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The Ocean in us

Epeli Hau'ofa

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

I have advanced the notion of a much enlarged world of Oceania that has emerged through the astounding mobility of Pacific peoples in the last fifty years (Hau'ofa 1993). 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 criss-cross 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 through our own efforts, and have kept vibrant, and independent of the Pacific island 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; and through much of the latter half of this century people have tried to instil a strong sense of belonging for the sake of sustained regional cooperation. So far these attempts have foundered on the reef of our diversity, 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 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 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 important developments in the global economy will be concentrated in huge regions that encircle us. As individual, tiny countries created by colonial powers and acting alone, we could indeed 'fall off the map' or disappear into the black hole of a gigantic Pan-Pacific doughnut. 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 of 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, 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 if we are to retain our sense of humanity and of community.

An identity that is grounded on something so vast as the sea is, 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 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 to be erased by a regional identity and 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 against

seemingly overwhelming forces, to regain their lost sovereignty. This regional identity is supplementary 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 from nearly twenty years of direct involvement with the University of the South Pacific (USP), an institution that caters for much of the tertiary education of the South Pacific islands region, and increasingly of countries north of the equator. Its size, its on-campus staff and student residential arrangements and its spread make the USP the premier hatchery for the regional identity. Nevertheless the sense of diversity there is much more palpable and tangible than that of a larger common identity. Not surprisingly students identify themselves more with their nationality, race and personal friendships across the cultural divide, than with a common Pacific Islander identity. Apart from primordial loyalties, students go to the university to obtain certificates for returning home to work for their respective countries. Ultimately they do not come to the USP in order to serve the region as such.

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 the 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 a new set of relationships along the rim of our ocean that excludes us totally. Had this been happening elsewhere, our exclusion would not have mattered much, however in this instance we are physically located at the centre of what is occurring. 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 stronger and genuinely independent regionalism than exists 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.

In the few instances when the region has 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 unity on threats to our common environment: the ocean. It should be noted that on these issues Australia and New Zealand often assumed the necessary leading role because of our common sharing of the ocean. It is on issues of this kind that 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 driftnetting, against plans to dispose of nuclear waste in the ocean, the incineration of chemical weapons on Johnston Island, and the 1995 resumption of nuclear tests on Mururoa, and most ominously, the spectre 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. 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, still 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 still continue; driftnetting has abated but not stopped, and the reefs of the Mururoa 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 present region-wide silence while the plutonium laden Pacific Teal is about to sail or is already sailing through our territorial waters. 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. To develop the ocean resources sustainably, regional unity is also required.

A Pacific islands regional identity means a Pacific Islander identity. But what or who is a Pacific Islander? The issue should not arise if we consider Oceania as comprising 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 must first be Ni Vanuatu, or Tuvaluan, or Samoan. For my part, 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. Under 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.

The Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture

In 1996, the University of the South Pacific finally acted on a decision made by its Council in 1992 to establish an arts and culture program. A centre for Pacific arts and culture was to start operation 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 that 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 that I had propounded a few years previously, but felt uneasy about it because I did not wish to appear to be riding a hobby horse. It is bad manners in many Oceanic societies to appear to push things for yourself, but it is a forgivable sin if someone else accidentally does 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 for the October 28 issue of *Time*.

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 per cent. And not so coincidentally 97 per cent of Earth's water is Ocean. (1996:52)

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, *WANSOLWARA*, a pidgin word which 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

Despite the sheer magnitude of the oceans, we are among a minute proportion of Earth's total human population which can truly be referred to as 'oceanic peoples'. 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 the interactions with the sea, and the more pronounced are its influences on the culture of the island. However one does 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 influence the systems of terrestrial activities are largely determined by the ocean. On the largest island of Oceania, Papua New Guinea, products of the sea, especially the much-valued shells, reached the most remote highlands societies, shaping their ceremonial and political systems. More importantly, inland people of our large islands are now citizens of Oceanic countries whose capitals and other urban centres are located on coastal areas, to where 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 sea-sick as soon as we set foot on a rocking boat. This means only that we are no longer sea travellers or fisherfolk, 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 into the Pacific, 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 the only non-oceanic influences being 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 the 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. It is for these reasons that 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 delineates us clearly from Asia and the pre-Columbian Americas and 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. However, there are many people on our islands who do not share these common traits as part of their heritage, and there is an increasing number of true urbanities who 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 those whose ancestral heritage is 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 potential is enormous, exciting—as it has always been. When our leaders and planners say that our future lies in the sea, they are thinking only in economic terms, about the development of marine and sea-bed resources. When people talk of the importance of the oceans for the continuity of life on Earth, they are making scientific statements. But for the people of Oceania, the sea defines us, what we are and have always been. As the great Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott, puts it, the sea is history. This realisation 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, 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 at the root of some of the most intractable problems in virtually all our communities. Until 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 near-shore areas 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, lost Tongan fishermen, who might well have been fishing in the Fijian waters, wash up in their frail vessels on the shores of Fiji. So far they have always 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 also extended the territorial instinct to where there was none before. Territoriality is probably the strongest spur for some of the most brutal acts of aggression and because of the resource potentials of the open sea and the ocean-bed, the water that has united subregions of Oceania in the past may become a major divisive factor in the future relationships between our countries. It is therefore essential that we ground any new regional identity in a belief in the common heritage of the sea.

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 does so on 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 is no more grandiose than the growing 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 awaking to things that are already happening around us.

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

In short, 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. In much the same way our ancestors wrote our histories on the landscape and the seascape; carved, stencilled 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.

Twenty years ago, Albert Wendt (1976) in his landmark paper,

‘Toward a New Oceania,’ wrote of his vision of the region and its first season of post-colonial cultural flowering.

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 (1976:49)

At the end of his rumination on the cultural revival in Oceania, partly through the words of the region’s first generation of post-colonial writers and poets, Wendt concluded with this remark,

[t]his 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 (1976:60).

This is very true. 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—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 of 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 to revise the purpose and the direction 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. 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 upon. We will show them what we have, and learn from them different kinds of music, dance, art, ceremonies, and other forms of cultural production. Together we may even 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 upon us, the damaging things that 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 their 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 sixty 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 listen attentively to stories of ocean passage to new lands, and of other 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 roots. 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 of 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 our selves 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 been virtually defined out of existence. We have floundered, also, because we have considered regionalism mainly from the point of view of individual national interests rather than those of a wider collectivity; and we have failed to build any clear and enduring regional identity because we have continued to construct edifices with disconnected traits from traditional cultures and passing events, without basing them on concrete foundations.

The regional identity proposed here has been constructed on a base of concrete reality. The sea is as real as you and I, it shapes the character of this planet, it is a major source of our sustenance, and it is something that we all share in common wherever we are in Oceania: these are all statements of fact. 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.

Notes

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