

# A NEW OCEANIA

## *Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*

*A USP 25th Anniversary Publication*

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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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*in association with*

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## PREFACE

EVER SINCE ITS ESTABLISHMENT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, the School of Social and Economic Development has been concerned with development problems that affect the island states of the South Pacific. Smallness and the specificities of being remote and insular have been considered as peculiar to most Pacific micro states.

When the possibility of autocentric endogenous national development for large underdeveloped and undeveloped countries was seen as being constrained by the presence of relatively industrialised states in the world, the small island as well as the land locked states (usually categorised together) were seen as having no hope. Even the more optimistic perspective that capitalist development taking place in post colonial territories required certain basic conditions (e.g. capital, capitalists, natural and human resources) seemed to by-pass Pacific island states.

Indeed, dependency-type ideas permeate the notion of MIRAB societies, whose authors feel that the reality of economic dependence should be coupled with greater political (colonial!) integration with metropolitan countries. In the opposite view, ideas about following the 'Singapore model' remain a chimera that only the most naive believe in and none but charlatan economists and politicians espouse.

Within the context of this development quandary, troubled by his apparent failure to give hope to his students, profoundly perturbed by the 'belittling' of island people and the psychological consequences of this, and cognisant of the expanding horizons of islanders as well as their creative resilience, Epeli Hau'ofa, from

the turmoil in the deep recesses of his Manu-like head, has conceived a vision for island people. Those of us in his immediate environs were engulfed by his *Our Sea of Islands* and felt that it should be more widely debated.

Epeli's paper was circulated to some forty colleagues in the University to generate discussion. Responses were elicited from right across the Laucala campus. It was agreed that the School should publish a volume incorporating his paper and commentaries on it in 1993, the University's 25th Anniversary Year. This decision was made because Hau'ofa's paper is a seminal one and therefore worthy of publication to commemorate this historic year. In many ways the volume is a synopsis of past and present debates on the position of small island states and Oceania in the development debate.

The timing of the publication of *Our Sea of Islands* and responses to it has meant that the deadline allowed resulted in commentaries that are of varying scope. Commentators were asked to provide 'gut reactions' of no more than a 1000 words. Those who were prompt and wrote earlier tended to be direct, brief and literary. Others spent more time cogitating on the paper and provided more scholarly analyses, complete with references and footnotes.

This volume is structured with Hau'ofa's paper at the beginning, followed by a sequence of papers under the headings of Perceptions, Identity, Needs, Power and Environs. The volume ends with a final piece by Hau'ofa himself appropriately entitled, *A Beginning*. It is hoped that the organisation of the papers makes the collection more readable.

In this 25th year of The University of the South Pacific's existence, the School of Social and Economic Development regards Epeli Hau'ofa's paper as a very significant contribution to the Development and Pacific Studies debate in the South Pacific region. Hau'ofa himself feels that *Our Sea of Islands* is the most important paper that he has written. We hope that it will stimulate thinking and debate, and help in reformulating perceptions of Oceania and her people in the Region and beyond.

— Vijay Naidu

## WHOSE SEA OF ISLANDS?

VIJAY NAIDU

*The sound of the conch shell  
Haunts me still.....*

.....  
*The Masters of our lands  
Have sold our souls  
To the new religion, money lenders  
Experts and the watchdogs of Vegas*

.....  
*Pray, give me now a fast canoe  
That I may join  
The fish of the ocean  
And together we will weep  
For the works of the night*

From *Konai Helu Thaman, Langakali, 1974.*

*That future lies in the hands of our  
own people, and not of those who  
would prescribe for us, get us forever  
dependent and indebted because  
they could see no way out*

E Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands*

EPELI HAU'OFA'S ESSAY IS DESIGNED TO CHALLENGE the dominant paradigm currently espoused by the ruling classes and their

advisers, the self-proclaimed development experts from international organisations. It is also meant to provoke those of us who may have been seduced into their way of thinking, to reaffirm our people's desire to be self-reliant and to live with dignity and self-respect by enabling them to cope effectively with, and even control, the powerful forces that are increasingly moulding cultural and physical environments throughout the world.

The dominant view of the Pacific island states is that they are small, resource-poor, remote, isolated and dependent.<sup>1</sup> Their development prospects are limited, necessitating perpetual external support and even wardship of '... the manipulators of the global economy and World Orders'. There has been a belittlement of Oceania and its people by the ruling classes and their international associates. In order to pursue aided and therefore dependent and indebted development, Oceania is presented in '... tiny, needy bits'. Hau'ofa warns that belittlement, when internalised and passed on to younger generations, could inculcate amongst the people, moral paralysis, apathy, fatalism and confinement to mental reservations. He could add a perpetual sense of inferiority and inadequacy.

In constructing an alternative view, Hau'ofa considers the creative and dynamic responses of the peasants and proletariats of the Pacific to the opportunities and options being opened up to them as the incorporation of their economies and societies into the world economy intensifies. This incorporation has had 'a liberating effect on the lives of ordinary people in Oceania, as it did in the Caribbean islands'.

Islanders are shaking off the artificial national boundaries, inherited from rapacious colonialists, that unnaturally confine them, and like their ancestors before them, they have enlarged their world by their physical and social mobility. The new systems of transportation and communication have facilitated this movement. They are now found in relatively large numbers in rim countries but their social networks remain intact in the islands. Hau'ofa distances himself from the MIRAB thesis which perceives a perpetual dependency of Eastern and Central Pacific people on migration, aid and remittances, arguing that these attributes are by-products of colonial and neocolonial constraints upon island people. In any case, remittances are derived from the sweat and hard work of

migrant islanders and are ultimately returned to the metropolitan countries for the payment of imports of goods and services. The latter are often value-added products and not simply the raw and semi-processed goods that islanders export.

Further, the considerable wealth of living and non-living marine resources, as well as the existence of significant reserves of mineral ores and forests on the larger islands, make for more optimistic assessment of the situation of Oceania. Islanders must conserve and protect these sources from unscrupulous exploitation. If there were greater appreciation of island peoples' creativity and capacity to meet the challenges that confront them, then not only would the belittlement of islanders wane, but more independent forms of development may proceed.

I agree with much of what Epeli has so eloquently stated in his paper. In responding to it, I would like to supplement some of his observations, as well as identify some of the central factors that affect our sovereignty and prospects for dignified livelihood.

Historically, Pacific islanders have adapted themselves to a range of physical environments and have led lives that were largely in accord with nature. Their societal organisation established an economic system that provisioned society as a corporate entity. Everyone who was physically able had access to the means of livelihood. In their socioeconomic organisation, there was no poverty-stricken or undernourished class of people. Unemployment was unknown. Leisure activities including a wealth of songs, dances, sports, weaving and carving took a significant proportion of their time.

The disarticulation of these age-old, self-sustaining systems began with mercantile capitalism which plundered Pacific islanders of such resources as sandalwood, beche-de-mer, whales, mother-of-pearl shells, phosphate, timber and, more recently, gold. Relative to their size, the Pacific islands have contributed significantly to the enrichment of merchants and bankers in Boston, Salem, Sydney, Melbourne and London. Their current peripheral status should be put into an historical context — although not as rich as the sugar and spice colonies of the Caribbean, they were certainly sources of primitive accumulation by metropolitan interests.

Michael Taylor has written about the extent to which island states in the region are aid-dependent.<sup>2</sup> He should acknowledge that Pacific island dependency has been fashioned by metropolitan countries and that aid is more often than not in the self-interest of the latter. Consider, for instance, the case of the former Trust Territories of Micronesia. The flourishing aid industry in the South Pacific benefits metropolitan-based consultants and experts more than it does island people. Australia and New Zealand have acted to confine islanders to their island homelands through policies of denying islanders entry, whilst receiving hundreds of thousands of migrants from distant Europe. Their policies highlight Epeli's poignant observation about the imposition of artificial constraints on island people. In any case islanders have long laboured in enterprises owned and operated by metropolitan capital. The profits generated by island labour were and still are being transmitted to Rim countries. The historically established regional economic network continues to subordinate island economies: while capital and technology have never been more mobile, labour is artificially contained, perpetuating aid-dependent societies.

Epeli perceives regionalism as an important principle of organisation for island countries to engage with powerful foreign forces. By combining their efforts and acting in unison, common objectives such as improving terms of trade and gaining access to markets in metropolitan countries can be achieved. Inter-island state cooperation can also bolster their capacity to protect their vast marine resources from would-be plunderers from the Rim countries. Unfortunately, emergent regional bureaucrats seem to be mouthing much the same remedies to island problems as the international experts. There is a category of well-educated islanders whose preoccupation is to keep pace with the latest international fad with respect to aid so that they can write up projects and be rewarded handsomely by way of employment and consultancy on UN rates.

There is in Epeli's thesis a danger that we must be aware of; that in less sophisticated hands it may become fodder for nationalistic appeals. He himself differentiates the upper classes from the workers and peasants. The former have allied themselves

with those who engage in the belittlement of islanders. It is important that we do not adopt a mentality of 'us' (as an undifferentiated category of island people) and 'them' — 'them' being those from Rim countries.

Although Epeli seeks a common purpose for islanders in giving them self-confidence and putting an end to their belittlement, he utilises conventional terms that artificially divide islanders. This division has also historically contributed to a derogatory attitude of eastern Pacific islanders (Polynesians) towards their western cousins (Melanesians). The threefold categorisation of islanders into Micronesian, Melanesian and Polynesian is most misleading. It fails to portray the fluidity of racial and cultural traits throughout the Pacific. "The range of physical types in most Oceanic communities is great," observed Alkire, "and it is fairly simple in Micronesia to find within the same village individuals whom anthropologists of 30 years ago would have labelled 'Mongoloid,' 'Negroid' and 'Europoid' or 'Caucasoid'".<sup>3</sup>

Another aspect of Epeli's paper that requires comment is his contention that the 'sea of islands' is not small. While it is true that artificial borders have made it difficult for islanders to take up the opportunities available in the global village, it is also true that their changed aspirations cannot be met in the small vulnerable economies of island societies. The vast marine and terrestrial resources are being exploited in ways that are detrimental to the future well-being of islanders and cannot sustain their rising expectations. Some Pacific states are threatened by rising sea levels as a consequence of the greenhouse effect.

Thousands of island people have migrated to metropolitan cities to find their fortunes — usually to eke out a living as part of an underclass. In one view the islands of the Pacific have become, like the rest of the Third World, a vast labour reserve for international capital.<sup>4</sup> The proletarianisation of islanders has led them to island capitals and to metropolitan cities such as Auckland, Melbourne, Honolulu, San Francisco, Vancouver and even London. It is admirable that like the rest of humanity island people have shown adaptability and resilience in responding to the challenges that they face. Some of them have acquired celebrity status as

sportsmen and sportswomen, others have become well-known artists and still others have become successful professionals and businessmen.

But the structural framework of island societies' insertion into the capitalist global system as subordinate and dependent entities must not be ignored. Nor should the transnationalisation of capital and the evolution of a transnational bourgeoisie together with a transnationalised bureaucracy be overlooked. If we are to contribute to the betterment of our people we should understand the nature of the interests that seek to exploit and undermine them. In identifying the peasantry and the proletariat as the oppressed masses who are creatively meeting the challenges that face them, Hau'ofa is correct; but we should not underestimate the forces that perpetuate their structural and individual subordination.

We must learn from the experiences of countries such as Chile (under Allende), Nicaragua, Cuba and Grenada that when people-centred modes of development are engendered, very powerful forces act to undermine them. As a result, successful models of self-reliant development for small island states are difficult to identify and even more difficult to achieve. Whether the group, communal and societal orientation of past generations can be emulated at a higher level remains an open question.

As we enter the twenty-first century, supposedly the Pacific Century, and with an era marked by the unchallenged hegemony of the United States of America, it is worth recollecting the prophetic assertion of an American Senator who proclaimed in his maiden speech:

*The Pacific is our ocean ... And the Pacific is the ocean of the commerce of the future. Most future wars will be conflicts for commerce. The power that rules the Pacific, therefore, is the power that rules the world. And ... that power is and will forever be the American republic.*<sup>5</sup>

This state of affairs has indeed come to pass. Hau'ofa's visionary essay is a timely cri de coeur to redirect our minds

towards assisting our people in their struggle against the powerful transnational and global forces that are running amok.



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> P Selwyn, *Small, poor and remote: Islands at a Geographical Disadvantage*, Discussion paper, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> M Taylor, *Fiji-Future Imperfect*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> W H Alkire, *An Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Micronesia*, Cummings Publishing Co., Menlo Park, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> W Sutherland, *The state and capitalist development in Fiji*, PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1984

<sup>5</sup> Senator A G Beveridge, speaking in 1900. Quoted in L E Freedman, *The United States Enters the Pacific*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1969