Frontiers in Mormon Pacific History

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Though many important and fascinating studies in Pacific Mormon History have been produced in the past (a number of which were first shared in MPHs meetings), there is still room for more to be done. The following are areas where we need more information or fresh interpretations:

1) "Interregnum" Mormonism. Whether in French Polynesia or in Hawaii, there have been periods after the gospel was first brought to the islands when the local Saints were left on their own. In some instances, it is decades before the "Zion Elders" return. We need to know more about the nature of the Church during the years they were on their own. For instance, during the 40 year period from 1852 to 1892 in French Polynesia, various groups emerged from the original converts. They were called Mormons, Israelites, Whistlers, Abraham’s church, the Sheep, and Darkites. We know very little about them. How did the experience there compare with Hawaii? Were there aberrations similar to the ones introduced by Walter Murray Gibson?

2) We need a good history of missionary techniques throughout the Pacific as they developed both in response to SLC and local innovation.

3) More detailed studies of the importance of Maori rangatira-prophets, healers, etc. in the conversion of Maoris in the late nineteenth century. It would also be important to explore more closely the process of reversion from faith in the elders’ healing power to local adepts. I would like to explore more closely the prophets like Potangaroa and other millennialists in New Zealand and specify with greater sophistication their role as forerunners.

4) There is always more room for biography—local greats like what we know about Napela (there’s still room to learn more). I’d like to know more about Maihea and Mapuhi in French Polynesia or Pelio and Manoa in Samoa.

5) How about a full history of hui tau and the changes it has experienced over the years? Or, why not a full and nuanced history of the interaction between Maoritanga and Mormonism over the years? We need to know more about the dynamics of the Mormon-ratana-Mormon experience in the 1920s.

6) We need a closer interweaving of Mormon Pacific studies with other contact and religious syncretism studies.

7) A sophisticated and comparative study needs to be done on the World War II years and how they impacted the church around the Pacific.
8) I'd like to see a full and comparative history of "island zions" tracing the meaning of the doctrine of gathering. Why did gathering not mean to USA as in most other places in the nineteenth century? Do we have any other examples of zions away from Zion, like we do in the Pacific? There is an important analysis to be pursued here.

9) We need a better understanding of how ethnicity has colored church experience around the Pacific. I know of no study, for instance, that has explored the contrasting experience of Fijian and Fiji Indian Saints.

10) How about a comparative study of "folk Mormonism" in various Pacific cultures. Which stories are perpetuated and why?

11) I'd like to read a history of native v. LDS morality and how it has been handled in the various countries or maybe a comparative history of ava or kava drinking and the various internal and external reactions to it.

12) We need a better teasing out of the chronology and dynamics of the localization of church leadership in each of the areas of the Pacific.

13) How about a comparative study of the nature of the appeal of Mormonism in various places. Were there customs, ideas, values that made the church seem attractive at the various times and places?

14) Greater sensitivity to cultural and historical analysis should be pursued in our studies of Mormon Pacific history. A question mark must be placed beside any overly confident and consistent history. What biases, desires, and especially confusions is it smoothing over? Since these elements are constitutive and inescapable they should be openly identified. All of this "raises thorny problems of verification: how are the truths of cultural accounts evaluated? Who has the authority to separate science from art? realism from fantasy? knowledge from ideology?" (Roger M. Keesing, "Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific," The Contemporary Pacific 1 (Spring 1989): 25). Pacific peoples, especially those pursuing nationalism or even separatism, are creating pasts that serve their political purposes. "The ancestral ways of life being evoked rhetorically may bear little relation to those documented historically, recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archaeologically--yet their symbolic power and political force are undeniable." (19) How has all of this affected people's construction of identity as Pacific Islander Mormons?

In sum, as the words of the famous missionary hymn read, the harvest is great but the laborers are few. There is plenty of room for all of us to thrust in our sickle with our mights and to recruit others to do likewise. That we might do so is my earnest plea.