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Epeli Hau'ofa

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A New Oceania: An Interview with Epeli Hau'ofa

by Juniper Ellis

*Epeli Hau'ofa is an internationally acclaimed writer, anthropologist, and teacher of Pacific Islands literature and culture. He is one of Tonga's most prominent authors of fiction, with **Tales of the Tikongs** (1983) and **Kisses in the Nederends** (1987). His satiric presentation of Pacific Islands humor and physicality draws comparisons to Rabelais and Jonathan Swift. Hau'ofa himself, in his works and interviews, calls attention to the oral Pacific Islands' basis of his works, as well as his wide-ranging readings in many bodies of literature. For the past five years, Hau'ofa has been the founder and director of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. The Centre funds and exhibits young artists, musicians, and dancers from the thirteen Pacific Islands nations that have created the university in Suva. As director of the Centre, Hau'ofa embodies a conceptual shift in the ways Oceania is perceived. His 1993 essay, "Our Sea of Islands" heralds Pacific Islands' traditions of representing the region. Hau'ofa counters the image of islands as isolated outposts of land overwhelmed by a vast ocean; he emphasizes the vibrant connections between islands in Oceania, a region named for the ocean currents that enable travel, trade, and cultural exchange. He spoke with me at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture on 9 July 1999. For a time Sailasa Tora, a composer from Fiji based at the Centre, joined our conversation. Tora's comments are attributed in the text.*

JE: Your very moving work *A New Oceania* (1993) seems equal parts poetry and manifesto. What stylistic considerations did you keep in mind while writing that piece?

EH: One puts everything that one has into writing. Not in, say, official letters, but in things like "Our Sea of Islands". One writes to communicate with people and to write as elegantly as possible, to really use the language.

I haven't written fiction recently, and some people ask me, "When are you going to start writing?" I am writing now, but not fiction. There is a kind of canon now growing, that insists writing means only fiction, poetry, and drama.

In writings like *A New Oceania* you persuade people, and to be persuasive you write it well. My experience with anthropology and the social sciences has been that many in these fields are careless in writing and use a great deal of obfuscation. My writing is for the people. The ideas in that essay are very important, not only for me but for Oceania.

I've published in *The Contemporary Pacific* journal, because it's broader and it serves to distribute the idea across the Pacific to a range of people. I believe that if you have an idea that you really want to communicate you put your heart and mind and soul into it.

I have been writing in this way from my early works. [Reading from *Our Crowded Islands* (1977):]

Our songs are full of allusions to the beauty of nature, our language is blessed with a great capacity for capturing the most subtle shifts in mood and the most minute changes in the state of the sky and the wind and the sea and the trees. The bodies of our dancers are adorned with leaves and flowers and anointed with the perfumed oils of life. All these things which provide quality and joy to our national existence and a richness and depth to our culture are based on our generously endowed land and sea....

If you want to communicate with people you have to touch them, touch their sensitivities.

JE: You mentioned the divisions people make between fiction and non-fiction. To what extent is a new Oceania a creation of something new or a return to something that's been there but hasn't been recognized in written accounts--for instance, the different cultural forms in Oceania that challenge distinctions between categories of literature.

EH: Our world was much bigger before colonialism. In the past there wasn't a clearly constituted body called Oceania, but there were much larger conglomerations of peoples and places, inter-relationships. And colonialism broke up these relationships. And I think even the technologies that people had in those days--for travel, for instance--made the world relatively larger, probably bigger than our world today in Oceania. The transport technology fostered connections among people. In that sense, yes, this "Oceania" existed before.

We have to recognize this history, these currents of movement and exchange. We can use what we have here, and in our histories. That also helps bolster the value of the things we have now. The value of our histories is immense.

I write to an audience that is the people of Oceania, talking to them. Not excluding others, but that's the kind of conversation--or monologue--that I'm addressing to people. And for that, I use the traditions that come into us.

That method brings it down to a more personal, intimate kind of writing. I think this is from my background sitting at the feet of the preachers, and my father was a very big preacher. So there's a preachiness in the things that I write.

At the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture we are establishing a new Oceania: new music, new dance, firmly rooted. And my role is to spot the most talented people around.

JE: What form does that take?

EH: We talk a lot, because I don't teach [in a formal classroom setting]; my job is to talk with people. The rest is up to musicians such as Sailasa Tora [a musician based at the Centre who walked by just as Epeli was addressing my question, and joined our conversation for a time], and up to the dancers, the artists.

JE: Sailasa, do you collaborate with other artists?

ST: Yes, that's the future of Oceania. Artists have to work together, on common ground, among Oceania: with Fiji and the Solomon Islands, Melanesian and Polynesian countries. Even though we differ from one another we have a lot of common ground in Oceania, our cultures have a lot of similarities. And we imbue each other on some deeper, unexplainable level. On my tape, *Kacikaci Vakatama* (1999), I work with a Solomon Islander; on some verses I do the chanting; on others he does. There are shakers--sounds like water, pebbles--these were his idea. Actually, this collaboration was Epele's suggestion.

JE: How much of what you do is traditional, Sailasa, and how much is a new direction?

ST: All of it is traditional. Well, basically. The songs that we have created transmit the tradition. Even though we use orchestration, western instruments, the way we've played it we've made the violins sing our songs. The violin comes to our chants.

EH:] We've often put our traditions in cages, and so we try to do what we think our elders, the people in the past, did. And we trap our traditions there. We freeze them. Whereas people in the past really lived very much like people in the present. There were always cultures mixing. Things were fluid, they were not frozen. But we froze them.

And now we work to release, to free our traditions, and they invite them to come to our world and teach us, tell us their Oceania. We welcome them here. That way we bring these things, this character, to the contemporary world, and it shapes the new world, it belongs. They're not just things of the past; they're part of our world now. People do appreciate that.

People appreciate, for instance, what Ana Rokotuiwai has done in working with Fijian dance at the Centre. Fijian dance is very good, very interesting, but it's martial, and movements are highly stylized and rigid. I don't know whether it was that way in the past; probably. But that kind of rigidity has been maintained in the Fijian traditional dancing today.

Ana takes those movements and lets them loose. She frees the movements but still keeps them traditional and graceful. We're trying to find other Fijian girls, three or four, and to work with them to build a repertoire.

Our traditional performances, as Albert Wendt comments, are usually done by the whole community. The singing is done by a big group, the dancing is done by a big group, which is very good.

But I think that when we bring performance into a contemporary situation, to get people to focus more on the subtle details, we can cut down: Sailasa, only you and your two fellow musicians sang. That way the audience can focus more. When you have a mass of dancers then your perspective is different. In offering solitary performance, we are modernizing our traditions.

JE: How do you two conceive of the role of the artist? What is the artist's relationship to the community? What can the artist bring to the community?

EH: We are embarking on something different and we are trying to bring in new things. And our role is to do the best

we can so that the people in the community will appreciate it.

In our arts, especially our performing arts, we have tended to go for the least common denominators, and to perform in the easiest ways. We've had groups travel overseas. Where do we perform? Not in big cathedrals, but in small churches, in hotels, on streets for people to see.

The most telling thing was when our groups of musicians and dancers performed in Sydney--at Sydney Opera House, but on the steps outside. Our aim is to go inside. And to do that we have got to do the performance so well that it will take us inside and onto the stage. And Australia is connected to the South Pacific! We would like to do so well that we will be invited to the galleries and the concert halls, and not stay on the steps or on the streets. We must be the best.

The ultimate would be autonomy within a larger system, and for that autonomy you have to bring quality. You have to respect the art. That's the ultimate goal. How long it will take I don't know, but we will reach that. So far we are entertainers, we smile, our smiles are famous. Smiling, smiling natives. And that's ok, I have nothing against it. It's better to be smiling than not. But we have to aim higher than that. Our cultures, our new Oceania, have to be recognized, not because of pride or anything else but because it's the only way, the surest way, of securing our autonomy.

We cannot get that autonomy as long we continue to be patronized. There was a big international conference in Sydney on world multi-culturalism, and the prime minister of Australia opened the conference. Thousands of people from all over the world were there. Beautiful works by Aboriginal painters and weavers were in the big foyer where people were mingling, and the artists were displayed doing their things sitting on the fucking floor.

We must not accept that. And this is the big UNESCO conference, a respected organization. And we were all walking past the artists. I'm not shouting or anything; I'm doing it quietly, and that's the only way to do it.

Part of that movement toward autonomy is made by our artists here. Sailasa's our first creative musician. We have some very good musicians in town, but they play jazz, blues, and hip hop. You know the first thing Sailasa said when we met? He said, "I want to revolutionize Fijian music." I said, "Ok, come do it."

ST: Revolution. It is not completely different, but just moving it. In the past our ancestors did not simply copy things from their past. When they had an occasion awaiting a composition, they had to come up with something new, not something from three hundred years before. They had to do something completely new. And that meant new poetry, something particular to that occasion, new movements, dance expressions, and all that, and the music. Our present musicians are not doing that. Certain people have gone to a disco type of music, reggae, hip hop, rock, but we have to look into our past, where we have our own rhythms to move into. So that's what I am doing. [At this point Sailasa said goodbye.]

JE: To go back to one thing we were talking about, the ways that people froze music and dance for a time: what factors do you think contributed? Is it a response to missionaries and colonialism? Or is it internal to the culture, an attempt to preserve what can be preserved?

EH: Well, there are many reasons for freezing cultures in our past. Look at it from the political point of view: people try to bolster their position in power by not changing the ideologies underpinning chieftainship and things like that, so they freeze culture. There's also a misapprehension that to preserve our traditions we must do exactly what our ancestors did.

In "Our Sea of Islands" I point out that our past holds constant travel, constant interplay of cultures, and that the coming of the Europeans was just one aspect, just broadening that. It was nothing new. It was new in the sense that there were more powerful groups moving in but movement was always there. So things were in ferment all the time, people going, coming. But somehow or other we have this notion of stasis, assisted in part by anthropologists, who wanted at one stage to record traditional cultures before they disappeared. That's the worst thing, record the cultures before they disappear; the idea is that they're going to disappear anyway.

But we can change culture and change that idea. Although anthropologists deny it, they still hide behind the idea that there was once a pristine culture, untouched, untrammelled. Since a lot of us were educated by these people, we sort of believed it. We helped put cages around traditional culture.

In *A New Oceania* I try to open those cages, free culture, let it move, so we can come in touch with it in our world. Let our ancestors right into our world, come and dance with them in our world. We learn from them, through the continuity between us and them and also more importantly our distinct identity within the world system. With the depth of our history, we will bring our ancestors to us, carry our spirits, bring them forward to our world, willingly, rather than put them in cages in a zoo across the world.

And our young people are not to be interested in fossilized cultures. Especially in urban areas. Now we have this problem that our policy makers have decided that the most important thing is to join the market system, which is ok, but then everything else, resources for education and development, our culture, our creativity, are not encouraged.

In the future we have to protect our ocean because our very existence depends upon it. And this is central to a new Oceania, both at a symbolic level and as a physical reality. The ocean shapes us at a physical level and a cultural level. The physical reality is it's the same water that washes here, that washes there, on all our shores. And you can extend the metaphor back and forth. We must protect it environmentally and culturally.

We occupy the largest, most expansive space on earth. And we are only a few million. The most indicative statement ever made about the Pacific was by Henry Kissinger, when someone asked about the radiation raining on the Bikinis. He said, "Who gives a damn about seven thousand people?" Now, that is not an American thing, that's one man's view. But it marks the attitude of the world at large: Who gives a damn about a few million people? And the big powers have used us in ways that they cannot use places elsewhere because of political consequences. Nuclear tests, all kinds of burning, including poisonous gasses.

The time is likely to come when we will band together, with all the others around the ocean, and protect it. The British said, when they depopulated Banabans, "For the good of the British empire we take your land." For the good of mankind, humankind. And that's exactly what happened to the Bikini Islanders too: "For the good of mankind, we'll use your islands for experimental explosions." And the

Japanese now are trying to hold much of our land--they are an island group themselves, for chrissake, but they're desperate for land. So we have to unite for very very practical reasons.

But also for another practical reason: the protection of the ocean. The very notion of the ocean offers a kind of idealism, altruism, that we need. The ocean works as a strong force for culture and idealism.

JE: I was glad that you mentioned *Our Crowded Islands* earlier, because I see that beginning there and going back to your earlier anthropological works, what came out in "Our Sea of Islands" is a natural flowering forth of a style that began early on: different facets are revealed in the varying kinds of writing that you do.

EH: Yes, yes, yes. I was asked, during my final year as an anthropology student, and as a professional anthropologist, to give a paper at an Australia-New Zealand association for social sciences. I gave a paper called "Anthropology and Pacific Islanders" that was published and resurfaced a couple of years ago. So my style goes back to that work as well. There I examine the way we anthropologists have dealt with the other, as you know. But in *Our Crowded Islands* I deliberately wrote to the people. So it's a style that developed from that.

JE: You write literature in many forms, and you foster collaborations between many kinds of arts. Your fiction seems to me to do something of the same. You perform many traditions and create something new. Does what gets explicitly termed fiction, *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983) and *Kisses in the Nederends* (1987), allow you to express something distinct from your other writings?

EH: There's a wicked side of me which is my sense of humor. And *Tales of the Tikongs* I wrote because I was really disappointed by what was happening in the Pacific. You see, I am a very self-righteous shit. And every one of the *Tales of the Tikongs* was written in anger--except "The Wages of Sin," which was written in humor. "The Wages of Sin" was inspired by this Seventh-Day Adventist who started a month-long campaign against smoking.

JE: And here you are with your pipe.

EH: And my cigarettes, smoking smoking smoking. And I was lying in bed, at midnight, and suddenly I laughed and laughed and said, "I've got a story." And I went and wrote the rest of the evening. But the rest of the pieces came from anger. And then I would work and work to get that anger off, and bring out the other side of me, which is poking fun.

JE: Why did you work to minimize the anger? Is comedy more powerful, or does it do something different than anger?

EH: My first tendency is to be a comedian. So there's that comic side of me, antic entertainer. The other thing, too, is that one loves life. I never take myself too seriously.

I think humor's a saving grace. I started writing those pieces when I was involved in all sorts of things and was writing up my thesis for my Ph.D., preparing my thesis for publication. I was writing a report on food distribution systems in the Pacific, and if that's not the most boring thing in the Pacific!

JE: So the tales were a kind of a release?

EH: They were a relief. When I started writing the tales, they became about making people laugh. That's what I did in the past. When I went to school I was the youngest, smallest kid there. You have to survive, and the only way to survive there for me was to weave my way through this big disaster by entertaining the bastards. And you pick up a kind of mascot status. It was a rough boarding school, very very rough. So you develop humor. But that's what I also naturally do: I was naturally a clown. So that came out in the writing. And I love to do it.

Making people laugh is not easy. And it's a very Tongan thing to use that medium to put through your critique of society. You never criticize people directly. It has to be devious. I found out later on--someone had written about Russian humor--that it's a characteristic of very highly stratified societies, controlled, authoritarian societies. So that was a natural tendency, part of my growing up in that country. It's fun, being devious, and I loved reading. I always liked dark humor. For instance, a black writer, Chester Himes, in his novel *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), presents the most morbid sense of humor.

JE: And there's such a long tradition of clowning in the Pacific Islands too.

EH: Yes, but it's all oral, which is very very different from writing. I was very good at oral humor before I went to the west and continued my studies. I was very good at it in Tongan and Fijian, and I was a very good storyteller.

You know, at that time we didn't have radios and things. For one hour every Sunday the principal, when I went to school here, brought a radio and we all went to the dining room to listen to the radio. One hour a week, in the mid-'50s. So we entertained each other. It was all jest, horsing around with language. I was damn good at that.

Then I went to Australia and English, always a formal, written language, became entrenched. Only later on did I loosen up in English. And I lost some of my ability, spending probably fifteen years in the west, with no-one to joke with in the languages I knew. So when I went back to Tonga, as it came out in the interview with Subramani, one day the ability surfaced, and I wrote my first story.

JE: Another thing about *Tales of the Tikongs*, and especially *Kisses in the Nederends*, is the very important role that the body plays. That is, the body, with an emphasis upon physicality, and also upon the b-a-w-d-y.

EH: One of the things that I love about the Islands is that we are very very politically incorrect. That counteracts the tendency toward a kind of puritanism in all the islands. And somehow or other, puritanism allows a worship of the body.

JE: But in a particular form. Sanitized.

EH: Yes, and especially, I think the biggest victims in that are American and European women. You see the body is a funny thing, and I think that's universal. I did American history for three years, an honors program in nineteenth century, dating to the American Revolution. My god, cartoonists were really

outrageous, crude, especially in their details of King George! I loved that period of history. There was no respect for the body. The people were freer with the body. And it still is that way here. It can be really crude, but that's the price you pay.

And there's another thing about the body, the privatization of the body. And it's coming here, the developing of classes, and the building of rooms in our houses. And each person to a room. We're developing that sense of privacy: this is mine, this is my body, this is my room. Whereas I grew up, as is still the case in much of the South Pacific, with extensive body contact. You grew up, you slept in the same room with many people. So there's nothing private about anyone's body.

But the body is being privatized by the kinds of economic development and architecture we're importing. Still, body contact is more extensive here. People go with their friends, holding hands, walking around--women with women, men with men-- holding each other's hand. In certain areas of Papua New Guinea instead of shaking hands you shake penises. They have these penis sheaths. But that's another tradition.

It's very funny now, to remember: in Sydney, after the Fiji years, I had a friend from Tonga who came to visit, and we were walking down the street and he put his arms around me and held me. So I held him. The guy was not homosexual, and at the time--early '60s--homosexuality was not very public. I was aware of the fact that people were staring at us and were disgusted. Then I realized that my reaction was "Fuck them."

So the attitudes to the human body differ culturally, but also I think between social classes. Now it's common here, with the development of economic classes, that the wealthy are more into western attitudes toward the body. The epitome of that is the bedrooms we now have: kids are brought up to live in their own bedrooms. When we tried to do that with our son, he kept coming to our bedroom, and Barbara my wife, who is an Australian, said "Let him." And he didn't leave our bedroom until he was about thirteen. Until he was so big that I had to kick him out.

There is a term, *moheofi*, that describes a bonding. In our culture we grow up with large families, and still it's very common that you sleep together. And people say that *moheofi* establishes that bond, keeps the family together. So they deliberately sleep near their kids until they're grown up. *Moheofi*: sleep close.

That way the body doesn't have only sexuality. So the body is nothing. Sexuality is not everything. There is nothing extraordinary about it. But sexuality is built up in what Christianity has brought in, this guilt. And if you talk about sin in the Pacific it only means one thing: sex. Sex is sin. The missionaries have failed disastrously in making us less sinful. And to me, this is the success of the missionaries.

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