

# New Zealand, the Cook Islands, and Free Association

Evelyn Marsters<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Max Beer Straße 18, Berlin-Mitte, 10119 Berlin, Germany

DOI: 10.23791/462125

**Abstract:** The Free Association arrangement between New Zealand and the Cook Islands is a pivotal force behind the movement of Cook Islanders between the two countries. Part of the Cook Islanders' way of life is understanding and leveraging the different opportunities that exist across the Cook Islands, New Zealand and further afield. This paper introduces the Cook Islands and New Zealand Free Association agreement and provides background to the historical and contemporary political relationships between New Zealand and the Cook Islands. This leads into a short discussion on the different concepts of citizenship and independence, and how these relate to the Cook Islands transnational population. This paper began as a panel discussion on Sovereignty movements in the Pacific Islands at the annual meeting of German "Pazifik-Netzwerk" and raises many important questions about "Where to from here for the Cook Islands?"

**Keywords:** Cook Islands, New Zealand, Free Association, Transnationalism, Sovereignty

[Submitted as Research Note: 15 June 2016, Acceptance of the revised manuscript: 02 August 2016]

Cook Islanders are voyagers interested in life beyond their home island(s). The contemporary movement between the Cook Islands and New Zealand has created dense networks of ties which connect people physically and emotionally across distances. Air travel facilitates these ties with increased frequency of movement to many other places, and new technologies have provided wider access to communications (Crocombe, 2003). The density of ties connecting the Cook Islands to New Zealand, and vice versa, is not unique to the Pacific, with similar patterns of mobility and international relationships existing globally (Portes, 2003). This paper introduces the Cook Islands and New Zealand Free Association agreement and the establishment of a Cook Islands transnational social field. Extensive literature on the diverse characteristics of Pacific transnationalism already exists, and this paper does not set out to duplicate it (Lee & Francis, 2009; Macpherson, 2012; Nahkid, 2009; Spoonley, 2001). Instead, this paper provides background to the historical and contemporary political relationships between New Zealand and the Cook Islands and leads into a short discussion on the different concepts of citizenship and independence, and how these relate to the Cook Islands transnational population. This paper began as a panel discussion on Sovereignty movements in the Pacific Islands at the annual meeting of the German "Pazifik-Netzwerk" and raises many important questions about "where to from here for the Cook Islands?"



Figure 1: Cook Islands Flag, Rarotonga



## A brief history of the relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand

The colonial relationships between the Cook Islands and New Zealand occurred during a period when New Zealand was becoming responsible for administration in the Pacific Territories at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1901, New Zealand took over as the colonial power in many parts of the Pacific, including the Cook Islands and Niue (Crocombe, 1979). A colonial government remained in the Cook Islands until 1964 when self-government was discussed, planned and approved at the Sessions of the Cook Islands Assembly and by the New Zealand Parliament (Crocombe, 1979; Strickland, 1979). This constitution was initiated by the New Zealand government during a period when colonial administrations in the Pacific were retreating, and the self-determination of indigenous populations was heavily promoted by organisations such as the United Nations (UN). Strickland (1979) argued that many Cook Islanders believed that this was the:

... opportunity to recreate nationhood in the Cook Islands and to ensure that the governance of the Cook Islands was in the hands of men and women dedicated to the cause of greater prosperity and increased social welfare of the Cook Islands (p.9).

The Cook Islands and New Zealand also recognised that the Cook Islands would have difficulty in sustaining a fully independent national state at such a small scale (Strickland, 1979). Therefore the response of both govern-

ments was to favour that the Cook Islands be in 'Free Association' with New Zealand. Free Association represented an alternative to independence that allowed Cook Islanders to govern their own islands and have full responsibility for external affairs. It also allowed Cook Islanders to retain New Zealand citizenship, use New Zealand currency, and to call upon the New Zealand government to assist in defence and foreign affairs matters (New Zealand Government, 1999). One of the most significant features of the Free Association relationship is that it continues to afford Cook Islanders the advantage of New Zealand citizenship. As such, Free Association between the Cook Islands and New Zealand plays a role in not only the population mobility of Cook Islanders, but also their access to social welfare and other benefits while in New Zealand.

Currently, more Cook Islanders reside in New Zealand than in the Cook Islands, a pattern which can be traced back to the rising number of Cook Islanders migrating to New Zealand after the Second World War (Loomis, 1990; Macpherson, 2012). During this period, Cook Islanders were attracted to New Zealand for employment opportunities in primary and manufacturing industries (Macpherson, 2012). However, Cook Islanders had been present in New Zealand since the nineteenth century (Bertram, 2012). Mallon (2012) refers to early movement of Pacific people between the islands, New Zealand and elsewhere, as "regional traffic" (p.92), conveying not only the establishment of main thoroughfares

between the Pacific Islands and New Zealand, but also disrupting the notion that New Zealand only became connected to the Pacific through the migration of the 1960s and 1980s.

Afterwards, the extensive outward migration of Cook Islanders during the 1960s and 1970s, facilitated by a newly opened international airport in 1974, led to the growth of Cook Islands communities resident in New Zealand and large scale depopulation in the Cook Islands (Barcham, et al. 2009; Crocombe, 2003; Koteka-Wright, 2007; Spoonley, 2001). The other key moment in the Cook Islands' political history, which heavily influenced large-scale migration from the Cook Islands to New Zealand was in the 1990s when economic restructuring in the Cook Islands halved public sector jobs and removed government subsidies for basic goods and services (Murray & Overton, 2011; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2005). For example, in 1995, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Cook Islands government providing them with the responsibility of investigating the economic situation of the nation. The Cook Islands at this time had been unable to meet international loan repayments and pay public servants and other creditors. The ADB, as a major lender of development finance to the Cook Islands, along with other aid donors refused payments to the government until an investigation had taken place (Rasmussen, 1998). During this investigation, which lasted a year, it was discovered by the ADB that development programmes had been overly ambitious, aid funding had declined from New Zealand, and costs associated with an inflated public service were high (Asian Development Bank, 1995). The solution, according to the ADB was a restructuring 'rescue' package that mirrored the economic reforms implemented in New Zealand from 1984–1993. The package, which was termed the 'Economic Reform Process' (ERP), was designed by representatives from the ADB, New Zealand and the Cook Islands. The overall aim was to reduce numbers of government employees, by shifting towards 'user pays' for public services, enhancing government accountability and stimulating private sector investment (Asia Development Bank, 1995; Pragnall, 2003). The implementation of the

Source: Evelyn Marsters 2010.



Figure 2: Parliament of the Cook Islands, Rarotonga.

ERP, which is referred to within the Cook Islands by the local population as 'the Transition', was funded by another loan from the ADB (Pragnall, 2003).

The economic restructuring in the Cook Islands, as part of the neo-liberal economic development of the 1990s, influenced population decline there among both the Southern and Northern groups. Murray & Overton (2011) capture some of the intensity of this period of time for Cook Islanders as:

... a very rapid and harsh structural adjustment. New Zealand, its (Cook Islands) former colonial power, in concert with the Asian Development Bank, imposed a severe cut in direct budgetary support for the Cook Islands government in 1996. As a result nearly two thirds of the country's civil servants lost their jobs more or less overnight (p.276).

'The Transition' for Cook Islanders caused widespread unemployment, en-masse migration to New Zealand, and the dislocation of families and communities. In some cases, the responses of Cook Islanders to global forces set in motion in the 1980s and 1990s have been positive, with the creation of transnational communities as one example (Nahkid, 2009). However, it has also been argued that these communities have had heterogeneous sets of transnational behaviours and activities (Dunsford, et al. 2011), and exacerbated impoverishment or declining opportunities have also occurred (Alexeyeff, 2011). According to Spoonley, Bedford, & Macpherson (2003):

Without doubt, the circulation of people, capital, goods and ideas all represent important transnational linkages that have contributed to the development of Pacific peoples in their island homes and 'homes abroad'. However, the 1980s and 1990s have also marked an important period of economic adjustment as states have sought to respond to new global forms of capitalist production and consumption, often by radical measures. In the case of Pacific peoples, this restructuring has led to new or enhanced forms of impoverishment (p.39).

The depopulation of the Cook Islands during the 1980s and 1990s has had a lasting effect on the shape of the Cook Islands population and the trend of outward migration to New Zealand and beyond continues.

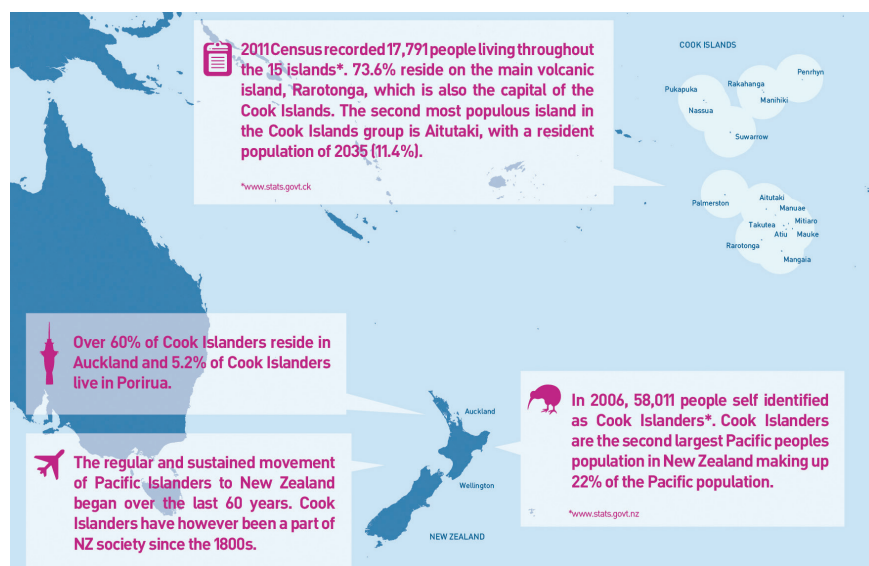


Figure 3: Overview of NZ-Cook Islanders relations

### Tracing the edges of the Cook Islands Transnational Social Field

The Free Association arrangement between New Zealand and the Cook Islands is a pivotal force behind the movement of Cook Islanders between the two countries. Part of the Cook Islanders' way of life is understanding and leveraging the different opportunities that exist across the Cook Islands, New Zealand and further afield. The creation of a Cook Islands transnational social field has emerged as a new conceptual understanding of the constellations of Cook Islanders' lives stretching beyond nation state boundaries (Marsters, 2014). The scale of population mobility in a globalised world and the "tempo driven by revolutions in communications and transport technology" (Daulaire, 1999, p.1) is the new face of global movement of people, goods, ideas and capital and while nation states still exert influence, engagement with what has been coined a "transnational social field" is now common (Glick-Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1995). Under transnationalism the nation-state is interrogated via questioning the basic assumptions of how people organise their lives. The state remains a major influence on livelihoods, but this sits alongside people's own influences and logic in determining their lives (Hannerz, 1996). Crocombe (2003) states that "Cook Islanders of today are genetically and culturally new people, creating new culture, deriving from the past and present, the local and the international" (p.14).

As a group of people, Cook Islanders live across many boundaries with atoll, island, and national borders actively navigated for reasons such as education, employment, celebrations, ceremonies, and healthcare (Alexeyeff, 2008; Koteka-Wright, 2007; Horan, 2012; Marsters, Lewis & Friesen, 2006; Marsters, 2011; Underhill, 1989). The weaving of livelihoods between the Cook Islands and New Zealand by Cook Islanders is a phenomenon which is often taken for granted, and Free Association as an alternative to independence is often supported in an unquestioning fashion. However, small groups of people, within both the current Cook Islands government and the transnational Cook Islands communities, are raising important questions about the future of the Cook Islands' sovereignty. The question is: will the links between citizenship and state remain in this multiple form, or will the concepts of identity and citizenship continue to evolve?

### Sovereignty, Free Association or Independence?

The specifics of the Free Association agreement have become opaque over time as the concepts of identity, citizenship, borders, place and economy have become, for some people, fluid across space and through time (see Vertovec, 2004) and many Cook Islanders consider their nation to be operating in a state of full independence. For example, prior to being renamed 'Te Maeva Nui', the annual Cook Islands constitution celebrations were referred to by many as 'Indepen-

Source: Evelyn Marsters.





Source: Evelyn Marsters 2010.

Figure 4: Migration Mural on the side of the library and museum in Rarotonga.

dence Day Celebrations’ or ‘Constitution Day Celebrations’. In the minds of Cook Islanders, the weeklong event celebrates the combination of nationhood, self-government, and independence. This is a reflection of the fact that the Cook Islands’ political relationship with New Zealand has become known as operating in a simultaneously independent, integrated, and interdependent manner. Furthermore, many Cook Islanders uncritically perceive that the Cook Islands have reached their final point in the trajectory of economic development, self-determination, and sovereignty.

The intention here is not to imply political apathy among Cook Islanders. Quite the contrary. Many among the Cook Islands population are politically active at multiple scales, at the village, island, national and New Zealand level. I am a New Zealand-born Cook Islander who has focussed multiple research projects on trying to uncover the various manifestations of Cook Islands transnational livelihoods and I have some understanding of how Cook Islanders leverage the ties that tether them to New Zealand. For my family, and for many others, New Zealand citizenship remains a most tightly protected dimension of Free Association by Cook Islanders, affording Cook Islanders notions of independence whilst offering integration with New Zealand.

In 2015, Henry Puna, the current Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, reopened the conversation regarding the Cook Islands’ aspirations for United Nations Membership. The dialogue between Henry Puna, the

giving position on the global world stage. In an official statement, Henry Puna stated that “it made sense as a maturing and growing country to aspire to be part of the UN...Our country is strong enough to stand on its own feet. We are proud of that fact” (Kumar, 2015). Henry Puna’s aspiration for UN memberships demonstrates an openness to explore new possibilities for the Cook Islands political trajectory, and a willingness to reconceptualise the Cook Islands existing international relationships in this globalised era. However, the conversation regarding UN membership in this case was, and has in the past been, abruptly stymied because of the uncertainty these questions pose in regards to New Zealand citizenship. The appeal for UN Membership is a divisive issue in the Cook Islands Parliament and the Democratic Party has publically expressed opposition to the formulation of a UN membership bid (Kumar, 2015). According to the Democratic Party, the progression of a UN bid will threaten the rights to New Zealand citizenship for Cook Islanders, and the framing of this dichotomy has been used to gain favour with Cook Islands transnational public, as well with as the current New Zealand Government. In a statement from the spokesperson for John Key, Prime Minister of New Zealand, it was made clear that New Zealand would not support the Cook Islands membership to the UN under the existing constitutional status, and that any change to the constitutional status would change the shared citizenship agreement (Kumar, 2015).

New Zealand government and the Opposition party in the Cook Islands party has appeared only in popular media, nevertheless the different standpoints on this issue illustrate an ongoing tension between the ties that bind the Cook Islands to New Zealand, and the Cook Islands’ emer-

The bid for UN membership by the Cook Islands has not been advanced, however the topic has seen the re-emergence of questions regarding the future of the Cook Islands. Since the formalisation of the Free Association agreement in 1965, the Cook Islands have reached an “advanced stage of Free Association” and have developed their own governance structures, political capacity and capability. The Cook Islands’ government participates in a range of international relationships beyond New Zealand, and is party to many multilateral agreements but the existing relationships do not bring into question Cook Islanders’ rights to New Zealand Citizenship under Free Association. In this current age where memberships in international organisations and multilateral agreements exert real influence on governance structures and economic sustainability, the Cook Islands, while remaining tethered to New Zealand, needs to re-evaluate historical and contemporary political relationships.

## Conclusion

Free Association has become a taken-for-granted, positive outcome of the historical colonial relationship by both New Zealand and the Cook Islands. Cook Islanders navigate the complicated networks created by this relationship, and in a sense, navigate pathways via citizenship to New Zealand and further afield. There is a lack of information and critical analysis about the motivations for seeking UN membership on behalf of Henry Puna’s government, and the possible reasons why New Zealand continues to halt conversations in such a paternalistic manner. Beyond the small statements generated by the media about the Cook Islands, New Zealand citizenship, and UN membership, the people of the Cook Islands in both the islands and in New Zealand are not substantially informed on this issue. Furthermore, Cook Islanders’ participation in the discussions regarding our sovereignty and citizenship is as limited now, as it was in the 1960s.

The relationship between new modalities of aid, dependencies, sovereignty, and pervasive forms of colonial authority needs to be investigated in the Cook Islands context (see Banks & McGregor, 2011; Murray & Overton, 2011; Teaiwa, 2012).

On the international world stage, the Cook Islands now operates in a manner that has evolved and expanded beyond a focused binary relationship with New Zealand. The conversations regarding Cook Islands' membership to the UN are likely to resurface, and when they do, substantive critical analysis of how this could exist outside of, or within relationships with New Zealand must be conducted. The potential loss of New Zealand citizenship should not be used to prohibit the re-evaluation of the Cook Islands constitution in today's globalised political environment.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers for their suggested changes to this paper.

## References

Alexeyeff, K. (2011). *Bingo and budgets: gambling with global capital*. In M. Patterson, & M. Macintyre (Eds.), *Managing Modernity in the Western Pacific* (pp. 201-227). Queensland: University of Queensland Press.

Alexeyeff, K. (2008). *Neoliberalism, Mobility, and Cook Islands Men in Transit in Changing Patterns of Pacific Masculinities*. *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 19(2), 143-161.

Asian Development Bank. (1995). *Cook Islands: Performance, Issues and Strategies*. Rarotonga: Office of Pacific Studies.

Banks, G., & McGregor, A. (2011). *Pacific 'Solutions' and Imaginaries: Reshaping Pacific relations or re-colonising the 'sea of islands'?* *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 52(3), 233-235.

Barcham, M., Scheyvens, R., & Overton, J. (2009). *New Polynesian Triangle: Rethinking Polynesian migration and development in the Pacific*. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 50(3), 322-337.

Bertram, G. (2012). *Trade and Exchange: Economic Links between the Pacific and New Zealand in the Twentieth Century*. In S. Mallon, K. Mahina-Tuia & D. Salesa (Ed.), *Tangata O Le Moana New Zealand and the People of the Pacific* (pp. 201-220). Wellington: Te Papa Press.

Crocombe, R. (2003). *Introduction*. In R. Crocombe, & M. Crocombe (Eds.), *Cook Islands Culture: Akono'anga Maori* (pp. 11-21). Suva: University of the South Pacific, Institute of Pacific Studies.

Crocombe, R. (1979). *Forces Shaping the Arena*. In R. Crocombe (Ed.), *Cook Island Politics - The inside story* (pp. 1-6). Auckland: Polynesian Press.

Daulaire, N. (1999). *Globalisation and Health*. *Development*, 42(4), 22-24.

Dunsford, D., Park, J., Littleton, J., Friesen, W., Herda, P., Neuwal, P., Blackmore, P., Mahua, S., Grant, J., Kearns, R., Bryder, L., & Underhill-Sem, Y. (2011).

*Better Lives: The struggle for health of transnational Pacific peoples in New Zealand 1950-2000. Research in Anthropology and Linguistics*, 9.

Glick-Schiller, N., Basch, L., & Blanc-Szanton, C. (1995). *From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration*. *Anthropology Quarterly*, 68(1), 48-63.

Hannerz, U. (1996). *Transnational Connections. Culture, people, places*. London: Routledge.

Horan, J. (2012). *Tivaivai in the Cook Islands Ceremonial Economy (PhD in Anthropology)*. University of Auckland, Auckland.

Koteka-Wright, E. (2007). *'Te u'u no te akau roa': Migration and the Cook Islands* (Master's thesis). Massey University, New Zealand.

Kumar, R. June 18, 2015, *UN push nothing to do with aid, says PM*, 9311th edn, *Cook Islands News*, Rarotonga.

Lee, H., & Francis, Steve Tupai. (2009). *Migration and transnationalism: Pacific perspectives*. Acton, A.C.T.: ANU E Press.

Loomis, T. (1990). *Cook Island remittances*. In J. Connell (Ed.), *Migration and Development in the South Pacific* (Vol. Pacific Research Monograph). (pp. 61-81). Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian University.

Macpherson, C. (2012). *Empowering Pacific Peoples. Community Organisations in New Zealand*. In S. Mallon, K. Mahina-Tuia & D. Salesa (Ed.), *Tangata O Le Moana New Zealand and the People of the Pacific* (pp. 179-199). Wellington: Te Papa Press.

Mallon, S. (2012). *Little Known Lives. Pacific Islanders in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand*. In S. Mallon, K. Mahina-Tuia, & D. Salesa. (Ed.), *Tangata O Le Moana New Zealand and the People of the Pacific* (pp. 77-96). Wellington: Te Papa Press.

Marsters, E. (2004). *Pacific Flow-(Re)Versing Remittances in the Cook Islands (Master's of Science)*. University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

Marsters, E., Lewis, N., & Friesen, W. (2006). *Pacific flows: The fluidity of remittances in the Cook Islands*. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 47(1), 31-44.

Marsters, E. (2013). *A transnational syndemic: Cook Islanders and their experiences of TB and diabetes*, (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Auckland, Auckland.

Marsters, E. (2014). *Cook Islander's Transnational Responses to Health*. *New Zealand Population Review*, 40, 127-142.

Murray, W. E., & Overton, J. (2011). *The inverse sovereignty effect: Aid, scale and neostructuralism in Oceania*. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 52(3), 272-284.



Figure 5: Pareau stall at the Punanga Nui Markets, Rarotonga.

Nakbid, C. (2009). *Conclusion: The Concept and Circumstances of Pacific Migration and Transnationalism*. In H. Lee, & S. Tupai-Francis (Eds.), *Migration and Transnationalism: Pacific Perspectives* (pp. 215-230). Canberra: ANU E-Press.

New Zealand Government. (1999). *New Zealand Statement at the ADB Consultative Group Meeting on the Cook Islands*. Noumea.

Portes, A. (2003). *Conclusion: Theoretical convergences and empirical evidence in the study of immigration transnationalism*. *International Migration Review*, 37(3), 874-892.

Pragnell, A. (2003). *'Good Governance' in a Local Context: Devolution and Local Institutions on Aitutia* (Unpublished MA thesis). University of Auckland, Auckland.

Rasmussen, W. (1998). *Polynesia in review: Issues and Events, 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998*. *Contemporary Pacific*, 11(1), 164-175.

Secretariat of the Pacific Community. (2005). *Demographic Profile of the Cook Islands: 1996-2002*. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

Spoonley, P. (2001). *Transnational Pacific Communities: Transforming Politics of Place and Identity*. In C. Macpherson (Ed.), *Tangata O Te Moana Nui, Evolving Identities of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (pp. 81-96). New Zealand: Dunmore Press.

Spoonley, P., Bedford, R., & Macpherson, C. (2003). *Divided loyalties and fractured sovereignty: transnationalism and the nation-state in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 29(1), 27-46.

Strickland, M. (1979). *Self-Government and the New Colonialism Cook Island Politics - the inside story* (pp. 7-16). Auckland: Polynesian Press.

Underhill, Y. (1989). *Population mobility as a household strategy: the case of Mamihihi, Cook Islands*. (Unpublished Master's thesis in Geography), University of Hawaii. Honolulu.

Vertovec, S. (2004). *Migrant Transnationalism and Modes of Transformation*. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 970-1001.

**Corresponding author: Evelyn Marsters [evelyn@impolitikal.com] has a PhD in Development Studies from the University of Auckland. Her research interests include migration, transnationalism, health inequalities, infectious diseases, and indigenous research methodologies. Her work to date has focussed on the Pacific region, especially the Cook Islands and New Zealand. Mother of two, she currently lives in Berlin. She is a freelance research consultant and Deputy Editor at Impolitikal.com.**