

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## 12<sup>th</sup> European Society for Oceanists Conference (ESfO)

7-10 December 2018, Cambridge

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The 2018 ESfO conference was held 18 months after the last one in Munich, at the University of Cambridge. It coincided with the biannual conference of the Pacific History Association. The Pacific History event has always taken place at Pacific island universities or in Australia, and this was its first time in the UK, in the days before ESfO. Pacific Island scholars could participate in both conferences on a single trip, although not all of them stayed for the ESfO conference. Another benefit was the chance to see the excellent Oceania exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. For that reason, the opening of the ESfO conference was in the Brian West Lecture Theater of the Royal Academy in Piccadilly (London), accompanied by a welcome reception and entry to the exhibition. The inspiring and enriching first keynote, 'Thinking Through Intersectionality and Gender Inequality in Papua New Guinea', was given by Holly Wardlow (Anthropology, University of Toronto) and addressed the general theme of the conference, 'Dealing with Inequality: Pacific perspectives, Pacific futures'. The podium discussion that followed focused on archival and museum collections and the difficulties of including Pacific perspectives. The exhibition itself featured rich displays (see background picture of this article) and thoughtful arrangements but lacked an explicit Pacific input, some felt.

After the opening and the welcome drinks, the participants, in other words "the whole conference", were transferred to Cambridge by coach, organized and managed by the conference team, under the guidance of Prof. Nicolas Thomas. Sean Mallon (Museum of New Zealand/ Te Papa Tongarewa) gave a keynote on museum work at Te Papa Tongarewa with all its challenges, limits and rewards. The conference sessions followed, some with more participants than others. While it was great to have many different topics covered, there was a constant complaint – as at previous ESfO conferences – that it was impossible to listen to all the great papers happening simultaneously.

Unfortunately, even the lunch breaks were filled with extra sessions, shortening the time for informal meetings and exchange. At the same time, it was sad for the presenters of the lunchtime events to lose some of their audience. Informal communication was possible during the wine reception at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge, and the conference dinner at the Doubletree Hilton. Some of the conference sessions were in relatively small but modern rooms at the hotel, while others took place in a nearby University building in Mill Lane.

Due to the high number of parallel sessions and the wide range of topics presented and questions raised, it is quite difficult to summarize the conference. All in all, we had 32 Sessions, of different length and intensity, on topics including racial mobility, current perspectives in archaeology, socio-linguistics, and resource extraction. There were sessions on contemporary repatriation practices and on the second day, new forms of political participation, economic dependency, landscapes of power, and decolonizing or closing maritime frontiers. Other topics included fashion, gendering the city, refugees, fighting climate change, new capitalism in the Pacific, transnational rituals, traffic, and indigenous responses to invasive species.

The corresponding author was lucky to participate in several sessions, and all of them were of a high standard and led to intense and profound discussions. Young scholars and students indicated new and creative directions for Pacific scholarship. The conference faded out on Monday afternoon and did not have a closing session. Many participants had already made their way back home or were heading on to visit friends and relatives. We look forward to the next ESfO conference to be held in Ajaccio, Corsica, in 2021.

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