

OF FIELD ENCOUNTERS AND METROPOLITAN DEBATES  
Research and the making and meaning of the Melanesian 'race' during  
demographic decline

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*ABSTRACT.* In this article, I trace the significance of Melanesians' psychological and intellectual capacities for the making and meaning of racial and demographic knowledge from 1900 to 1935. I begin with descriptions of field encounters in the New Hebrides to discuss how knowledge about race and depopulation was collected, and then move to the meanings of the Melanesian race in researchers' reports of depopulation in the New Hebrides. I conclude with a discussion of how knowledge of Melanesians figured in metropolitan debates on race and demographic decline. For the historiography of 'race' or 'human variation', depopulation offers an interesting context in which to explore notions of 'race' because population decline was recognised to be such a complex issue. Depopulation provided a context in which to debate 'hybridity', 'racial mixing' and concomitant concepts like heredity, the environment and cultural adaptation. Through an understanding of what Melanesians meant to these researchers in both field encounters and demographic debates, I argue, we can see both the malleability of racial thinking and the intransigence of racial categorisation at that time.

The ambiguity of those sets of relationships between the somatic and the inner self, the phenotype and the genotype, pigment shade and psychological sensibility are not slips in, or obstacles to, racial thinking but rather conditions of its proliferation and possibility (Stoler 1997:187).

In this article, I trace the significance of Melanesians' psychological and intellectual capacities for the making and meaning of racial and demographic knowledge from 1900 to 1935. I begin with descriptions of field encounters in the New Hebrides to discuss how knowledge about race and depopulation was collected, and then move to the meanings of the Melanesian race in researchers' reports of depopulation in the New Hebrides. I conclude with a discussion of how knowledge of Melanesians figured in metropolitan debates on race and demographic decline. Through an understanding of what Melanesians meant to these researchers in both field encounters and demographic debates, I argue, we can see both the malleability of racial thinking and the intransigence of racial categorisation at that time. What is at stake here is identifying the practices and processes through which ostensibly scientific differences between human groups were pro-

duced, shaken and stabilised in demographic research in colonial contexts.<sup>1</sup> In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the formation of race was debated in terms of the extent to which biological, heritable, environmental or cultural factors were at play, but where Melanesians were concerned, the categories were maintained much more rigidly positing differences based on psychological and intellectual attributes.

In the early twentieth century, Pacific peoples were of interest to physical anthropologists and biologists in large part for what supposedly lab-like isolated populations could reveal about key disciplinary concerns like heredity and adaptation (Lipphardt 2012). By the 1920s, when racial mixing, especially recent ‘crosses’ became an important scientific topic (Lipphardt 2012), the region had become significant for studying this theme (Anderson 2009a), particularly because ‘racial crosses’ between Europeans, Asians, and Pacific islanders were thought to be recent. Accepted biological concepts of the interwar period recognised the vexed possibility (vexed because humans could not be studied in labs like *Drosophila* or fungi) of racial classification through serological or anthropometric means<sup>2</sup> and held that ‘hereditary material remained relatively impervious to its environment determining the potential for growth during the organism’s life time’ (Anderson 2009a:144). Intellectual and psychological capacities were widely held to be heritable in this respect (e.g. Roberts 1927:359). These premises, Warwick Anderson demonstrates, can take racial mixing to different conclusions; they could at once mean white triumph in Australia and the invigoration of Pacific peoples through hybridisation (2009a). These varying possibilities, Anderson claims, indicate the potential ambiguities of racial thinking in connection with population growth or decline in the Pacific in the interwar period. Here, I argue that the meaning of the Melanesian race, especially in contrast to the optimism shown in respect of the potential of racial mixing for Polynesians, shows another aspect of the ambiguous nature of the ostensibly objective study of human variation. The scientific understanding of the depopulation of Melanesia brought together many significant strands of racial debates on the environment and heritability in respect of a population’s viability, and Melanesians’ experiences were taken as evidence of the significance of the relationship between culture, the environment and the mind for the reproduction and survival of a population. The effects of the environment on Melanesians were entry points for both liberal and conservative contributions to debates about human potential and differences. Still, from field encounters to metropolitan debates, researchers’ discussions of Melanesians’ psychological attributes reproduced differences between populations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Demography was not yet a distinct discipline, but a growing number of biologists, physical anthropologists, geneticists, birth control activists and eugenicists conducted qualitative and quantitative research on population growth and decline.

<sup>2</sup> There were other, less common means of ostensibly measuring race, for example, by comparing lung capacity or colour blindness.

<sup>3</sup> In making these points, I will quote some passages from researchers’ texts that are at best distasteful and at worst profoundly racist. I quote them with some trepidation, but I have found this unavoidable

Bringing encounters between Europeans and indigenous people in Oceania to the heart of historical narratives has been shown to have important analytical significance, for

[...] even in the midst of massacre and revenge, there was a meeting of meanings, of bodies and minds, whereby pre-existing understandings, preconceptions from both sides of the encounter, were engaged, brought into confrontation and dialogue, mutual influence and ultimately mutual transformation (Jolly and Tcherkézoff 2009:1).

Furthermore, this emphasis is especially relevant for encounters in field research contexts in general because of the recognition of the analytical importance of the materiality of scientific practices for postcolonial science studies.<sup>4</sup> This is pertinent in analysing research on human variation in particular in order, as Chris Ballard indicates, to ‘focus on embodied encounters as a critical locus or moment in both the performance and production of raciological knowledge’ (2008:340). Describing the encounters and scientific practices that contributed to the production of such knowledge provides a local specificity to the discourse on the extinction of ‘primitive races’ that Patrick Brantlinger (2003) has so lucidly described.

One of my aims in using encounters as an analytical point of departure to frame both an aspect of the colonial history of the New Hebrides and the historiography of race and demography is to stress the importance of indigenous knowledge and social organisation. I share with Bronwen Douglas ‘a conviction that colonial tropes, classifications and practices were partly shaped by indigenous contexts, actions and desires, in complex, cryptic dialectic with the colonisers’ experience, fantasies and phobias on the periphery’ (1999:163; emphasis in the original). With this in mind, as far as is possible, I call attention to the indigenous presence that shaped the form that European scientific representations could take, to build on the analysis of European representations of race in the Pacific that Christine Dureau and Morris Low emphasise (1999:145).

For the historiography of ‘race’ or ‘human variation’, depopulation offers an interesting context in which to explore notions of ‘race’ because population decline was recognised to be such a complex issue. It also provided a context in which to debate ‘hybridity’, ‘racial mixing’ and concomitant concepts like heredity, the environment and cultural adaptation. The relationship between race and population politics in the early twentieth century has been examined for its convergence with eugenics in Britain and Europe (e.g. Schneider 1990, Soloway 1990), as well as in colonial demography, for example, in east Africa (Ittmann 2010), but the importance of Oceania in both racial

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if I am to make arguments deconstructing their categorical claims by showing their performative nature. I hope that this language of the past, which produces primordial differences, might act as a constant warning against any repetition of such primordial claims in the present.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson (2009b:393). By ‘scientific practices’ I am referring to the broad networks of activity by which data deemed scientific by contemporary actors were identified, collected, stored etc.

and population thinking has not yet been sufficiently studied (Douglas 2008:3). While typically racial knowledge was scientifically produced through anthropometry, and to a lesser extent serological data, at that time depopulation was an unfolding process used to debate other aspects of the scientific understandings of human variation. After a discussion of the context in the New Hebrides, I move to describe the making and meaning of the Melanesian race in field encounters between Pacific islanders and European researchers. I then discuss the multiple meanings and reproduction of the Melanesian race in debates about depopulation and race mixing.

### CONTEXT

Reports of many deaths and fewer than expected births had been coming out of the New Hebrides since the mid 1800s. In 1906 an Anglo-French condominium, the New Hebrides, was formed, creating a joint sphere of influence from which an independent Vanuatu emerged in 1980. During the years under consideration in this article, from 1900 to 1935, the Condominium's influence was limited, to the chagrin of missionaries and researchers, even when district agents were appointed to Tanna, Santo and Malekula in 1912 (Woodward 2002:27). The Condominium's strategy of governance could be described as indirect in that it had very few resources and so generally achieved its goals by giving power to local chiefs and encouraging villages to maintain themselves in ways that promoted a sense of local independence (Rodman 1987:164).

The influence of Protestant and to a much lesser extent Catholic missionaries waxed and waned but still was more of a significant presence in people's lives than the colonial government. The expansion of a plantation economy proceeded slowly, impeded by a lack of labourers, part due to widespread depopulation and in part because indigenous people continued to have access to land for survival and thus were not compelled to work for cash. The French imported indentured labourers from the Gulf of Tonkin region of French Indochina. Miriam Meyerhoff notes that 'there were nearly 6,000 Vietnamese workers in Vanuatu in 1929, 3,700 men, 1,200 women and 1,000 children' (2002:47). There were areas of the New Hebrides where indigenous people refused to engage with either missionaries or planters.

Several researchers spent time in the New Hebrides in the first three decades of the twentieth century. W.H.R. Rivers (1864–1922) travelled to Melanesia from 1907 to 1908 and again from 1914 to 1915, collecting genealogies from the Banks, Torres, Pentecost, Ambrym and Aneitum from key informants. From 1910 to 1912, Felix Speiser (1880–1949) travelled throughout the archipelago, measuring people's height, hair, eye colour, skin colour, gait and body odour, and constructing indices calculated from body measurements. He also took a keen interest in material culture and initiation rites. Over his career, he amassed a collection of 400 skulls, sets of measurements from approximately

500 people and 1620 field photographs (Kaufmann 2000:212). He collected a sizeable amount of material culture that he brought back to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel. Over the course of three trips, John Randall Baker (1900–1984) conducted research on insect, plant and animal reproduction (intersex pigs among them) in constant climatic conditions, climbed to the top of the highest mountain (Mt. Tabwemasana) and took an interest in rituals. From June to September 1924, Sylvester Lambert (1882–1947), together with Patrick A. Buxton (1892–1955), travelled throughout the archipelago on the British government yacht, the *Euphrosyne*, and stayed at the British Residency with the Smith-Rewse family while in Port Vila. The French resident Commissioner, Henri d'Arboussier, was also 'cordial' to the researchers which demonstrated to them 'his belief in measures for the generation of the native races' (NHBS 1924:2–3). While Buxton focused his research on malaria and filariasis, Lambert conducted hookworm surveys that entailed collecting faecal samples and holding health education lectures as they travelled (NHBS 1924:28).

As their various research activities might indicate, these men did not arrive or leave the New Hebrides with unified theoretical models of race, human variation, cultural change and the possibilities for indigenous people. Speiser was working within a framework of 'Kulturkomplexe',<sup>5</sup> while Rivers was developing diffusionism. Baker came to have a strong interest in the place of heredity – even in intelligence – and this led to his support of eugenics (Kenny 2004:408–409, Schaffer 2008:166–170). Lambert was active in promoting Pacific islanders' medical education in Fiji, though not to the point of training them to become fully fledged physicians, though they carried out medical work nevertheless and gained the respect of the local people (Widmer 2010). Still, with different disciplinary trainings, the researchers shared a commitment to the scientific method and a concern for ending depopulation. They did agree on the dire nature of the problem, that there was a significant role for the Condominium to play in improving the health situation of the New Hebrides, and that demarcating difference, both between Europeans and indigenous people and within the indigenous population, was the key to analysing the problem. While simultaneously making general statements about 'Melanesians' and recognising cultural and biological variation within the New Hebrides, the researchers also made internal differentiations within the 'native race', using the differences between 'bush' natives and Christian natives as significant variables to compare death and birth rates and stipulating what should be done to fix these problems.

In brief, all of these authors made recommendations that entailed administrative involvement in the service of saving lives. Rivers thought the remedy should be for government and missionaries to work together in order to 'modify the old customs and institutions of the people to preserve enough to maintain interest while removing all those

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<sup>5</sup> *Kulturkomplexe* were thought of as 'sets of structurally linked elements or culture traits' (Kaufmann 2000:203–204). Such markers of human variation were allegedly the result of long historical processes and were distinct from evolutionary biological formations.

features which conflict with the ideals of modern civilization' (1922a:107). This would 'give him [the Melanesian] that renewed interest in life to which the health of people is mainly due' (1922a:113). Speiser argued for changes to plantation labour practices, so that people would only work on plantations near their villages (as opposed to being absent for three years), and should be allowed to go home one weekend per month, to see their wives, and so that they do not become alienated from their culture (1922:57–58). Baker's suggestion was to transport people to the island of Gaua in northern Vanuatu and then put them under a twenty-year quarantine enforced by the Condominium to allow the population to regenerate and grow under natural conditions (1929a:75–80). Lambert advocated training indigenous medical practitioners to deliver primary health care and public health measures (1924) and Buxton recommended an 'industrial branch of missions to encourage participation in the growing cash economy' (1926:433).

The researchers also shared a frustration over the lack of vital statistics and census data in the New Hebrides. And, as I will show, they put their trust in Rivers' genealogies or used his genealogical method themselves to document the extent of the depopulation and to document the decline in terms of both a high death rate and a low fertility rate.

#### *FIELD ENCOUNTERS AND OTHER MINDS*

While in the New Hebrides, pursuing their various research interests, the researchers developed common strategies to do their work. While infrastructure, equipment and the organisation of the material side of research in the field sciences crucially shapes the possibilities for research, adapting to the pre-existing social relationships of their research assistants and research subjects was key in this respect.

The interaction between the researchers and their local assistants was one common respect in which the sociality of field surveys affected the pace, if not the shape, of the former's research in the New Hebrides. The descriptions of research assistants are significant for what they reveal about contemporary distinctions between Europeans and indigenous people based on the possibility of rational thinking. Rivers dutifully acknowledged help from John Pantutun and John Maresere, indicating:

They showed such interest and intelligence in the task that it was clear how great might be our hopes for the future of Melanesia and Polynesia if their peoples were given a fair chance. These two men were doubtless above the average of their fellows, but their capacity shows how much might be done by the encouragement of independent industry and the preservation of such features of native culture as do not conflict with the better aspects of our civilization (1914:iix–ix).

Speiser hired boys from Ambrym to help explain his intentions when arriving in a village (Kaufmann 2000:210). Baker hired native assistants as guides, on one expedition as many as 41, to carry his equipment, which he said was mainly food. Baker resented feed-

ing his 'carriers', but T.F. Bird, a member of the 1933 Baker expedition, attempted to respect food taboos according to which a chief needed to eat food cooked on a separate fire, which at times meant difficulties for their expedition (Bird 1935:224–225). Buxton and Lambert had the assistance of Fijian medical practitioner Malakai Veisamasama and of two prisoners on Tanna to analyse the faecal specimens to assess hookworm rates.<sup>6</sup> Local taboos hindered this work as well, as many people refused to give faecal specimens with their names and ages for fear of their identification and subsequent use in sorcery attacks (NHBS 1924:31).

Karai, an important research assistant, involved Baker in a local dispute:

One night we arrived at a village and saw a man the muscles of whose legs had almost disappeared, leaving only skin and bone. He walked on his hands, a half coconut shell being held in each to serve as a shoe. This affliction and many others were attributed to the evil machinations of a woman of a neighbouring village. Next day we went there, and I was confronted by her. A most extraordinary request was made to me by Karai. I was asked to gaze at her through my instruments, and then to report whether in fact she was the cause of all the illness and death that was attributed to her. Her life was in serious danger, so I agreed, and made a most meticulous examination of her through my clinometer and prismatic compass. After serious thought I was able to report that she was guiltless. I felt that I had done my good turn for the day (Baker *et al.* 1935:221).

In this anecdote, Baker places himself as a unique and benevolent Western hero whose modern instruments impress ignorant people with irrational beliefs. This is part of a familiar narrative that reproduces the dichotomy between civilized and primitive minds. However, when read against the grain and situated in local history and culture, another interpretation is possible that allows for the possibility of indigenous ingenuity in dealing with conflict in a modern way. Though Baker does not elaborate, it is likely that he was being asked to intervene in a sorcery accusation as a serious illness was often considered to be caused by a sorcerer at the behest of someone who wanted to cause harm (Rio 2002:145). The ensuing accusations and retributions could turn violent. Judging from requests to the British authorities, Baker was not the only European who was invited to deal with sorcery cases. British colonial records indicate that indigenous people on other islands, such as Malekula and Paama in 1928 (NHBS 1928a, b) and Ambae in 1935 (Rodman 2001:94), would ask colonial officials to intervene and arrest potential sorcerers and remove them to prison in Port Vila to diffuse conflicts they were causing.

Speiser was particularly honest about the fraught nature of his field encounters. In part he attributed his difficulties to the effects of previous encounters with Europeans on his research. Speiser was hoping to locate a 'pygmy race', which the science of the day identified by inherited physical characteristics and non-material attributes (Ballard

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<sup>6</sup> Buxton (1926:440). It was common practice to have prisoners provide labour for Condominium projects.

2006) and which was the result of reproductive encounters. He therefore frequently inquired about marriage customs. Speiser writes that he was repeatedly told that the small-statured people in the New Hebrides were monogamous, which mirrored the cultural practices of the other small-statured races he had read about. And yet he lamented,

At last, however, I found that I had been deceived, as all the people had taken me for a missionary, and had fancied I was asking them questions in order to interfere with their matrimonial customs by sending them a teacher or a 'mission-police-man' (Speiser 1913:170).

Speiser was correct to assume that his measurements were being actively interpreted by indigenous people. Twenty years later, Bird reported of central Santo that Speiser 'must have carried out some anthropological work there, for the natives vividly described how he measured heads. This appears to have made a lasting impression on all concerned' (Bird 1935:225).

At other times the exigent nature of his field encounters led Speiser to genuine exasperation, and he complained in his scientific ethnography that he had discovered 'they were supplying me with every kind of rubbish and obscenity [...]. Here we have evidence of the passive resistance which the natives show towards any white person they do not know well' (1996:3). Speiser's assistant could be devious, compassionate but unreliable, which led Speiser to conclude: 'Because of such changes of mood, the native is highly incalculable, quite apart from the fact that the white man can never really think his way into the black man's mind' (1996:72). Irritation notwithstanding, Speiser's comments also invite readers to suppose that he felt out-witted in many encounters and that in many respects he felt that his would-be informants understood him much better than he understood them. He mused,

For most whites, of course, the native is stupid. That he certainly is not. In terms of views and notions which are entirely alien to him – and almost all those that are European are – he cannot, of course, think logically. But if we take the criterion of intelligence to be the ease with which the native follows familiar patterns of thought and the way he reasons within them, his intelligence cannot be rated far below that of the whites; at least, it is more difficult for whites to think their way into native mental processes than vice versa (1996:80).

What these representations of field encounters reveal are the heightened perceptions of psychological differences between self-proclaimed rational researchers and 'superstitious' natives. I will return to this in a subsequent section when I show how such differences were also present in metropolitan debates linking race and depopulation.

*FIELD ENCOUNTERS, FIELD METHODS AND LOCAL SOCIALITIES*

The social situation in the New Hebrides led researchers to be scientific commentators on the devastation they were witnessing. But the local cultural context and socialities – locally specific social associations and ways of being social – shaped what the researchers could and could not know about such problems. Studying depopulation scientifically required counting and categorising a definable population. The very notion of a birth or death ‘rate’ is a measure of the size of a group of people over time compared to the expectations of demographic science. Without exception the researchers cautioned their readers about the inaccuracy of the vital statistics, which they blamed on both contemporary collection techniques and the lack of intelligence or the uncooperative nature of the people they wanted to count. Since depopulation was a catastrophic process that required measurement over time, the researchers needed accurate past figures with which to compare those collected in present circumstances. Presbyterian missionaries had collected data on deaths (e.g. Gunn 1914:261–269, Miller 1986:30–32), but the scientists raised concerns about the accuracy of their figures. For example, though he found an increase on Tanna between 1919 and 1924, Buxton could not take it seriously since ‘its inhabitants are still heathen’ and the ‘first census was regarded with suspicion by the people in some parts of the island’ (1926:444). New Hebrideans would still run into the bush when officials arrived and ‘lacked the ability’ (1926:444) to reply to questions with the accuracy demanded by researchers.

Another difficulty in collecting census-type data suitable for demographic analysis was that people did not know their ages. Baker dealt with this problem by determining that the age of fifteen for males was indicated by the appearance of facial hair and that it was the marriageable age for females (1929a:45), while Buxton conceded that ‘it must be understood that very few natives know their age, even approximately; the division of the population into “adults” and “children” depends on the opinion of the person who takes the census’ (1926:449).

What the researchers admitted they did not have, i.e. accurate census data to chart demographic change, can partially be attributed to the condition of the Condominium’s state apparatus, which was underdeveloped and unable to do a satisfactory census in a dispersed area (Widmer 2008). The first country-wide census to be considered reliable would not be undertaken until 1967 (McArthur and Yaxley 1968). At that time, Norma McArthur and John Francis Yaxley trained local school-teachers from throughout the archipelago to administer the census questionnaires. Although carrying out a credible census requires modern technologies, it also needs people who are deemed capable by researchers of responding to the criteria by which they are being categorised. It also requires that the people being counted care about the process, identify with the criteria of the data collection, and are willing and able to share information in order to answer the questions. For example, when trying to understand child nurturance, fertility regulation

and the possibility of abortion and infanticide, for reasons relating to social conditions in the field the researchers could not obtain answers to their questions. Buxton wrote:

The only thing known certainly about the practice of abortion is that it is common in all the islands, and that it is not a custom introduced by the white man, from whom, in fact, all detailed knowledge of it is withheld. [...] Much uncertainty exists about the actual methods for procuring it. Many of them are secrets, the property of the old women (1926:425).

The women's cultural practice of protecting knowledge would doubtless have been augmented by decades of missionary's judgements about child nurturance, abortion and infanticide.<sup>7</sup>

Not being able to discuss the topic with women did not stop Baker or Speiser making conflicting statements about abortion that acknowledged women's agency in a back-handed, 'insouciant' way (Jolly 1998:177, 183, 212). Although he reported that it was the husbands who made the decision, Baker saw that the women had some control and that they wanted to avoid having children who might only die from disease (1929a:65). Speiser had harsher words: 'The motives for abortion are the woman's desire for an easy life, her disinclination to be burdened with many children, and also her wish to disappoint a brutal husband' (1996:40).

Ultimately the researchers did find ways to measure depopulation. Baker wrote:

My method was to take vital statistics of a large part of Espiritu Santo, and as far as possible to find whether a suggested cause was operative or not by reference to these statistics. To do this I visited personally as many of the villages as possible, and got information about every single person from a few men in each village. The Melanesian loves talking about his relations, and my informants were as bright as ever when I was quite weary after a long session. I often proved the accuracy of their information by getting them to repeat it: invariably the details were the same (1929b:322).

Elsewhere he repeated his claim to accuracy as dependent on the values indigenous people placed on social networks: 'But anyone who knows the Melanesian is aware of the intense interest he takes in his relationship to other members of his village' (Baker 1929a:45). So, in Baker's view, this would allow for accurate census-type data without the more conventional census methods that demanded that census-takers talk to people individually. Indeed, kin-type relationships affect many aspects of indigenous sociality, from land tenure and food production to politics and dispute resolution to companionship in daily tasks (e.g. Hess 2009).

For his part, Buxton put his trust in Rivers' genealogies, indicating that 'Rivers shows that the native memory for genealogies is so trustworthy that ample pedigrees can be collected, which are complete, even in collateral lines: from these pedigrees he

<sup>7</sup> Women's knowledge about plants and reproduction has been documented for a different period (1985–1987) and under different circumstances (e.g. Bourdy and Walter 1992).

is able to show that there is a decrease in birth rate' (Buxton 1926:448). Because Rivers recognised that kinship in Melanesia entailed more than just bilateral descent, and also involved 'collateral lines', he was able to document far-reaching genealogical connections that could act as a proxy for vital statistics collected through repeated censuses every five or ten years (Rivers 1900:81). The genealogies provided researchers with a systematic representation of the births and deaths in each generation, allowing them to see that the depopulation problem entailed high death rates and low birth rates.<sup>8</sup> Rivers could systematically document pedigrees (Rivers 1914:191, 197, 200), not only because he was a perceptive anthropologist, but because the islanders knew them so well.

When researchers asked about matters such as age, cause of death or reproductive patterns, they did not receive answers. When they asked about how people were related to one another, there were long sessions of story-telling. Where census data collection failed in typical ways, the knowledge of relations between people, so crucial to Melanesian sociality, enabled the scientists to collect population data they could trust. The success of genealogies in measuring population size over time where census data failed can be considered an example of the sociality of field science, that is, that the practice of field science necessarily inserts practitioners into existing social relations that they overlook at their peril. In the absence of a colonial state that could collect and compile census data over time, successful research depended on an overlap between the scientists' interests and indigenous concerns and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In addition, at this time, genealogies were extremely common tools with which to represent data in several disciplines, like psychiatry, medicine and genetics (Gausemeier 2005). As is well known, when Rivers adapted the genealogical method to social anthropology (1910), it contributed to his rise to prominence in the discipline. The method was successful for many reasons. As a field technique for the new anthropological standard of first-hand field observation, it became widely used because of 'the empirical observation that genealogical information has great social importance in preliterate societies' (Langham 1981:77), or, as I have shown, because of the realities of field encounters. As a means of both gathering and presenting data, genealogies were successful because of the visual component they shared with Europeans' own representations of their pedigrees (Bouquet 1996). As well as being important in speaking to broad multidisciplinary audiences, genealogies have broad, multivalent appeal because they purport to represent social and biological reproduction unproblematically, that is, crucial components for conceptually framing scientific debates about the place of heredity and the environment for a population and its health. In the depopulation reports, the genealogies, with their seeming unequivocal relationship with social and biological links, provided a fitting multivalent methodology with which to speak with varying degrees of emphasis on the psychological, social and biological factors of the commentators.

<sup>8</sup> Hortense Powdermaker (1931) also used genealogies to study depopulation in New Ireland.

<sup>9</sup> On the use of Rivers' research in contemporary historical demography, see Ulijaszek (2006).

*THE MEANING OF RACE AND THE EVIDENCE OF HISTORY*

Rivers makes some mention of Polynesian and Melanesian racial types and admixtures in “The history of Melanesian society”, noting familiar biological markers (1914:302–303), but one of his overall goals in establishing the genealogical method in that book is to improve on his earlier work, which he confesses, he wrote while ‘under the sway of the crude evolutionary doctrine of the time’ (1914:vi). In his oft-cited portion of “Essays on the depopulation of Melanesia” (1922a), where he argues for the ‘psychological factor’ in depopulation, he makes no references to racial markings. Throughout his career Rivers was inconsistent in his treatment of the distinction between cultural and racial heritage (Slobodin 1978:152), but in his 1922 presidential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute, Rivers clearly states that physical attributes, if combined with ethnological and linguistic inquiry, have much to contribute to the understanding of human history. Studying somatological features was only problematic if attempted in isolation from cultural practices (Rivers 1922b:22–23).

Speiser made the voyage from Switzerland to the New Hebrides with a theoretical interest in ‘cultural evolution from the standpoint of biological variation’ (Kaufmann 2000:203), and he hoped to find evidence of both in a ‘pygmy’ culture and ‘pygmy’ race. Of all the researchers who made recommendations on depopulation, his original research aims and methods were most concerned with measuring human races using the methods of physical anthropology that he had learned from the well-known German anthropologist Felix von Luschan. Speiser was the only researcher to collect anthropometric data in the New Hebrides and comment on depopulation.<sup>10</sup> He travelled to most of the inhabited islands, meticulously documenting variations in height, skin colour and facial formations with reference to specific racial types to assess migrations in the forms of Polynesian, Papuan and Melanesian presence (1996:59). Giving a general picture, he wrote:

The island-nature of the archipelago is very favourable to race-mixture; and as we know that on some islands there were several settlements of Polynesians, it is not surprising to find a very complex mingling of races, which it is not an easy task to disentangle. It would seem, however, that we have before us remnants of four races: a short, dark, curly-haired and perhaps original race, a few varieties of the tall Melanesian race, arrived in the islands in several migrations, an old Polynesian element as a relic of its former migrations eastward, and a present Polynesian element from the east (Speiser 1913:11).

When he eventually published his anthropometric data, he was firmly of the belief that the small-statured people were not a separate race (1927/28, 1946).

<sup>10</sup> Speiser (1920, 1927/28). Clarence Blake Humphreys collected anthropometric data but did not comment on depopulation in his ethnography (1926).

Lambert and Buxton included descriptions of biological markers of difference, though they did not conduct their own measurements. Though he was a doctor researching hookworm and epidemiological reasons for depopulation and not measuring race as such, Lambert took note of racial characteristics but simply recapitulated the racial narratives that figured in common descriptions of Pacific Islanders at that time. He indicated that:

[s]ome of them are black enough, but the colour shades off into brown to copper colour. On the same island one sees extraordinary differences in colour and physical characteristics and even in the same family there may be several distinct shades. In general they have negroid faces with flat noses and prominent lips, and curly hair that may cling tightly to the head or frizz out to a bushy mop. Where there is more of the lighter blood, the hair commences to straighten and lie flat (NHBS 1924:9).

His research companion, Buxton, recorded:

The natives of the New Hebrides are Melanesians [...]. They are very dark brown in colour, with tightly curled black hair, and a type of face that is often negroid. Polynesian settlements have been made in many places in Melanesia; in the New Hebrides the people of Futuna are almost pure Polynesians, and traces of this race can be detected on other islands. [...] Apart, however, from occasional incursions from Polynesia, the people of the New Hebrides, in common with all Melanesians, arise from several immigrations of related peoples, who spoke many different languages and possessed different social organization and different material cultures. The resulting diversity makes it extremely difficult to give a concise description of the islanders' life and habits, because what may hold true in general will certainly not hold good in particular instances (1926:421–422).

The diversity of the New Hebrides, studied by Rivers and Speiser but deemed crucial by others, was put to service in the explanatory narrative of human history and migration in the Pacific. In the descriptions of the biological markers of race studied by Speiser and reiterated by Buxton and Lambert, the history of the islands emerges as a narrative of 'racial waves' of encounters between the copper-skinned Polynesians, woolly haired Melanesians, Papuans and small-statured people they encountered in their fieldwork. The observations from field surveys played an important role in attempts to disentangle a historically original and pure racial strand from the complex mixtures of Melanesian and Polynesian physical traits that these researchers actually encountered in the New Hebrides. Such descriptions were often ascertained by looking at people and interpreting their physical appearance through historical narratives. During the first decades of the twentieth century, racial markers in the New Hebrides provided the evidence whereby human migration history was understood.

*THE MELANESIAN RACE AND DEPOPULATION DEBATES*

Melanesians, both as a declining population and as a race, entered into contemporary scientific debates on biology, culture and human variation. The framework of the debates about decline – to what extent were the causes biological, cultural or social – meant yoking biological, cultural and especially psychological factors together in understanding depopulation and human variation. However, what unified these interventions is that, when Melanesians were discussed, the ‘psychological factor’ tended to stabilise the hierarchical difference between Melanesian and Europeans, I have already discussed with respect to representations of field encounters. Despite noting the diversity of physical markers in the contemporary population, which could have destabilised the racial category when Melanesians were described and when discussed with respect to depopulation, the ‘native’ aspect of Melanesian minds was a stable aspect of what it meant to be part of the Melanesian race. That Rivers would identify psychological and social factors, as well as biological ones, as central to the decline has rightly been lauded by historian Donald Denoon as one of the last productive collaborations between medical practitioners, public health and social anthropologists (1999). Historian Rose Hunt justifiably and approvingly calls Rivers’ statement – that colonialism was problematic for health – a political one (2007:252–253). But during the debates about heritability, environment, and human variation in the interwar period, Rivers’ explanation of the ‘psychological factors’ in depopulation was also drawn on in the context of debates about the capabilities of primitive minds and the nature of the biological and cultural variation of isolated populations. While the ‘psychological factor’ was never deemed to be the exclusive factor, it was often invoked in a manner that essentialised ‘the native mind’ or ‘the black mind’ and that was at odds with the cultural and physical diversity that had been noted in the field encounters with New Hebrideans. The emphasis on the social environment was progressive at the time, but it never developed into a critique of racial categories, and the Melanesian category in particular was invoked as primitive.

As both Henrika Kuklick (1996:348) and Ian Langham (1981:71) have suggested, when Rivers began using the genealogical method in the Torres Straits, it was so he could enter the debate on ‘the relative importance of environment or heredity in the determination of individual characteristics’ (Kuklick 1996:348). For example, writing of the Torres Straits, Rivers mentions the childlessness of inter-racial marriages and wrote: ‘if such a fact could be established it would have great biological interest, but I am afraid there are disturbing factors’ (1900:81). Showing his leaning towards environmental and social factors early on, he goes on to list social factors (rather than biological ones), like the temporary nature of these marriages, which might lead to higher rates of abortion and therefore childlessness (1900:81).

Given this aim, it is difficult to know whether or not Rivers would have been heartened by the fact that Melanesians and their environment and psychology were to be invoked by the well-known British biologist and eugenicist A.M. Carr-Saunders as

reasons for down-playing the importance of inherited intellectual abilities, but still in a way that evoked hierarchies between Europeans and Melanesians.

Melanesian decay is due to an enervating mental atmosphere. Now I do not suggest that enervating influences can have anything like the same power over civilised communities: a Melanesian for instance who has lost interest may die without showing any apparent signs of disease simply because he no longer wishes to live. [...] In this as in so many other sociological problems a study of primitive races is of great assistance and I think that anyone interested in the problem under review [germinal change] cannot fail to be impressed by the essay to which I have referred and to realise that practically no limit is set to the influence that the mental environment may have over the achievements of man (Carr-Saunders 1923a:254; emphasis added).

Carr-Saunders proclaimed the importance of the environment again in his “Review of essays on the depopulation of Melanesia” in the same issue of *The Eugenics Review*:

It is hoped they will be widely read by all those who come into contact with native races. But they have a wider interest. Dr. Rivers has emphasized the important part that mere joy in living plays. [...] The application of this to the problems of the rise and fall of civilization is obvious and those, who are inclined to neglect all factors except germinal change when seeking an explanation of the fluctuations of civilization, might well ponder over these words of the very experienced anthropologist and brilliant biologist whose loss we all deplore (1923b:283).

To other commentators, the psychological causes were deemed less important, but still significant. For example, historian Stephen Roberts read data from throughout the Pacific and identified three causes for the decline: ‘1. The changed ways of life and thought. 2. A psychological inertia or despair [...]. 3. Physical weakness, which operates in two ways, by introducing new diseases and by weakening the stamina of the natives in resisting the old ones’ (Roberts 1927:65). Well versed in the cultural and biological diversity of the region, Roberts believed in the potential of Pacific peoples to recover with education, but also felt that fixing the ‘psychological factor’ would be difficult because:

There are the difficulties of interpretation, for the native mind, so far from being simple and childish as was formerly supposed, is extremely complex; and secondly, this complexity is the more difficult because it is of a different genre from our thoughts. To ‘think black’ is especially difficult for a mind attuned to the conditions of Western civilization (Roberts 1927:130).

While his overall attitude toward Pacific peoples was one of promise and possibilities, Roberts does distinguish between Melanesians and Polynesians. His depiction of Melanesians’ attitude towards sorcery and murder is perhaps Roberts’ most illuminating commentary on his notions on the different workings of the ‘native mind’. He writes,

Natives of Santo in the New Hebrides killed an Englishman at the close of 1923, as soon as the local sorcerer promised them that nothing could touch them by way of retribution. [...] This atavistic tendency is, of course, not as noticeable in the Polynesia of today as in Melanesia, where it has always to be taken into account – a constant reminder of the different codes of the native (Roberts 1927:134).

Biologist H. Hamlin noted that the psychological factor was third in significance for depopulation, coming after ‘poor health due to endemic and especially introduced diseases’ (1932:314–315) and ‘the dislocation of inherent village life’ (1932:316). Contextualising the psychological aspect of illness and its relationship to a population’s health, he argued that

No one who has been with Melanesians can overlook the fact that individuals have been known to die from unexplainable psychoses which can be termed autosuggestive, but it is going beyond what is fully granted by facts to apply such phenomena to a social group of any size and to declare its members, therefore, easy prey to any disease and doomed to decline. The concept of a variable physiological constitution in races, which is conditioned by their history and the influences of external elements is valid. The influences appear to be automatic in action, and we do not yet know how they operate, but important correlations have been made by comparing the facts of history and environment with the racial type as it exists today (Hamlin 1932:319).

Yet, Hamlin does take the opportunity to note that ‘we know very little about its [the primitive mind’s] quality except that it works differently from ours’ (1932:320).

Despite essentialising Melanesian intellectual and psychological tendencies into ‘native minds’, Carr-Saunders’ and Roberts’ overall arguments were to the effect that with nurturing environments all races could survive and thrive. On the other hand, after a consideration of material from across the Pacific, G.H.L.F. Pitt-Rivers, whose work emphasised the inherited aspects of human populations’ potentialities, concluded that isolated races were closely adapted culturally to their physical environments and thus could not adapt quickly to shocks to their environments. Pitt-Rivers was thus convinced that racial decadence was inevitable. He still linked the psychological aspect of adaptation to difficult circumstances, but only when yoked to inherited features in his notion of ‘psycho-physical problems’. He stated,

We have to face the problem of racial capacity to become adapted to changed environmental conditions. An examination of population tendencies in the Pacific regions and in America shows that people are far less adaptable to great and sudden changes in culture-form. The more specialized a people become through segregation and the agency of selection, the more closely adapted they are to the culture-forms they have evolved (Pitt-Rivers 1927:2).

So, while Rivers himself was attempting to advance the analysis that social and environmental reasons affected the health of an individual and a population (rather than emphasising inherited characteristics), the ‘psychological factor’ could be interpreted in different ways, and never really to the point of dismissing the primitiveness of Melanesians. Indeed, a wide spectrum of interpretation was possible: from Carr-Saunders’ use of the psychological factor to show that ‘practically no limit is set to the influence that the mental environment may have over the achievements of man’ to Pitt-Rivers’ ‘psycho-physical problem’ that would lead to racial extinction. But still throughout, the difference between Melanesian minds and European ones was maintained.

#### MELANESIANS AND RACE MIXING

In the 1920s, the Melanesian race and its demographic decline were analytically and practically linked to another topic of the day: leading scientists of human population genetics and physical anthropology were fascinated by the study of ‘racially mixed populations’ or ‘racial crosses’. Racial mixes provided a context in which to study the effects of inherited traits and environments. At that time, biologists, geneticists and physical anthropologists debated the degrees of heritability of intellectual, somatic and psychological traits (Lipphardt 2012). The depopulation of the Pacific islands provided conditions in which to study such topics. Stephen Roberts’ commentary on racial mixing in the Pacific (1927: 353) ‘confirmed the trend in biological thinking toward support for race mixing’ (Anderson 2009a:152). But while racial mixing was deemed desirable in ‘Hawaii, New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga and perhaps Samoa in the future’ (Roberts 1927:366), Roberts was clear that he would not extend his support for it to include crosses with Melanesians. He argued that positive racial mixing could only take place in lands which were situated, ‘economically and climactically, to allow a large European population’ (1927:365). Therefore, ‘In Melanesia [...] the problem is quite different, for there the children of such mixed connections have little future, and as it is the children who should be considered, and the children’s children, the fusion in this case stands condemned *in toto*’ (1927:365). Racial mixing was only favourable for Polynesians, whose features could be absorbed into European populations, while between Europeans and Melanesians or Papuans,

The barrier is impassable: the union unwise or, to use the phraseology of the race-specialist, ‘disharmonious’ [...] It is banned alike by racial, social and political considerations. [...] It should be noted that the very use of the word ‘absorption’ precludes a race such as the Melanesian or Papuan, for in the case, the gap between the two participants, and this applies to Asiatics as well as to Europeans – is so wide that it cannot wisely be bridged. The Polynesian’s racial origin, his adaptability to new conditions, and certain racial characteristics (the serene urbanity of the Hawaiian and the manly comradeship of the warrior Maori [...]) place him in a different category (Roberts 1927:366).

Scientific thinking about racial mixing between Pacific peoples and Asian groups would also come to bear on population issues back in the New Hebrides, where the imperative to stop depopulation of the 'native race' co-existed with the labour shortages from which the settlers were suffering. By the time Buxton and Lambert visited Vanuatu in the 1920s, labour migration both internally and to New Caledonia had slowed considerably, which they took to be a good thing. If New Hebrideans were not away on plantations, Buxton thought,

The native race would then have an opportunity to increase in numbers, and to rebuild itself, if indeed it is capable of doing this. The people would live their own lives, under their own social system, and would grow copra, cotton and other products in order to obtain European goods as they needed (1926:430).

Recognising that plantation owners needed labourers, Buxton agreed with a French plan to bring in labour from the Tonkin and Annamese regions of French Indochina, as those parts of present day Vietnam were called (1926). The British settlers needed labour as well, and in 1927 a Commission considered the problem (NHBS 1927). Not unlike what Nicholas Thomas writes about early colonial Fiji (1990), Buxton's recommendations would have insulated the traditional Melanesian from Asian labourers. Buxton had recommendations for how best to import labourers, which involved discouraging the mixing of the 'native race' with indentured labour from French Indochina.<sup>11</sup> Buxton advised:

If indentured labour is brought in, the labourers must not be allowed to settle permanently, even if they wish to do so at the end of the period for which they have contracted to work. If they are all repatriated they will be no menace to the native race or to 'White Australia'. Men as well as women should be brought, so as to avoid, as far as may be possible, the hybridization which might otherwise occur between the imported race and the natives (1926:430).

## CONCLUSION

When data about race and demographic decline was collected in the New Hebrides and turned into statements about racial groups, the cultural and physical diversity made researchers cautious when it came to formulating general statements about the people there. Such reticence did not extend to generalisations about the otherness of 'native minds' that the researchers experienced in their research assistants and subjects, despite

<sup>11</sup> When faced with the opportunity to define citizenship at the time of independence in 1980, legislation was passed in Vanuatu that limited citizenship to those who had four ni-Vanuatu grandparents. Jolly writes that this at once brings out the indigenous importance of belonging and identity through genealogy, but it is still 'haunted' by the colonial obsession with racial purity (2007).

the intelligence that Rivers and Speiser recognised. In debates about environment and heritability, the meaning of the Melanesian stretched from evidence that environments are crucial for human development to the inevitability of racial extinction. And yet, throughout the continuum, the psychology of Melanesians, despite the acknowledged cultural, linguistic and physical diversity of the New Hebrides, stood in for a general statement about their essential group identity as different.

Rivers became a founder of British social anthropology and was a Labour Party candidate standing for election at his untimely death in 1922 (Kuklick 1994:361). Speiser found the physical and cultural complexity in the New Hebrides difficult to reconcile with evolutionary explanations. He adopted a historical perspective and made his career as a scholar of material culture (Kaufmann 2000:204, 222), his statement that Melanesian small-statured people were not a race (1946) – he specifically used the non-racialised term ‘Kleinwüchsige’ over ‘Pygmäen’ – earning him some recognition from Eugen Fischer, a leading German physical anthropologist (1950). Baker went on to a career in biology at Oxford, where, despite being worried about depopulation in Melanesia, he devoted himself to the study of chemical birth control (Löwy 2010) and the promotion of eugenics (Schaffer 2008:100, 166–170). In his last publication, “Race” (1974), he makes the reactionary case for the enduring presence of human biological races and inheritable group characteristics, including intelligence. Lambert continued to build up the Fiji School of Medicine, and Buxton studied vector-borne diseases, famously marking the line through the Pacific islands indicating the modern border of malaria (Buxton and Hopkins 1927).

Speiser’s ethnographic text and photos have great value in contemporary Vanuatu. At the request of Father Walter Lini, the first Prime Minister of Vanuatu, an English translation of Speiser’s 1922 German volume was published in 1990, with the endorsement of Chief Willy Bong Matur Maldo, President of the National Council of Chiefs, as well as the Honourable Iolu Abil, then Minister for Home Affairs and now President of the Republic (Speiser 1996). Iolu Abil points out that, while Speiser did not go into any depth in describing any particular place because he travelled throughout the archipelago, the ethnographic and photographic materials were still of ‘great value to our new nation’. Rather charitably, he continues this praise, despite the fact that ‘certain rather ethnocentric comments made by the author in the original edition reflect European attitudes of those early times and could be very different if the work was done now’ (Abil 1996:vii). However, very little is known about the boys on Ambrym, the 41 carriers on Santo, the Tannese prisoners, the women who protected their knowledge, or the men who dictated their pedigrees and discussed the histories of their villages through social relationships. We do know that they and their social forms shaped the kind of data these early researchers could collect. Possibly their descendants are part of the now vigorous and vibrant population of Vanuatu.

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