

Not Polynesian, not Melanesian, not Micronesian: just Pasifika

by Amota Ataneka

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George "Fiji" Veikoso brought together Pasifika people through his music over many decades (University of Hawai'i concert, 2017)

Photo Credit: Amota Ataneka

As we honor George Veikoso's legacy of unity through music, let's reject the labels that have long divided our people.

The recent passing of George Veikoso, known across Oceania as "Fiji", sent waves of grief across the Pacific. Whether we grew up in the outer islands or in capital towns, Fiji's reggae music was the soul of our youth. "Sweet Darling", "Chant of the Islands", "Morning Ride" and "Come on Over" weren't just songs. They were soundtracks of island pride, shared memories and deep belonging. I had the privilege of watching him perform live at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2017 — already performing from a wheelchair, but undeterred, his voice still uniting thousands with power and grace.

And yet, as I scrolled through the many tributes to Fiji, I noticed a familiar pattern: "Polynesian reggae legend", "loss to the Polynesian music world" and so on. That label — Polynesian — struck a nerve. Because, as someone from Kiribati which is often labelled as part of "Micronesia", I've long felt that dividing ourselves by these colonial labels — Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia — continues to undermine the unity that artists like Fiji embodied. This moment, this loss, has rekindled in me an urgent call: it's time we dismantled these outdated and divisive terms.

We often speak with pride of being one "Blue Continent". Pacific leaders, scholars and advocates alike celebrate this vision of unity. Yet, ironically, in the very same speeches and gatherings where the Blue Continent is hailed, we rarely — if ever — hear any mention of dismantling these colonial groupings. It feels like a taboo subject, something too controversial to confront, even in the most pan-Pacific of forums. We chant unity but remain silent on the divisions baked into our everyday language.

Take Micronesia, for example. The term literally means "small islands". Yet most islands in so-called Micronesia are not coral atolls. Many are large volcanic islands with mountains and dense forests — like Pohnpei or Yap. Only Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Nauru are primarily coral islands, and thus geographically "small". So

who was this label for? Not for us.

Or consider Fiji. According to the colonial map, Fiji is part of Melanesia. But talk to locals in Hawai'i or across Polynesian circles, and you'll hear Fiji referred to as part of Polynesia — because “Fiji is doing well” or “Fiji feels close to us”. The Polynesian Cultural Center at Brigham Young University in Hawai'i even features a Fijian village. When I visited it, I remember being genuinely confused. Their explanation included deep cultural ties and historical connections — which, of course, are real. But that's precisely the point. Our connections predate and defy these imposed borders.

These labels were not created by us. They were imposed by outsiders — European explorers and anthropologists who drew boundaries not to reflect Pacific realities, but to simplify, control and categorise what they could not understand.

Polynesia, from the Greek for “many islands” was coined in 1756 by some **French writer**. Micronesia was introduced by **another French explorer** in 1831. Melanesia, meaning “black islands” came in 1832 by **the same French guy** — and is the most racially explicit, reflecting colonial beliefs about skin colour and civilization.

These names were never neutral. They reflect a colonial gaze that reduced our ancestors to geography, morphology and skin tone. And tragically, we continue to internalise them today. They're embedded in our institutions and our minds. From the “Micronesian Games” to “Polynesian or Micronesian TikTok”, they are reinforced daily. Young people embrace them as identities — mistaking them for indigenous categories.

Worse still, they fuel competition and division. I've heard “Polynesian dominance” or “Micronesian marginalisation” discussed as if they were natural facts rather than the outcomes of colonial framing.

I believe this call to action is particularly urgent for our Polynesian brothers and sisters. Some have achieved world-class recognition in sports and entertainment and other arenas, like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and Jason Momoa. It might seem a daunting task for them to lead this charge. However, their success is precisely the reason that their voices are so crucial. The visibility and influence associated with being Polynesian in the global sphere present a unique opportunity to lead this vital conversation. By challenging these labels, they can demonstrate that true strength and unity lie not in adherence to colonial categorisations, but in recognising and celebrating the rich, diverse and interconnected tapestry of all Pasifika peoples.

Beyond these broader regional labels, I also feel compelled to address a more

personal and equally vital act of reclamation: the name of my own country. We know it today as “Kiribati”, a colonial echo that every I-Kiribati, both at home and abroad, is strikingly nonchalant about. Yet, every single one of us knows our true, indigenous name: **Tungaru**.

“Kiribati” is merely a localised pronunciation of “Gilberts”, after Thomas Gilbert. Gilbert was a drunkard captain who, on his return journey from dropping off convicts at Botany Bay, merely sighted four of our islands. He never set foot on our shores, yet upon his arrival in England, he affixed his name to the charts. And, just like that, millennia of our islands’ history, identity and self-definition were wiped away, replaced by the name of a stranger for my generation and generations to come.

This profound erasure is why I’ve dedicated a Facebook page *Proud to be Tungaruan* to quietly and slowly campaign for the return to our rightful name, Tungaru. I understand this might upset some, particularly those who were at the table during the British negotiations before our independence in 1979. Yet, this is a conversation we must have.

This personal frustration reemerged when I watched the 2025 Miss Pacific Islands Pageant speeches back in February. I was struck by how often contestants spoke of unity, yet not a single one addressed the divisive colonial terms that continue to silently fracture us. Their eloquence about togetherness rang hollow when it failed to confront the very labels that undermine the unity they celebrated.

This is my plea — to Pacific scholars, artists, activists, educators and our youth. We must begin the work of dismantling these colonial frameworks. If we truly believe in the idea of a Blue Continent, then we must speak honestly about what still divides us. It is not geography. It is not culture. It is a map made by others, still guiding our tongues and teaching our children who they are.

Let’s teach them differently.

Let us honour George Fiji Veikoso — not by saying he is “Polynesian” but by saying he is a Pacific Islander. All of ours. Because he sang for all of us. Because he reminds us that the music, the legends, the ancestors — we’ve always been one people.

Now let’s choose names for ourselves.

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