
*Pacific Worlds* is an impressive enterprise that shows how societies along the shores of the ocean have intertwined historical trajectories. Populations of the American and Asian continents and peoples of islands and archipelagos are shown participating in global dynamics. The common thread linking such disparate lands in terms of complexity and evolution is their dependence on the Pacific, which was linked to the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic world through Panama and the Magellan Strait. The relevance of the book resides in the construction of an original portrait made out of a ‘confluence of narratives’ from different locales at different historical times.

Historiography to a large extent is still land-based and written within the limits of nation states. Oceans and seas are considered borders and obstacles rather than economic ways to communicate and gather resources. In the case of the Pacific, the late integration in a worldwide web of communications and economic relations explains a dichotomy between the Rim societies studied by national and regional historians and the world of the archipelagos—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—which despite scholars’ efforts, in general are neglected in current historical representations. Given the lack of written sources before the arrival of the Europeans, the ‘timeless’ peoples of Oceania were left to anthropologists. In contrast with conventional practice, this book’s ‘episodic approach’ is skillfully organized around structural changes in order to show how different societies were transformed by a global dynamic. Structural changes, global trends and worldwide events, are carefully presented through the prism of individual people to illustrate their diverse manifestations and differing consequences for societies on the Pacific shores and presented through the prism of individual people.

Narrative materials are taken from oral traditions, biographies, chronicles, monuments, historical documents, everyday objects, and archaeological remains. The Pacific is described as ‘multiple sites of trans-localism, the specific linked places where direct engagements took place and were tied to histories dependent on the ocean’ (5). The author does not accept a hierarchy of sources or a ranking of peoples according to customary reliability or conventional categorizations. Narratives of Polynesians tracing their kinship to the islands of Southeast Asia are deployed along records
referring extensively to maritime trade between Southern China, Persia, and India, and to exchanges with the Indonesian islands. Sinbad’s navigations are compared with Ibn Battuta travels from Africa and Asia on his way to China by way of Sumatra.

The Majapahit empire—at its peak in the second half of the fourteenth century—ruled over Southeast Asia, including the archipelagos of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, parts of Thailand, the Philippines, and East Timor, and claimed sovereignty over western Papua New Guinea. These chronicles of past imperial splendor were appropriated in the twentieth century by Indonesian nationalists to claim territorial boundaries after independence.

Magellan gained the support of Charles I’s ‘Council of the Indies’ for his knowledge of cosmography and foreign lands, but to buttress his claims he introduced to the councilors a Sumatran woman and a Malayan slave with the name of Enrique de Malacca. The 1595-1596 voyages of Alvaro de Mendaña and Pedro Fernández de Quirós are brought to the reader’s attention because accounts of Mendaña’s trip to the Solomons and the encounter with the Marquesas are among the first written records of Oceanian peoples—in both Melanesia and Polynesia—since Austronesian migrations.

Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea (1592-1598) is represented by the abduction of a Korean potter, Yi Sam-pyong, whose kilns produced cobalt blue porcelains, which, transported by the VOC ships from the port of Iwami, reached European tables and appeared in Dutch still-life paintings. The ‘Christian Century’ of Japan ended tragically with the Shimabara rebellion of 1637-1638. Amakusa Shiro—a fifteen-year-old Christian—was the leader of the rebellious warriors. Villagers recounted how a dove laid an egg in the palm of his hand and how, upon hatching, the egg shell displayed a picture of Jesus Christ and a minute scroll of divine scripture. Matsuda notes that ‘in Shimabara today, his statue overlooks the hills and fields where his followers gathered’ (100).

Captain James Cook’s detailed charts of the Pacific were deeply indebted to the knowledge of a native navigator-priest named Tupaia (c. 1725-1770), who also explained to the British commander the seasonal westerly winds shift that made possible Polynesian navigation. The czar of Russia sent Vitus Bering on his famous voyage of exploration (1725-1728) after meeting Dembei, a Japanese castaway from Osaka, who had been taken to St. Petersburg by Vladimir Atlasov on his 1697-1699 expedition to the Kamchatka Peninsula.

After Cook, global interests in Pacific Commodities—copra, sandalwood, whales, furs—accelerated. A commercial vortex in the trade of such