

*Freeing the Ancestors:
An Interview with Epeli Hau'ofa*

MICHELLE KEOWN

EPELI HAU'OFA is a senior figure in South Pacific Literature and Cultural Studies. Born in Papua New Guinea in 1939 to Tongan missionary parents, Hau'ofa attended primary and secondary school in Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji, and Australia. He subsequently studied at the University of New England, Australia, McGill University in Montreal, and the Australian National University, Canberra, where he graduated with a PhD in social anthropology. Since completing his tertiary education, Hau'ofa has held a variety of positions, including an academic post at the University of Papua New Guinea, a position as Deputy Private Secretary to the King of Tonga, and a Research Fellowship at the University of the South Pacific (Suva, Fiji), where he is now Professor and Director of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture. The Centre opened in February 1997 with Epeli Hau'ofa as Director and Lillian Thaggard as Programme Assistant.

Hau'ofa has published a short story collection, *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983), and a novel, *Kisses in the Nederends* (1987). He has also published three non-fiction texts and a number of articles focusing on political, economic, and cultural issues in the contemporary Pacific. Hau'ofa's creative energies are currently invested in non-fiction writing and in other Pacific art forms such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance; as Director of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture, his primary role at present, he claims, is to support and encourage young Pacific artists in developing new art forms which transpose traditional forms and images into the contemporary world. The following interview, conducted by Michelle Keown, took place at the Oceania Centre during a literary conference, "Representing Oceania," held at the University of the South Pacific in July 1999.

Let's start by talking about your fiction, focusing in particular on its function as literary satire. Literary critics such as Rod Edmond and Arlene Griffen have analysed the comi-satirical structures and energies in both of your fictional works with reference to Bakhtin's theory of the comic-grotesque in Rabelais's work. Given your rich and varied educational and employment history, do you tend to evaluate your writing in terms of its relationship to other literary contexts and traditions?

To me, literature is about telling stories. I love stories, and I loved Shakespeare, for example, when I was at school. When I first went to university in Australia, however, I was put off reading anything to do with Shakespeare, because I was subjected to reading so many critical commentaries on Shakespeare's work, and for me that wasn't what literature was about. I was interested in the stories, I was brought up with them, so I found these critical analyses uninspiring. But when I finished my undergraduate degree I was going back to Tonga to work for the church, so I bought a whole lot of Penguin classics, which were cheap at the time. I read small portions of Rabelais — not the whole lot, but the bits I did read I found very funny. I never thought about Rabelais as a "literary figure," however: I wasn't aware of Bakhtin's theories, but I have read widely since those university days.

I was wondering to what degree specific European literatures and discourses have influenced your writing. In an interview with Subramani, you have discussed the way in which your training as an anthropologist served as inspiration for the ethnographic allegory in Kisses in the Nederends, where the main character Oilei Bomboki's chronic fistulitis is described in terms of a war between opposing tribes within his body. Swift's Gulliver's Travels, with its focus on dialectical oppositions between various social groups, seems another possible influence on this section of your novel. The segregation of the Uppertuks and the Lowertuks in your novel reminded me of the opposition between the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms in the fourth section of Swift's novel, for example.

When I wrote the body-war episode, my friend Tony Hooper, an anthropologist from Auckland University in New Zealand, suggested that I should write that section as a piece of ethnography. That particular section was also an ironic response to Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, where she discusses the body as a

symbol for society, with reference to the Hindu conception of the body and various attitudes to taboo and bodily “pollution” across cultures. So the body-war episode in *Kisses* was a take on Douglas’s book; it was a kind of a “dig” at anthropology as a discipline. But generally one doesn’t think about who wrote this and who wrote that when you’re writing fiction. Maybe the influences are there, but you’re not conscious of them — or at least I’m not conscious of them. I think mainly about the stories and the ideas, how you set certain characters up, and so on. There are of course other writers who do respond consciously to other texts when they write.

Thinking more specifically about the relationship between humour and satire in your writing, would you say that the two elements are somehow consistent and co-dependent in your work? How is your comic-satirical style influenced by your own social background?

My approach to humour and satire is influenced by my experiences living in Tongan society. During my first period in Tonga, I stayed for seven years, and I discovered that in Tongan society you never criticize people publicly and directly, you do it through humour instead. You do it through telling funny but extremely biting stories: the people you criticise may be at a feast, for example, and you get up and tell these stories, and everyone, including the targets of criticism, will laugh. So laughter mediates the message, the telling of the message. You can laugh and still be angry at the same time, or become angry later, but then you get revenge by getting up and telling some ridiculous story about that person in response, and making everyone laugh. So in that way, humour and satire are part and parcel of this social exchange; they represent a ritual social exchange. Tongan society is very hierarchical and authoritarian, so you don’t say things directly; you do it in devious ways, and it’s more fun. I found out later about Russian humour, which does the same thing: it’s a very strictly controlled society, the Soviet society, but you have all kinds of Russian jokes through which criticism is offered. So it’s critical but mediated through laughter. The satire and the humour are connected.

*One particular target of satire in Kisses in the Nederends is the “Pacific Way” ideology which was popularised during the 1980s. As you’ve explained in a recent article in *The Contemporary Pacific*, proponents of the*

“Pacific Way” sought to foster a sense of solidarity throughout the Pacific Islands region through a valorisation or ‘rediscovery’ of Pacific ‘traditions’ and cultural practices, and you were critical of the movement’s tendency to promote a static, nostalgic view of cultural identity. You’ve also pointed out that there was an opposing neo-Marxist ideology, also widespread at this time, which eschewed regional models of identity in favour of representing Pacific peoples as belonging to a global class structure. In Kisses in the Nederends, this argument is satirised through the grandiose universalist ideals of the “Third Millennium” movement, led by eccentric guru Babu Vivekanand, who suggests that world peace will be brought when people throughout the world learn to demonstrate their love and acceptance of one another by kissing one another’s anuses.

Yes, the “Pacific Way” ideology was propagated by certain academics, and this campus was plagued with it. I was on the other side, allied with the critics of the Pacific Way. People were also talking about “The Millennium” a lot at the time, so I incorporated that into the novel too. So all the material in the book which focused on the Third Millennium and the Pan-Pacific Way, and the philosophy of “Kiss my Arse” — it was a conscious dig at my ideological opponents, all those Marxists and traditionalists. Then the coup in 1987 finished most of the biggest exponents of the Pacific Way, and the Marxists disappeared!

In spite of your previous criticisms of the “Pacific Way” as an unsatisfactory, regionalized model of cultural identity, you’ve indicated that at present, more than ten years after the first publication of Kisses, you now support and advocate the concept of a regional Oceanic identity. Could you tell me a bit more about the nature of this new regional identity?

Yes, I was working through these ideas while I was writing *Kisses in the Nederends*. At the time, I laughed at the concept of a Pan-Pacific Way, but in hindsight I realize it also influenced the way I see things now. After the coup, the university died, intellectually, for many years. It has just started living up in the last few years; there’s a resurgence now, and I want to contribute to that. Unfortunately, this resurgence has had very little to do with larger ideologies, so at the moment, I’m trying to rekindle a sense of idealism amongst our youth, to develop the concept of a New Oceania. My argument is that it’s not just the islands themselves or the land that are important — it’s the Ocean

that is our reality: we touch it, we drink it, we smell it, and the same water that washes our shores also washes the shores of other islands. The Ocean moves, the fish and other ocean life move with it, and so do our people, all the time: we put boundaries down, but they move constantly. So at the Oceania Centre, we are rekindling the music of the ocean, the boats, the fish coming and going. The Ocean is not just a concept, it's not an airy fairy sort of thing: it's physically "out there," and anything that affects the Ocean and the environment affects us too. So what we are trying to do here at the Centre is to use the Ocean as a metaphor for creativity, but at the same time to recognize the Ocean as a visual, physical reality, to forge a kind of unity in order to protect it.

Has your desire to protect the Ocean also developed in response to the various environmental threats to the Pacific in recent years? I'm thinking in particular of the various nuclear tests which have been performed here.

Yes, all sorts of things have been done here, because in the Pacific a huge part of the earth's surface is occupied by just a few million people. And that's why nuclear explosions have been carried out here — there's been all kinds of experimentation; the Ocean has been used as a rubbish dump because it's "safe": politically, you couldn't get away with this anywhere else, but with regard to the Pacific region, people think "what can three million people do?" If the Ocean is killed, through pollution, through global warming and so on, then we are finished. So I want to rekindle idealism for the sake of protecting the Ocean, but also to set the imagination alight and to stimulate creativity, and to foster a greater sense of unity in the region. I want to encourage our young people, our hope of the future, to create this new Oceanic identity that is specifically ours. I want our young people to recognize that and to strongly advocate it. So I was rubbishing this whole concept of a regional identity in my novel but at the same time I think I was working out and building up to what I believe in now.

Let's talk about some of the ways in which your ideologies have been put into practice at the Oceania Centre. You've pointed out that the 'New Oceania' philosophy is not designed to promote a synchronic, retrospective sense of cultural identity; instead, it adapts traditional rituals and practices to a modern, contemporary context. Recently, at a conference at the University of

Kent in England, you spoke about the oral storytelling tradition in Tonga and other parts of the Pacific, targeting the importance of myth as a central component of this tradition. You explained that you and others at the Oceania Centre have created a new oral storytelling form entitled "tala." As I understand it, this new form perpetuates elements of the traditional storytelling tradition, creating modern stories which mythologize events relevant to the present day by embellishing the bald "facts" with miracles and strange happenings. You demonstrated this process at Kent firstly by telling a "fact-based" story about the devastating effects of Western goldmining upon the island of Misima, Papua New Guinea, where you lived as a child, and secondly by presenting a mythologized version of the story. You emphasized the importance of avoiding the temptation to write these stories down, arguing that writing and publishing petrifies these stories, whereas the oral storytelling process keeps them dynamic and alive, so that every telling of the story is different. So are these tala also a by-product of this new concept of adapting traditional artistic and literary forms to the New Oceania?

Yes, a lot of what we call "tradition" only succeeds in trapping our ancestors in cages, and we have a responsibility to free them from these restrictions and to invite the spirits into our world. People say our traditions are disappearing and that we must therefore capture them and preserve them as they are — well, to me that means we cage them: we trap the spirits in a prison, whereas the past was much more fluid than that. So we must free them.

Another example of the way in which your ideologies have been put into practice was demonstrated during the "Representing Oceania" conference here in Fiji, where you introduced to the conference audience a young woman who danced to some music composed by a musician from your Centre. You explained beforehand that the dance incorporated elements of traditional Fijian dance, including ritual patterns of movement which mimicked the actions of certain animals, fish and birds of the Pacific, but you also pointed out that it was infused with contemporary motifs and energies as well.

That dance was only possible because of the music, which was written by Sailasa Tora, who was artist-in-residence here and is now teaching full-time — although he may return to us sometime in the year 2000 for more music-making. The dancer, Ana Rakei, heard Sailasa Tora's music, and she said "I must dance to that!" So

we talked about it, and she choreographed the dance herself, and her grandmother helped her with her costume. Traditional Fijian dancing is very stylised and rigid — it's beautiful to see, but it's not something that could become very popular today. I don't want to popularize it, but we can do more with it, bring it in line with what we are doing at the Oceania Centre. I wanted to take the rigidity out of the Fijian dance, to release the spirits, to bring them out in music and dance. And the dancer, Ana Rakei, was thinking along the same lines as I was. The music and the dance coincide with the ideas I've mentioned about combining the traditional and the modern: it's new music, but it's not so new, because what we're doing is to sing traditional tunes, chants and songs, while using modern instruments as accompaniment.

And similarly, the dance, like the music, represented a syncretic fusion of the traditional and the modern. It seemed to me that the entire audience was rapt by the performance; did you also get a sense that the response was positive?

I was very pleased with the performance. Normally when Pacific dances are performed, people start clapping and making lots of noise, but with this one, everyone was quiet, and you could see that people were strongly affected by it. I've never seen a Pacific dance performance where people were affected in such a way: everyone showed a sense of reverence and respect. So it's great that we were able to draw that out, and to be taken seriously, and to earn such respect. And I felt tears coming!

Yes, it was definitely a moving performance. You've mentioned a few details about the background of the musician, Sailasa Tora, who composed this particular piece of music. Could you comment on the activities of other young artists at your Centre? What are their specialities and backgrounds?

There are fifteen young artists who are connected with the Centre at the moment. All but one began artistic life here at the Centre. Eleven of them are from Fiji, and one each from Tonga, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati. Twelve of them are painters, one a wood sculptor and one a metal sculptor. Nine of the artists are working daily at the Centre, and some work both at home and at the Centre. They are all unemployed youths, mostly from working

class families. Another five include a university student, a university lecturer, two teachers and a graphic artist. They hold full-time jobs and produce art work in their spare time. The last one is an unemployed youth, who originally worked at the Centre full time, but now works mostly at home, visiting the Centre occasionally. We also have a couple of Solomon Islands musicians composing at the Centre. There are, in addition, at least thirty other young people who have participated in Centre-sponsored workshops. Although they are no longer with us, they visit us occasionally, and attend our functions and exhibitions.

News of the Oceania Centre is spreading rapidly; there are many people further afield who would be interested in seeing the work of the artists at your Centre. Are you planning any touring exhibitions?

The Red Wave Collective will tour Sydney in September 2000 for an exhibition at the James Harvey Gallery. We are looking forward to this. One of the images I have in my mind is a group of Pacific people entertaining, demonstrating their cultural roots — the dance, the traditional rituals, the music — at the Sydney Opera House: not performing inside the building, but rather outside on the steps of the Opera House. It's time for us to get out there and up there; a lot depends on us. With the establishment of the Oceania Centre, we have a much greater degree of autonomy now to create things and to earn respect. Because if people don't respect you, you can't get anywhere: you're trapped. We need to achieve a freedom that we can protect; we need to protect ourselves in order to do things freely.

And as the reputation of the Oceania Centre grows, people will want to visit the Centre itself. What are your views on visitors to the Centre?

Because of the lack of space at the Centre, and because of the lack of finance, we are not able to invite or encourage as many visitors to the Centre as we would like. We can only invite one group per year at the moment, but we're hoping to expand. I always say the mountain must come to Mohammed! If we can develop a strong sense of confidence and autonomy in ourselves, then we can reach out to others.

So it's a matter of building something here first?

Yes, building something here first, gaining confidence, because we have lacked that confidence until now. It's to do with gaining the freedom and the confidence to do all sorts of things, without being patronised.

And how do you, as an individual, incorporate your own artistic talents into this collective project? I'm thinking in particular of your flair for writing.

To me writing is secondary; writing is one way out. Writing fiction is only a tool to achieve certain objectives, and if I can find better tools with which to express my ideas, then I will use those. And writing is a very, very self-centred thing, everything is “you, you, you” versus “me, me, me” — and I'm not comfortable with that; that's a thing of the past. People always ask me “when are you writing again” or “when are you writing fiction again?” I'm not really interested in writing fiction these days.

So your energies as a writer are now channelled into non-fiction commentaries?

Yes, I love this form of writing: you put in the same amount of attention, the same commitment, you use the language for the same purposes, in order to communicate ideas, and I think I can communicate more effectively this way. I think it's a more effective medium than fiction in terms of reaching out to our people. All the talk of being part of the literary canon, of judging what is good writing and what is not —fiction writers get dragged into that. But it's not important to me. I think some of the most beautifully crafted writing is produced by columnists and journalists, for example. Fiction texts are experiments centred on the self; it's so egocentric. So these days, I don't really like to read out excerpts from my earlier work during literary conferences and events. What I'm doing now is for the collective: we have a great bunch of people here at the centre, all working for the collective. That's what it's about.

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