

NUKU RAPANA

MIGRATING TO ENTERPRISE AND DEVELOPMENT



Nuku Rapana

Nuku Rapana is the president of the Pukapuka Island Community in New Zealand, a community made up of families who originally migrated from a tiny coral atoll in the Cook Islands. As president, Rapana has led a strategy of development that has brought many innovations to this community, and has served as a role model for other migrant groups. He has also established the Pukapuka Community Centre which is virtually a cultural village operating out of a former industrial warehouse in South Auckland.

Rapana has established several community-owned enterprises including the Pukapuka Training Academy which teaches computer skills, and Kai Malie Foods which sells Polynesian delicacies at the local Mangere Markets. He has also set up a range of social services including literacy programmes, employment training schemes, and health and housing initiatives. And he works to ensure that the dispersed network of Pukapukan communities remain connected wherever they are living and working – by establishing community networks of cultural and sporting events throughout New Zealand, Australia, Samoa and Rarotonga.

- Pukapuka is one of the most remote places on Earth. The atoll is in the Northern Cook Islands group and is around 1150 km, or a four-five day boat journey, from Rarotonga. The isolation of the atoll is compounded by the lack of any harbour that is accessible by large ships, and the surrounding submerged reefs that make navigation dangerous. A small air-strip was built on the atoll in 1994, but flights are infrequent and it is not unusual for several months to go by before freight demand means a flight is scheduled.

The entire population on Pukapuka is said to be descended from around 80 people who survived a tsunami which swept over the atoll over 500 years ago. There have been small settlements on the atoll for many hundreds of years before this, and recent archaeological

evidence suggests that it was inhabited as far back at 300 BC, as part of the Samoan and Tongan migrations into Eastern Polynesia.

Pukapuka consists of three tiny islands on a reef which encloses a triangular-shaped lagoon. It has only about two square miles (5 sq km) of land area, and the highest point is no more than five metres above sea level. There are usually good water supplies drawn from wells, or from rainwater captured in tanks. The soil is relatively poor and consists mainly of sand and coral gravel, and the vegetation is largely of coconut palms, breadfruit trees and local varieties of taro.

Today, about 400 people live on the atoll, where daily life is dominated by fishing, farming and the harvesting of local crops such as coconuts, bananas and papayas. Permanent settlement is only allowed on the largest island called *Wale* (home). There are three main villages on this island, each of which keeps reserve areas for food on the other small islands.

Rapana: "We are very aware of the limits of our environment. Our people have long had a conservation practice which means that entire villages move to these reserves for several months at a time. We protect the trees by not cutting them down unless you have permission, and all birds and seafood are left untouched until they mature. We are strict about these controls, and there are penalties for breaking the rules."

In 1950, Pukapuka purchased the neighbouring island of Nassau and developed it as a further plantation reserve. A virtual "fourth village" has since grown up on Nassau as a number of Pukapukan families have settled there permanently.

While Pukapuka is politically part of the Cook Islands group, it is actually closer to Samoa (which is 640 km to the west), and Pukapuka has a unique language which is not understood by other Cook Islanders. Rapana: "When the colonial powers were cutting up the boundaries of the Pacific, they weren't too sure whether to make Pukapuka part of the Cook Islands or Samoa. In the end it came down to a question of who brought the Gospel ... and it was missionaries from Rarotonga who brought the Gospel to us in 1857."



Pukapuka atoll



*Life on
Pukapuka atoll*

The Pukapukan lifestyle may seem like the Pacific ‘paradise’ of popular novels where families are living simply and close to a bountiful sea in an environment of stunning natural beauty. The life of local churches is a strong cultural element on the atoll, as is the communal singing of chants and hymns. Local crafts are prevalent, and Pukapuka is especially renowned throughout the Pacific for the weaving of fine mats. And sport is also popular, especially *poolo*, a Pukapukan version of cricket.

But if this lifestyle is ‘paradise’, it is one that is regularly interrupted by fierce Pacific hurricanes which can cause tremendous destruction and distress. One such hurricane struck the atoll in 1914, destroying houses and crops, and led to many Pukapukan families becoming famine refugees and moving to Rarotonga.

In February 2005, Pukapuka and Nassau were again hit by a series of hurricanes, including Cyclone Percy, which tore through the islands bringing down thousands of trees and destroying the taro gardens. Only 10% of the houses survived intact, and much of the island’s water supply was contaminated.

A huge rescue effort was undertaken by the Cook Islands government with help from aid agencies from New Zealand and elsewhere. But the remoteness of the islands has made work a logistical nightmare, and the rebuilding effort took more than four years. During this time, there was another significant migration of young people and families away from the islands.

The first Pukapukan to settle in New Zealand was Papa Manua Tutara, one of seven Pukapukan soldiers who fought alongside New Zealanders in the First World War. He decided to stay on in New Zealand and marry a local Ngati Whatua woman (known as Mama Matua). They lived in Hellensville, and Tutara started to sponsor relatives to come and join him, and work mainly in the forests and the dairy factories. This started the flow of Pukapukan migrants coming to New Zealand.

In the 1950s, this small community began to shift into Auckland city, initially in the central Ponsonby area, but later out to the western or southern parts of the city. In 1951, they decided to more formally organise themselves as a community, and they elected their first leader in New Zealand, Papa Atawua Robati QSM.

By the mid-1970s, the Pukapukan population in New Zealand was still only about 225 people. But soon the floodgates of immigration from the Cook Islands opened up, and many more Pukapukans moved to Auckland, or Australia, to chase better employment opportunities. In



PUKAPUKA COMMUNITY GROUP

2010, it was estimated that about 3500 Pukapukans now live in New Zealand — with the total Pukapukan population (including those living in Australia and the Pacific) now exceeding 6000 people.

- Nuku Rapana was born and raised on Pukapuka, and even as a child he was recognised as someone with a sense of curiosity and enterprise that was unusual for his community. Rapana: “I was very interested in how things worked, and how to fix things. I was only about nine years old when I figured out how to set up a light that was made from discarded radio batteries. I would collect the batteries and bake them in a tray and wired up some little lights to use, and put a switch in. On Pukapuka, there was no other person — young or old — doing that sort of thing.”

Rapana immigrated to New Zealand when he was 12 years old, and was educated at Rutherford and Onehunga High Schools. On leaving secondary school, he threw himself into his passion for electronics by joining Screencraft, a subsidiary of Fisher & Paykel that manufactured printed circuit boards for the likes of Tait Electronics and Wormald. He quickly rose through the organisation to become a production supervisor, and an expert on the programming software that is used in lathes and printing machines.

He was appointed manager of the prototyping division, where he introduced innovative parallel production processing methods, and tripled the division’s revenues within a year. Rapana: “I have been very grateful to Fisher & Paykel because they trained me well, and put me through a lot of management programmes ... and these skills have since proved very useful.”

In 1994, Rapana left Fisher & Paykel to establish his own electronics company. He bought the New Zealand franchise for Entech Electronic Products which designs and supplies printed circuits and switch assemblies, as well as distributes computer hardware and software. The business was successful and Rapana was earning a good income — but his life was soon to take a major change in direction. A call from his elders in the Pukapuka community meant that this career in electronics would be forced to take a back seat.

In 1995, Rapana was asked to become the new leader of the Pukapuka community in New Zealand. “It was quite an honour for me to be asked, and would mean that I became the eighth leader since 1951. I think they asked me because they had already noticed my close involvement with the community. I used to come to the meetings, and I would always be talking with the old people ... and that was unusual because generally the younger people in our community would not come and sit in with the meetings.”

“An election was held, but before this, I also had a personal choice to make: whether I would leave all my business work with electronics and step across to be the leader of our community. I knew that the community didn’t really have any finances, so I knew it was going to be tough. Yet I also knew that I could bring back to my community some fresh thinking, and also the enterprise and problem solving skills that I had learned in the electronics and business world.”



*Brian Donnelly and Nuku Rapana
at the NZSEF Retreat*

At the time Rapana became president, he says the organisation was ‘flat dead’ and its overall direction was unclear: “We really needed to have a rethink. After all, we had migrated to New Zealand to seek greener pastures, but it seemed that our people were really only feeding on dry grass. They were struggling ... struggling in health, and struggling in education. I wanted to make the changes that will help realise the potential of New Zealand for our people — the potential and opportunities that had brought us here in the first place.”

Taking on the leadership of this organisation was certainly a personal challenge for Rapana and his family. He worked for almost two years with no pay as he consulted with the community and put in place new plans. And because he wouldn’t allow his family to go on a benefit, he almost lost his house in the process.

“We trusted in God ... and yes, we survived.”

- While the Pukapuka community in New Zealand had been loosely organised since 1951, it had never formally registered itself as a legal entity. Rapana set up the *Pukapuka Community of New Zealand Incorporated Society* that would be a new legal vehicle for their work. The society soon gained official charitable status, and Rapana then started to register a series of companies, wholly owned by the Society, through which they would undertake their various activities.

Rapana would weave into this Society a philosophy of community and economic development that was backed by pragmatic business principles. This was a significant innovation in a Pacific community that was more usually organised around its churches. Rapana: “We took a different approach which means that we are not a church-based community, but there are churches within our community. Whenever and wherever we meet *is* our place of worship ... but it can also be the place that provides social services and improves the education and wellbeing of our community, and also runs businesses and creates jobs.”

Rapana convinced his community leaders that it would be important for them to own their community facilities and build up their capital base — so they could pursue their development on their own terms.

“I felt that we needed to set up business units and other economic activities that will generate the revenue to keep our organisation going, and lift our whole community. When we



Nuku Rapana welcoming visitors to the Pukapuka Training Academy, in Mangere

look at middle class New Zealand, we know they're well off now because of a lot of economic decisions their parents and grandparents made a long time ago. They are in a better position today, and they own their own homes ... whereas a lot of our Pacific people have just recently migrated and are only just starting this process."

The first step for Rapana would be to establish a Community Centre that would be a base for the Pukapukan activities in Auckland. While the migrant families had continued their association with different Pacific Island churches, it was often difficult for them to come together as a whole Pukapuka community.

"We needed a home in which we could re-establish our traditional activities, and re-activate the concept of *kāinga* (family hearth) and an essential consciousness of our identity as Pukapukans within a foreign environment."

In 1997, Rapana found an empty manufacturing warehouse, situated in an industrial area of Mangere. He rented it to establish the new Community Centre which would soon become a Pukapukan 'cultural village' within the heart of South Auckland.

The Centre is open seven days a week for a range of community purposes, including a licensed pre-school (with registered teachers teaching the Pukapuka language), after-school and holiday programmes for children, a performing arts group for young adults, a women's traditional crafts circle and men's woodworking group, weekly gatherings with elders to practise traditional music, and community nights which are held twice weekly. When bereavements in the community occur, the Centre becomes like a marae, with as many as a thousand people in attendance at the *wakaalanga*, or funeral.

Once the Centre was established, the Pukapuka community found itself with a new challenge — to come up with the funds to purchase the premises within the next two years. Rapana: "When I started as president, we had \$6000 in the bank account, and the main fundraising we were doing was running social functions based around alcohol. I said, 'No more drinking' — because that was the source of most of the struggles within our families. The other thing we were good at was selling raffle tickets, and I stopped that the day we started because gambling was also a problem.

"I said, 'Come and pray about it, and think about how we can mobilise people in other ways'. Our community in fact managed to come up with the \$60,000 we needed to secure

the site, and that's how we enabled the whole project to move and now its hard to stop. That warehouse building is now worth over \$2 million.”

All the operational costs at the Centre are paid for from the profits from the business units that the Pukapuka community has established. One of these businesses is Kai Malie Foods, which runs a bakery and shop at the Centre, and also sells Polynesian delicacies at the weekly Mangere Markets. Another is Wale Works, a building company which is part of Rapana's desire to build up a land and housing portfolio through which the community can build and sell or rent homes to their own people.

- Two years after establishing the Community Centre, Rapana bought another facility in Mangere to set up a new business unit — the Pukapuka Training Academy. This is a NZQA-registered private training establishment. It targets Pacific Island communities with education in electronics and computer literacy, as well as job search guidance for young school-leavers and long-term unemployed adults. The programmes are open to anyone, and the Academy has around 300 students. Many of the courses are run in collaboration with Maori tertiary provider *Te Wananga o Aotearoa*, which Rapana credits as being a role model for this work.

Part of the computer training at the Academy is offered in collaboration with Cisco Systems, an American-based multi-national corporation specialising in computer networking. Cisco runs many training academies in poor and disadvantaged communities around the world, including in seven locations around New Zealand. The students undergo a series of internet-based training modules leading to their initial computer industry certification.

Rapana: “The Pacific Island population has a long way to go to join up with the current tertiary system. We really need to raise aspirations beyond the factory jobs that most Pacific people are in. There are a lot of other fields that our people can move into, and we need to be supporting our people to think about becoming teachers, or working in health sector jobs, or with computers and engineering.”

“I recognise that there are all sorts of pressures on our people which mean they will drop out of tertiary education. It is not just about the individual young people themselves — we

*Pukapuka
Community Centre
in Mangere*





Pre-school and language nest run at the Pukapuka Community Centre

need to change the attitudes of all of us. We need to build up the whole community awareness to understand the process of how to support our young people to succeed at higher education.”

Beyond the business, education and training programmes, the Pukapuka community also runs a range of social and welfare services, many of which operate under contract to government departments. These include weekly English classes and an orientation course for new migrants, driver education courses, training in health and safety, and a health clinic which runs preventative health education programmes for families with young children. The Centre employs social workers to provide advocacy and counselling, and has a network of voluntary welfare workers who also work with families.

Rapana: “These services are not just a matter of grabbing money from government and running welfare schemes. They are part of our developmental approach which means that we’re working with problems and searching for real solutions. And we’ve got to come up with the solutions that will work — whether we get the government funding or not.”

- It wasn’t long before Rapana and his team at the Community Centre in South Auckland started to connect with and extend their services to other Pukapukan community groups around New Zealand, and in Australia and the Pacific.

In Hastings, there are two Pukapukan businesses doing contract picking in the apple orchards, and they have bought a facility there for a community centre. There are also Pukapukan initiatives happening in Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch.

In Australia, large numbers of Pukapukan migrants have settled in Wollongong (New South Wales) and in Brisbane, where they have also established a new community centre. In Rarotonga, they have raised funds to complete a community hostel for the island.

Meanwhile, Rapana is constantly coming up with ideas on how to bring enterprise and development back home to the islands of Pukapuka itself. The isolation and expense of travel continues to be an issue which inhibits progress — especially when you consider that, for most Cook Islanders, it’s cheaper to fly to Paris than to Pukapuka. (A round-trip eight-day boat journey from Rarotonga costs about \$1600, and the less-frequent airfares cost \$3600).

Rapana believes that opening up new transportation routes through Samoa will help bring down prices and also help encourage people to go back home to the atoll. He has a plan to secure a block of land in Samoa to use as a transit base for accommodation and freight for people travelling to the Northern Cook Islands. He has also been encouraging island leaders to look at purchasing their own boat or planes. Establishing a more regular transportation service could provide a conduit for exports of local produce such as coconut oil, taro and fish — and it would enable the islands to market themselves as a destination for eco-tourism.

A major concern for Rapana is the fall in population on Pukapuka since the devastation of Cyclone Percy in 2005. The pre-cyclone population of about 600-700 is now down to just 400 people. “The issue for me is that we are losing the cultural integrity at the island, and our traditions and language may be under real threat. We will lose it if we don’t do something about it right now. We can maintain our culture here in New Zealand, where most of the population is now living — but there are still many things that you can’t practice over here in the middle of a city.”

Rapana says that keeping the integrity of the Pukapukan language will be key element in facing these challenges. Only about 2000 people speak the language and a written form does not yet exist.

In order to preserve the language, and keep it in daily use, the community has undertaken a major project to translate the Bible into Pukapukan. Rapana has brought together pastors and catechists from the three main island denominations — Catholic, Protestant and Seventh Day Adventist — to work with advisers in this translation process. “It has some unique challenges for us, because there are many concepts in the Bible that are difficult to describe in our language — we don’t have any words for mountains and green pastures!”

- Rapana has become a recognised leader in the wider Cook Island and Pacific communities, where he is respected for his abilities to turn a vision into reality. In recent years, he has chaired the annual Pasifika Festival, and also the Pacific Leaders Group which has contributed to the Auckland Regional Economic Development Strategy.

Rapana: “The impact of what we are doing is not just on the immediate Pukapukan community — but it is now reaching our wider Pacific neighbours. We have many other island groups looking at us and asking, ‘How can we also do what Pukapuka is doing?’ And we are getting to mentor some of them and share how we made things happen.”

“I explain that the key is getting a core team of people who are willing to take some risks. You don’t need many ... in our own case, we can probably count them on my hands. But they make it possible, and they make the big difference. They can take the leadership and move the other 5000 people in our community.”

Rapana says that his involvement in the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship has been inspiring, and has also given him a place to stand: “It helps to know that there are other people like you out there ... in this big world, you don’t always have the opportunity to find each other and to come together. Being part of the fellowship has also motivated me to speak out more about how social entrepreneurship can help our communities. I think that the more we talk about our stories for how change really happens, then the more these changes will take hold.”

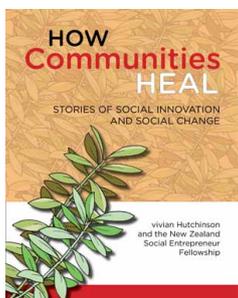


Nuku Rapana and the Pukapuka community welcoming NZSEF Fellowship members to the Community Centre.

When Rapana joined the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship in 2007, many of the Pukapuka training and social service enterprises were being affected by government programme cut-backs. The tougher financial conditions meant the laying off of some staff, while others continued as unpaid volunteers.

“It’s all part of the risks we take. Unfortunately the proportion of funding coming from our own efforts, compared to government contracts for education and social services, is still not a good balance ... so we are particularly vulnerable to the politics and changes in government policies. There’s always the ‘ups and downs’ of running an organisation, but if you have a clear and long-term view of things, then the ‘ups and downs’ are just part of the overall journey.”

When giving a workshop on business and community development, Rapana will often refer to what he calls the *lelei wua philosophy*. “When you ask a Pukapukan, ‘How’s things?’, they will always come back and say ‘*Ko lelei wua*’, which means, everything is okay. They will say this even though they may be struggling, or have just survived a cyclone! But it’s really a philosophy of how you are choosing to look at your situation. *Lelei wua* is our Pukapukan mentality and mindset — we are used to good times and hard times, but overall, everything is okay.”



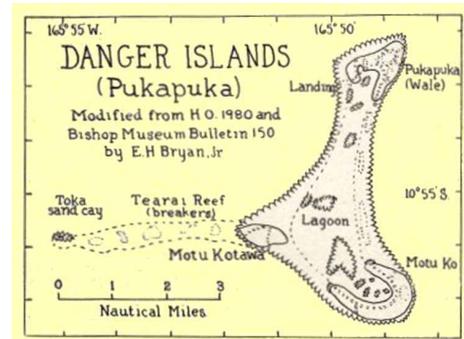
Notes and Links

- This article by Vivian Hutchinson is part of the [HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project](#) — stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship. It is available online at tinyurl.com/hchrapana
- Nuku Rapana QSM can be contacted at nuku@ihug.co.nz or at the Pukapuka Community Centre, 23 Canning Crescent, Mangere, South Auckland phone 09 275 9630
- The Pukapuka Atoll is located at 165°50' W by 11°55' S which makes it roughly 640 kilometres northeast of Samoa and 1120 kilometres northwest of Rarotonga.
- According to local legend, the first man on Pukapuka was Mata-Aliki, who emerged out of the coral-head when it surfaced amidst the Pacific Ocean, and this gave the atoll its oldest name of *Te Ulu O Te Watu*, or the head of the rock. The legends tell of Mata-Aliki being instructed by the gods

to travel to a land named *Wakalava* (America) where he met his wife Te Vao Pupu, after which he returned to the atoll and settled.

Recent archaeological evidence suggests the Pukapuka atoll was inhabited as early as 300 BC. Pukapuka was “discovered” by Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana on 20th August 1595 and he named it San Bernardo. The English commodore John Byron sighted it again in 1765 and his description of high surf and submerged reefs around the atoll led to the name “Danger Island”, which is still used on some maps today.

On the 5th of December 1857 the missionary ship the *John Williams* landed on the atoll with the Cook Islands missionary teachers Luka and Ngatimoari, and the Pukapukan people soon converted to Christianity. Pukapuka became a British protectorate in 1892, and New Zealand took over its administration in 1901. The atoll was incorporated into the Cook Islands in 1915 and administered from New Zealand until the Cook Islands became self-governing in 1965.



- The traditional history and culture of Pukapuka has been captured extensively by Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole in “*Ethnology of Pukapuka*” Bishop Museum Bulletin 150, 1938
- *Pukapuka* (*Encyclopedia of World Cultures*) article by Robert Borofsky 1996 tinyurl.com/3gpo2fy
- *The Book of Pukapuka* (1929) by Robert Dean Frisbie, an American travel writer who lived on the atoll and married a local woman. His book made the island famous, and popularised the romantic isolation of atoll life away from “*the noisy clamour of the civilised world.*”
- *1914 famine refugees moved to Rarotonga* ... where they established a Pukapukan community in the Pue district of Avarua.
- *the communal singing of Pukapuka chants and hymns* see www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DEhKdhQAXc
- In 2010 Nuku Rapana estimated the global population of Pukapukan people to be about 6,000 people. This includes roughly 400 on Pukapuka atoll itself, 3500 in New Zealand, 1100 in Australia, and 1000 in Rarotonga.
- *Pukapuka Community of New Zealand Incorporated Society* ... all Pukapukan adults in New Zealand are entitled to vote at business meetings and elect the office-holders. The management committee comprises 12 elected officials, including the leaders of three traditional lineage groupings (“villages”), and meets at least once per month.
- *Cisco Computer Network Training* ... there are 10,800 Cisco Networking Academies operating in 152 countries worldwide, equipping students with the necessary skills to sit industry certifications, including the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA). For more see tinyurl.com/99yw7
- “*Unlocking the Future*” interview with Nuku Rapana in *Voyages — New Directions in Public Health* April 2007 available at tinyurl.com/3m2lshp
- “*Pukapuka Cook Islands lack of population concerns*” Tagata Pasifika TVNZ 2009 www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMPdKbqJiEo
- *Gospel translated into Pukapukan* ... see “*Island celebrates the arrival of the Gospel*” by Lynley Smith 20 December 2007 in *OpenTheWord.org* tinyurl.com/3vxzxek
- “*How Community Enterprise Enables Community Empowerment*” — presentation by Nuku Rapana to the Community Economic Development Conference, Waitakere in February 2010.
- *Nuku Rapana comments* taken from workshop presentations at the NZ Social Entrepreneur Fellowship Retreats at Long Bay 2007 — 2009, and interviews with vivian Hutchinson 28 July 2008, and 26 May 2009, and interview for HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project 15 December 2010.

- More articles in this series, and further information on the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project can be found at www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal
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