



Australian Government



NEW COLOMBO PLAN

Connect to Australia's future - study in the region

CULTURAL AWARENESS



Part 4b Tips and Strategies for the Pacific Region



WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES

OF PACIFIC CULTURES?

Photo: Maria Phuong Thi Nguyen

There are distinct countries and cultures in the Pacific region, notably the cultures of Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The peoples and countries of the Pacific region are diverse in ethnic background, traditions, cultures, belief systems and religions. Not only do Pacific countries differ in sociocultural traits, but subgroups within countries often differ as well.

THE PACIFIC REGION HAS DISTINCT CULTURES: MICRONESIA, MELANESIA AND POLYNESIA

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I would say my country is a multicultural country ... there are over 800 languages and each province has its own way of doing things, its own culture and its own belief systems in place.

So, we have different cultures from the islands up into the highlands. The way people behave are quite different.

Miriam, Australia Awards Scholar



Photo: Jacqueline Smart

A SUMMARY OF KEY CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The Christian religion has been a powerful expression of culture throughout the Pacific Islands. Christian practice is evident in the high attendance of church services on Sunday and it is common that meals are blessed before eating. Although the region comprises such social, cultural, and historical diversity among the islands that generalisation is difficult, this observation about the importance of religion is one that holds very broadly.

RELEVANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN SOCIETY

Interpersonal relationships and social behavior are governed by links of kinship. Households affiliate with households with which they share a common ancestor, forming an extended family group with extensive social and economic interactions.

Indigenous villages consist of people from the same rural kinship or language group, and constituting in themselves systems of mutual support and protection based on kin loyalties, often with traditional forms of governance intact. This linguistic and group diversity often gives rise to a weaker focus on nationhood. Kinship ties have so far proved strong but are gradually loosening under the impact of individualism.

VILLAGE OR KINSHIP LOYALTIES

Attitudes to time may differ between different cultures in often quite significant ways. For example, being late for an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in most Pacific Islands (referred to as Pacific time).

ATTITUDES TO TIME

Family loyalty, respect for hierarchy and strong relationships are important values in many Pacific cultures.

Traditional Pacific Island culture highly regards the family unit, the village and the land (or vanua). Villages, tribes and clans are led by a chief.

RELEVANCE OF FAMILY TIES AND HIERARCHIES IN SOCIETY

The concept of personal property is well developed with each individual, regardless of rank, having a variety of possessions such as tools, clothing, ornaments, and other items. Other types of property, such as land, are owned by extended families or descent groups in common and are used for the common good.

For example, if your brother has a crop of taro and you're hungry, then some of that taro belongs to you. Although many islanders may be poor by Western standards, it is rare that someone in a village goes hungry or sleeps without a roof over their head.

LAND IS OFTEN COMMUNALLY OWNED AND TIED TO THE CULTURE

Sport is a thriving sector in the Pacific and is a recognised enabler for advancing regionalism, and importantly, sustainable economic and social development. Islanders have a long association with sport pre-dating colonial times. Indeed, sport has and continues to play an integral role in promoting a sense of cultural and national identity alongside economic, social and community development for years through schools, churches, clubs, villages and other community settings.

SPORT IS A POINT OF UNITY

For example, the Pacific Games represents the largest manifestation of the Pacific community in action as every two years they bring together upwards of 5,000 athletes, team officials, technical officials, Head of Government, Ministers, VIPs, media, broadcasters, sponsors and spectators into the host nation. The Games are organised by the Pacific Games Council and its 22-member island nations and territories from Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.



Photo: DFAT

Public displays of affection (other than holding hands) are considered inappropriate. Men and women rarely show affection in public. It has traditionally been

considered respectful for men and women to maintain a distance from one another. The appropriate amount of personal space tends to be an arm's length. Although some greet family members with a hug or kiss, they may not be comfortable to do so with strangers or, people they meet for the first time. Some Pacific Island villages may have a private place where only women may enter. Entering the ladies' area without permission warrants punishment by the chief.

INTERACTION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN WHO ARE NOT MARRIED OR RELATED IS KEPT MODEST

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

- VERBAL TECHNIQUES

When people are taught to communicate in different cultures, it is not just language which is significant, but also the order and style of communication. In a 'high-context/indirect' communication culture, the social context or social environment is often more important than the words being spoken. Verbal communication between two people can indicate not only how they feel about the topic at hand, but also how they feel about their relationship with the other individual.

In the Pacific Island region, communication is less direct, relying on implicit messages and contextual cues to relay information. People's listening style may focus more towards the end of another person's message as it builds up to the main point, paying less attention to what is said at the beginning.

**PEOPLE OFTEN EXCHANGE OPINIONS
OR VIEWPOINTS THROUGH
NEGOTIATION RATHER THAN
ARGUMENT**

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When we start a conversation, of course, we have to start with a greeting, and then we have to ask how you are, how your family are, how your grandparents are, how your extended family are. And then we'll come to the point of why we're talking to you in the first place.

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Peniana, Australia Awards Scholar



Photo: Rowena Harbridge/DFAT

VERBAL COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

Communication Style: Directness vs Indirect

Many Pacific Island people often prefer a more circular and indirect style of communication.

Indirectness is valued and recognised as polite behaviour.

Politeness

People are usually polite whether locals or tourists and this is often expressed as exaggerated reserve.

In rural areas, people do not usually pass others without saying a word of greeting. In villages, the central area is where the chiefly lineage lives and people must show respect by not wearing inappropriate clothing, hats, sunglasses, garlands, or shoulder bags, and by not speaking or laughing boisterously.

Use of slang

People often have their own version of slang and is usually a play on words. Just check the local meaning before using the slang.

Communication Style: Indirectness vs Directness

In many Pacific Islands directness may be perceived as blunt, rude and uncouth.



Photo: DFAT

Humour

People often like to share laughter freely, loudly, publicly and proudly and believe it's better when a humorous moment is shared. They love to tell stories of their families, villages and countries.

Note: This list is by no means exhaustive and acknowledges that there will always be exceptions.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



- NON-VERBAL TECHNIQUES



Among the most varying dimensions of intercultural communication is non-verbal behaviour. Much of non-verbal communication may be broken down into five areas: dress, body language, eye contact, the use of body space and paralanguage. Given the variance in social norms and protocols amongst communities, it is difficult to articulate a general approach. Each community has their own understanding of what constitutes typical non-verbal behaviour.

Note: Speech contains non-verbal elements known as paralanguage, including voice quality, rate, pitch, volume, and speaking style, as well as speech variables such as rhythm, intonation, and stress. Paralanguage may be expressed consciously or unconsciously.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS!

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Fijian culture is very respectful. We are very respectful towards our elders and towards our leaders in the village, in the society, in the family. If you show your respect to someone, you bow your head. You're not supposed to make eye-contact with them. You have to look down. If you make eye-contact with leaders, it can be considered disrespectful and sort of a challenge.

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Peniana, Australia Awards Scholar



Photo: DFAT

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

Pointing and beckoning

Finger-pointing can be seen as a challenge. In general, the Fijian and Indo-Fijian will not point to a person.

In Fiji when beckoning someone, the palm faces down, and the whole hand is used to beckon by waving the fingers back toward the palm.

Touching

Touching during conversations only tends to take place between Fijian women. Otherwise, there is generally no touching during interactions.

In other Pacific Islands people connect through touch. However, there are touches that are not appropriate:

- do not pat older people, as you would a child or pet
- do not touch the head, not even playfully, this applies to all age groups
- do not presume to touch older people unless they touch you first (that's usually a cue that touching is okay).

Personal space

Public displays of affection (much more than holding hands) are considered inappropriate.

The appropriate amount of personal space tends to be an arm's length. It may be a bit more with strangers and usually a bit less with friends and family. Personal space depends on the person's culture and whether that person is familiar with the person with whom he or she is interacting.

Table and eating manners

In Fiji the formal evening meal requires the presence of family members and may not begin without the head of the household. The meal is usually blessed before eating.

Food is boiled, roasted, or fried. Cooked food is served on a tablecloth spread on the floor mat inside the house. Everyone usually sits cross legged on the floor.

If you are eating with them, ask the host where you should sit. It is considered rude to eat food with hands at a table where cutlery is provided.

Head

Among indigenous Fijians, it is inappropriate to touch someone on the head. The head is considered to be the most sacred part of the body. Do not pat or stroke anyone's head – including children.

Feet and shoes

Do not sit with your feet pointing directly at a person. It is a sign of disrespect and confrontation.

Among indigenous Fijians, you are not supposed to point your feet toward the kava bowl or the chief.

When you enter a Fijian household, it is considered respectful for you to take off your shoes.

Eye contact

Eye contact tends to be acceptable in most situations, but prolonged direct eye contact can be considered rude and confrontational.

Nose blowing

There's no significant etiquette for blowing your nose. You can go as loud as you want or as quietly as you can.

Smiling and laughing

Don't forget to smile. It is important to approach a person with a smile on your face; it will set the tone of your interaction.

Even when they don't feel like smiling, they will make the effort to ensure the other person is made to feel welcome and happy.

Giving and receiving

When offered a gift you should first refuse. When it is offered again with more emphasis, the gift should be accepted.

Be careful admiring Fijians' possessions i.e. "What a beautiful ring!" because tradition dictates it should then be given to you.

Sources:

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Intercultural Effectiveness training, Border Force, 2015

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I spent time living with an indigenous family for a week. And just living with them, I got introduced to all the cousins, the nieces, the nephews, the aunts, the uncles. And just the whole family all together. So, it really is an important part of their culture. And it's very precious for them. I think my advice would be for someone who is heading to the Pacific is that relationships really matter. And it's not about the quantity of relationships, but the quality of those relationships.

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Dominic, New Colombo Plan Scholar



Photo: Bayan Yazdani

Where can I learn more about my host country's culture?

The Cultural Atlas is an educational resource providing comprehensive information on the cultural background of Australia's migrant populations. The aim is to improve social cohesion and promote inclusion in an increasingly culturally diverse society.



<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/>