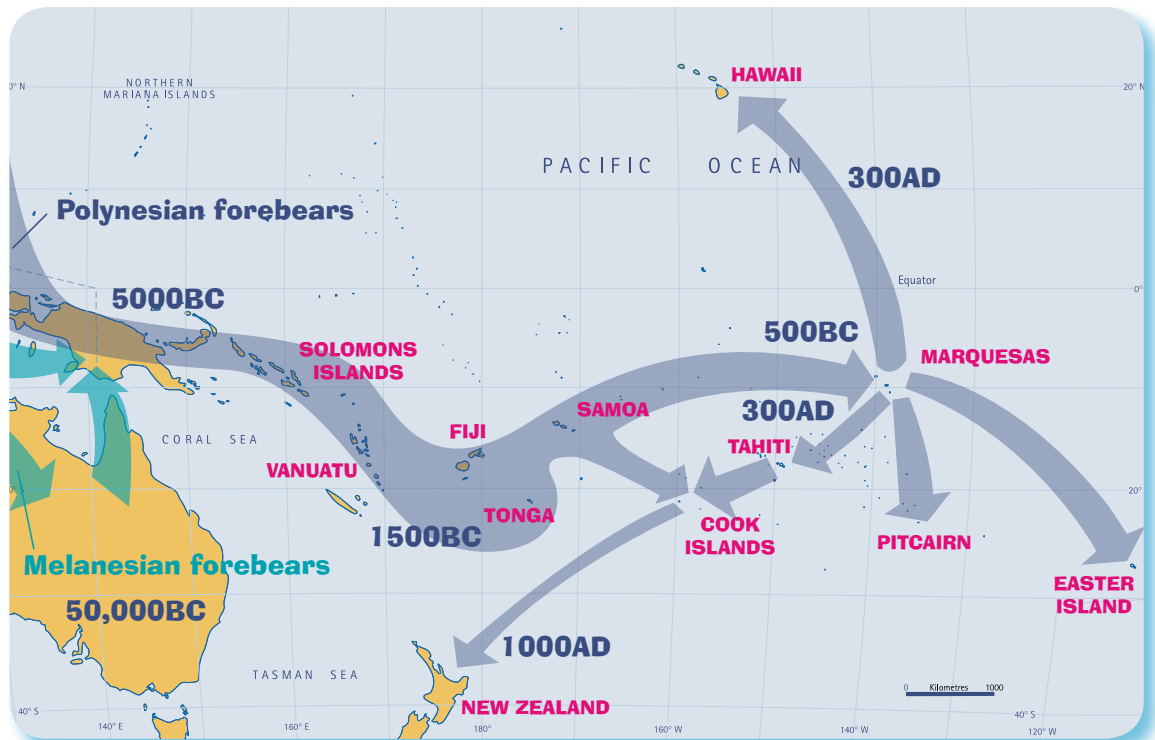
Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), or genetic evidence, suggests that the Indigenous Australians, Melanesians, Polynesians, South East Asians and Han Chinese are all descended from one ancient group of people.

Linguistic evidence

Languages provide many clues to the links between people. By studying the variations and similarities in languages, it can be shown that the Austronesian language family, which is found throughout most of the Pacific, originated in Taiwan around 5,200 years ago and moved through South-East Asia, along New Guinea and into Polynesia. All Australian Aboriginal languages and most inland Papua New Guinea languages are non-Austronesian.

| English | fish | English | chief |
|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Bahasa (Indonesia) | <i>ikan</i> | Maori (New Zealand and Cook Islands) | <i>ariki</i> |
| Javanese (Indonesia) | <i>iwak</i> | Tuvaluan and Tokelauan | <i>aliki</i> |
| Tetun (East Timor) | <i>ikan</i> | Rap Nui (Easter Island) | <i>'ariki</i> |
| Tagalog | <i>isda</i> | Samoan and Hawaiian | <i>ali'i</i> |
| Maori (New Zealand) | <i>ika</i> | Society Islands (French Polynesia) | <i>ari'i</i> |
| Fijian | <i>ika</i> | | |
| Hawaiian | <i>i'a</i> | | |
| Rapa Nui (Easter Island) | <i>ika</i> | | |

What do scientists think happened?



Waves of migration to the Pacific

Connections between the evidence – such as artefact dating, genetic links and the spread of languages – can produce a picture of how people migrated across the Pacific. The map of Pacific migration shows the story of what historians, scientists and archaeologists think happened in the Pacific based on the best interpretations of the evidence at this time. While this evidence remains under constant scrutiny, there is broad consensus that Melanesian islands were occupied by Papuan people from about 50,000 years ago and that significant migration from Asia through the Pacific to Polynesia began around 6,000 years ago and continued for several thousands of years until New Zealand was finally settled by Maori people about 1,000 years ago.

Thinking about

1. What evidence has been used to develop the understanding of Pacific migrations?
2. Apart from pottery, what other types of artefacts would you expect to find at archaeological sites? What might these items tell you?
3. What insights do the similarities in language provide about the connections between different people?

Thinking more deeply

Dr John Gibbons from the University of the South Pacific said 'trying to make sense of Pacific history may be [like] someone who arrives in time for the second act of a play, and then attempts to work out the plot without realising that the first act has already taken place'.

1. What do you think Dr Gibbons means?
2. What questions about the cultural, biological and linguistic evidence might you ask to find out about the 'first act'?

What alternatives are possible?

While the map and evidence described above present a fairly well-accepted view of the early settlement of the Pacific Islands, the information below about the Caves of Nanumaga and the voyages of the Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl on the Kon Tiki both demonstrate how new discoveries can challenge the experts to review the evidence.

The Fire Caves of Nanumaga

'Off the northern shore of Nanumaga island in western Polynesia's Tuvalu island group in 1986, two scuba divers investigating a local legend of "a large house under the sea" found an underwater cave more than 40 metres down the wall of a coral cliff. Dark patches on the roof and walls and blackened coral fragments on its floor suggest the use of fire by human occupants.

The last time people could possibly have occupied the cave was during a time of low sea level more than 8,000 years ago, a date sharply at odds with the view that this part of the Pacific was settled just 6,000 years ago. The evidence of fire may be ambiguous, but the cultural memory of the cave's existence is not so easily dismissed.

Pacific archaeologists may have got it very wrong. In focusing on archaeological evidence, they have been blind to a vital piece of climatic evidence – a massive and continuous rise in sea level that began 18,000 years ago and stopped 4,000 years ago and probably drowned most of the evidence of much earlier human migrations into the Pacific.'

Source: *The Age* (Australia), Monday 13 April 1987

Thinking about

1. According to this article, when was the Cave of Nanumaga last occupied?
2. Given Tuvalu's Polynesian geography, how does this evidence challenge or support the accepted view of Pacific island migration and settlement?
3. Do you think the Pacific archaeologist 'got it wrong'? Give evidence to support your view.

Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon Tiki

Contrary to the prevailing scientific opinion in the 1940s, Thor Heyerdahl suggested that people could have reached the islands much more easily from the Americas to the east. Living and studying flora and fauna on the remote French Polynesian island of Fatu Hiva, he noted that the winds and currents came steadily from the east and that South American plants such as the sweet potato were to be found in Polynesia. In 1947, after being towed 100 kilometres to the open water, he sailed a balsa-wood raft named Kon Tiki that was accurately modelled after ancient South American rafts to demonstrate that such voyages were theoretically possible. He followed this up with archaeological work on Easter Island (Rapa Nui), finding stone statues, similar to those on Galapagos Islands, to suggest that South Americans had been in the Pacific.

Thinking about

1. What evidence convinced Thor Heyerdahl that people from South America had migrated to the Polynesian islands at some time? How valid do you think this evidence is?
2. Create a map showing the two possible migrations – one from the east and one from the west. What do you think is the explanation for each viewpoint? What conclusion do you draw?

Polynesian and Melanesian societies

The Pacific voyagers sailed across the vast ocean in voyaging canoes using complex way-finding skills based on bird migration patterns, ocean currents and stars. They took their animals, plants, household items and way of life with them setting up new communities on the islands they settled. There is some commonality among Pacific people based on their origins and languages, but there is also great diversity. One generalised example of difference between Polynesia and Melanesia can be found in their social structure. In most of the traditional Polynesian societies leaders inherited their power. Rules governed relationships and the rights and responsibilities of community members. These societies were based around a system of chiefs. In comparison, in traditional Melanesian societies, such as those in Papua New Guinea, leaders gained power through being recognised as the best hunter, orator and agriculturalist or as the wisest and most persuasive. These were called 'big men'.

Samoa: an example of a Polynesian society

Fa'a Samoa means the Samoan way. It's like a code of behaviour that governs how Samoan people should behave. Despite all the modern and Western influences, *Fa'a Samoa* is still very important as many Samoan people still follow and respect the hierarchical structures of society, customs and traditions.

In Samoa, traditional society was based on the *fa'amatai*, a system of social order and governance led by *matai*, the high-ranking chiefs, lesser chiefs and titled men. The basic social unit was the *aiga* or extended family. As Samoan families often had a large number of children, the extended family was very large indeed, with up to 30 or more people. Villages were made up of a number of *aiga*. The larger the *aiga*, the more powerful the village!

In the village, everything was run by a *fono* or council of *matai*, senior men, made up of representatives from each *aiga*. The *fono* passed judgement on all sorts of matters, rather like an Australian court. In traditional society, the *matai* were men who inherited their power from the *ali'i*, sacred chiefs, and were said to trace their ancestry back to *Tagaloa*, the god who created Samoa. These days, *matai* can be men or women and are given power for a number of reasons.

Before the missionaries brought Christianity to the Samoan Islands, the people believed in many gods. There were the *atau*, non-human and *aitu*, human gods, that influenced what happened from day to day.

Although the practice has now been stopped due to the influence of the missionaries, traditionally the *matai* could be married up to 50 times. Traditional marriages were arranged between the chiefs of the different *aiga*. The marriage process and ceremony were long and complex and usually finished with the dowry exchange *nunu* after the first child was born. During the ceremony, the families tried to compete to provide the largest dowries, which could include a range of valuable items such as *ie toga*, woven mats, money, pigs and *siapo*, bark cloth.

Liz Thompson/Lonely Planet Images



Applying the pattern to the *siapo*, bark cloth.

Vincent Talbot/Lonely Planet Images



Rows of men dancing using strong movements accompanied by singing and foot stamping.

The Huli of Papua New Guinea: an example of a Melanesian society

Roger Fry



Sing sing

Huli people in traditional dress prepare for a *sing sing*. On their heads they wear a wig, woven from human hair, or a hat of the fur of a cuscus (possum) decorated with flowers and cassowary feathers. They wear shell necklaces and string aprons trimmed with pigs' tails and leaves on their painted bodies. Each carries a kundu drum.

The Huli belong to *hamigini*, clans that have rights over certain areas of land. Membership of the groups is based on kinship or being descended from the same ancestors. The clans often fought over the three most valuable items in Huli culture – land, pigs and women.

Half-brothers, half-sisters and cousins are accepted in the same way that Australian families consider brothers and sisters. Huli men and women live in separate houses. When boys are about nine years old they leave their mothers to live with their fathers. Huli men may have many wives as long as they are able to pay the *variabu*, bride price, which is a number of pigs, to the bride's family.

The Huli people believe that everyday events such as climate and fertility of the soil are controlled by the *dama*, spirits, who live in natural features such as water holes and caves and control the fertility of the soil; the less powerful *dinini*, the ghosts of the dead, who are active in human affairs; and the *tomia*, who live in stones and cause sickness or death.

In Huli society, power is not inherited but is gained by being knowledgeable, skilful and talented. A Huli man may have special spiritual knowledge, be a talented farmer or keeper of pigs or be a skilled hunter, warrior, negotiator or singer. Women are able to own pigs, but they have little power and are required to raise children and tend the pigs, gardens and house.

Adapted from www.gabelomas.org

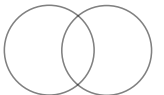
Thinking about

In small groups take either the Samoan or Huli examples from these pages and answer the following questions. Work with another group to share your learning. Create a **Venn diagram** of the similarities and differences between the two stories.

1. How do cultural practices provide an insight into the culture of the community?
2. How are decisions made about organisation, protection of resources and marriage?



Venn diagram



Pacific islanders today

Globalisation means traditional borders no longer exist. Pacific islanders move around the world for work and study taking their culture with them.

Many contemporary art forms from the Pacific mix traditional with modern styles and blend cultural influences from both home and abroad. Pacific reggae is a type of music based on Jamaican reggae but using ukuleles and traditional drums, and Samoan hip hop merges American dance styles with traditional Samoan ones.

Peter Hendrie/Lonely Planet Images



Tattoo

Tattooing was once widespread throughout Polynesia. It was carried out as a 'rite of passage' to mark the transition to adulthood and as a mark of courage and status. The pain of traditional tattooing was an important part of the cultural practice. Sometimes tattoos were referred to as the 'clothing of courage'. Although the traditional tattooing practices have been largely replaced by modern ones, there is a revival going on across the Pacific as many Pacific islanders get tattoos as a mark of cultural identity.

George Telek

Music

George Telek is a Tolai singer who comes from a village near Rabaul, in Papua New Guinea. He has been playing music for more than 20 years, combining the harmonies of the Tolais, stringband music and rock to express his feelings about everyday events. He is recognised internationally after collaborations with Australian musician David Bridie from the band Not Drowning Waving.

Paul Kennedy/Lonely Planet Images



Artwork

This painting on a bus in Samoa shows how modern Pacific artwork combines strong colours and patterns with traditional themes.

Fa'a Samoa or fa'a America?

Young Samoans these days can be seen popping, locking and breaking as hip hop culture takes hold of the islands and other countries where Samoan people have migrated. It's not surprising, as dance has always been an important part of Samoan culture, and this is a new way for young Samoans to express themselves at the same time as keeping in touch with traditions. This trend is thought to have started with Samoan migrants to America picking up on the hip hop culture in California and transforming it to their own.

Thinking about

Choose the tattoo, music or artwork from page 34 to describe how the activity has adapted a traditional practice into a new form.

Thinking more deeply

1. Use the tattoo, music or artwork examples to show how time and space influence culture.
2. Find out what the word *fa'a* means. Do you think hip hop can be considered *fa'a* Samoa? Is it really their own or not? Give evidence to support your opinion. Do you get a sense of different identities or shared identities?

Chapter activities

Collecting your thoughts

Choose one Pacific island country and produce a display (poster, slide show or multimedia) of the cultural practices of that country. Contrast a traditional and present-day activity or item. Comment on what factors might have influenced the change.

Taking action

1. Find out about a national cultural celebration in Pacific island countries. For example:

- Heiva Festival (Tahiti, French Polynesia)
- Hiri Moale Festival (Papua New Guinea)
- Fest Napuan (Vanuatu)
- Gogadola Canoe Festival (Papua New Guinea)
- Pacific Festival of Arts (every four years)
- Heilala Festival (Tonga)
- Tuila Festival (Samoa)

What days are significant?

What is the meaning of the celebrations?

How do families and the community celebrate?

Construct a poster or display in your school library or on a noticeboard to educate the teachers and students about this celebration.

2. Invite a local representative of a Pacific island community to your class to discuss how important cultural celebrations are in their home country and in Australia. Ensure that you and your class prepare a series of questions for the guest speaker.