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# Oceania - from Tobacco in Culture and History: An Encyclopedia, Vol 2

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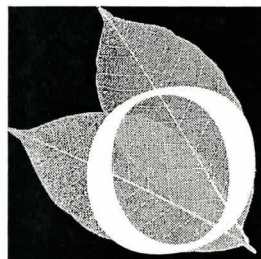
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## Oceania

Covering half the earth's surface and containing thousands of islands, the Pacific Ocean, locus of the world region called Oceania, is so vast and inhabited by such diverse peoples with widely varying histories that almost any generalizations are problematic, and this certainly is the case regarding tobacco use.

### Early History

The earliest historical record of tobacco use in Oceania dates from 1616 on islands off the northwest coast of New Guinea. Tobacco cultivation may have been introduced to the Philippines by the Spanish as early as 1575, but it was after large-scale cultivation began to flourish in Europe in the 1590s that the use of tobacco, if not always its cultivation, rapidly spread, with introductions by the Dutch in Java in 1601 and almost immediate diffusion throughout what is now Indonesia, with Halma-hera becoming a center of cultivation and export (as was Java) by 1616.

So far as the Western Pacific is concerned, while there are severe limitations in the historical record, especially for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it appears that the adoption of smoking and cultivation of tobacco spread generally eastward, becoming established in most of New Guinea by the time of sustained European colonial presence in the mid- to late-1800s. However, early European sources indicate that tobacco was then still unknown in many parts of eastern New Guinea and on numerous islands of Melanesia, as when German entrepreneurs found it necessary to create smoking schools in the Bismarck Archipelago in 1875. The purpose of the schools was to instruct the people regarding how to stuff and light a pipe, inhale, and then—importantly—blow out the smoke amidst much coughing and choking.

Where tobacco use was established prior to the arrival of Europeans, people in rural areas cultivated it for their own individual use or obtained it through trade from neighbors, as is still true today in most of New Guinea and Melanesia. Moreover, smoking was often highly restricted, usually to adult males and often to ritual contexts. While the



Two young women from the Solomon Islands lighting up pipes, 1950. Pipe smoking is particularly popular among the women on the islands. © HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

sharing of a pipe or cigarette was a widespread gesture of sociality, casual recreational smoking appears to have been a product of more modern times and forces.

### Diffusion and Trade

Throughout the nineteenth century, traders, whalers, labor recruiters, colonial officials, and missionaries created, or simply amplified, a passion for smoking that soon made commercially produced tobacco (usually in the form of twists or plugs) a nearly universal trade commodity in Oceania. Spaniards had planted tobacco in Tahiti in 1774 and 1775, but by the mid-1800s the smoking of trade tobacco was rapidly becoming promoted and established throughout Polynesia, and by 1850 the island of Guam had become a major supply station for the islands of Micronesia, with large consignments also being sent out of Sydney, Australia, to serve the Western Pacific market by 1848.

Beginning in 1886, the Neu Guinea Compagnie began to establish tobacco **plantations** in colonial Kaiser Wilhelmsland on the northeastern coast of what is now Papua New Guinea. By 1888, tons of tobacco leaf

**plantation** historically, a large agricultural estate dedicated to producing a cash crop worked by laborers living on the property. Before 1865, plantations in the American South were usually worked by slaves.



were being shipped to Germany for consumption in Europe, but periodic droughts and health problems among laborers (mostly imported Asians) added to other difficulties, and production for export ceased after 1903.

Throughout Oceania, all manufactured cigarettes were imported until recent decades, with cigarette factories being founded in Fiji first in 1955, then Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Western Samoa in the 1960s and 1970s. Both domestic and foreign brands are now commonly smoked in those countries as well as in Cook Islands, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. In none of these countries, however, is tobacco or cigarette production a major source of export income. In fact, cigarette imports substantially exceed exports in all of the Oceanic nations for which recent information is available. Despite health-related antismoking campaigns by virtually all Pacific governments, in most areas imports of cigarettes have shown steady rates of increase over the past three decades.

### Demographics of Consumption

While tobacco consumption (overwhelmingly through smoking) is **ubiquitous** in Oceania today, rates of adult smokers vary considerably. According to the World Health Organization, in 2002 nine of the 100 countries with the highest percentages of adult smokers were Pacific island nations, with Nauru (54%) at the top of the list ranging down to Samoa, in ninety-sixth place with 23 percent adult smokers. In some cases, such as French Polynesia, recent decades have seen a decrease in adult smoking, but more often rates of consumption show steady increases, especially among the younger population.

World Bank reports indicate that in almost all Pacific nations male smokers outnumber females among young adults, with the highest rates for males appearing in urban Kiribati (95%) and Tonga (60%), corresponding to 63 and 10 percent respectively, for young adult females. However, for much of Oceania, widespread smoking—indeed, smoking itself—is a relatively recent phenomenon.

**See Also** Philippines.

■ TERENCE E. HAYS

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**ubiquitous** being everywhere; commonplace; widespread.