

The 2015 European Society for Oceanists conference was one of the largest-ever gatherings of scholars of the Pacific. This In Brief reviews the day-long session on Urban Melanesia, convened by two eminent anthropologists: Lamont Lindstrom and Christine Jourdan. In addition to the convenors, the session included a mix of established scholars (Jenny Bryant-Tokalau, Annelin Eriksen, Debra McDougall and Knut Rio) as well as promising early-career researchers (Tait LeFevre, Tim Sharp and Chelsea Wentworth). Presentations included all Melanesian countries: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji, providing the opportunity for interesting cross-regional comparisons but leaving Indonesian West Papua as a major omission. All papers were satisfying works of scholarship that documented and analysed important contemporary issues for Melanesian cities and towns, tracing the contours of emergent social divisions as they are articulated in everyday life, economic activities, housing policies, political forums, new forms of leadership, class and ethnic distinction, and religious discourse.

Each presenter addressed a different aspect of social inequality and its consequences in Melanesian cities. Most Pacific towns began as colonial outposts where 'natives' were second-class citizens. In the post-colonial era, explicit racial exclusion is no longer practised but there are new economic divisions that dictate who is welcome or unwelcome in the contemporary Melanesian city. Frequently, what might be considered 'middle-class' perspectives shape the ways that cities are governed and planned. Sharp's paper on the recent ban on betel nut in Port Moresby provided a striking example of how the informal sector can be marginalised by a politics of space based on middle-class aesthetics or elite imaginings of what appearance a global city should have. Bryant-Tokalau presented on the implications of new housing projects on government-owned land in Fiji. Government investments in upgrading settlements are dwarfed by middle-class housing developments funded by foreign capital that displace urban squatters. Nevertheless, there are non-

government organisations and policy responses that do advocate for the needs of the urban poor in Fiji (Bryant-Tokalau 2014).

As high costs of living eat into their modest incomes, the middle classes are not always flourishing (Cox 2014). Jourdan and Rio each took up the perennial challenge to the budgets of Melanesian townsfolk, namely unsustainable pressures from visiting relatives. Jourdan, foreshadowing the themes of her forthcoming book on middle-class Solomon Islanders, argued that Honiara's middle class is renegotiating kin obligations (cf. Barbara et al. 2015). Within these negotiations, 'fairness' has become a way of explaining the limitations of urban salaries and is often successful in encouraging rural visitors to contribute more during their stays in town. Residents of the Port Vila settlements Rio studies have established local trade stores as a service to the neighbourhood. He argues that this has the effect of setting up new rules for communal sharing that are based on buying from the store, where credit is expressly forbidden and so unreasonable demands from relatives are minimised. However, 'demand-sharing' may still be acceptable for children. Wentworth brought a public health approach to the study of malnutrition among children in Port Vila. In some neighbourhoods, children are able to eat well at local feasts, supplementing their otherwise inadequate diets.

Not all contemporary urban social divisions are framed in terms of class: intergenerational, ethnic and religious cleavages are also in play. LeFevre documented the ongoing legacy of French colonialism in contemporary moral panic over the (Kanak) 'youth crisis' in Noumea. Kanak youth resist being typecast as adrift in time and lacking a future and turn these characterisations back on both traditional leaders and settlers. Lindstrom outlined his Vanuatu-based research on the proliferation of 'respect' as an urban discourse that includes laments about the bad conduct of others (young people, urban settlers) and prescribes ideal civil conduct for the sometimes uneasy situation of strangers

meeting in town. McDougall analysed changing social connections and identities in Honiara: more and more Solomon Islanders struggle to maintain ties with rural kin while working in town. McDougall (2016) argues this is producing more fixed and exclusive groups in town and that new forms of urban 'ethnic' leadership are emerging. Eriksen's paper on Pentecostal Christians in Port Vila demonstrated that practices of exclusion and experiences of alienation in cities can also be articulated in religious practices. For growing numbers of Melanesian Pentecostals, the city is often imagined as a place of spiritual peril, needing to be purged of satanic influences and demanding prayerful vigilance.

During the session, Melissa Demian, a contributor to the previous (2010) European Society for Oceanists session on urban Melanesia, noted that most panellists had represented the city as a problematic space, perhaps reflecting the long tradition of what Connell and Lea (2002) called 'anti-urban bias' in the Pacific, where towns are seen to be bad places of cultural decline, immorality, poverty and crime. Demian challenged presenters to give an account of Melanesian cities and towns that captures the diverse motivations of the populations that seek out urban life and does not simply represent them as mistaken hopefuls drawn to the 'bright lights'. Some more positive renderings of urban Melanesia were assembled in response to this question. However, considerable work seems to be needed in order to articulate the productive possibilities for urbanisation in the region (e.g. Richards (2015) on youth culture in Manokwari, West Papua).

In an era when town life is the norm for most of the population in several Pacific countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands), the study of urbanisation in Melanesia is still strangely marginal. With exceptions — notably the presenters in this panel — many scholars, policymakers and Pacific politicians and their publics still cling to the romance of the village as the authentic mode of social life for Pacific islanders. This session provided rich accounts of the lived experience of urban Melanesians and examined the emergent social and economic structures (and accompanying political debates) that are reshaping life in the towns. For the most part

this was done at a local level, focusing on particular communities within a given urban setting but giving less attention to the workings of the city at a larger scale. The session added to the growing momentum of new scholarship addressing the challenges and opportunities of urban Melanesia, not least around economic questions (Sharp et al. 2015), gender (Demian forthcoming; Spark 2011) and class divisions (Barbara et al. 2015; Besnier 2009).

Author Notes

John Cox is a research fellow with SSGM.

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