The essays collected in this volume were originally presented at the fourth conference of the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) that was held in Leiden in June 1999. More than 170 scholars from within and outside Europe participated, including scholars from research institutions in the Pacific and Asia. Ron Crocombe, Jonathan Friedman and Jan Pouwer each gave a keynote lecture at a plenary session, while a total of 75 papers were presented in parallel working sessions.

The main theme of the conference was ‘Asia in the Pacific’, which was chosen as a focus for reflection and debate. After the historical penetration of the Pacific by European and American traders, missionaries, colonial administrators and other development agents, the organizers wanted to draw attention to the contemporary economic, political and cultural influences from Asia in the Pacific. This was considered relevant following the observation that the Pacific is becoming a major centre in the world economy. The debate about the main theme was largely limited to the plenary sessions, while many other themes were presented and discussed in the working sessions, including migration, tourism, mythology, ritual, conversion, fertility, trade, displacement, language, resource exploitation, knowledge, and mobility. The essays brought together in this volume were selected from a variety of these workshops on the basis of their common concern with the dynamics of cultural identity in politicized circumstances in the Pacific. A preliminary version of the chapter by Jelle Miedema was presented earlier at the third conference of the ESfO held in Copenhagen in December 1996.

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