

The French invention of Oceania and its regions

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bionote (in French):

<http://www.auventdesiles.pf/nos-auteurs/240-tcherkezoff-serge.html>

EHESS/ANU: see:

<http://www.pacific-dialogues.fr/>

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Introduction

Behind the names that we all know and constantly use, there is a story, often forgotten, sometimes an unfortunate one, and often originating in France. We shall first look at the names for the whole area: South Sea, Pacific, Oceania, then at the various parts: Australia, Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia.

I. Names for the whole region

SOUTH SEA

One Spanish conquistador Vasco Nunez de Balboa is in the new colonies (central America) since the early 1500s. Around 1510-12 he hears from local people about a great sea on the other side.

Gathering an expedition, he climbs the mountain range, and according to the Spanish narratives written about his expedition shortly after, when he indeed saw the open sea (in January 1513), he would have called it “Mar del sur”, the South Sea.

This label will have a great destiny, on all maps, until well into the 19th century; because, the European view that gradually took shape about the Southern part of the world somehow perceived the Pacific as a “southern sea”, while the Atlantic became by contrast referred

to, sometimes, as the Northern Ocean, although both Oceans extend just as much in the north and in the south of the world.

But we can be sure that Balboa did not have at all in mind that view, of course, as this view of a North looking at an exotic “South” became prevalent much later. According to the best French historian of Spanish explorations in those years, Annie Baert, it was just that Balboa’s route, to climb over the ridge, took him from north to south. When he saw the new Ocean, it lay to the south of his position. He thus called it the South Sea:



PACIFIC

Now that the existence of that Ocean is known, another Spanish, a Portuguese but to the Service of the Spanish Court, Ferdinand de Magellan, has decided to try to find a route to the Indies going westward, instead of following the Portuguese route that rounded

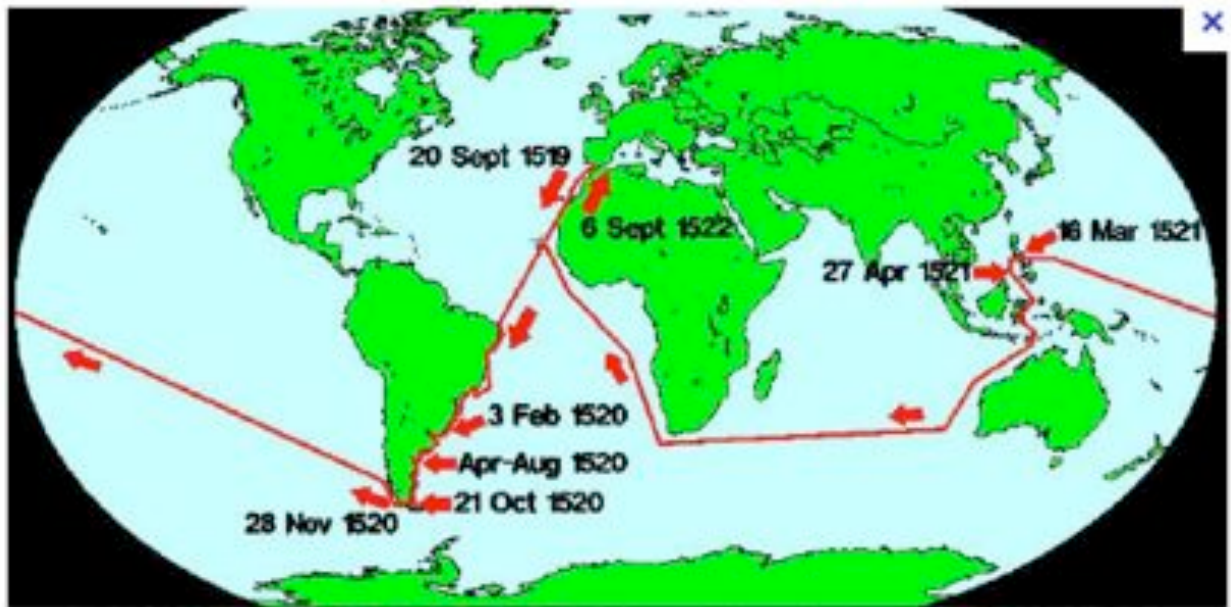
Africa --a route established by Vasco da Gama who passed Cape of Good Hope in 1497; see map:



Magellan's route:

Going down along the American coast, he finds a passage leading to the West. He engages in it. All the way the weather was awful. He sees land on both sides but cannot stop. He does not realize of course that the land on his left side is the end of the American continent, and that the tip of America is not very far. He is persuaded

that he sees the famous long searched “Southern Continent” (we’ll come back to it):



In the journal of his chief pilot, we can read about the horrible storms during the crossing and, that, when the ships come out and enter the open sea, weather is all calm. The journal says: “we entered the sea aptly named Pacific (*mar pacifico*)”. There is a slight uncertainty; pages are missing; most probably Magellan is the author of that label (or someone on board?), but we don’t have the full evidence.

Thus, “South Sea” (or Seas) and “Pacific” will be the labels on all the maps.

OCEANIA

But the other name, Oceania, is a French invention. During the late 18th early 19th century, the French expression “vast ocean” “Grand Ocean” is sometimes used. This may have had a consequence on the writings of a certain Conrad Malte-Brun, who did his career in France and was the leader of a group of Geographers who devised the first “Géographie Universelle” from the very early years of the 19th Century (he will also be the first President of the Société de Géographie de Paris, which will play a major role in welcoming d’Urville’s lecture in 1832). He writes in 1804 that it is time now to have a name for each major part of the world. There are already Europe, Asia, Africa, America; but, he says, there is nothing for the “5th part of the world” (our region); at least not a unique term (our region is known since mid 18th century, --Charles de Brosses, I’ll come back to this author--, as made of “Australasia” and “Polynesia”). Malte-Brun writes in 1804 that, in comparison to the other 4 parts, the main characteristic of this 5th part is that it is mainly composed of an oceanic expanse. Hence he finds logical to talk about it as “the oceanic lands”, “les terres océaniques”; and “the oceanic part of the world”, in French “la partie océanique du monde”; from there he suggest that it could be called, more shortly, as “l’Océanique”, in order “to follow the [phonetic] analogy with the other labels” (“pour suivre l’analogie des noms des autres parties du monde”; he has of course in mind “Afrique” and “Amerique”). Thus,

in 1804, “l’Océanique” appeared in writing; Malte Brun adds that its inhabitants could be referred to as “les Océaniens”.

The first map called “Océanique” is engraved in 1809 under Malte-Brun’s supervision:



The name will go into English language atlases as “Oceanica”—and will last much longer than “Océanique” in France. Indeed, in the early 1820, French geographers must have found the name “l’Océanique” sounding a bit strange in French (it is an adjective form –la “partie océanique du monde”; not a noun) and that is probably the reason why they changed “l’Océanique” into a proper noun “l’Océanie”. It will be adopted by all French atlases, while “Oceanica” will continue for many years, as we said, to be on English language atlases, before being replaced by “Oceania” towards the end of the 19th century.

II The various parts of Oceania

AUSTRALIA

As we are in Australia, we shall begin here. Of course everyone knows that the name became officially adopted in the 1820 after Flinders's narrative of early 1800 has been widely read, a narrative where the navigator advocated for using that name, from the expression "Terra australis", and abandon the old name "New Holland". But the expression "Terra australis" has a long prior history.

It all begun with the belief in the existence of a great land mass in the south of the world; it begun in Ancient Greece, among philosophers --at least those who believed that Earth was round: Pythagoricians and others-- and was discussed again in the 12th-15th centuries in Europe. For the proponents of the theory of a spherical Earth, the main cosmological value, from Aristotle, was "balance"; the world has to be "balanced". Now, as there was the large land mass of (part of) Europe, near-Asia and north Africa already known, it was assumed that a mass of equal size *must* exist in the other half of the world. Maps showing this unknown but sure to exist southern land mass were of several types: mainly one with lands surrounded by oceans, and another one, said to be of "Ptolemaius" tradition, where lands were occupying nearly the whole space:

1: Land surrounded by seas



Each half has 3 climatic zones, from “iced” to “torrid” (of course the intermediate one is “temperate”). It was believed no one could cross the torrid ocean, where waters were nearly boiling. Thus it was certain that the imagined Great Southern Land was existing as well as it was sure that it would never be reached (this latter certainty of course disappeared after the Portuguese managed, during the 1490s, to follow the western coast of Africa all the way to the south; see above da Gama’s route).

2. Sea surrounded by lands:

Africa is enlarging to become part of a great southern continent:

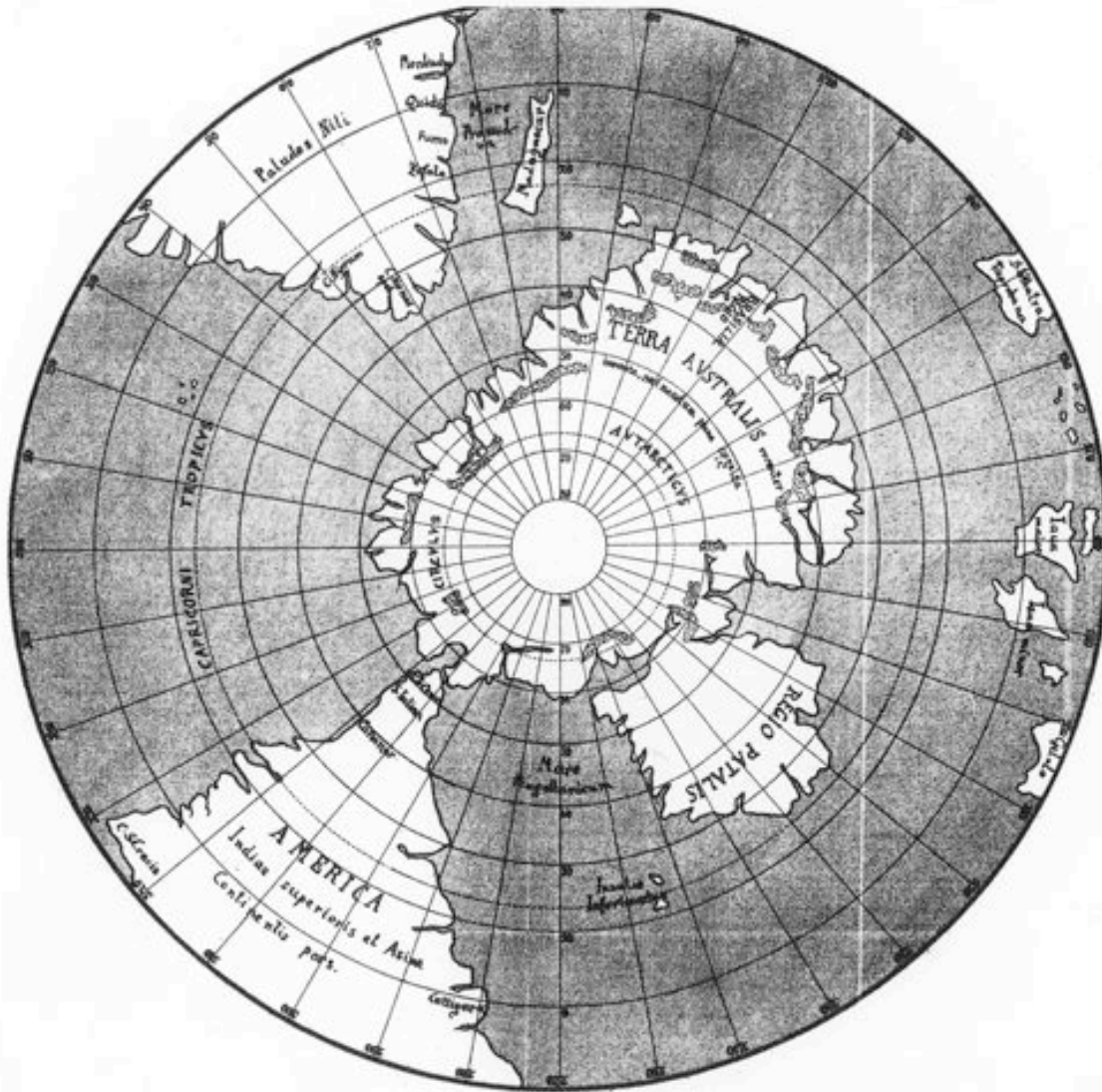


In this map, the southern great land has no specific name, but its existence is certain, even if “incognita secundum Ptolemeum” (“unknown, according to Ptolemeus”).

Nota: this map where 180 degrees separate West Europe to East India (while there is much less) made Columbus believe that, if he attempted to navigate westward, “behind” that side of the map if I may say, (himself assuming that Earth was round), he could reach India after only navigating 180 degrees. Estimating the time needed, he navigated and was not surprised to arrive indeed on some land after a lapsed time corresponding to the plan. He thus thought he had reached islands near India--- but it was a new world.

Back to our story of “Terra Australis”. It seems that the expression appeared on maps only in the 1520s. The German cosmographer and mathematician, [Johannes Schöner](#) (1477-1547): on his globes of 1523 and 1533 he described a southern annular region as *TERRA AVSTRALIS RECENTER INVENTA SED NONDUM PLENE COGNITA* (“Terra Australis, recently discovered but not yet fully known”). It was taken up by his followers, the French cosmographer [Oronce Fine](#) in his world map of 1531, and the Flemish cartographers [Gerard Mercator](#) in 1538 and others.

Schoner 1523:



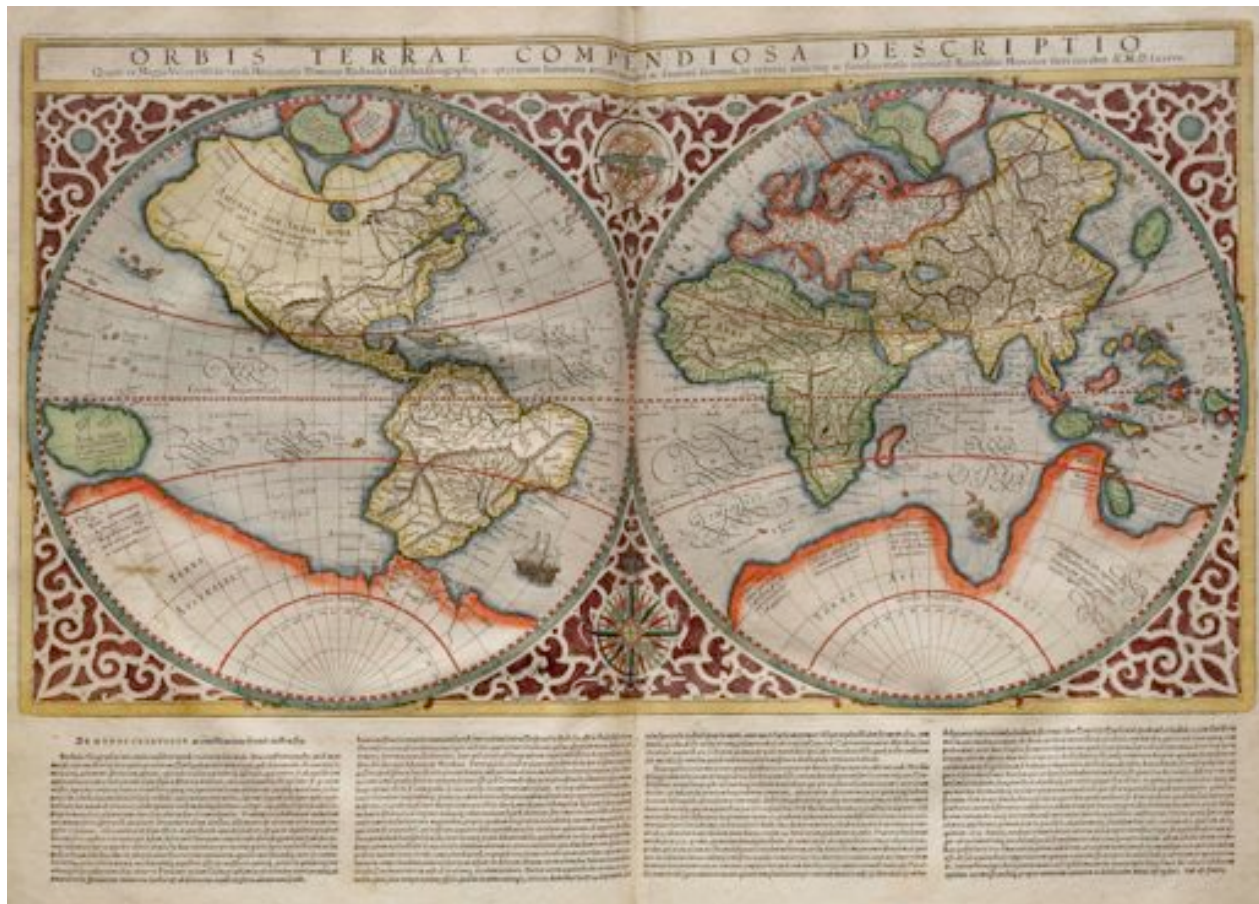
Oronce Fine 1530:



Fine wrote the same words on the great southern land mass: **TERRA AUSTRALIS NUPER INVENTA (recently discovered) SED NON DUM PLENE EXAMINATA** (not yet “fully examined” !!!).

From then on, the name of the imagined great southern land will usually include the expression “Terra Australis”.

Mercator 1587:



On this world map by Mercator, Africa is “detached” from the southern land. Cartographers knew that Vasco da Gama, when he rounded Africa in 1497 (see above map of Gama’s route), did not see land on his right. But America is “attached” as Magellan, going through “his” Straits, saw land on his left side (and for the cartographers of the time it could only have been the Great Southern Continent).

As we know, European geographers will have to wait until the end of the 1770s, after Cook's third and last voyage, to admit that the Great Southern Continent does not exist (Cook tried to sail in the south of all the oceans and saw no land until he met icebergs. Of course he did not know that, beyond, there was indeed land, covered with ice, but much smaller than the imagined Great Southern Continent.) Thus, when the belief into a "Terra Australis" that would occupy the whole south of the world was abandoned, the expression was available to be used for the largest land mass indeed found in this 5th part of the world: "New Holland" was ready to be called "Australia", thus taking into account the critiques advocating that there should be a specific name and not a name referring to Europe, and not only to one European country of explorers (Dutch: Holland).

POLYNESIA

We tend to think that the word was coined together with Melanesia and Micronesia, when the triadic system of regional labels was first drawn (in 1832 by Dumont d'Urville, we'll come back to it); because we all have seen and learned in our College atlases this triadic scheme:



But in fact, the word Polynesia was coined long before, in 1756, by a French geographer and jurist, Charles de Brosses, with a much wider definition. De Brosses developed a passion for reading narratives of explorations in the south seas (in Spanish and Dutch --there were yet nearly no English or French narratives). He thought it would be useful to translate them in French. Thus he published a compilation of his choice, and took the opportunity to coin labels for this newly discovered part of the world. He entitled his book “Histoire des navigations aux Terres Australes”.

For de Brosses, this expression covered at the same time the imagined Great Southern Continent yet to be “fully examined” and all the islands in this 5th part of the world, those already known *as well as those to be discovered*. Indeed, in his book, he stated that “there is no doubt that many more islands, rich in spices, will be discovered in this vast part of the world”.

Nota: he was so persuasive on that point that the French royal court and (immediately the following year) the British Admiralty decided that it could be worth exploring the Pacific. That will be the beginning of the great era of the French and English “classic” voyages of the 1760-1790 in the Pacific.

Charles de Brosses wanted to give a name to the various parts of the south of the world: he went for:

- “Magellanie” (Magellania) for everything that would be discovered south of America (drawing on “Magellanica” used on many maps, since the 16th century, for the south part of American and/or for the sea around the end of America;
- “Australasie” (Australasia)—which seems to be a new expression that he coined)-- for every land and seas in the south of Asia (that included the part already known of “New Holland” and the coast explored by Tasman in New Zealand);

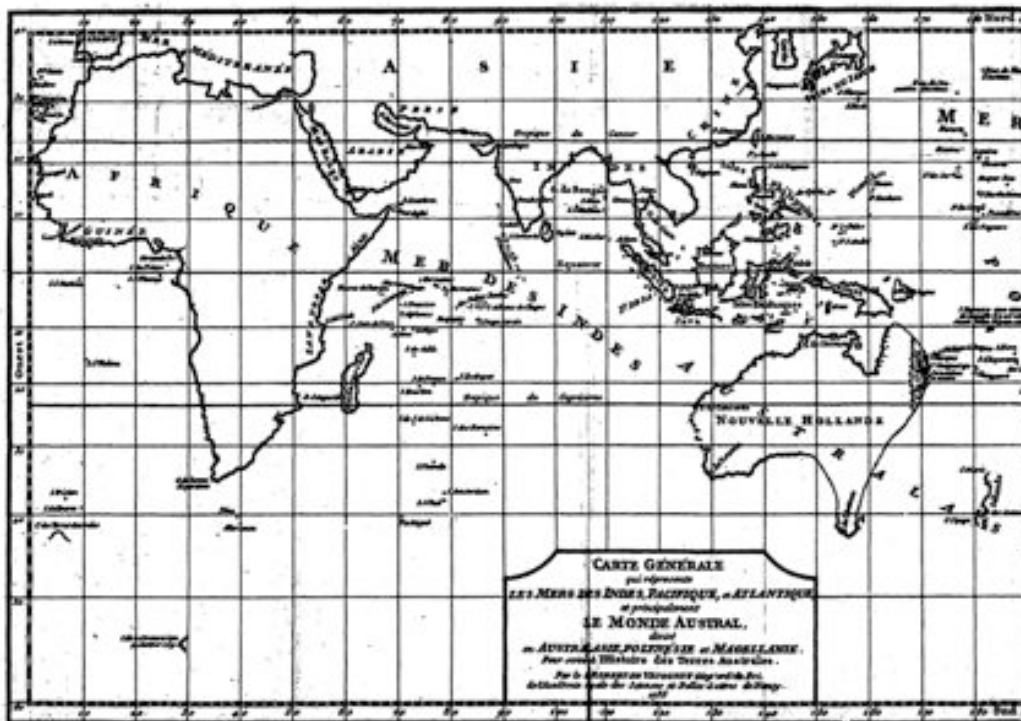
- and finally, for the region in between Magellania and Australasia: *Polynesia*. As there has been already some islands discovered, and as de Brosse wanted to be consistent with his wishful thinking that “many (more) islands” will be discovered there, he coined the word “Poly-nésie”, explaining in his text that he takes it from the Greek for “many” (polus) and for “island” (nésos).

Let us look first at the whole map:

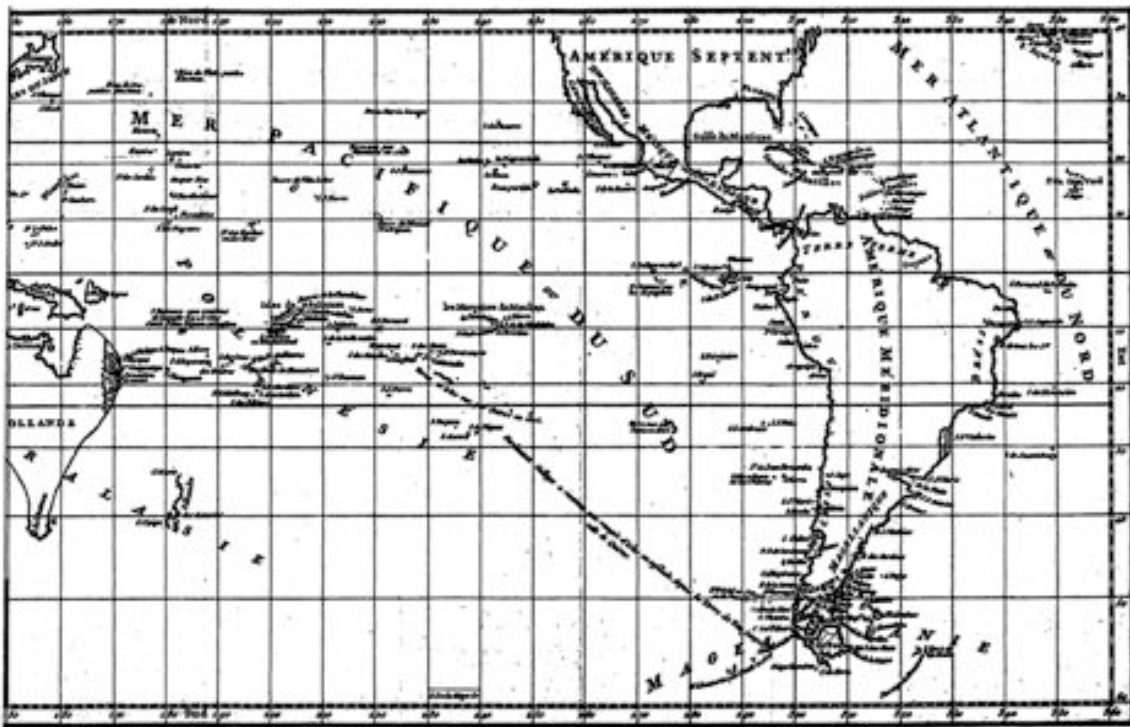


Let us now focus on the left page, which has also the title of the whole map:

“Carte générale qui représente les mers des Indes, Pacifique et Atlantique et principalement le monde austral divisé en Australasie, Polynésie et Magellanie, pour servir à l’Histoire des Terres Australes...”. On the right, down: “Australasie” extends over Australia and New Zealand:

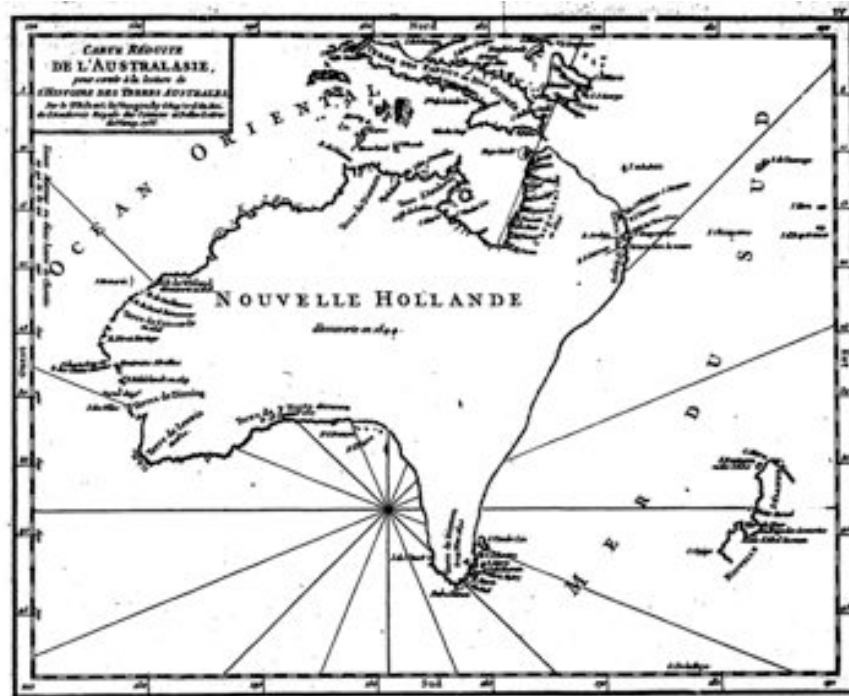


Let us next focus on the new “Polynésie”: all the Pacific islands between Australia and America: this new label, that can be seen printed in parallel to and under the “Mer Pacifique ou du sud”, extends from and through what we now call Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia:



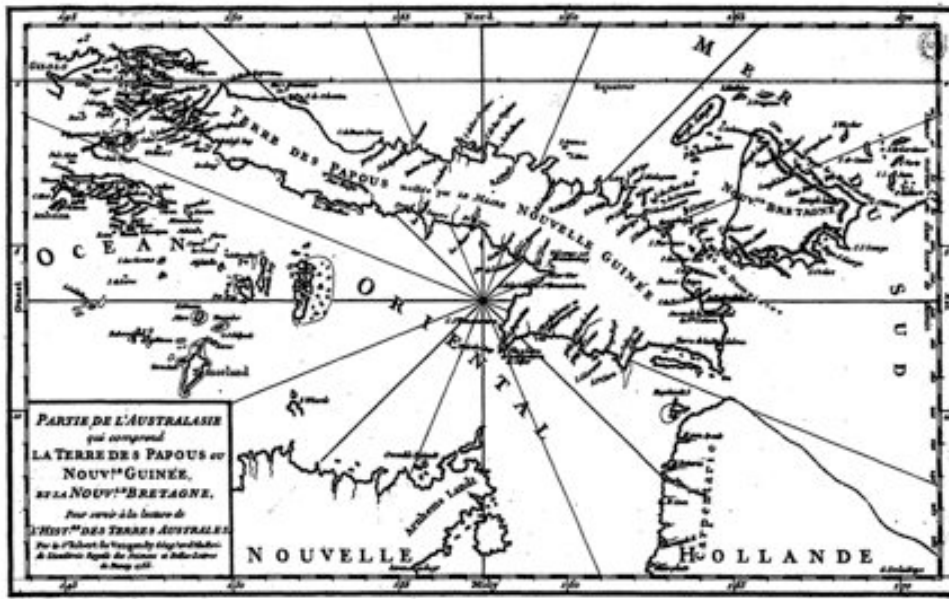
Note the Pacific as “south sea” (“mer Pacifique ou du sud”) in contrast with the Atlantic as “north sea” (“mer Atlantique ou du nord”).

Another map in this book is the “carte réduite de l’Australasie”, focussing on “Nouvelle Hollande”:



Reminder: we are before Cook’s voyages; the only coasts partially charted are in the west and the north west (and south coast of Tasmania). For the rest, the lines drawn are entirely imaginary.

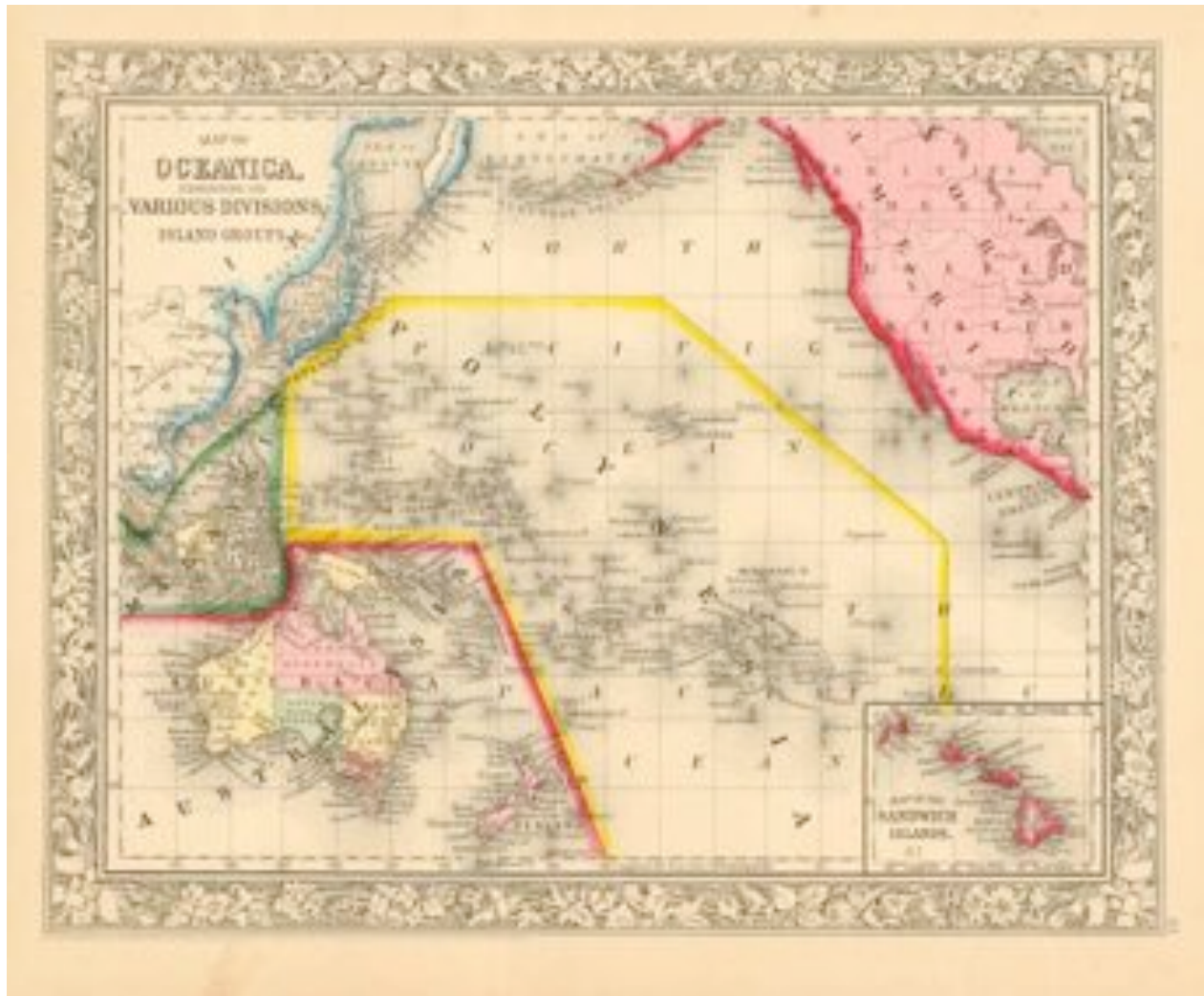
Another map focuses on New Guinea, still as “Partie de l’Australasie qui comprend la Terre des Papous ou Nouvelle-Guinée et la Nouvelle-Bretagne”:



De Brosse’s book was immediately translated in English; I should say “pirated”, as it appeared under a different name, with no reference to de Brosse. This probably explains why his model was not taken as a French invention, and thus, believed to be an English proposition, was immediately and fully adopted. From then on, all English language atlases, until the 1870 years, will have their map of “Oceanica” or “Oceania” divided into, in the West, “Australasia”, and in the East, “Polynesia”.

One classic example among so many world atlases:

Mitchell 1860 (USA)



In all those maps, the dividing line is purely “geographical”: a straight line. Archipelagos near Australia, PNG, Solomon, Vanuatu, New Caledonia are “australasians”, together with New Zealand, while Fiji happens to fall on the other side and thus is “polynesian”.

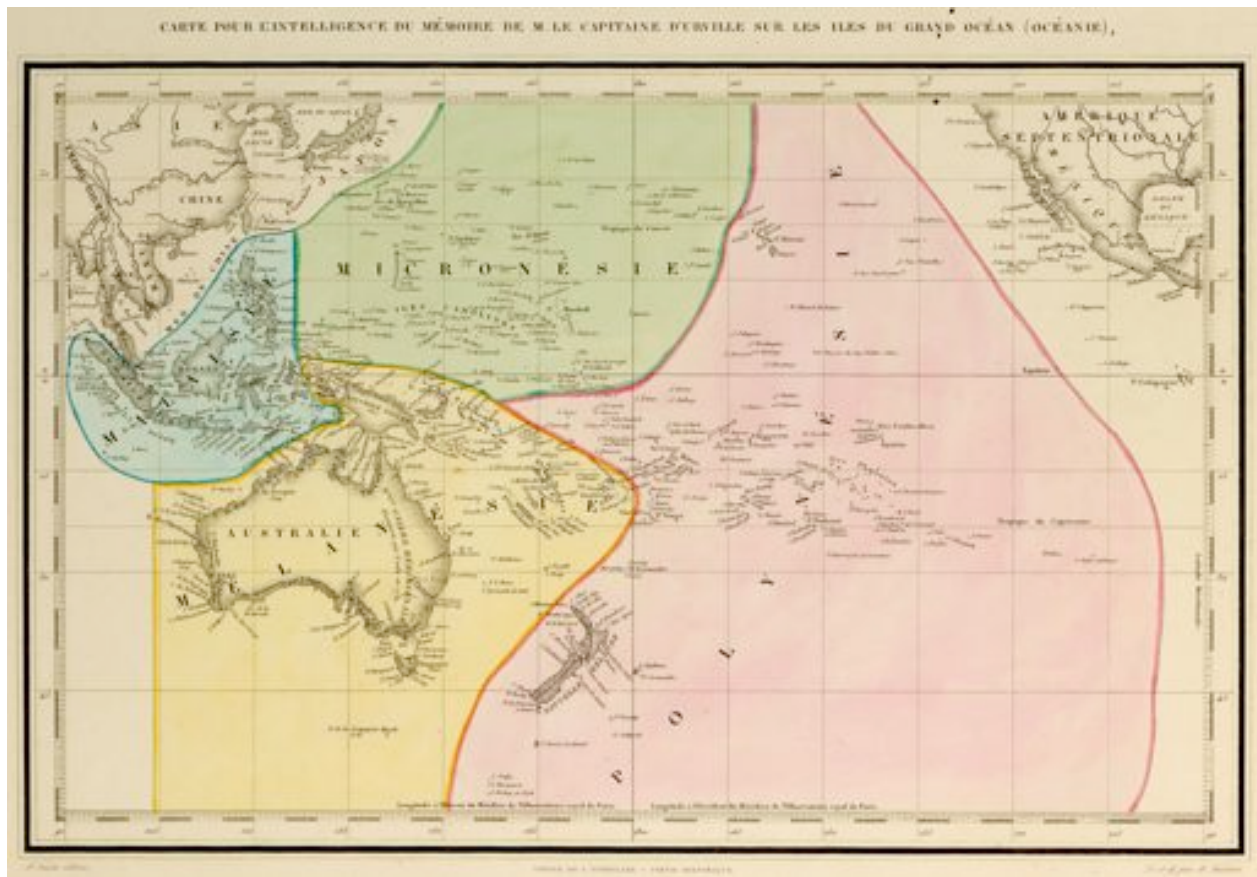
MELANESIA

Meanwhile, in France, a major shift happened: the Dumont d'Urville's model, elaborated and presented at a grand lecture at the Société de Géographie de Paris in 1832. Why did it gain favour immediately?

We remember what we said about Oceanique-Océanie: De Brosse's model of 1756 (Australasie+Polynésie) has already been displaced by Malte-Brun who substituted his Océanique-Océanie to the twofold Australasie / Polynésie model. But that opened a new scientific race for devising new subdivisions for this new "Oceanica-Oceania". Malte-Brun has prevented any move to come back to the de Brosse's terms. He had written that the notion of "Australasie" gives the idea that "Nouvelle Hollande" and "Nouvelle Guinée" are geographically, and geologically, part of the South East Asian world, while that seems to him to be entirely wrong. As for "Polynésie", he wrote that this label, conveying the idea of many—but thus rather small—islands could not apply to immense land masses such as New Holland or even New Guinea. There was thus no opening to come back to de Brosse's dual terminology for anyone wishing to offer a sub-regional labelling system for the new whole "Océanie".

This is where Dumont d'Urville wanted to be the first. He gave a lecture in January 1832, announcing that he will propose an entirely

new system of regional labels for Oceania. He produced the following map (published in black and white in the Bulletin of the Society on that year, and in colour in his own book narrating his last voyage, published on the following year):



This is the map which is still in all our text books, with only the difference that, in early 20th century, Australia went out of “Melanesia” to stand on its own, as geographers considered that the Australian main population was European and no more mainly composed by native “Océaniens”. Also, in the same years, “Malaisie” - Malaysia went out of “Océanie” - Oceania and joined with “Asia” or at

least “South East Asia”. This is how we arrived at the triadic model that is in all our atlases, and which we presented above.

Now, here is a most important point: d’Urville’s text in contrast to d’Urville’s map.

The lecture, the text itself, stayed within the Bulletin of the Société de Géographie, and was never reprinted anywhere, and never translated in English --until very recently, in 2003 (special issue of the Journal of Pacific History, here at ANU). Thus its content was forgotten. But the map, with (in addition to “Malaisie”) its alluring triadic simple model, with names being harmoniously in analogy (Poly-nésie, Méla-nésie, Micro-nésie) went everywhere. In France, it entered professional atlases within 3 years and college atlases within 10 years or less. It will take forty or so more years to enter into English language atlases (see above the Mitchell map still following de Brosse), but finally it will everywhere displace previous models.

The map, if it were only a series of names, would be no harm. But of course, with names the illusion come of a certain cultural historical unity. The map gave to everyone the idea that there were three “culture areas”: Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia. It holds good enough, with the limits drawn by d’Urville, for Polynesia and Micronesia, but not at all for Melanesia, according to critiques that begun to be heard in the late 1970 and 1980, when some linguists

and archaeologists, here at ANU (Andrew Pawley) and in New Zealand (Roger Green), said openly that the notion of Melanesia does not correspond to any linguistic or history of migrations unity. Darrell Tryon and other linguists here had shown extensively how “Melanesia” includes languages coming from very different broad language families.

This led some linguists, archaeologists, historians and anthropologists, again here at ANU, Roger Ward, Geoffrey Clark, and a group composed then of Nick Thomas, Margaret Jolly and Bronwen Douglas, to revisit what has been the content of the d'Urville's lecture. Some knew the content, but very few (those who could read French and took the trouble to dig for the 1832 Bulletin of the Society of Geography in Paris), and that is why it was so important to have it published in English in 2003 (the ANU Journal of Pacific History special issue directed by Geoffrey Clark). For my part, I tried to decipher d'Urville's private journal kept at the Library of Toulon.

All those specialised enquiries into the text of the lecture, besides and behind the map, revealed that, far from presenting a purely geographical and triadic (or of 4 terms with “Malaisie”) scheme, d'Urville had in mind to present a “racial” theory, and a theory based on a dual scheme.

He wrote clearly in his private journal that his presentation of the various parts of Oceania in January 1832 is, for him, first of all a

“memoire sur les races de l'Océanie”. The text itself of the lecture makes the point that the author, in his navigations in the Pacific, met essentially with “two different races”: one “black” and one “yellow” (reminder: since early 1800, the science of “races” has unfortunately become the dominant paradigm among scholars in France and in other parts of Europe; a “science” where the “skin colour” trait was one dominant trait for discriminating between human “species”).

He wrote (in another publication two years later) that, for him, one strong motivation for coining “Melanesia” was that it was “scientifically impossible to keep under the same label” (the old “Polynésie” by De Brosse which encompassed all the Pacific Islands) people “who are black and other who are just yellow” (“qui sont simplement jaunes”). Thus, for instance, Fiji which was “polynesian” in the de Brosse’s model continued by Mitchell etc., became “Melanesian”. D’Urville made it clear that his system of regional names must be understood in the following way: two races, one “black” and one “yellow”. For the “black race”: its region will be called “Mela-nesie”, for “islands” (nesos) inhabited by “black” (melas) people. On the other side, there is the “race” of the “yellow” peoples. Within this second race, “science” can then go into a second order subdivision: between “Polynésie, Micronésie and Malaisie”. The reasons for making differences there are of cultural and linguistic reasons, thus one level below the main “scientific” level of discrimination which must be “races”.

At that secondary level, d'Urville tried to distinguish between the “reign of custom of taboo” in Polynesia, and the absence of such knowledge of “taboo” rules in Micronesia (no need to comment on these over simplistic attributions). On the linguistic distinctions, d'Urville had some reasons in distinguishing between Polynesia, Micronesia (and of course Malaysia)—on that point, modern linguistics do support his division.

Thus “Mélanésie” is a construct based entirely and only on a definition of “race”, itself based only on “skin colour”. Fortunately, we have nowadays moved quite far from any “science of race”, but we have forgotten that, on our maps of the Pacific, “Melanesia” is there only for a “racial” reason. We must keep it at the back of the mind to avoid falling into the illusion that all the peoples living in “Melanesia” have a common historical (migrations) and linguistic origin; they do in Polynesia and Micronesia, they don't in “Melanesia”.

Then why not getting rid of that last label? Actually this is what was advocated for by some archaeologists and linguists already mentioned, in the 1980s. But it was too late, as, in the mid 1970s, on the ground, from a very different perspective, a political notion of “Melanesian identity”, a “Melanesian way of life”, have emerged in this western part of the Pacific. A striking example is the “Melanesian

Spearhead Group” which was formed in 1988 under this title by PNG, Solomon, Vanuatu and Fiji to support the fight for independence launched by the Kanak FNLKS. (This very week, in the name of that “Melanesian” alliance, the President of the Congress of New Caledonia, Rock Wamytan, who is going to visit the Australian Parliament in 2 weeks, has given a strong financial aid for the running of the Secretariat of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, in Port Vila).

Thus, when discussing modern political ideologies and movements in the Pacific, we can and we indeed should entirely forget the sad origin of the label “Melanesia”, and support the building of this regional west Pacific common identity. But when we compare, from a socio-anthropological and historical point of view, the various societies spread in the “Melanesia” area, we should avoid to pursue at all cost the illusion of unity through refined comparisons, and we can then remember that this region was defined and its limits drawn for reasons that have not any validity in modern social sciences.

Addendum: the “real” story of the peopling of Oceania

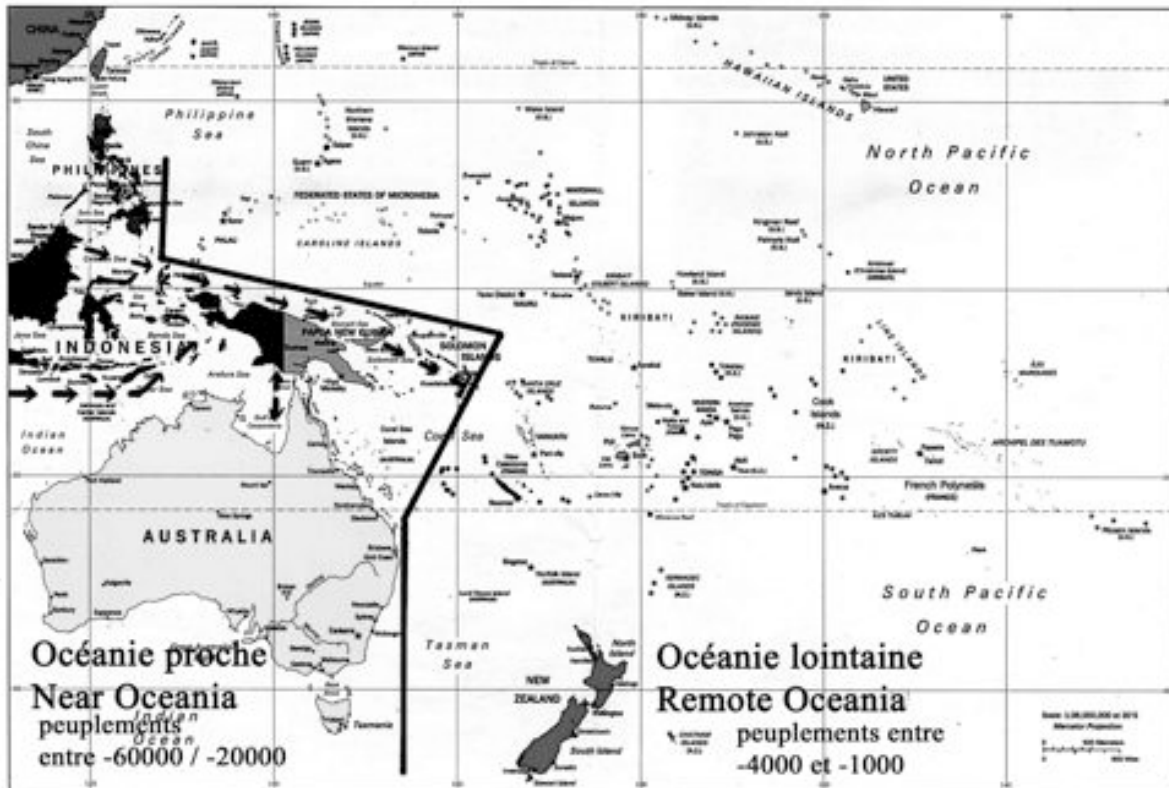
So what is the “real” story of the migrations in Oceania that explain the repartition of the linguistic groups? Let us look at two maps that will help us summarise it:

1- Linguistic migrations and supposed dates of arrival within the “Austronesian family” (this name is used by linguists to characterize a large group of languages which all clearly share a common origin going back not more than 5 or 6,000 years, stemming probably from the south coast of China –but the only evidence we have starts in Taiwan).

Some groups speaking those languages are still in Taiwan since 4 or 5,000 years, and in South East Asia today; (from there, one wave went westward all the way until Madagascar!); some groups arrived and have been staying on the coasts of PNG and Solomon since 4 to 3,500 years; while others, moving along those coasts, continued south-east and were the first to go further than the south Solomon and to step foot on New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji and into the whole of what we call today Micronesia and Polynesia (dates indicated below are before present BP):



This explains the regional division of Oceania that archaeologists and linguists use (and would like to be printed in all atlases, instead of the d’Urville’s model):



--A “Near Oceania” mainly peopled by inhabitants who arrived between 60 and 20 thousands years ago. This length of time explains why, whatever may have been (or not) some unity between those languages at the beginning, today the diversity of languages found say in PNG, Vanuatu or New Caledonia is the world highest percentage in relation to the number of inhabitants;

--and a Remote Oceania where all languages are related (the “austronesian” family) and have a common history with separations not going back more that 4 or 3 thousands years.

In near Oceania, on the coasts, a number of groups speak also austronesian languages: places where migrants of the recent waves

that went all the way into Remote Oceania established themselves, also intermarried with local inhabitants and their language prevailed. This adds of course another supplementary level of linguistic diversity within “Melanesia”.

Merci, Thank you

Note added by ST after the conference:

During the discussion that followed this presentation, some questions from the audience, in relation to that division of Near/Remote Oceania, raised the following point. Noting that the Santa Cruz (south Solomon), New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji are on the right (eastern) side of the dividing line drawn by archaeologists and linguists, thus sharply separated from the other “Melanesian” people, a question comes up concerning the “physical” distinctions. If people in New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji all have languages that belong to the austronesian family of languages and this make them being close in origin to the whole of Micronesia and Polynesia, why does their physical appearance make them look more similar to the people in the West (Near Oceania): Solomon, PNG?

The answer can only lie with the intense exchanges and intermarriages that happened within this “Melanesian” region, some of it already during the early migration routes, some later. There was of course more interconnections between say Solomon people with

Vanuatu etc. than with Tahiti or Hawaii, once the early migrations had taken place.

The main point to remember is that languages do not mix, while genes do mix. The sharp separation drawn by archaeologists and linguists rest only on two types of data: earliest dates of human occupation and types of languages spoken. On the right side, Eastern side of the dividing line (“Remote Oceania”), not any site that could be dated earlier than around 4000 BP was found; thus archaeological dates there have nothing to do with the dates of 40,000 – 20,000 BP commonly found in the left (Western) side of the line (“Near Oceania”). On the right (Eastern) side of the line, not any language spoken has been found that would not very clearly belong to the “austronesian” family. On the left side of the line, few groups (only coastal) do speak austronesian languages; but all the rest, the vast majority, speak “non-austronesian” languages (sometimes improperly called “Papuan languages”).

This being said, all kinds of encounters, exchanges and intermarriages happened and do happen nowadays between neighbouring archipelagos. That created a relative “physical” unity in the region that d’Urville called “Melanesia”. But there again, the limit drawn by d’Urville is meaningless. In Samoa for instance, the physical variation is great, pigmentations, types of hair, etc, are very varied, some persons are close to some encountered in Fiji, and

there is no reason to draw the limit of that “Melanesian” region between Fiji and Samoa, as d’Urville did.

More generally, this notion of physical unity is very vague. Still today it mainly rests on vague impressions of “skin colour”—while we all should keep in mind what is known today on that matter: in the genetic pool of a human person, in his total chromosomic capital, the genes responsible for pigmentation (“skin colour”) are never more than some 3°/0000 of the total! (“8 to 10 genes over several dozen of thousands”, according to Albert Jacquart, whose authority on biological issues is well known; see his “Eloge de la difference: la génétique et les hommes. Paris, Seuil, 1978).

* * *

PS. For more details in English about some maps presented here, see the file (maps and texts) online (free access): through the French language entry:

http://www.pacific-encounters.fr/cartographie_ancienne_moderne.php

or through the English language entry:

http://www.pacific-encounters.fr/cartographie_ancienne_moderne_eng.php

For much more details on the story of the whole European vision, since 15th century up to contemporary times, and on the evolution of “theories of races” in Europe, see the book (in French; English translation in progress, to be put on line at the same publisher, Au Vent des Iles, Papeete):

<http://www.auventdesiles.pf/notre-catalogue/42-culture-oceanienne/386-polynesiemelanesie-linvention-francaise-des-gracesq-et-des-regions-de-loceanie-xvie-xxe-siecles.html>

SERGE TCHERKÉZOFF

Polynésie/Mélanésie

L'invention française des « races » et des régions de l'Océanie (XVII^e-XIX^e siècles)

Polynésie, Mélanésie... mais aussi Australie, Micronésie : on ignore souvent que le découpage actuel de l'Océanie résulte d'une théorie raciste des « couleurs de peau », élaborée en France au début du XIX^e siècle et préparée par des siècles d'interrogations européennes sur la présence des « Nègres du Pacifique ». C'est aussi l'histoire d'un regard européen-masculin qui admit bien plus les femmes polynésiennes que les femmes des « Bas noirs » (Mélanésie).

En rassemblant les divers traités français (ainsi que le traité anglais de J.R. Forster de 1778) qui ont prétendu donner une classification des peuples du Pacifique, en retraçant l'origine des appellations savantes, ce livre propose une histoire générale — et une déconstruction — des visions européennes, raciales et sexistes, sur la nature physique et morale de ces peuples, entre les XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles.

Cet examen permet aussi de s'interroger sur l'histoire générale du racisme européen, en suivant le bouleversement qui s'est produit à la charnière des XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles, quand le naturalisme a laissé la place à la « biologie » et l'humanisme au racisme moderne.

La conclusion fait le point des connaissances actuelles en convoquant l'archéologie, la linguistique et la génétique. Un dossier de cartes présente la vision et les explorations européennes depuis l'Antiquité. On s'aperçoit qu'il faut repenser une partie de nos programmes d'histoire et de géographie. Ce livre s'adresse ainsi tout autant aux enseignants, du secondaire et du supérieur, qu'aux chercheurs spécialisés.

Polynésie/Mélanésie
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SERGE TCHERKÉZOFF

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> Il est membre fondateur (1995) et fut directeur (1999-2007) du CREDO.

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