Story: Niueans

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1974

Walrond, 2005a

Niue

Niue, known as 'the rock', lies 2,400 km north-east of New Zealand's Cape Rēinga. At 259 sq km and with a high point of 68 m above sea level, it is one of the world's largest uplifted atolls. The British gifted Niue to New Zealand in 1901 for services during the South African War, but New Zealand administration frustrated many Niueans. Facing petty laws (including curfews and alcohol bans) and a subsistence lifestyle, Niueans looked to Niu Silani (New Zealand) as a land of opportunity. Niue's main export became its people.

Chain migration

When 150 Niuean First World War troops landed for training in Auckland in 1915, they were greeted by the few Niueans who lived there. The 1936 census recorded 54 Niue-born residents in New Zealand. It was around this time that chain migration began, where family members established themselves in New Zealand so that others could follow. By 1943 the population had increased to 200. They grouped around the Auckland suburbs of Freemans Bay, Grey Lynn and Parnell. There, well-dressed men met in hotels to speak their native Niuean and sample the vai mamali ('smiling water').

From the rock of Polynesia to the mud of France

In the First World War, 150 Niueans volunteered for active service. The majority had never been out of the tropics or eaten palagi (western) food. They spoke no English and had never worn shoes. In 1916, after training for three months at Narrow Neck camp in Auckland, they were dispatched to Egypt and France with the New Zealand Māori Contingent. Theirs is not a battlefield story; it is one of body and climate shock – 82% were hospitalised and many died as they had no immunity to European diseases. Returned soldiers had been exposed to a much wider world, and although most settled

When tropical cyclones battered Niue in 1959 and 1960, new houses were built with New Zealand aid. But the introduction of modern conveniences changed Niuean attitudes. During the 1960s hundreds turned their backs on villages and bush gardens: 'whole families flew away, wrote back and encouraged the others to follow'. [1] This exodus was fuelled by the opening of Niue's airport in 1971. And when Niue became self-governing in 1974, many Niueans hurried over, mistakenly thinking that they would no longer be able to enjoy residency rights in New Zealand.

Migration only slowed as numbers on Niue dwindled. The population had peaked at 5,200 in 1966; by 2003 Niue's government estimated it at 1,700 (others put it as low as 1,300). In contrast, there were 14,424 Niueans in New Zealand in 1991; by 2013 there were 23,883 – just under 80% were New Zealand-born. Niueans represent about 9% of New Zealand's Pacific population. They rarely return to the atoll, and although they can draw a New Zealand pension in Niue, few take this option.

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back on Niue, some grew footloose and migrated.

Ghost villages

Niue's depopulation has taken its toll on traditional village life, as the journalist Vaughan Yarwood reported in 1997:

'House after house stands empty amid the vibrant greenery, their windows staring blankly across overgrown yards or hammered shut with sheets of rusting iron. So many families have left the island that, on the rugged and exposed east coast especially, the villages seem at first sight to have suffered an outbreak of pestilence or some other natural calamity'. [2]

A cyclone in January 2004 means that emigration may continue to increase. Cyclone Heta's 300 km/hr winds and 30 m waves devastated the island, destroying crops, reefs and buildings. Niueans face the difficult choice of rebuilding or leaving for New Zealand. The collective choices of individuals prove critical – if too many leave, the island's population may fall to a level that is unable to support itself.

Niue pins its hopes for a viable economic future on tourism, fisheries and vanilla production. Remittances, so important to island relatives, have recently declined.

Settlement in New Zealand

Unlike many other Pacific peoples Niueans did not group together, but dispersed throughout Auckland's inner suburbs. When they gathered, it was mainly for marriages, deaths and coming-of-age ceremonies, when boys had their hair cut and girls their ears pierced. The magafaoa (extended family) made decisions and functioned as the primary social group.

In the 2000s Niueans were highly urbanised and disproportionately young – 39% were under 15 in 2013. While most early migrants were blue-collar workers, today's New Zealand-born Niueans are more likely to have office jobs.

Footnotes:

1. Graeme Lay, *Pacific New Zealand*. Auckland: David Ling, 1996, p. 25. ›
2. 'Life on the rock', *New Zealand Geographic* 37 (Jan–Mar 1998): 68. ›

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