The Waigani Seminars and other talk-fests; looking back – and forward – in the Pacific Islands

Max Quanchi
Humanities Program, Queensland University of Technology

In 2008, UPNG revived the Waigani Seminars. Three hundred academics, practitioners and interested observers conducted a three day retrospective analysis of plans laid in 1975, and why Papua New Guinea (PNG) had not achieved these goals after thirty-three years of independence. The sequence of Waigani Seminars since 1967 suggests that the Territory of Papua New Guinea (known as TPNG up to 1975) and then PNG confronted new levels of intensity and change in the political, economic and social domain, and that a sense of being overwhelmed was real, but challenged in the series of seminars after 1967 with enthusiasm and confidence.

Other Pacific nations have not followed the annual academic-practitioner talk-fest approach, although regional meetings are ubiquitous and congresses, round-tables, seminars, conferences, symposia and workshops are a daily occurrence across the region and around the world. This paper looks at several insider and outsider attempts to equip Pacific Islanders with tools to manage modernity;

- The Waigani Seminars (1967-1997)
- The conference system – the endless series of “talk-fests” in, about and outside the Pacific
- The TTPF/HistoryCops project - a regional project to equip school teachers and students with a means to develop national histories and develop a greater sense of national identity, cohesion and purpose (1995-2002)

This paper offers a tentative answer to the question -

- in the 1970 seminar; a breakthrough in the development of nationalist politics
- in the 1972 seminar; a challenge to conventional, colonial notions of development.
- in the 1973 seminar; a turning point in Australia-TPNG relations occurred when the Australian Minister responsible for TPNG, Bill Morrison, proposed controversially that after independence, direct budgetary aid (no questions asked) might be replaced by project or program aid delivered only after “cooperation and consultation”.
- In the 1978 seminar; a questioning of decentralisation as a process that could not be reversed, and a questioning of the high praise and promotion of a provincial government system.
- And, in the 1982 seminar; a “watershed in the development of Melanesian feminism”.

Oscar Spate, in the closing address to the 1968 seminar declared the seminars were “one of the tools … which can add something to the foundations of a Papuan and New Guinean nation.”

4  Moore and Kooymann, op.cit., Ibid., p.164
5  Ibid., pp.326 and 364
6  OHH Spate, “Closing address: Britannia, Anglia, Melanesia”, in Ken Inglis, ed, The History
These were mighty claims for a mostly non-Papua New Guinean academic talk-fest in a colonial possession still six years away from independence. It was noticeable that Spate stressed that it was the Australian National University’s Research School of Pacific Studies and its recently established New Guinea Research Unit, that “had played a not inconceivable role in the intellectual activity of the country” and he then praised two non-Papua New Guineans – Ken Inglis and Ron Crocombe – for providing “much of the impetus to the holding of the Waigani”. If foundations were indeed being laid these were clearly Australian as much as Papua New Guinean exercises in planning.

This raises the question whether the Waigani seminars were a home-grown seeding ground for ideas, or an outsider, closed shop in which predominantly non-Papua New Guinean scholars could debate their theses and theories. In 1970, Oscar Spate gave the opening address and said the Waigani seminar “will not be, as it should not be, only an abstract discussion”, suggesting that everyone realised it was popular and well attended but ultimately still an academic, intellectual talk-fest. Spate thought the seminars were not effective in practical terms, and should not have been expected to produce actual plans, projects and actions, but were useful in determining broad gaols and principles “in forward planning, in the strategy and tactics of advance”.

In the seminar in 1982 that reviewed progress since the setting of the Eight Point Plan and National Goals and Directive Principles, seventy papers were presented over the six days, including, the convenor claimed, some “memorable intellectual exchanges”, but it was criticised for overlooking two crucial issues at the time – corruption in government, and the decline in rural and urban law and order.

Donald Denoon, later a Professor of History at UPNG, argued that in the Canberra and TPNG administration, “suspicion of higher education was widespread” and Robert Waddell reporting in the AJPH’s “Political Chronicle” highlighted the gap in Port Moresby between the Port Moresby administration quartered at Konedobu and the Papua New Guinean thinkers and academics at UPNG, and between the distant Canberra bureaucrats and those working, teaching and researching in TPNG. At the 1970 seminar, Waddell thought there was a huge gap between “the lively potential of this country and the prosaic but no doubt well-intentioned approach of Canberra and Konedobu”.

Ron May, in the editor’s preface to the 1972 Waigani proceedings, admitted the seminar “may not have achieved much at the operative level” and “might not have done much to establish a set of agreed priorities for Melanesian development. But it did generate some lively discussion”. It was noticeable that an influential key agent of change in TPNG and later PNG, Ulle Beier, failed to refer to the successive Waigani seminars on development, rural life, education and law even though the sub-title of his memoir was “The impact of the university on culture and identity in Papua New Guinea 1971-74”.

Claims that Waigani was making a difference were standard in the opening and closing addresses. Matthias To Liman, a Minister and member of parliament in 1971, typically claimed the Waigani seminars “had a distinguished record for the high standard of the contribution they have made … (it) provides analysis and discussion by experts … (and) provides a forum where the aims of all spheres of development may be coordinated”.

But at the tenth seminar in 1976, in the first year after independence, the opening address was given by the Minister for Primary Industry, Boyamo Sali, and he suggested the words of distinguished local thinkers and overseas intellectuals over the previous decade reflected transitions already taking place rather than initiated or drove through new changes. He rhetorically asked “Who can say how many of the ideas first elaborated in these seminars have been translated into programmes?”

15 Robert Waddell, “May-August 1970” in Moore and Kooymann, op.cit., p.113. Quotation from, or citing the Waigani seminars is rare in the literature suggesting they were not regarded as scholarly enough to be cited as conventional references. An exception is the 1973 edited collection by A Clunies Ross and J Langmore, Alternative strategies for Papua New Guinea (Melbourne, OUP, 1973) which refers to several seminars.


17 Ibid., p.v.


Published proceedings of the Waigani Seminars 1967-1982 (in italics)

1. New Guinea People in Business and Industry (1967)
2. The History of Melanesia (1968)
3. The Indigenous Role of Business Enterprise (1969)
5. Change and Development in Rural Melanesia (1971)
6. Priorities in Melanesian Development (1972)
7. Foreign Investment International law and National Development (1973)
   and
   Lo bilong ol manmeri; Crime Compensation and Village Courts (1973)
8. Education in Melanesia (1974)
10. Agriculture in the Tropics (in Lae, 1976)
16. The role of science and technology in development (1984)
17. Ethics of Development (1986)
18. The state of the Arts in the Pacific (1988)
21. (* devoted to preparation for the Beijing World Congress on Women)
22. Information and the Nation (1997)

Eventually Papua New Guinea wrote a constitution in the fast run home to independence in September 1975, and it innovatively included five “National Goals and Directive principles”. These were claimed to be the “home grown fruit of grass-roots consultation and prolonged deliberation by the Constitutional Planning Committee”.21 They were, however, derived in part from Michael Somare’s Eight Point Plan of 1972, which in turn had been based on the reports of the University of East Anglia’s visiting UN team led by Michael Faber, and in part by a couple of backroom Australian advisors to the Constitutional Planning Committee.22

The five guiding principles were accepted by the House of Assembly without modification, because, as Donald Denoon argued, Michael Somare saw them as general statements that “were vague enough to satisfy every point of view”.23 The National Goals and Directive Principles were critically analysed ten years later in seventy papers at the Waigani seminar of 1985, but generally may be said to have disappeared without much impact in the Papua New Guinea political arena in the three decades since independence.

Goroka University lecturer Sam Kari, whose doctoral thesis was on the National Goals and Directive Principles, eventually helped to create a political party in 2008 that called for a return to the original guiding principles. It won six seats. The consultations and village meetings prior to 1975 that responded to the proposed National Goals and Directive Principles had the appearance of direct participation in shaping a nation’s destiny, but like the Waigani seminars, they were also outsider-inspired and although espousing worthy principles, ended up generating more talk in the capital city than action across the country.

National Goals and Directive Principles (1975)

1. Integral Human development
2. Equality and Participation
3. National Sovereignty and Self-reliance
4. Natural Resources and Environment
5. Papua New Guinean Ways

The Pacific is the subject of many conferences, workshops, symposiums, and congresses, so much that the annual schedule of events takes on the appearance of a conference system, like that regular, institutionalised round of congresses and conferences promoted in Europe between the wars to solve international conflicts. The “Pacific conference system” creates its own energy, has its own protocols and conventions and because there are so many, has created “Pacific Man/Woman” – the perennial conference delegate tripping here and there in the region and beyond, on generous allowances and benefits, representing whatever interest group needed representing and not necessarily in the area of their expertise or responsibility.

The International Council for the Study of the Pacific Islands (ICSPI), a UNESCO initiative based in Samoa, publishes a regular list of conferences related to the Pacific.

Similar to the Waigani Seminars and the consultation process on PNG’s National Goals and Directive Principles, the outcomes of the conferential system are worthy, lead to impressive, often-cited publications, and have follow-up meetings that require another round of annual and bi-annual delegate attendances. Similarly they rarely translate into action, are often not reported on at home by delegates, only occasionally surface in parliamentary debate, and serve merely to tick-the-box for an international funding agency or regional organisation. This may seem cynical, but as

21 King Lee Warakai, op.cit., p.1.
22 The doctoral theses of Jonathon Ritchie at Deakin University, and Sam Kari at QUT tackled aspects of consultation and drafting in the constitution making process. Although the legal aspects of the constitution have a large body of literature, more needs to be done on the Eight Aims and NGDP and their implementation after independence.

23 Denoon, op.cit., p.123.
Boyamo Sali asked at Waigani in 1976, how can we measure, and “who can say how many of the ideas first elaborated in these seminars have been translated into programmes?” Three decades later an editorial in Islands Business was still asking the same question, querying whether the 53 conferences of the UN Commission on the Status of Women had led to any improvement across the board. Islands Business asked as the next overseas jaunt headed off for another in the endless round of meetings “What difference has it made to the life of women in the Pacific over the years?”

(See list of conferences below)

The Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration, known as the Pacific Plan, is an outsider attempt, primarily driven by Australia, to enforce a common purpose in a Pacific Island response to the Millennium Development Goals. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) has adopted the Pacific Plan as a regional strategy for development, however, as Cate Morris has noted, “the success of such a strategy relies on the local, national and regional capacity to take decisive action, the strength of political will to make sustainable short and long term change … Can the PIF be confident that … (it) is right for the region?” The Pacific Plan is intended to deliver real benefits to the people of the Pacific by coming up with practical steps to achieve the Pacific Forum’s four key goals;

• economic growth,
• sustainable development,
• good governance
• security.

The plan puts forward 15 strategic objectives, which range from free trade, enhanced policing and the development of national sustainable development plans through to a regional ombudsman’s office.

Elise Huffer, writing in 2005 as the Forum’s four key goals;

• economic growth,
• sustainable development,
• good governance
• security.

The plan puts forward 15 strategic objectives, which range from free trade, enhanced policing and the development of national sustainable development plans through to a regional ombudsman’s office.

Elise Huffer, writing in 2005 as the

PIF leaders Meeting.

Endorsed actions by the 2005 Pacific Forum Leaders Meeting.

- Expand access to markets for trade in goods under the SPARTECA, PICTA, PACER, and with non-Forum trading partners;
- Expand regional technical and vocational education training (TVET);
- Ensure the portability of technical qualifications;
- Support Australia’s offer to investigate the potential of setting up in the Pacific region an Australian Pacific Islands Technical College;
- Continue to consider the issue of labour mobility in the context of member countries’ immigration policies;
- Facilitate international financing for sustainable development, biodiversity and environmental protection and climate change in the Pacific including through the Global Environment Fund;
- Note with appreciation additional resources contributed by Australia
  - AUD 5 million for the Pacific Judicial System;
  - AUD 3 million for maritime security;
  - AUD 0.4 million for regional aviation
- By New Zealand
  - NZD 5 million for the Pacific Judicial System;
  - NZD 1.4 million for a permanent home for the Oceania Customs Organisation
- By the USA

Finally, are there lessons to be learnt from a small scale, action-oriented, from the bottom up, chalk-and-talk solution to a regional problem? In 1995, with large Japanese funding, a plan was put in place to encourage Pacific Island nations to decolonize their school’s History curriculum by replacing studies of European, New Zealand and American History with national histories – what a regional workshop in Vanuatu in 1992 had called “Our History in our own words”. The project also targeted professional development for history teachers as a goal, along with encouraging history teachers to become the authors of the classroom materials they so desperately identified as essential but unavailable. The project set about facilitating the creation of “History Teachers Associations” in a number of Pacific Island nations, where they had never existed, had lapsed, or had been unable to create links regionally to other nations. Known by the acronym TTPF (Teaching the Pacific – Forum) a series of workshops for history teachers were held around the region for eight years, a newsletter was published, but most importantly guides, texts and classroom materials were produced using a writing workshop approach. The outcomes were distributed free to schools, libraries and Education Departments around the region.

It was a simple premise – involve teachers in the implementation of their own professional development. In the last phase of funding, TTPF was transformed into a regional network based in Samoa and adopted a new acronym – HistoryCOPs (The Council of Presidents of History Teacher Associations) but it lapsed eventually because the cost of travel around the region was prohibitive, and because History and Social Studies could never attract the level of funding from international agencies that went to Science, Environment and Languages. The collapse of the Yen also dramatically affected the level of donor funding.

Outcomes; Publications of the TTPF project

- Our History in our own words
- Report of the Honiara Conference
- Teachers, teaching and History
- Report of the Port Moresby Conference
- A guide to essay writing and SPBEA projects
- 100 Books for a Pacific History Reference Library
- Good Books for schools
- Report of the Honiara Conference
- National History Posters (a set of 23 wall posters)
- Glossary of Historical Terms for Students
- Pacific History, Museums and Cultural centres: A guide for History Teachers
- Pacific History, Teaching and the role of Professional Associations
- Teaching History: A guide for teachers teaching history for the first time

The original proposition in this paper was that change, modernity, development and globalization was being tackled through a conventional, international and regionally structured academic dialogue that had created a “conference system” and library shelves full of bound volumes, CDs and online sites. It was also proposed that success in bottom-up long-term, people-centred problem-solving might be achieved through projects that had tangible outcomes and involved practitioners (and grass-roots communities) in plain old fashioned teamwork with shovels, axes and pencils. This insider-outsider division is simplistic and artificial as there have been many significant improvements resulting from outsider funded and led collaborations over the last fifty years. The argument over reliance on western models, and borrowed values and outside experts and consultants is not new.

Thirty-five years ago the “electrifying” speakers that Ken Inglis had noted in 1973 were all outsiders – Ivan Illich, Lloyd Best and Rene Dumont. Today there are electrifying speakers from within the region – such as a young niVanuatuans Member of Parliament, Ralph Reganvanu, who for the last two years has spoken widely on demanding recognition for village, community and clan-based “traditional economy” and a cultural heritage revival movement as integral factors in national self-reliance. He positions a government’s development policy based on ‘growth’, foreign investment, cash and land acquisition for infrastructure as the enemy.

The massive regional development project aimed at the lives of 20 million people – the Pacific Plan – which ignores “traditional economy” – is on a scale that dwarfs the miniscule TTPF project with its 200 hundred or so Pacific Island History teachers. But is a new building for the Oceanic Customs bureaucrats a more desirable outcome than a newly formed Kiribati History Teachers Association in Tarawa that will offer the professional development for its members that is not provided by the nations own Education Department?

The Waigani seminars with their audience of 400 and seventy to a hundred papers dwarfs the

Moore and Kooyman, op.cit., p.164.
Reganvanu has spoken widely on this topic, including keynote addresses at the PHA conference, Dunedin in December 2007, the AAAPS conference, Canberra April 2008, the “Changing Pacific Policy” symposium at Deakin University, February 2009.
18 delegates at the TTPF writing workshop on “Our government - Our Nation” held in Saipan in 1999. The thousands of pages in the series of published Waigani Seminar proceedings dwarfs the 18 classroom lesson plans presented, reviewed, edited and prepared for publication during the Saipan workshop. But, once the 18 lessons on “Our government - Our nation” are used widely in classrooms, they will be of more value in nation-building, good governance, security and development than any set of thick, bound volumes of erudite conference papers.

Rabi Islanders know the significance of the Miss 15th Arrival Day competition, which commemorates their dumping on Rabi by the British in 1945, but they may not know what the acronym MDG means and the Pacific Plan is not a commonly used phrase on Rabi, nor is its background and content taught in the four primary schools and one secondary school.

These are forced and uneven comparisons because the Pacific needs both levels of dialogue, organization and implementation. Pacific Islanders already demand and are already demonstrating energetic involvement in development, change and growth at the grass-roots level. At the governmental level – at the nation state – there is also a benefit from engaging local thinkers and leaders through the conference system in the same arena as overseas intellectuals, thereby benefitting from global perspectives and holistic, transnational understandings.

The conference system – the Talk-Fest – does serve a useful purpose when its ideas circulate more widely, and it creates as Ron May said “a lively discussion” and is translated into plain talk, and quickly informs legislators and planners practical projects and program. But how often is a travel budget for yet another international, regional or sub-regional talk-fest rescinded and reallocated to twenty or thirty small-scale, local grass-roots events or projects? When will the day come when the fourteen PIF nations send in their reports, audits and recommendations electronically to international and regional meetings and “skype” their oral presentations, and then use the budget allocations for the practical grassroots activities their delegates would have travelled to talk about?

This is not a call for tapering back the conference system, and indeed it is hoped that the Pacific Science Congress, a revived TTPF project and the Waigani seminars surge ahead into a new 21st century series, but it is a renewed call for a revaluation of the comparative benefits of keeping things small and as the t-shirts once said, ‘thinking globally but acting locally’.

---

30 These classroom materials are being made available as free downloads, online with a grant from the Pacific History Association.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 – 7 Feb</td>
<td>9th Australian Urban History/Planning History Conference:</td>
<td>University of the Sunshine Coast Qld,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 8 Feb</td>
<td>Film and History in the Pacific.</td>
<td>Australian National University, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 – 9 Feb</td>
<td>Pacific World and the American West</td>
<td>Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 – 22 Feb</td>
<td>The third UNESCO International Memory of the World Conference: Communities and Memories – a global perspective</td>
<td>National Library of Australia, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – 4 Apr</td>
<td>Conference on Micronesians in Hawai‘i.</td>
<td>University of Hawai‘i Manoa, Honolulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 – 20 Apr</td>
<td>Oceanic Connections: 2nd Conference of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies</td>
<td>ANU, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 8 May</td>
<td>PIMA Oceanic Art Symposium</td>
<td>New Zealand and the Mediterranean:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 July</td>
<td>Putting People First: Intercultural Dialogue and Imagining the Future in Oceania,</td>
<td>Florence, Italy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – 12 July</td>
<td>Photographies: new histories, new practices</td>
<td>ANU, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12 July</td>
<td>New Zealand and the Mediterranean:</td>
<td>Verona, Italy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 July-2 Aug</td>
<td>Su'iaga'ule a le Atuvasa: Threading the Oceania 'Ula; The tenth Festival of Pacific Arts</td>
<td>Pago Pago, American Samoa,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-26 Sept</td>
<td>Folktales and Fairy Tales: Translation, Colonialism, and Cinema</td>
<td>UH Manoa,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-13 Oct</td>
<td>Contemporary Myths in the South Pacific</td>
<td>University of New Caledonia, Noumea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 – 14 Nov</td>
<td>Objet d’Art et Art de L’Onjet; CORAIL</td>
<td>Noumea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 5 Dec</td>
<td>Symposium on Pacific Roots: Heritages and Identities</td>
<td>Fiji at USP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 – 12 Dec</td>
<td>18th Biennial Pacific History Association Conference,</td>
<td>USP, Suva, Fiji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 – 17 Dec</td>
<td>4th Measina a Sāmoa Conference: E lē o le fūsiga po’o le fīsiga a’o le niusina o le fa’asāmoa: In search for the core elements of the fa’asāmoa,</td>
<td>National University of Samoa, Samoa.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>