

16

The Ocean in Us

Epeli Hau'ofa

Hau'ofa, E. 1998. The Ocean in Us. *The Contemporary Pacific* 10(2): 391–410.

Republished with the kind permission of the University of Hawai'i Press.

We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood.

—Teresia Teaiwa

In a previous essay, I advanced the notion of a much enlarged world of Oceania that has emerged through the astounding mobility of our peoples in the last 50 years (Hau'ofa 1993).¹ Most of us are part of this mobility, whether personally or through the movements of our relatives. This expanded Oceania is a world of social networks that crisscross the ocean all the way from Australia and New Zealand in the southwest to the United States and Canada in the northeast. It is a world that we have created largely

1 This paper is based on one that was delivered as an Oceania Lecture at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, in March 1997 and subsequently published in *Dreadlocks In Oceania* Vol. 1:124–48. A briefer, earlier version was delivered as a keynote address at the Third Conference of the European Society of Oceanists, Copenhagen, 13–15 December 1996. I am grateful to Greg Fry for his very insightful papers, 'Framing the Islands', 'The Politics of South Pacific Regional Cooperation', and 'The South Pacific "Experiment"'. Our recent conversation in Wainadoi helped to clarify a number of issues dealt with here.

through our own efforts, and have kept vibrant and independent of the Pacific Islands world of official diplomacy and neocolonial dependency. In portraying this new Oceania, I wanted to raise, especially among our emerging generations, the kind of consciousness that would help free us from the prevailing, externally generated definitions of our past, present and future.

I wish now to take this issue further by suggesting the development of a substantial regional identity that is anchored in our common inheritance of a very considerable portion of Earth's largest body of water, the Pacific Ocean. The notion of an identity for our region is not new; through much of the latter half of this century people have tried to instill a strong sense of belonging to an island's region for the sake of sustained regional cooperation. So far these attempts have foundered on the reef of our diversity, and on the requirements of international geopolitics, combined with assertions of narrow national self-interests on the part of our individual countries. I believe that a solid and effective regional identity can be forged and fostered. We have not been very successful in our attempts so far because, while fishing for the elusive school of tuna, we have lost sight of the ocean that surrounds and sustains us.

A common identity that would help us to act together for the advancement of our collective interests, including the protection of the ocean for the general good, is necessary for the quality of our survival in the so-called Pacific Century when, as we are told, important developments in the global economy will concentrate in huge regions that encircle us. As individual, colonially created, tiny countries acting alone, we could indeed 'fall off the map' or disappear into the black hole of a gigantic pan-Pacific doughnut, as our perspicacious friends, the denizens of the National Centre for Development Studies in Canberra, are fond of telling us. But acting together as a region, for the interests of the region as a whole, and above those of our individual countries, we would enhance our chances for a reasonable survival in the century that is already dawning upon us. Acting in unison for larger purposes and for the benefit of the wider community could help us to become more open-minded, idealistic, altruistic and generous, and less self-absorbed and corrupt in the conduct of our public affairs than we are today. In an age when our societies are preoccupied with the pursuit of material wealth, when the rampant market economy brings out unquenchable greed and amorality in us, it is necessary for our institutions of learning to develop corrective mechanisms such as the one proposed here, if we are to retain our sense of humanity and community.

An identity that is grounded in something as vast as the sea should exercise our minds and rekindle in us the spirit that sent our ancestors to explore the oceanic unknown and make it their home, our home.

I would like to make it clear at the outset that I am not in any way suggesting cultural homogeneity for our region. Such a thing is neither possible nor desirable. Our diverse loyalties are much too strong for a regional identity ever to erase them. Besides, our diversity is necessary for the struggle against the homogenising forces of the global juggernaut. It is even more necessary for those of us who must focus on strengthening their ancestral cultures in their struggles against seemingly overwhelming forces, to regain their lost sovereignty. The regional identity that I am concerned with is something additional to other identities that we already have, or will develop in the future, something that should serve to enrich our other selves.

A Regional Identity

The ideas for a regional identity that I express here have emerged largely from nearly 20 years of direct involvement with an institution that caters for many of the tertiary educational needs of most of the South Pacific islands region, and increasingly of countries north of the equator. In a very real sense, the University of the South Pacific is a microcosm of the region, and many aspects of its history, which began in 1968 in the era of decolonisation of island territories, mirror the developments in the regional communities it serves. The well-known diversity of social organisations, economies and cultures of the region is reflected in the student population that comprises people from all 12 countries that own the university, as well as a sprinkling from other regions. This sense of diversity is heightened by daily interactions—between students themselves, among staff, and between staff and students—that take place on our main campus in Suva, and by staff visits to regional countries to conduct face-to-face instruction of our extension students, summer schools, research and consultancy, and to perform other university duties.

Yet through these same interactions there has developed at our university an ill-defined sense of belonging to a Pacific Islands region, and of being Pacific Islanders. Because of its size, its on-campus residential arrangements for staff and students, and its spread, the university is the premier hatchery for the regional identity. Nevertheless, the sense of diversity is much more

palpable and tangible than that of a larger common identity; students identify themselves much more with their nationality, race and personal friendships across the cultural divide than with the Pacific Islander identity. This is to be expected. Apart from primordial loyalties, students come to the university to obtain certificates for returning home to work for their respective countries. They do not come to the university in order ultimately to serve the region as such.

In the early years of the university's existence, there was a concerted attempt to strengthen the common identity through the promotion of the Pacific Way as a unifying ideology. But the Pacific Way was a shallow ideology that was swept away by the rising tide of regional disunity of the 1980s. While promoting the Pacific Way, the university was simultaneously sponsoring diversity through the support it gave to student cultural groups based on nationality and race. This support was manifest most clearly in the sponsorship given to Pacific Week, an annual festival during which students displayed, largely through music and dance, the cultural diversity of the region. The irony of promoting both the Pacific Way and the Pacific Week was lost in the hope that unity would somehow emerge from diversity. But any lasting sense of unity derived from the enjoyment of the variety of music and dances of the region was tenuous because no serious attempt was made to translate them or place them in their historical and social contexts. Audiences enjoyed the melodies, the rhythms and the movements; everything else was mystery. There is also a complete absence in the university's curricula of any degree program in Pacific studies. Anthropology, one of the basic disciplines for such a program, is not even taught at our university.

The development of a clear regional identity within this university was also hampered by the introduction in the early 1980s of neo-Marxism, which, as a global movement, was quite hostile to any expression of localism and regionalism. According to this ideology, Pacific people were part of a worldwide class structure based on an international division of labour. Nationalism and regionalism were bourgeois attempts to prevent the international unity of the working classes. The demise of the Pacific Way through natural causes, and that of neo-Marxism as a direct result of the 1987 right-wing military coups in Fiji, removed from our campus discourses the ideologies that transcended cultural diversity. The Pacific Week sputtered on for another 10 years as an affirmative expression of difference, with nothing concrete to counterbalance it.

Outside the University of the South Pacific, Pacific Islands regionalism, promoted by several other regional organisations, was facing parallel problems, together with a considerable degree of confusion. Much of this could be traced back to the colonial period. For example, our region has come under a variety of names that reflect not only confusion about what we are, but also the ways in which we have been slotted into pigeonholes, or juggled around for certain purposes. The earliest general name for the region was the South Seas, which became virtually synonymous with paradise, a false concept that we have not successfully shed because it is used to promote the hospitality industry. When I grew up in Papua New Guinea in the 1940s, we were still South Sea Islanders. We had not heard of the South Pacific or Pacific Islanders.

A much less used term for our region is Australasia, which is a combination of Australia and Asia, meaning south of Asia. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, it refers to Australia and the islands of the southwest Pacific. The term implies that the islands are in Australia's orbit. Not infrequently, however, Australians refer to the region as their 'backyard', the sort of area that has to be guarded against intrusions from behind.

Only after the Second World War did the term South Pacific come into general and popular use. It seems to have first spread through the Western Alliance military terminology during the war, and was popularised by James Michener's book *Tales of the South Pacific* and Rodgers and Hammerstein's hugely successful musical version of it. But the term is a misleading one. As used in our premier regional organisations, South Pacific comprises not just those islands that lie south of the equator; it covers the whole region, from the Marianas, deep in the North Pacific, to New Zealand in the south. Be that as it may, the term South Pacific has replaced South Seas, which today is confined almost totally to history books and old records.

Since the beginning of the postcolonial era, the term Pacific Islands region has emerged and is gradually replacing South Pacific as the descriptive name for our region. The South Pacific region was a creation of the Cold War era, and its significance was largely in relation to the security of Western interests in the Far East. South Pacific clearly included Australia and New Zealand, but the term Pacific Islands region excludes our larger neighbours and indicates more clearly than before the separation between us and them. This may reflect our contemporary political sovereignty, but in more recent times it has emerged to signify our declining importance

to the West since the end of the Cold War, as well as the progressive movement by our neighbours toward Asia. The South Pacific of the Cold War, when our region was liberally courted by the West, is finished. Perhaps the best indication of this is the recommendation made at the last meeting of the South Pacific Conference to remove the term South Pacific from its secretariat, the South Pacific Commission. It will come as no surprise if the secretariat is renamed Pacific Islands Commission, or some other redesignation to be determined by the ever-shifting perceptions of what our region is or should be. Will the same change be made to the conference itself? And what of the South Pacific Forum or, for that matter, our very own University of the South Pacific? The point is that, as the Pacific Islands region, we are no longer as needed by others as we were; we are now increasingly told to shape up or else. The Forum Secretariat has been radically downsized, and the headship of the South Pacific Commission has recently been taken over by a non-Pacific Islander for the first time in about three decades.

Two other terms that include our region are significant indicators of our progressive marginalisation. The first is Asia-Pacific region as used by certain international agencies, such as those of the United Nations, to lump us together with hundreds of millions of Asians for the administration of services of various kinds. The other term is Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, APEC, which covers the entire Pacific Rim, but excludes the whole of the Pacific Islands region. Thus in the United Nations' Asia-Pacific region we are an appendage (or perhaps the appendix) of Asia, and in APEC we do not exist. It should now be evident why our region is characterised as the 'hole in the doughnut': an empty space. We should take careful note of this because if we do not exist for others, then we could in fact be dispensable.

This is not an exaggeration. Early this century the people of Banaba were persuaded to give up their island to a phosphate-mining company for the benefit of the British Empire. In the mid-century, the inhabitants of Bikini were coaxed into giving up their island for atomic tests that would benefit all mankind. Both groups of people consented to the destruction of their inheritance largely because they had no choice. They are today among the world's displaced populations; those who benefited from their sacrifice have forgotten or are doing their best to forget their existence. What does this bode for us in the 21st century and beyond? Banaba and Bikini were not isolated cases. The latter part of this century has made it clear that ours is the only region in the world where certain kinds of experiment

and exploitation can be undertaken by powerful nations with minimal political repercussions to themselves. Modern society is generating and accumulating vast quantities of waste matter that must in the near future be disposed of where there will be least resistance. It may well be that for the survival of the human species in the next millennium we in Oceania will be urged, in the way the people of Banaba and Bikini were urged, to give up our lands and seas.

The older terms for our region were coined before any sense of regionalism on our part arose. In Africa and the Middle East, regionalism emerged from the struggle for independence. In our part of the world, regionalism first emerged as a creation of colonialism to preempt the rise of revolutionary, or even non-revolutionary, independence movements. This is the root of much of the problem of regionalism in the Pacific. We have not been able to define our world and ourselves without direct and often heavy external influences.

In summary, we could take our changing identities as a region over the last 200 years as marking the different stages of our history. In the earliest stage of our interactions with the outside world, we were the South Sea paradise of noble savages living in harmony with a bountiful nature; we were simultaneously lost and degraded souls to be pacified, Christianised, colonised and civilised. Then we became the South Pacific region of much importance for the security of Western interests in Asia. We were pampered by those whose real interests lay elsewhere, and those who conducted dangerous experiments on our islands. We have passed through that stage into the Pacific Islands region of naked, neocolonial dependency. Our erstwhile suitors are now creating with others along the rim of our ocean a new set of relationships that excludes us totally. Had this been happening elsewhere, our exclusion would not have mattered much. But in this instance we are physically located at the very centre of what is occurring around us. The development of APEC will affect our existence in fundamental ways whether we like it or not. We cannot afford to ignore our exclusion because what is involved here is our very survival.

The time has come for us to wake up to our modern history as a region. We cannot confront the issues of the Pacific Century individually as tiny countries, nor as the Pacific Islands region of bogus independence. We must develop a much stronger and genuinely independent regionalism than what we have today. A new sense of the region that is our own creation, based on our perceptions of our realities, is necessary for our survival in the dawning era.

Our present regionalism is a direct creation of colonialism. It emerged soon after the Second World War with the establishment (by Australia, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States) of the South Pacific Conference and, later, its secretariat, the South Pacific Commission. The 1950 South Pacific Conference at Nasinu, Fiji, was the first occasion ever in which indigenous island leaders from throughout Oceania met in a single forum to discuss practical issues of common interest to them. Needless to say, the agenda was set by the colonial powers. These authorities dominated the conference and the commission, which they had established to facilitate the pooling of limited resources and the effective implementation of regional programs in health, education, agriculture, fisheries and so forth, and to involve island leaders in the consideration of regional development policies. But behind all this was our rulers' attempt to present a progressive face to the United Nations, decolonisation committee and to unite the region, under their leadership, in the struggle against Marxism and liberation ideologies. It is not surprising then that, unlike other colonial regions of the world, our political independence (except in Vanuatu and Western Samoa) was largely imposed on us. It also came in packages that tied us firmly to the West.

Politics was not discussed at the South Pacific Conference, a policy that has survived more or less in regional organisations that have emerged in the postcolonial period. Although the Nasinu conference and subsequent South Pacific Conferences engendered a sense of regional identity, the ban on political discussions, which, at the time, were on the burning issues of decolonisation and communist expansionism, prevented the development of this identity beyond a vague sense of commonality.

The frustration with external domination of the South Pacific Conference led to the formation of the South Pacific Forum as an exclusive club by the leaders of the newly independent countries of the region. But the independence of the South Pacific Forum was compromised from the beginning with the inclusion, for financial considerations, of Australia and New Zealand in its membership. The membership of these countries in the South Pacific Conference and the South Pacific Forum has brought about complications in the development of a postcolonial regional identity. Australia and New Zealand are members of these regional bodies, not as nations but as patron governments. By mutual identification, their leaders who attend high-level regional meetings, and their representatives in regional secretariats, do not call themselves, nor are they considered,

Pacific Islanders. They are, however, our closest neighbours, with whom we have had historical and cultural connections that date back to the beginning of the European settlements of their countries. There is already an identity with these countries based on history, geography and numerous contemporary involvements, but this is fraught with ambivalence. New Zealand and especially Australia are not infrequently considered by us to be domineering, exploitative and in possession of the gentleness and sensitivity of the proverbial bull in a china shop, while we are often considered by the other side to be mendicant and mendacious, and our leading citizens woefully inept. Among ourselves, we do hold and express mutually uncomplimentary views, and occasionally act violently against each other, attitudes and conducts that are inimical to the development of regionalism. The point, however, is that, by virtue of their governments' membership in our premier regional organisations, Australia and New Zealand exert strong, if not dominant, influences in the conduct of our regional affairs and in the shaping of any Pacific Islands identity. At the same time, these countries display a strong chameleonic tendency; they have a habit of dropping in and out of the South Pacific region whenever it suits their national self-interests.

National self-interest and pride, the emergence of subregional blocks based on perceived cultural and ethnic affiliations, and the timidity and sheer lack of foresight on the part of our leaders, are examples of the numerous problems that beset Pacific Islands regionalism. Since these are commonly known, I will not discuss them here; suffice it to say that in general our regional organisations exist today mainly to serve national interests rather than those of the region as such.

Nevertheless, in the few instances when the region stood united, we have been successful in achieving our common aims. It is of utmost significance for the strengthening of a regional identity to know that our region has achieved its greatest degrees of unity on the issues of the threat to our common environment: the ocean. It should be noted that on these issues Australia and New Zealand often assumed the necessary leading roles because of our common sharing of the ocean. On issues of this kind, the sense of a regional identity, of being Pacific Islanders, is felt most acutely. The movement toward a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific, the protests against the wall-of-death drift-netting, against plans to dispose of nuclear wastes in the ocean, the incineration of chemical weapons on Johnston Island, the 1995 resumption of nuclear tests on Moruroa, and, most ominously, the specter of our atoll islands and low-

lying coastal regions disappearing under the rising sea level, are instances of a regional united front against threats to our environment. But as these issues come to the fore only occasionally, and as success in protests has dissipated the immediate sense of threat, we have generally reverted to our normal state of disunity and the pursuit of national self-indulgence. The problems, especially of toxic waste disposal and destructive exploitation of ocean resources, remain to haunt us. Nuclear-powered ships and vessels carrying radioactive materials still ply the ocean; international business concerns are still looking for islands for the disposal of toxic industrial wastes; activities that contribute to the depletion of the ozone continue; drift-netting has abated but not stopped; and the reefs of Moruroa Atoll may still crack and release radioactive materials. People who are concerned with these threats are trying hard to enlist region-wide support, but the level of their success is low as far as the general public is concerned. Witness the regionwide silence while the plutonium-laden Pacific Teal sailed through our territorial waters in March 1997. There is, however, a trend in the region to move from mere protests to the stage of active protection of the environment. For this to succeed, regionalism has to be strengthened. No single country in the Pacific can by itself protect its own slice of the oceanic environment: the very nature of that environment prescribes regional effort. And to develop the ocean resources sustainably, regional unity is required.

A Pacific Islands regional identity means a Pacific Islander identity. What or who is a Pacific Islander? The University of the South Pacific categorises its students and staff into regionals and non-regionals. A regional is someone who is a citizen of one of the member countries of the university's region. A regional is a Pacific Islander. But the issue is more complex than that. There are thousands of people with origins in Oceania who are citizens of Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and who consider themselves Pacific Islanders. In Fiji, about half the citizen population is of non-indigenous origin, and they are not considered or called Fijians. The term Fijian is reserved for the indigenous population, which still considers the rest as *vulagi*, or guests, even though their ancestors might have emigrated to Fiji a century or so ago. Fijians are Pacific Islanders. What of the rest? Given the mutual misunderstandings and suspicions between indigenous Fijians and, to some extent, most other indigenous Pacific Islanders on the one hand, and Indo-Fijians on the other, what proportion of the latter consider themselves Pacific Islanders? The view held by some people in the region is that only indigenous

populations are Pacific Islanders. One of the reasons why many people disliked the Pacific Way ideology was their perceived exclusion from its coverage. There were, and perhaps still are, a few people in Tonga with full or part foreign ancestries who were or are stateless persons. Cook Islanders are citizens of their own country and simultaneously of New Zealand. French Polynesians and New Caledonians are French citizens, Guamanians are American citizens, and American Samoans have a leg each in the United States and eastern Samoa. To what degree are these people Pacific Islanders? Similar questions could be raised about the New Zealand Māori, Native Hawaiians and Australian Aborigines.

In anticipation of what I shall say later, I would like to make one point briefly. The issue of what or who is a Pacific Islander would not arise if we considered Oceania as comprising people as human beings with a common heritage and commitment, rather than as members of diverse nationalities and races. Oceania refers to a world of people connected to each other. The term Pacific Islands region refers to an official world of states and nationalities. John and Mary cannot just be Pacific Islanders; they have to be Ni-Vanuatu, or Tuvaluan, or Samoan first. As far as I am concerned, anyone who has lived in our region and is committed to Oceania is an Oceanian. This view opens up the possibility of expanding Oceania progressively to cover larger areas and more peoples than is possible under the term Pacific Islands region. In this formulation, the concepts Pacific Islands region and Pacific Islanders are as redundant as South Seas and South Sea Islanders. We have to search for appropriate names for common identities that are more accommodating, inclusive and flexible than what we have today.

At our university, the search for unity and common identity took on a new life following two incidents of violent confrontation in 1994 between inebriated students of different nationalities. In the aftermath of these incidents, which shook the university to its foundations, renewed efforts were made to bring about a sense of unity and common identity among our students in order to promote cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, and to forestall further outbreaks of violence. Measures were taken to minimise the deleterious consequences of diversity. Funding of cultural groups was drastically reduced, the Pacific Week was abandoned and the flag-raising ceremonies to celebrate national days were discontinued. Students were urged to regroup themselves into interest-based associations with memberships that cut across nationality and ethnicity. Our staff reexamined our academic programs, resulting in the

introduction of a common course in Pacific studies, which itself is the beginning of a drive to introduce a Pacific studies degree program for the first time at this university, of all places.

The Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture

In 1996, the university finally acted on a decision made by its council in 1992 to establish an arts and culture program by creating the Centre for Pacific Arts and Culture, which opened in 1997.

As I was intimately involved in the planning for this centre, which deals directly with the issue of culture and identity, I became aware of two things. First, this new unit provides a rare opportunity for some of us at the university to realise the dreams we have had for many years. We have talked and written about our ideas and hopes, but only now have we been presented with an opportunity to transform them into reality. Second, if we were not careful, the programs being conceived for the centre would become a loose collection of odds and ends that would merely reflect the diversity of our cultures.

I began searching for a theme or a central concept on which to hang the programs of the centre. I toyed with the idea of *Our Sea of Islands*, which I had propounded a few years earlier, but felt uneasy about it because I did not wish to appear to be conspicuously riding a hobby horse. It is bad manners in many Oceanic societies to appear pushy. You do not push things for yourself. But it is a forgivable sin if you accidentally get someone else to do it for you. So I kept the idea at the back of my mind, and while in this condition I came across the following passage in an article written by Sylvia Earle (1996) for *Time Magazine*:

The sea shapes the character of this planet, governs weather and climate, stabilises moisture that falls back on the land, replenishing Earth's fresh water to rivers, lakes, streams—and us. Every breath we take is possible because of the life-filled life-giving sea; oxygen is generated there, carbon dioxide absorbed. Both in terms of the sheer mass of living things and genetic diversity, that's where the action is. Rain forests and other terrestrial systems are important too, of course, but without the living ocean there would be no life on land. Most of Earth's living space, the biosphere, is ocean-about 97%. And not so coincidentally 97% of Earth's water is Ocean.

After I read Earle's account, it became clear that the ocean, and our historical relationships with it, would be the core theme for the centre. At about the same time, our journalism students produced the first issue of their newspaper, *Wansohwara*, a pidgin word that they translated as 'one ocean, one people'. Things started to fall into place and we were able to persuade the university to call the new unit the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture.

Oceania

It also occurred to me that despite the sheer magnitude of the oceans, we are among the minute proportion of Earth's total human population who can truly be referred to as 'oceanic peoples'. Besides, our region is sometimes referred to as Oceania, a designation that I prefer above all others, for some very good reasons.

All our cultures have been shaped in fundamental ways by the adaptive interactions between our people and the sea that surrounds our island communities. In general, the smaller the island the more intensive are the interactions with the sea, and the more pronounced the sea's influences on culture. One did not have to be in direct interaction with the sea to be influenced by it. Regular climatic patterns, together with such unpredictable natural phenomena as droughts, prolonged rains, floods and cyclones that influenced the systems of terrestrial activities were largely determined by the ocean. On the largest island of Oceania, New Guinea, products of the sea, especially the much-valued shells, reached the most remote highlands societies, shaping their ceremonial and political systems. But, more importantly, inland people of our large islands are now citizens of Oceanic countries whose capitals and other urban centres are located in coastal areas, to which they are moving in large numbers to seek advancement. The sea is already part of their lives. Many of us today are not directly or personally dependent on the sea for our livelihood and would probably get seasick as soon as we set foot on a rocking boat. This means only that we are no longer sea travellers or fishers. But as long as we live on our islands we remain very much under the spell of the sea; we cannot avoid it.

Before the advent of Europeans in our region, our cultures were truly oceanic in the sense that the sea barrier shielded us for millennia from the great cultural influences that raged through continental land masses

and adjacent islands. This prolonged period of isolation allowed for the emergence of distinctive oceanic cultures with no non-oceanic influences, except on the original cultures that the earliest settlers brought with them when they entered the vast, uninhabited region. Scholars of antiquity may raise the issue of continental cultural influences on the western and northwestern border islands of Oceania, but these are exceptions, and Asian mainland influences were largely absent until the modern era. On the eastern extremity of the region, there were some influences from the Americas, but these were minimal. For these reasons, Pacific Ocean islands, from Japan through the Philippines and Indonesia, which are adjacent to the Asian mainland, do not have oceanic cultures, and are therefore not part of Oceania. This definition of our region that delineates us clearly from Asia and the pre-Columbian Americas is based on our own historical developments, rather than on other people's perceptions of us.

Although the sea shielded us from Asian and American influences, the nature of the spread of our islands allowed a great deal of mobility within the region. The sea provided waterways that connected neighbouring islands into regional exchange groups that tended to merge into one another, allowing the diffusion of cultural traits through most of Oceania. These common traits of bygone and changing traditions have so far provided many of the elements for the construction of regional identities. But very many people on our islands do not share these common traits as part of their heritage, and an increasing number of true urbanites are alienated from their ancient histories. In other words, although our historical and cultural traditions are important elements of a regional identity, they are not in themselves sufficient to sustain that identity, for they exclude all those people whose ancestral heritage is sourced elsewhere, and those who are growing up in non-traditional environments.

The ocean that surrounds us is the one physical entity that all of us in Oceania share. It is the inescapable fact of our lives. What we lack is the conscious awareness of it, its implications and what we could do with it. The potentials are enormous, exciting, as they have always been. When our leaders and planners say that our future lies in the sea, they are thinking only in economic terms, about marine and seabed resources and their development. When people talk of the importance of the oceans for the continuity of life on Earth, they are making scientific statements. But for us in Oceania, the sea defines us, what we are and have always been. As the great Caribbean poet Derek Walcott put it, the sea is history. Recognition of this could be the beginning of a very important chapter in our history. We could open it as we enter the third millennium.

All of us in Oceania today, whether indigenous or otherwise, can truly assert that the sea is our single common heritage. Because the ocean is ever-flowing, the sea that laps the coastlines of Fiji, for example, is the same water that washes the shores of all the other countries of our region. Most of the dry land surfaces on our islands have been divided and allocated, and conflicting claims to land rights are the roots of some of the most intractable problems in virtually all our communities. Until very recently, the sea beyond the horizon and the reefs that skirt our islands was open water that belonged to no one and everyone. Much of the conflict between the major ethnic groups in Fiji, for example, is rooted in the issue of land rights. But the open sea beyond the nearshore areas of indigenous Fijian fishing rights is open to every Fiji citizen and free of disputes. Similarly, as far as ordinary people of Oceania are concerned, there are no national boundaries drawn across the sea between our countries. Just about every year, for example, some lost Tongan fishers, who might well have been fishing in Fijian waters, wash up in their frail vessels on the shores of Fiji. They have always, so far, been taken very good care of, then flown back home loaded with tinned fish.

It is one of the great ironies of the Law of the Sea Convention, which enlarged our national boundaries, that it is also extending the territorial instinct to where there was none before. As we all know, territoriality is probably the strongest spur for some of the most brutal acts of aggression. Because of the resource potentials of the open sea and the ocean bed, the water that had united subregions of Oceania in the past may become a major divisive factor in the relationships between our countries in the future. It is therefore essential that we ground any new regional identity in a belief in the common heritage of the sea. A realisation of the fact that the ocean is uncontainable and pays no respect to territoriality should spur us to advance the notion, based on physical reality and practices that date back to the initial settlements of Oceania, that the sea must remain open to all of us.

A regional identity anchored in our common heritage of the ocean does not mean an assertion of exclusive regional territorial rights, for the same water that washes and crashes on our shores also does the same to the coastlines of the whole Pacific Rim, from Antarctica to New Zealand, Australia, Southeast and East Asia, and right around to the Americas. The Pacific Ocean also merges into the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans to encircle the entire planet. As the sea is an open and ever-flowing reality, so should our oceanic identity transcend all forms of insularity to become

one that is openly searching, inventive and welcoming. In a metaphorical sense, the ocean that has been our waterway to each other should also be our route to the rest of the world. Our most important role should be that of custodians of the ocean, and, as such, we must reach out to similar people elsewhere for the common task of protecting the seas for the general welfare of all living things. This may sound grandiose but it really is not, considering the growing importance of international movements to implement the most urgent projects in the global environmental agenda: the protection of the ozone layer, the forests and the oceans. The formation of an oceanic identity is really an aspect of our waking up to things that are already happening around us.

The ocean is not merely our omnipresent, empirical reality; equally important, it is our most wonderful metaphor for just about anything we can think of. Contemplation of its vastness and majesty, its allurements and fickleness, its regularities and unpredictability, its shoals and depths, and its isolating and linking role in our histories, excites the imagination and kindles a sense of wonder, curiosity and hope that could set us on journeys to explore new regions of creative enterprise that we have not dreamt of before.

What I have tried to say so far is that in order to give substance to a common regional identity and animate it, we must tie history and culture to empirical reality and practical action. This is not new; our ancestors wrote our histories on the landscape and the seascape; carved, stenciled and wove our metaphors on objects of utility; and sang and danced in rituals and ceremonies for the propitiation of the awesome forces of nature and society.

Some 20 years ago, Albert Wendt, in his landmark paper 'Towards a New Oceania' (1976), wrote of his vision of the region and its first season of postcolonial cultural flowering. The first two paragraphs read:

I belong to Oceania—or, at least, I am rooted in a fertile part of it—and it nourishes my spirit, helps to define me, and feeds my imagination. A detached objective analysis I will leave to sociologists and all the other 'ologists' ... Objectivity is for such uncommitted gods. My commitment won't allow me to confine myself to such a narrow vision. So vast, so fabulously varied a scatter of islands, nations, cultures, mythologies and myths, so dazzling a creature, Oceania deserves more than an attempt at mundane fact; only the imagination in free flight can hope-if not to contain her-to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain.

I will not pretend that I know her in all her manifestations. No one ... ever did; no one does ... no one ever will because whenever we think we have captured her she has already assumed new guises—the love affair is endless, even her vital statistics ... will change endlessly. In the final instance, our countries, cultures, nations, planets are what we imagine them to be. One human being's reality is another's fiction. Perhaps we ourselves exist only in each other's dreams.

At the end of his rumination on the cultural revival in Oceania, partly through the words of the region's first generation of postcolonial writers and poets, Wendt concluded with this remark:

This artistic renaissance is enriching our cultures further, reinforcing our identities/self-respect/and pride, and taking us through a genuine decolonisation; it is also acting as a unifying force in our region. In their individual journeys into the Void, these artists, through their work, are explaining us to ourselves and creating a new Oceania (ibid.).

This is very true. And for a new Oceania to take hold it must have a solid dimension of commonality that we can perceive with our senses. Culture and nature are inseparable. The Oceania that I see is a creation of countless people in all walks of life. Artists must work with others, for creativity lies in all fields, and besides, we need each other.

These were the thoughts that went through my mind as I searched for a thematic concept on which to focus a sufficient number of programs to give the Oceania Centre a clear, distinctive and unifying identity. The theme for the centre and for us to pursue is the ocean, and 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 inspirations 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 revisions 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 that we have taken and those yet to be embarked on. We will show them what we have, and 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.

I have said elsewhere that there are no more suitable people on earth to be the custodians of the oceans than those for whom the sea is home. We seem to have forgotten that we are such a people. Our roots, our origins are embedded in the sea. All our ancestors, including those who came as recently as 60 years ago, were brought here by the sea. Some were driven here by war, famine and pestilence; some were brought by necessity, to toil for others; and some came seeking adventures and perhaps new homes. Some arrived in good health, others barely survived the traumas of passage. For whatever reasons, and through whatever experiences they endured, they came by sea to the sea, and we have been here since. If we listened attentively to stories of ocean passage to new lands, and of the voyages of yore, our minds would open up to much that is profound in our histories, to much of what we are and what we have in common.

Contemporary developments are taking us away from our sea anchors. Most of our modern economic activities are land based. We travel mostly by air, flying miles above the oceans, completing our journeys in hours instead of days and weeks and months. We rear and educate our young on things that have scant relevance to the sea. Yet we are told that the future of most of our countries lies there. Have we forgotten so much that we will not easily find our way back to the ocean?

As a region we are floundering because we have forgotten, or spurned, the study and contemplation of our pasts, even our recent histories, as irrelevant for the understanding and conduct of our contemporary affairs. We have thereby allowed others who are well equipped with the so-called objective knowledge of our historical development to continue reconstituting and reshaping our world and ourselves with impunity, and in accordance with their shifting interests at any given moment in history. We have tagged along with this for so long that we have kept our silence even though we have virtually been defined out of existence. We have floundered also because we have considered regionalism mainly from the points of view of individual national interests rather than the interest of a wider collectivity. And we have failed to build any clear and enduring

regional identity, partly because, so far, we have constructed edifices with disconnected traits from traditional cultures and passing events, not basing them on concrete foundations.

The regional identity proposed here has been constructed on a base of concrete reality. That the sea is as real as you and I, that it shapes the character of this planet, that it is a major source of our sustenance, that it is something that we all share in common wherever we are in Oceania, are all statements of fact. But above that level of everyday experience, the sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else, the sea is our endless saga, the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us.

References

- Earle, S. 1996. The Well of Life. *Time Magazine*, 28 October.
- Fry, G. 1991. The Politics of South Pacific Regional Cooperation. In R. Thakur (ed.), *The South Pacific: Problems, Issues, Prospects*. London: Macmillan, in association with the University of Otago. doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-12519-7_11
- Fry, G. 1996. Framing the Islands: Knowledge and Power in Changing Australian Images of 'The South Pacific'. *The Contemporary Pacific* 9:305–44.
- Fry, G. 1997. The South Pacific 'Experiment': Reflections on the Origins of Regional Identity. *Journal of Pacific History* 32(2):180–202. doi.org/10.1080/00223349708572837
- Hau'ofa, E. 1993. Our Sea of Islands. In E. Waddell, V. Naidu and E. Hau'ofa (eds), *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific. Reprinted in *The Contemporary Pacific* 6(1994):147–61.
- Wendt, A. 1976. Towards a New Oceania. *Mana Review* 1:49–60.

This text is taken from *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and its collaboration with The Australian National University*, edited by Stewart Firth and Vijay Naidu, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/UO.2019.16