

Our Place Within

FOUNDATIONS FOR A CREATIVE OCEANIA

AS IN OTHER PLACES in our world, modern institutions in Oceania, such as the University of the South Pacific (USP), are continually being restructured and otherwise redesigned to synchronise their activities with the processes of globalisation. In this fiercely competitive environment there should be no room for free-ranging imagination and creativity of the kinds not tailored to the demands of the global economy.

But such a space exists within the University of the South Pacific, our region's leading training institution for globalisation. And it is part of my purpose here to talk about its genesis, its objectives and hopes for the future, and the actual steps taken over the nearly seven years of its existence in contributing to the nurturing of a creative Oceania. More important, the narrative shows what can happen when particular sets of ideas are acted upon. It is these notions, and their potential for generating actions leading to desired ends, that underlie the narrative about the development of the particular space mentioned above. Discussions of these ideas, and experiments with their implementation, could help us to refine and invent continuously better ways of effecting changes that enhance our capacity for creativity and the attainment of cultural autonomy.

The development at our university of a space or community dedicated to reflection, exploration, and originality is based on the belief that in order to be continuously creative, we must have spaces where we give free rein to our imagination and ample time to experiment with and develop new forms and styles, new movements, sounds, and voices, that are unmistakably ours. The arts community that we are nurturing is infused with the sense of continuity with our pasts, which we plumb for inspiration and guidance. History and culture may no longer be priority subjects and disciplines in our schools and institutions of higher learning, but living pasts and the sense of historical and cultural continuity are essential components of our societies. They define us and provide the bases from which we venture into

other worlds. The people of the island of Tanna in Vanuatu conceive of their universe in terms of the tree and the canoe. The tree symbolises rootedness in culture, while the canoe stands for movements along sea routes that connect people of different island locations. The canoe is history—the working out of relationships established through travel and movement of materials from one island to another. One may extend this metaphor to include present-day connections between Oceania and the surrounding continental landmasses and cultures. One may even say that since it is made of wood, the canoe is part of the tree, and its potentials are to a large extent determined by the qualities of the tree from which it was made. History and culture are thus enmeshed.

It is therefore essential for us in Oceania that the creative arts and other forms of cultural production take up what our formal educational institutions have marginalised as nonessential in the world of the twenty-first century. For us they are necessary tools for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy within a homogenising global system. Our social, economic, and political institutions are woven into the larger world system; any free space within will have to be established through creative cultural production. And this is what the present and rising generations of Oceania's growing and widely dispersed intelligentsia are furiously involved in today. From their far-flung bases in Guam, California, Hawai'i, Cook Islands, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and increasingly elsewhere within and beyond the Pacific Basin, they are connecting through the Internet and face-to-face encounters to discuss and work towards a culturally creative and free Oceania.

What is happening in the cultural arena of our university should be seen in this context. In 1992 the USP Council decided that a programme on Pacific arts and culture, modelled on the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC) in Hawai'i, be established at the university's Suva campus. The Polynesian Cultural Center is Hawai'i's major tourism attraction. For several decades now, thousands of Pacific Islands students at the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University in Hawai'i have performed at the PCC, contributing to its phenomenal success while incidentally paying for their fees and lodging.

The USP, which by design had largely ignored Pacific cultures as a field worthy of serious teaching and research, was unexpectedly confronted with an instruction to take on art and culture as a way of conserving identity and enabling poor students to perform for tourists for their tuition and other

expenses. As normally done in such a situation, the USP formed a committee to look into the matter. The committee unanimously rejected the idea of our becoming involved in tourism as entertainers. That was the only thing it was united upon.

It should be noted here that Fiji was then going through a period of upheaval following the racist military coups of 1987 and the subsequent installation of an exclusive indigenous Fijian regime and a racist constitution. As a result, anything to do with Pacific cultures was intensely disliked by the so-called progressive elements within the university. This was reflected in the deliberations of the committee. A vocal group comprising expatriates and Oceanians of internationalist convictions viewed traditional cultures as barriers to the progress of liberal democracy and respect for human rights. They opted for doing away with Pacific arts and cultures entirely and replacing them with an enlightened, broad-based expressive arts programme to be offered to our degree and diploma students.

There was one dissenting voice that insisted on a programme in the creative arts of contemporary Oceania. He argued that because of the virtual absence in our university region of our own contemporary visual and performing arts, what we needed most urgently was to encourage their emergence and development. Without this, any teaching of the arts would take us away from our cultures into those of the West, aborting any chance for the development of our own contemporary forms. It would hasten our complete absorption by other cultures. It should also be noted here that although traditional arts and cultures were sponsored widely in the USP region, much of it in the interest of tourism and the hospitality industry, not one institution sponsored the development of our own contemporary arts. There are modern artists working in Fiji, for example, but most are either foreigners or Oceanians who have studied fine arts overseas or learned from resident Western artists. The content and some of the materials used may be local, but the styles, the perspectives, and the aesthetic values are all non-Oceanian.

Because of the fundamental disagreement within the committee—and the committee's departure from the council's decision that the programme be on Pacific arts and culture—nothing was done for several years until the council reminded the university of its unimplemented decision. One day I was informed of my appointment to head a new committee whose membership was to be selected by the chairperson. Things started to move quickly from then. All those who held contrary views in the previous committee

were uninvited. Membership was all Oceanian academics who were themselves writers, poets, and the university's lone visual arts lecturer. And since none of us had any experience in establishing and managing a general arts programme, the committee invited the very experienced Ulli and Georgina Beier, who were then directing a third-world arts centre at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, to visit us, look into our situation, and write a report that would help us. A most valuable report was eventually presented to the university—pregnant with ideas and suggestions but with no concrete recommendations for a systematic course of action.

All the good ideas contained in the report, as well as those of the committee members, were simply floating in the air. This was the situation when the decision was made that a new section of the university, to be called the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture, would be launched in early 1997 and I was assigned to do the job. That was all there was to it. There were no directives, no set programmes to be implemented. All other sections of the university were meticulously planned, structured, and vetted thoroughly before they were approved and launched and staff were recruited to implement already laid out programmes. Not the Oceania Centre. It was pushed through committees very quickly, perhaps because it was an unexpected conception that could not be aborted. Had it been still-born no one would have noticed except the director, who would then be on the streets looking for another job.

As the director I was provided with a programme assistant, a part-time cleaner, a very modest budget, and a small architecturally nondescript building, partly hidden under huge trees, located significantly on the boundary between the main part of the university and the residential quarters for staff and students. We were thus placed on the margins, where we have since blessedly remained.

There was no formal launching of the centre, which simply came into being on 1 February 1997, when I, the programme assistant Lillian Thaggard, and the part-time cleaner Mili Naikece moved into our assigned premises—and found ourselves left well alone to do as we liked. This was something that we never dreamt of, and we took the opportunity to establish as much freedom as possible acting as we saw fit. It gave us the chance to actually try out, in complete freedom, the things that we had dreamt about over the years, never thinking that we would one day be given the unique opportunity that had just befallen us. It was a trust that we did our best to be worthy of. Six years down the line, we still enjoy complete

freedom, though still with modest budgets, marginality, limited space, and bare-boned staffing. And we developed the cardinal rule of not making insistent demands on the university, especially on its financial resources. Such demands would attract unwelcome attention to what we were not supposed to be doing. Complaints would have attracted a similar response, so we never complained.

The freedom also allowed us ample time to develop ideas about aims, objectives, and programmes to be pursued without being unduly stressed by pressure to meet deadlines. There were no deadlines. But we were cognisant of the expectation that sooner or later we would have to produce tangible results.

Thus, while thinking about our objectives, etc., we embarked on our first project—the creation of a home for the arts—by transforming our existing premises and surroundings into a space that was conducive to creativity, an environment that people would find relaxing and welcoming. Most buildings at the university are coldly functional. Available funds enabled only limited extension to the existing building by the addition of areas with floors and roofs but no walls. The relatively small size and openness of the space obliges people to work closely with and in sight of each other. It also means that those who walk and drive by can see what is happening: dancers, painters, sculptors, and musicians all working and performing in the same space. And because of the absence of a proper gallery or auditorium, all the centre's exhibitions and most performances are held in the same open space, for everyone to view, free of charge. Even labourers mowing and sweeping the university grounds, the kind of people who would not normally enter enclosed galleries and auditoriums, feel comfortable enough to come and see our artists work or rehearse or to view our exhibitions. People can see both the processes of creation and the final outcome in the same space. It is very important in building a public for the arts that the process of creation is open to viewing. What we have actually developed is not only a home for the arts but also a space that reflects an important aspect of community life in Oceania: noisy openness with very little privacy. And as in real, relatively small communities, there is much sharing, with everyone influencing and learning something from everyone else, and occasionally getting on each other's nerves. Painters, sculptors, dancers, and musicians interact with and help each other—a process that seems to be leading towards the natural growth of a kind of integrated arts phenomenon, something that is much talked about but difficult to realise. A few years ago while on a visit to New

Zealand, I went to the opening of a school for creative and performing arts. Everything was contained in one large building, and as one passed through it one was weighed down by the silence that pervaded the soundproofed, air-conditioned edifice. All activities were held behind closed doors. One heard music or viewed rehearsals or performances only when one opened the appropriate doors. There were very good reasons for that kind of spatial arrangement, but I was still impressed by the stark contrast with the centre that we had built.

While constructing our home for the arts, we were able to produce our aims and objectives and, as well, the programmes that would lead towards our goals. Our first objective was, and still is, the cultivation of a spirit of creative originality that would lead to the flourishing of contemporary visual and performing arts that are firmly rooted in our histories, traditions, and adaptations to the changing international environment that is affecting every facet of our existence. This creative process will remain focussed on experiments and originality, which are necessary if we are to take our cultures out of the mire of imitation and cloning reproduction. What is generally taken for creativity in our region is largely the adoption, and occasionally refinement, of things generated mainly outside Oceania or the unceasing reproduction of the original creations of our forebears in ages past.

Second, the creativity unleashed should reflect important principles of our societies—in particular reciprocity, cooperation, openness to community, and transmission of knowledge and skills through observation and hands-on experience. In the modern world art is considered an individual's affair. We, however, view art from the interest of a collective and encourage our artists to nurture each other. We do not spurn individualism; we choose to give priority to the collective. Some people say that, considering our financial situation, we should weed out the less gifted artists. But in order to sustain the collective spirit we carry everyone, until members decide for themselves that they stay or leave. In Oceanian communities, for example, dance and music are a matter of communitywide participation. Everyone joins in, either performing or supporting. But we know who are the best, the good, and the weak. The weak are generally put in back rows, where they are not too conspicuous, or assigned supporting roles. The idea is that everyone has a part to play.

Third, we aim to develop our own criteria for assessing the aesthetic merit and other cultural values of our contemporary creations. We must be

satisfied with what we are doing, according to our own standards, before we present them. In the formal teaching sections of the university, each department has an external adviser, usually an internationally renowned scholar from overseas, who regularly assesses the departmental offerings to make sure that they measure up to internationally accepted standards. These standards are always set elsewhere—namely in the West. We still look to outsiders for approval, a lasting legacy of our colonial past.¹ But we at the Oceania Centre are convinced that on matters of cultural creativity, which express who and what we are, we must be self-assessed by our own standards of evaluation.

For this we go back to what remains of the creations from our pasts. The arts of our ancestors grace the great museums, galleries, and private collections of Europe, the Americas, Australasia, and Japan. They are works of power and beauty, as impressive as their creators' navigational and other historic achievements. Contemplation of these works, together with our contemporary creations and our traditional sense of aesthetics, could help us to produce for the first time written sets of standards that are our own. It is significant that this concern with our own aesthetic values has risen simultaneously with our university-based intellectuals' rising interest in Oceanian epistemologies, philosophies, and values. Pursuing our own value systems does not mean that we cut ourselves off from the rest of the world. I have written elsewhere that "we learn from the great and wonderful products of human imagination and ingenuity the world over, but the cultural achievements of our own histories will be our most important models, points of reference, and sources of inspiration. This should help to bring out the best in us, while we remain true to ourselves."

Fourth, we aim to produce visual and performing arts that are regional, transcending our national insularity and cultural diversity. To date, when people talk or write of Oceanian art they refer to the creations of different countries or cultural groupings within a particular geographic region known as Oceania. The focus is necessarily on diversity. Our centre is called Oceania deliberately to signify its regional nature and aspirations. We aim to produce for the first time contemporary arts that all of us in Oceania would consider ours and would be recognised by others as such. This is putting into practice what I have been advocating over the last decade: a regional Oceanian identity based on our common inheritance of a large swathe of the Pacific Ocean.

The development of new art forms that are truly Oceanian is very important in another respect. It allows our creative minds to draw on far larger pools of cultural traits than those of our tiny individual national lagoons. It makes us less insular without being submerged in the amorphousness of the global cultural morass. As the largest of our multicultural regional institutions, our university is an ideal location for focussed developments in regionalism. The centre's emphasis on Oceanian forms and identity in artistic and cultural production should contribute significantly to regional cooperation and unity in our part of the world.

Fifth, we aim to harness creativity to our practical struggle for survival. In Oceania all forms of creativity were integral to the daily and ceremonial life of the community; there was no such thing as art for its own sake. In the world today, the best way for the Oceania Centre to do this is to tie the arts to the most urgent need for protecting our oceanic environment: the sea and the islands. This should enable us to remain true to the tenets of our communities and to contribute significantly to the most important global environmental agenda: the protection of the ozone layer, the forests, and the oceans, for the continuity of life on earth.

Sixth, we aim to produce a corpus of contemporary works readily accessible to our educational institutions and our communities. Most of the creations from past eras have been either destroyed or removed to museums and private collections far from Oceania. Very few of us can access them directly. As an alternative, we can see them as photographs in art books so expensive that they might as well have been kept in the basement of the British Museum.

Our centre is often compared with the very generously endowed Jean-Marie Tjibaou Centre in New Caledonia, which is building up an impressive collection of contemporary Pacific arts from all over Oceania. Representatives of the Tjibaou Centre are able to travel outside New Caledonia and buy expensive works for their collection. They are also able to bring the best artists in the region to Noumea to exhibit their works, some of which the Tjibaou Centre buys. The Oceania Centre, by contrast, cannot afford to buy works of art from anywhere. One of the most recent of John Pule's canvases, for example, could wipe out half the centre's annual budget. We are nevertheless building up a growing collection, virtually all of them works done by our own trainees and established artists, who have grouped themselves into an association, the Red Wave Collective. Virtually all of what we have

collected are works that were created at the centre. We collect for posterity, keeping in mind the loss to powerful countries in the past, as today, of the best that we have produced: our people and other irreplaceable treasures.

Finally, we believe that it is in the field of creative cultural production that we are most likely to produce the best that we are capable of—rivaling or even equalling original creativity anywhere. People who visit our centre are often surprised by our trainee artists' show of remarkable talent, their natural creativity, enthusiasm, and so forth. Very recently a New Zealand-based Samoan conductor and composer of serious music was invited to start a university choir to rehearse and perform his works, the lyrics of which are in Pacific languages. Two hundred students volunteered and, within a week of evening rehearsals of what was completely new to them, gave an impressively smooth performance at our graduation ceremony to an awe-struck audience that had rarely seen a choir of that magnitude before. The maestro said that it normally takes him six weeks of rehearsals in Auckland to produce the same result.

This goes to show that within our own domain we can readily excel. In academic fields of natural and social sciences, information technology, and so forth, our students are generally confronted with enormous difficulties because the origins of these disciplines are alien to our societies, compelling our students to learn and perform by other people's unfamiliar rules and regulations. Within our own domain, however, we set rules that, because of their emergence from our circumstances, we can readily accommodate and be comfortable with, enabling us to perform at our very best and at our own pace. This does not mean that we cannot perform successfully in other people's fields, far from it. But there we do not usually perform with the same degree of confidence, inventiveness, verve, and enjoyment. In Oceanian societies, we prefer to do things with enjoyment, mixing work and pleasure shamelessly. Globalisation, on the other hand, is such a serious, mechanical, joyless, and soulless enterprise that the flames in people's spirit are often extinguished at the outset, making it very difficult to rekindle them. Much time and effort are thereby consumed wastefully.

In short, the actual realisation of the talents of our creative minds should enable us to carve out an ample space within the global system to allow us to breathe freely—a space in which we have control over what we do, and where to go, to be ourselves; a space recognised as ours, in which visitors abide by our rules as we abide by theirs when we enter their territories; a welcoming space from which we could reach out to others with the natural-

ness, assurance, and civility that normally come from those who are at ease and at peace with themselves and with their surroundings.

The financial and other material resources provided by the university have helped to shape the centre's programmes as well as its progress towards attaining its ambitious goals. We believe that setting our sights high will propel us to do much more than otherwise.

From the beginning our modest budgets prevented us from becoming just another formal teaching institution, leaving us free to move into other and new directions, away from the dominant preoccupation with globalisation. Teaching arts as part of the university's degree and diploma programmes would have entangled us and buried us under the far larger and more powerful teaching schools. I insisted from the beginning that we must be a freestanding unit. As a former head of the USP's largest teaching school, spending inordinate amounts of time trying to cajole and pacify contrary and independent-minded academics, I found that moving to establish a one-person unit where I try to reason only with myself was such a relief that my gout vanished forever.

That's by the way. In any case, formal teaching would have entailed recruiting staff from abroad, most probably from Australia and New Zealand. Courses would have been developed to conform to "international standards" with textbooks based on Western art history, aesthetic perceptions, and such. And like the rest of the university, we would have developed away from our Oceanian base. In their consultancy report, "Cultural Identity in Oceania," Ulli and Georgina Beier wrote of the negative effects of art schools in colonial India and Africa where the British "introduced the European method of learning and seeing. Anatomy, perspective, life drawing and heavy emphasis on European art history from the renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century. Students with strong personalities and original creative talents often took years to liberate themselves. They had to go back to rediscover their traditional wall paintings, their ancient calligraphy or folk art in order to overcome the process of alienation they had been subjected to." We are not necessarily opposed to the teaching of arts as such. We believe that at this stage of our development we should focus on producing contemporary works that will eventually become resources for teaching and research in our region. When we are ready to teach, we will not be so dependent on non-Oceanian resources as we are today.

Formal teaching of the arts would have denied access to our programmes to the largest body of the most creative original talents in our

societies. These people are school dropouts or leavers who do not qualify to enrol in university programmes. Most of our trainee visual and performing artists are from the ranks of the unemployed, part-timers, and casuals. Thus instead of teaching we facilitate. We provide a space, materials, and mentoring to any would-be artist who needs these to develop his or her talent. Aspiring painters, sculptors, musicians, and dancers come to the centre, where they are imbued with the idea of developing our own distinctively Oceanian arts.

Most university students are not interested in the arts; they have enrolled in the university in order to become bureaucrats, managers, professionals, and business entrepreneurs. Regional governments do not provide scholarships for the creative arts. Only those from wealthy and well-connected backgrounds can afford to enrol in arts schools overseas as private students. Most of the rest have to redirect their energies into nonartistic activities, or join the ranks of the unemployed or casually employed.

Very early on it became clear that to develop contemporary Oceanian arts the centre would rely on the full-time artists that it nurtures. We could not rely on established artists; they are set in their ways and are not amenable to redirection. That is to be expected. We therefore offered workshops for beginners to which we invited, through newspaper advertisements, young people between eighteen and twenty-four years of age, who are not on full-time study or employment, because these latter would treat art as a hobby to be indulged in their spare time. For our first painting workshop, at the beginning of 1998, we selected the New Zealand-based Niuean artist, John Pule, to conduct. Pule was chosen because his works at the time were inspired by Oceanian tapa and mat designs, and he worked in the earth colours used by weavers, tapa painters, specialists in traditional lashings, and such. Of painters with Pacific Island origins, Pule was the most distinctively Oceanian in his creations. Artists who have emerged from that workshop became mentors to newcomers to the centre. None of our artists has had any formal training except what little they obtained at school. Since they are such newcomers with no experience in the arts, they take readily to the centre's goals and are inspired by them. On two occasions we had workshops on techniques, conducted by an Australian and a South African, respectively. Our trainees were directed to paint scenery and realistic human forms, which they enthusiastically did. But as soon as the workshops were completed they returned of their own volition to what they now called

contemporary Oceanian styles but each time greatly enriched by their brief experience in the closest they have come to formal training.

Our contemporary dance programme was started by a mature university student who had some choreographic experience in traditional Polynesian dance. Allan Alo first came to the centre to participate in a painting workshop, but he expressed his wish to develop his choreographic talent. The centre provided him with a series of short-term appointments as artist in residence to develop expertise in contemporary Oceanian dance that weaves together strands of dance movements from across the region as well as from modern Western and Eastern dances. Since becoming our full-time choreographer he has established the Oceania Dance Theatre, which has staged performances of contemporary Pacific dance not previously seen anywhere in the university region.

In 1998 the centre appointed as artist in residence a young and talented musician, Sailasa Tora, who had come to me to declare his intention to revolutionise Fijian music. Since he was obviously out of his mind, he was most welcome to the loony bin. His compositions have influenced the development of a new Fijian music inspired by ancient chants.

Workshop and artist in residence programmes have enabled the Oceania Centre to provide a modicum of training to our visual and performing artists. These help to set them on their journeys of discovery. The rest depends on the individual artist's innate talent and drive, mutually supported by members of the arts community that we have built together.

Since the beginning we have worked only with the resources allocated to us by the university, most of which come from funds triennially provided by our governments and some from the New Zealand and Australian governments. We have never gone directly to outside sources for funds. We believe that on matters concerning our cultures and identity, we must rely on ourselves and not on anyone else. In the process of our development we have discovered that we actually have a great deal more resources available in our environments and in ourselves than we have been led to believe. The problem with our dependency today is not so much the lack of resources but the judicious and creative use of what is available and the will to live within our means and develop from there. I have often been told to go to funding agencies for what we need. They said that there is so much money out there to be tapped! We have resisted that—finding it exciting and challenging to produce as much as we can from what appears to be so little. It is the best

way for attaining and maintaining real autonomy. The community that we have started building cannot really be ours otherwise.

The freedom that we have obtained for the centre in relation to the university as a whole is that which we allow our artists. We never tell them what to do or not to do as artists. They work at their own pace, and they come and go as they wish. We are there to support them, guide them when needed, and help them to grow as artists. We always advise our artists to think of what does not exist and bring it to life. This may be the fairest explanation for what we, as a community, have been able to do with what we have had at our disposal over the relatively short period of our existence. Seeing such things happen, and contributing in some ways to their creation, makes one profoundly appreciative of what it means to be free in an increasingly managed and controlled world.

So far we have been working quietly at the centre and have not bothered to use the Internet to publicise what we are doing. We do not have a website. We have not even produced a single brochure. We prefer to focus on building our strengths first before we step outside. But after nearly seven years, we feel that we are in a position to expand into other parts of our region. In the near future we hope to establish our programme in Honiara with the Solomons creative artists that we have nurtured at the centre. In the long run we foresee expansion into the rest of the university region using our extension centres and campuses as bases of operation. Beyond that we would like to visit places outside Oceania proper, to share and exchange with the inhabitants thereof.

In 1996, while trying to produce a thematic concept that would "give the Oceania Centre a clear, distinctive, and unifying identity," I wrote the following: "The theme for the centre and for us to pursue is the ocean and, as well, the interactions between us and the sea that have shaped and are shaping so much of our cultures. We begin with what we have in common and draw inspiration from the diverse patterns that have emerged from the successes and failures in our adaptation to the influences of the sea. From there we can range beyond the tenth horizon, secure in the knowledge of the home base to which we will always return for replenishment and revision of the purposes and directions of our journeys. We shall visit our people who have gone to the lands of diaspora and tell them that we have built something: a new home for all of us. And taking a cue from the ocean's ever-flowing and encircling nature, we will travel far and wide to connect with oceanic and maritime peoples elsewhere, and swap stories of voyages we

have taken and those yet to be embarked on. We will show them what we have created; we will learn from them different kinds of music, dance, art, ceremonies, and other forms of cultural production. We may even together make new sounds, new rhythms, new choreographies, and new songs and verses about how wonderful and terrible the sea is, and how we cannot live without it. We will talk about the good things the oceans have bestowed on us, the damaging things we have done to them, and how we must together try to heal their wounds and protect them forever." We still hold on to these sentiments. They belong to the constellations that we use to guide us on our journey towards an ever creative and free Oceania.

Notes

This essay was originally delivered as the 2003 Forge Memorial Lecture, Australian National University, Canberra, on 8 October 2003.

1. In Australia, I believe, that cultural cringe has only fairly recently been outgrown.