



Positionality

Pacific Research in Aotearoa
New Zealand

Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand

Positionality Within the Pacific Research Guidelines

Pacific Migration to Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand are communities with ancestral ties to the Pacific Islands or Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, an oceanic region often referred to in colonial terms as Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. Pacific connections to Aotearoa are longstanding, grounded in deep ancestral, navigational, and cultural ties across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa.

More recent waves of migration, particularly from the 1950s to 1970s, were shaped by New Zealand's postwar industrial expansion. Pacific Peoples, primarily from Polynesian nations, were actively recruited by the New Zealand government to help meet labour shortages. This migration laid the foundation for strong cultural, economic, and political relationships between Pacific communities and Aotearoa.

However, as the economy slowed in the 1970s, Pacific Peoples faced increasing unemployment and racialised scrutiny. Government-supported rhetoric and biased policies portrayed Pacific migrants as job-threatening "overstayers," despite the fact that the majority of people overstaying then were from Europe and

North America (Spoonley, 2013). This hostility culminated in the infamous Dawn Raids, where Pacific families were subjected to early-morning raids by immigration officials and police, often using intimidation and racial profiling to enforce deportations. The lasting trauma and injustices of this era have only recently been formally acknowledged, with the Crown issuing an official apology in 2021 (Beehive, 2021). This history remains a critical context for understanding the experiences of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa today.

Though much of Pacific scholarship in Aotearoa relating to Pacific Peoples is based around dominant ethnic groups in terms of population size and colonial history, the Moanaroa Pacific Research Network is a home to Pacific research and researchers from a vast array of Indigenous communities within the Pacific. This document seeks to contribute to the discourse within Pacific scholarship as it relates to Aotearoa, and its place within the region and internationally.

**E le uma le
galuega, e fai pea.**

**The work is
not finished; it
continues.**

– Samoan Proverb

The New Zealand government defines Pacific populations as encompassing over 18 diverse ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand (MPP, 2020). These include, in order of population size: Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Fijian, Tokelauan, Tuvaluan, i-Kiribati, Tahitian, Papua New Guinean, Ni Vanuatu, Rotuman, Indigenous Australian, Solomon Islander, Hawaiian, Pitcairn Islander, Nauruan and “other” (MPP, 2020).

Each possess their own distinct languages, cultures, and unique migration and settlement histories. A significant proportion, 43%, of Pacific Peoples identified with two or more ethnicities in the 2023 census data. This figure rose to 62% for Pacific Peoples under 15 years, highlighting mixed-ethnic generations within this group. 21% of Pacific Peoples also identified as Māori, while 11% of Māori also identified as Pacific Peoples. Māori-Pacific Peoples are a small but fast-growing group in Aotearoa with nearly 5% of all children under 15 identifying as Māori-Pacific (MPP, 2025).

Hau’ofa (1994, 2000) conceptualised the Pacific not as a collection of small, isolated islands, but as Oceania, a vast, connected expanse where the ocean is a central and unifying force rather than a boundary. Hau’ofa (1994) challenged dominant narratives that framed Pacific nations as dependent and marginal, arguing instead for a view that honours the expansive, relational, and interconnected identities of Pacific Peoples. From this perspective, the ocean is not a void between lands but a space of movement, history, and belonging that affirms the mana and agency of Pacific Peoples. In these guidelines, the term Pacific Peoples is used inclusively to refer to Pacific communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, the wider Pacific region, and diasporic communities globally. The term Pacific is used to denote the collective of Pacific nations or Oceania, acknowledging the shared heritage and relationships that transcend geopolitical boundaries.

Recently, in *An Indigenous Ocean*, Salesa (2023) wrote of and compiled a collection of essays that explore the cultural, historical, and political dimensions of the Pacific region, or Te-Moana-nui-a-kiwa, from an Indigenous Pacific perspective. Providing an all-encompassing history of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa and the region goes beyond the scope of these guidelines. To support emerging researchers in navigating the rich and complex landscape of Pacific scholarship, the following introductory reading list offers a selection of foundational texts that illuminate key themes, thinkers, and perspectives within the field of Pacific scholarship.

An Entry Point for Pacific Research and Reflection

A starting place for those seeking to understand and honour the depth of Pacific knowledge systems

“Towards a New Oceania”

A foundational essay reimagining the Pacific as a connected sea of islands, shaping Pacific identity and literature.

Wendt (1976, 2004)

“Our Sea of Islands”

Challenges colonial views by affirming Indigenous connectivity, mobility, and sovereignty in the Pacific.

Hau’ofa (2008)

Tangata o le Moana: New Zealand and the People of the Pacific

An illustrative history of Pacific Peoples’ migrations, contributions, and lived experiences in Aotearoa.

Mallon, Māhina-Tuai & Salesa (2012)

“Teu le Vā: Toward a “Native” Anthropology”

Discusses Pacific relational ethics and vā in the context of education and social structures.

Anae (2010)

Island Time: New Zealand’s Pacific Futures

Examines Aotearoa New Zealand’s Pacific identity, migration, and the future of Pacific communities in Aotearoa.

Salesa (2017)

Pacific Art Niu Sila: The Pacific Dimension of Contemporary New Zealand Arts

Explores Pacific art in Aotearoa New Zealand as a medium for identity, resistance, and cultural continuity.

Mallon and Pereira (2002)

Leprosy in Samoa 1890 to 1922: Race, Colonial Politics and Disempowerment

Contributions to Pacific health histories and intersections of gender, migration, and colonialism.

Akeli (2007)

Oceans Between Us—Pacific Peoples and Racism in Aotearoa.

A paradigm-shifting volume examining systemic racism in Aotearoa New Zealand through Pacific scholarly perspectives.

Naepi (2025)

Voices of the Pacific: Climate Crisis, Adaptation and Resilience.

A comprehensive volume featuring Pacific scholars addressing climate justice, Indigenous knowledge, and resilience across the region, including Aotearoa.

Ratuva et al. (2024)

The Relational Self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific

Indigenous Pacific personhood through the lens of relationality, spirituality, and decolonisation.

Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2017)



Indigeneity in Pacific Research (Aotearoa New Zealand Context)

In the context of Pacific research, indigeneity goes beyond ethnic or geographic identifiers, and is a lived and relational condition rooted in genealogical connections (gafa, tupu'anga, 'akapapa) to sacred lands (fonua, vanua, enua), waters, and skies. It is expressed through responsibilities of care, stewardship, and reciprocity towards people and environment, interwoven with spirituality and cultural continuity (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

For many Pacific Peoples living in Aotearoa New Zealand, indigeneity is relational and layered; it is informed by ancestral homeland connections and the lived realities of being part of a broader Indigenous and diasporic community alongside Māori as tangata whenua (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In Pacific research, indigeneity requires methodologies grounded in Pacific epistemologies, collective wellbeing, relational accountability, and service to the community rather than extraction (Thaman, 2003).

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems are embodied in language, oral traditions, customary practices, performance, spiritual beliefs, and environmental stewardship (Hau'ofa, 1994; Vaai & Casimira, 2017). These systems are not static in the homelands they originate from, nor are they static in the diasporic communities; they adapt to diasporic realities while retaining cultural integrity. In Aotearoa, Pacific diasporic communities enact their knowledge systems in churches, village and island associations, cultural festivals, networks, talanoa, and intergenerational teaching and learning spaces.

In this sense, diasporic contributions to Pacific research sit within and alongside Indigenous knowledge, extending and re-articulating its relational geographies across time and place. For Pacific research in the diaspora, acknowledging these knowledge systems means recognising their dynamic nature and ensuring research processes honour both the continuities and innovations that diasporic life brings (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014).



Positionality as a Praxis

Positionality, in the context of Pacific research, refers to the way in which a researcher's identity, background, disciplinary epistemological reference, and relationships influence their approach to and interpretation of research. It acknowledges that researchers, whether insiders or outsiders to the communities they engage with, bring their own experiences, perspectives, and biases to the research process. These personal factors shape how research questions are formulated, data is collected, participants are engaged, and how findings are analysed, presented, and preserved.

In Pacific research, positionality is particularly important due to the unique cultural contexts and histories of Pacific Peoples in their home countries and abroad. Researchers' understanding of Pacific cultural values, experiences of migration, and relationships to their communities play a critical role in ensuring that the research process is culturally relevant, respectful, and aligned with aspirations of the communities being studied. This requires an acknowledgement of the dynamic and diverse identities of Pacific Peoples, who may have different cultural practices, languages, and beliefs shaped by their migration and diasporic experiences, and connections to their homelands.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important that the research process is also situated within a Te Tiriti o Waitangi / Treaty of Waitangi context, recognising the distinct cultural and legal rights of Māori as tangata whenua (Indigenous people of Aotearoa) and the responsibilities outlined in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In this context, positionality within Pacific research is not only about understanding and respecting the Pacific community but also engaging in meaningful relationships with Māori communities and considering how both these cultural worldviews intersect and interact in the research space. Māori and Pacific Peoples can often be part of the same research projects based on equity; however, there exists a genealogical link that goes beyond equity framing intended to address "need" or "priority."

⁶ The literal meaning of Moana-nui-a-Kiwa is "the great Ocean of Kiwa". Kiwa is regarded as an ancestral guardian of the ocean. The term reflects Indigenous understandings of the Pacific as a living, interconnected space that connects lands, peoples, genealogies, emphasising connection rather than separation.

"First and foremost, positionality needs to sit at the very beginning of any research done, particularly by non-Indigenous or settler researchers."

— Moanaroa member, Moanaroa Talanoa

Māori first arrived in Aotearoa as Tangata Moana or people of our seas, later referred to as Polynesians by the coloniser (Anderson et al., 2015). Rather than a singular moment of arrival, the first millennium CE marked the gradual emergence and “becoming” of Polynesian identities (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 19). According to Anderson et al. (2015), those who initially settled in Aotearoa were primarily descendants of East Polynesia, which itself had earlier been populated by people of West Polynesia (p. 20).

The genealogical ties between Māori and other Pacific Peoples are profound and enduring. Genetic research supports a shared ancestry among the Austronesian diaspora, from which all Pacific Peoples originate (Chambers & Edinur, 2015). This deep-rooted connection is further acknowledged by the HRC of New Zealand, which describes the relationships between Māori and Pacific Peoples as an ancient whanaungatanga, a familial bond, characterised by a tuakana-teina dynamic within Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa⁶, the Pacific Ocean (as cited in Naepi, 2015).

Prominent Pacific scholars such as Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau’ofa have affirmed that Māori are Pacific Peoples, emphasising the Pacific as a vast, interconnected ocean of islands rather than isolated lands in a distant sea (as cited in Somerville, 2012). Both Somerville (2012) and Anderson et al. (2015) offered compelling literature that highlights the deep interconnection between Māori and other Pacific communities. Pacific research in Aotearoa New Zealand is informed by an understanding and respect for Tangata Whenua as the Indigenous Peoples of the lands that we live in, with an emphasis on collaboration, respect, and reciprocal relationships.

It is important that positionality is understood as a foundational starting point in Pacific research, not a one-time declaration. It needs to be carried through the entire research process, guiding the researcher’s engagement, methods, and interpretation. While institutional approval of a researcher’s stated positionality may offer legitimacy, it does not grant unrestricted authority or autonomy. In the Pacific context, declaring positionality is a commitment to accountability, relational ethics, and cultural responsiveness. Researchers are encouraged to remain critically reflective and responsive to the communities they work with, recognising that positionality is living and needs to evolve alongside the research journey. As previously mentioned, Pacific Peoples live a way of life that encompasses nurturing shared spaces, or vā, with consistent acts of cultural respect.

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**“Why you, why
now, and why this
topic?”**

**— Fa’alogo Aganoa Assoc Prof
Jacoba Matapo, Moanaroa Talanoa.**

Positionality Guide for Researchers

Stage	 Context	 Motivations and influences	 Responsibilities and ethics	 Challenges	 Impact and contribution
Focus area	Personal and cultural background	Purpose and drivers of research	Commitments and ethical stance	Complexities and limitations	Intended outcomes and accountability
Guiding Questions	What are my ancestral, cultural, and academic ties? Who are my people and places of belonging? What relationships connect me to the community I am researching?	What motivates me to pursue this research? Why me, why now, and why this topic? Who has influenced or guided my journey? What privileges, biases, or knowledge gaps do I carry?	What responsibilities do I hold towards the community or cultural protocols? Am I an insider, outsider, or somewhere in-between? How will I ensure ethical and respectful engagement with Pacific knowledge?	What tensions or challenges do I face? How do I navigate Western academic expectations alongside Pacific epistemologies? What limitations or uncertainties do I need to acknowledge?	What do I hope my research will contribute to the community? Will the outcomes be beneficial and sustainable? How will I take responsibility for the impact of my research?