THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST

by

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the present century, scholars, colonial administrators, missionaries and the like were genuinely concerned that Pacific islanders quite possibly faced physical extinction. The voluntary and not–so–voluntary recruitment of Melanesians to work on distant overseas plantations, the kidnapping of Polynesians to work in mines in South America, greater destructiveness of warfare due to the introduction of firearms, and especially the ravages of introduced diseases, were some of the factors behind the alarming decline of island populations in the Pacific. But with improved health care, better control of labour recruitment, the proscription of internecine warfare, and so forth, the situation was gradually reversed.

There is a parallel between the situation that I have just sketchily outlined and the preoccupation, toward the end of our century, with the continuity or survival of the traditional cultures of the same groups of

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The title of this address has been taken from that of the journal Review (USP), No. 10, 1983, by Simione Durutalo.

people. With a few exceptions (such as Niue and the Cook Islands because of emigration) there is no longer any concern about population decline. What seems problematic for many people, islanders and interested outsiders alike, is the survival of the so-called traditional cultures. Programmes have been mounted in the islands, funded largely by international organisations, for the preservation of traditional cultures. I must confess that I am baffled by this concern with culture preservation. If we take it that 'culture' means the totality of the way of life of a given population at any given time, and that this way of life is subject to alteration as its environment changes, then I do not see why the cultures of ex-colonial peoples should be singled out for preservation, or for that matter, for much concern about their survival. Those industrial countries that have dominated the Pacific islands over the last two hundred years have not displayed much concern with the preservation of their own cultures as such; in fact their position of dominance has been achieved and maintained through constant ruthless changes in their traditions; the whole idea of growth and development means continuous change of technologies and value systems. In view of this, one cannot help but suspect that underlying the seemingly humane concern with the preservation of the traditions of the islands of the South Pacific, and indeed of the Third World in general, are some rather insidious motives including keeping sections of communities contented with their relative poverty and oppression.

But I'm not here to grind an axe, or to make accusations about neo-colonial exploitation. I'm in a good mood, so let us as scholars do what we are good at, and that is making mountains out of mole-hills, constructing realities out of illusions, endowing triviality with significance, and talking

about traditional value systems in the year 2000 not knowing exactly what we mean by the term 'traditions' in the context of the contemporary South Pacific, let alone their potential for survival into the twenty first century.

If by 'traditional' we mean purely indigenous, as many people have taken the term to imply, then there are very few things in the Pacific islands today that could be labelled 'traditional.' Of those few things that could be so designated, the most important are the native languages spoken by islanders today; but even here, the languages have been greatly affected by non-Oceanic influences, especially in the area of vocabulary. In most other areas of culture, aspects loosely termed 'traditional' are in fact things that have either been borrowed holus-bolus or have been mixed to varying degrees with introduced elements from Europe, America and Asia. The present aristocratic systems of Fiji and Tonga are in fact the creations of the 19th century - mixtures of indigenous and non-indigenous elements. Yet these systems are considered 'traditional' by Fijians and Tongans alike. So, for the purposes of this paper, I take 'traditions' and 'traditional values' to mean practices and beliefs held by a given population over a period of time, say, one hundred or so years. I also consider as traditional, practices and values deliberately created and cultivated recently by island leaders for their fellow men and their descendants to follow. Here then, we have traditions that are old and those that have been relatively recently established but increasingly accepted and having potential for long term growth and survival, although that potential can only be roughly estimated.

153

The other thing about traditions, and this seems to be the important issue, is the nature, or more precisely the origins, of the various elements that constitute a particular tradition. The question here is the identification of the origins of the elements of a particular tradition, which elements are indigenous and which non-indigenous. The indigenous elements are those whose origins can be traced back to the values and practices that existed before the earliest contact with alien cultures, in particular those originating outside Oceania. The non-indigenous elements are those aspects of a tradition that were introduced from cultures outside the Pacific islands region. This distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous elements of contemporary traditions is very important because generally, when people think of the survival of the traditional value systems, they, in fact, mean the continuity or persistence of indigenous (or aboriginal) elements of traditions rather than the traditions as such, for as mentioned above, there are very few important traditions in the islands today that are purely indigenous.

Finally, the degree of indigenousness of particular traditions held by a people varies according to the extant interests of different classes and other divisions within the society. In the internal politics in Tonga, Western Samoa, and Fiji, for example, the leaders often emphasise the indigenous aristocratic elements of their leadership tradition because it is in their interests that this should be so. Those who tend to stress the non-indigenousness aspects of leadership are more likely to be members of classes other than the chiefly ones. Furthermore, the rural dwellers, who are generally poor, are more likely to practise indigenous aspects of traditions than the culturally alienated, urban-based elites whose adherence to things indigenous is often more professed and idealistic than practical.

What I refer to as indigenous values, as distinct from traditional values, have their roots in the past of Pacific island societies before the invasion of European values. Indigenous values are rooted firstly in subsistence economies with non-metal, non-mechanical tools, and with generally highly perishable products; secondly, in transportation modes based on foot and canoes; thirdly, in the scale of society that was generally small and intimate; and fourthly, in exclusively oral methods of communication. Since the economic, transportation and communication systems and the population structures of the Pacific have changed and are changing, the value systems based on them must necessarily have changed too. But it is often the case that changes in value systems lag far behind changes in other areas of culture and society. It is the existence of these persistent values evocative of the past that causes concern about the survival of traditional cultures. The persistence of such values is due to the fact that changes in the economic, transportation and communication systems are not yet total: subsistence or semi-subsistence economic activities exist side by side with modern commercial activities; the improvement in transportation systems is limited to certain areas of societies; and illiteracy and semi-literacy are still with us. Moreover, the persistence of outmoded values can be politically useful to powerful interests in modern island societies, and these values seem also to provide the essential elements for the formation of distinctive local, national, regional and ethnic identities.

But what were the values that sprang from and were appropriate to the conditions outlined above? I am conscious here of the danger of over-generalisation, but I am compelled to resort to this tactic because it is

only through a degree of over-generalisation that we are able to transcend the relativity and the great complexity of Pacific island cultures, of which there are probably more than a thousand. Keeping this in mind, I venture to suggest that the most important indigenous values held by Pacific islanders were as follows.

1. The primacy of group interests over those of individuals as such. Unlike people in Western societies, Pacific islanders stressed the importance of groups rather than that of the individual. The main responsibilities of an individual were not for himself or herself but for various groups to which he or she belonged. Individualism as we know it was considered selfish and anti-social behaviour. This emphasis on the group was an essential feature of subsistence existence based on primitive tools, and of uncentralised political systems that were prone to inter-group violence in the settlement of disputes. Economic and political interdependence necessitated the emphasis on group solidarity at the expense of individual interests. And Pacific islanders grouped themselves mostly according to the principles of kinship ties, and secondarily along the principle of locality.

2. Sharing of goods and services. The ideas of sharing and of mutual assistance were highly valued. Most inter-personal and inter-group relationships were created and sustained through constant acts of giving and taking and sharing. These values were based on the necessity for group efforts in the performance of heavy tasks using primitive tools, and for the consumption of highly perishable products such as root-crops, fruits and meats, given the lack of methods for effective food preservation.

3. A sense for place and for social continuity. The sense for place is the attachment to the physical locality in which one ancestors lived and died and in which one lives. The sense for social continuity is the importance people place on their continuity with their ancestors and with their future generations. The sense for place and continuity developed out of limited physical mobility in the past because of elementary forms of transportation, rugged terrain and watery isolation between islands or groups of islands. Personal and social identities were rooted in kinship ties and in ancestral territories.

4. Intimacy in interpersonal relationships. This was very important even in the relationships between people at different levels of society. Personalised relationships, especially those based on ties of kinship and locality, were the order of the day. (Impersonal relationships are still alien to most Pacific islanders.) This was a function of the smallness in the scale of island societies. Within each socio-political unit everyone knew everyone else, and if pressed people could actually trace kinship connections with each other. The relationships between leaders and the led were usually phrased in terms of kinship relationships. The smallness in the scale of societies resulted from elementary technologies of warfare, transportation and production, as well as from geographical and demographic factors.

5. The recording and communication of ideas, of customary laws, genealogies, historical events, and rights and obligations of all kinds were very flexible, creative and highly politicised. Truth was, and still is to a large extent, negotiable. The idea that Pacific islanders were slaves to the dictates of their cultures is a myth; islanders were in fact masters of their

cultures — they manipulated them at will. This was made easier because of the absence of written records. Pacific cultures were based on oral traditions; and as we all know, when everything is transmitted orally and in no other form, anything can happen provided that the transmitters have the ability and power to make things happen. So every group had its expert orators, spokesmen and other liars to tell, and if possible force through, their versions of truth.

6. Self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Most people provided through their own efforts for all their needs. Only a very small number of groups depended on trade, which was conducted as barter between long established partners, and hardly ever between total strangers. Exchange was largely in terms of luxury goods, or more correctly, items of ceremonial value — feathers, shells, mats, tapa and so forth. Self-sufficiency and self-reliance was a function of integrated subsistence existence.

7. Care for members of society — especially for the elderly and the otherwise disabled. There were no social welfare services as we know today so people had to take care of their own. And because of the close kinship bonding that sprang from lifelong togetherness, of reverence for ancestors whose spirits had to be appeased as they were considered active in the world of the living, and of future security for themselves, people never entertained the idea of abandoning their elderly and their disabled relatives. Caring was ultimately a responsibility to one's corporate kin-group, which always comprised the dead, the living and the future generations. There were very

few exceptions, all found in resource poor environments, but the general pattern was a described above. This sense of caring for one's relatives is still strong throughout the island societies.

8. The arts and entertainments were integrated into community life. There was no such thing as art for art's sake. The sense for beauty was always imprinted on objects of utility: tools, implements, houseware, personal effects, canoes, buildings and sacred images. Poetry, music and dance were mostly integrated into, and usually performed as part of, some religious or community festivals or ceremonies. And there was a great deal of entertainment and fun in most serious group activities: in gardening, fish drives, construction of private and public buildings, and in religious ceremonies, even when these were connected with mortuary rites. The easy enjoyment of life and the sense of fun that people associate with islanders is not just a myth; it is a reality. Perhaps one reason why many islanders do not appear willing to give sustained effort to the so-called development activities is that such activities are not only foreign, they are also so deadly serious and devoid of any sense of enjoyment and fun. The Protestant work ethic is a prescription for a life of joyless toil – and it has no place in the islanders' view of the good life.

The conditions under which these indigenous values developed have changed over the last two hundred years. I shall not enter into a discussion of these changes in the economic, transportation and communication systems and demographic structure because we are very familiar with them. Suffice it to say that changes in technology and in population must in the long run be accompanied by changes in value systems. As far as I am concerned it is

impossible to maintain values, however laudable they may be, if their material bases have been altered dramatically. Given the changes that have occurred in the environment, our problem is to pinpoint the directions of change in indigenous values. The rest of the present paper deals with these trends.

1. We examine first the value related to the primacy of group interests over those individuals as such. There is much talk by island leaders about islanders leading lives that emphasise the community rather than the individual. Fr. Walter Lini's concept of Melanesian Socialism is based on this value. The fact is that the inexorable shift from subsistence to a capitalist mode of production belies the professed value because capitalism, at least in its Pacific manifestation, emphasises the individual profit motive and accumulation. The direction of change is unmistakably from group orientation to greater individualism; and national financial institutions, especially the development banks, are supporting this movement. We can see this very clearly in the changes occurring in the systems of land rights. Indigenous land tenure systems vested the major rights to land in social groups such as extended families, clans and so forth. But the mode of development to which island nations have committed themselves prescribes the increasing individualisation of land rights. Tonga was the first Pacific island nation so to change its land tenure, and presently there is a move in Tonga to introduce a freehold system for the entire country. Fiji leads the rest in the individualisation of land holding; and development banks throughout the island South Pacific demand as collateral for loans for agricultural and other land related development, individual leases on tracts

160

of land held by kinship groups. There are other factors for this trend toward individualism at the expense of the indigenous value of group solidarity, but the example given above is sufficient to illustrate the point.

I consider also as a trend toward individualism and the greater atomisation of society the emerging decline in the significance of extended family systems and the rise of the nuclear family as the basic social unit. This is also a consequence of the shift from purely subsistence toward commercial production, as well as demographic changes, the influence of Christian teachings, urbanisation and modern Western-type education. There is also a trend toward family life with absentee fathers, that is toward matrifocal family units, because of the increasing labour mobility not only from rural to urban areas, but also from one country to another. This is especially true of Polynesia because of the relative ease with which Polynesians can emigrate to New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii and West Coast USA.

Individualism is increasingly becoming the life-style of the urban-based island elites that often advocate group solidarity for the rural masses. But given the opportunity within the capitalist mode of development, rural dwellers, if they really want to overcome their relative poverty, will have to strive toward individualism, despite efforts by their leaders to get them organised into co-operative groupings of various kinds.

2. Sharing of goods and services. This was relatively easy in the past when most people in a society performed roughly the same tasks and produced virtually identical goods. But changes in economic activities have meant, among other things, that people are performing a much greater variety of tasks than before, and producing a much wider range of goods. Goods and services

161

therefore vary greatly in value, making it increasingly difficult for people to share things fairly; this affects adversely people's willingness to share.

As mentioned above, because of the high perishability of goods produced in the subsistence economies of the islands, people had to give their surpluses to their relatives and friends if things were not to be wasted. But today, because money is not so perishable and can be stored at home or in banks, there is a mounting inclination for people to keep their money for themselves rather than to give it away.

The indigenous values of sharing and meeting one's social obligations have also come under intensifying attack by development officials and agencies who consider these values to be inimical to progress.

Under conditions outlined above it appears that Pacific islanders who have always stressed the virtue of generosity, are heading toward being increasingly mean and accumulative – values that are appropriate to modern modes of development.

3. The tremendous increase in physical mobility brought about by changing modes of production, the introduction of efficient systems of transportation, the creation of larger territorial units to which people belong, and so forth, have wrought changes in islanders' sense for place and social continuity. Although people still identity themselves with the localities of their origins, they are also required to identify with several larger units – districts, provinces and the nations themselves. This is a particularly traumatic experience in western Melanesia because of the size and cultural complexity of, as well as the recency of their being organised into, national entities. But such identifications vary in accordance with the individual's

actual mobility and the territorial extent of his or her interests. Those who live mostly in villages still maintain the indigenous sense for place. Those who occupy positions in national institutions or in large-scale enterprises identify themselves more easily with the larger territorial units. Among the elites, there is also growing transnational identification with regional units, and with international groups with which they have professional or business connections. The trend seems to be that the more sedentary sections of societies, which are generally poor and rural dwelling, maintain very confined social worlds, while the more mobile sections have worlds that are far larger than their actual places of ancestral origins. The sense for continuity with the ancestors and therefore with the past is strongest among the poor and weakest among the more mobile elite groups. Ancestors and ancestral spirits do not have significant influences over their lives. They are learning to live without them. This alienation from ancestors is part and parcel of the broader alienation from the past, and therefore, from the indigenous elements of traditions. The greatest danger for the survival of the indigenous elements of traditions is posed today not so much by outsiders as by the educated, relatively wealthy, urban-based local elites. They are the ones who are locally instrumental in deciding the directions of change for their countries.

Paradoxically, it is also from the ranks of the alienated elites that conscious efforts for culture preservation and for cultural revival have emerged. The sensitive and creative minded people who live outside or on the margins of traditions are the most vocal in their efforts to preserve what little indigenous elements of traditions they still retain, or to review other

elements. This is fine so long as preservation or revival does not cost them their modern life styles. They are, therefore, highly selective in what they wish to retain or to retrieve. This underlies the belief that people can consciously combine the best from the past and the present. It never works out that way, for when it comes down to actual choices, the best of the past is always sacrificed even for the worst of the present.

4. Intimacy in personal relationships. The enlargement of the scale of society from largely village or small island communities into national units, the rapid population growth rates, and the increasing use of money as a medium in the relationships between people, are at certain levels transforming the nature of interpersonal relationships from intimately personal into remote, impersonal and contractual relationships. This trend in changing values is distinctly discernible so that by about the turn of the century intimate personal relationships, which pervaded entire societies of the past and still are relatively pervasive today, will be more restricted and increasingly replaced at strategic levels by impersonal, contractual relationships which are more appropriate to mass societies.

5. The flexibility with which social relationships were conducted, with which information of all kinds was gathered, interpreted and transmitted, and with which truth was negotiated, is rapidly giving way to rigidity because of the codification of rules of behaviour, documentary recording of events, precisely written contracts and other forms of agreements. The informality which characterises much of the interpersonal relationships in the islands is giving way to formal and rigidly structured relationships. Spontaneity is losing ground to calculation, the ultimate expression of which is canned laughter on radio programmes of today.

6. The progressive movement away from subsistence existence toward commercialism and the progressive adoption of expensive life-styles on the part of the ruling elites have eroded the indigenous values of self-reliance. Perhaps the most unfortunate effect of modern forms of development on islanders is the transformation of hitherto economically independent people into wards of rich countries. The idea that the present kinds of socio-economic development will restore self-reliance is a falsehood. All of Micronesia and Polynesia are heading toward complete neo-colonial dependence on their former colonial masters. French Polynesia, Niue, American Samoa, Tokelau and the former Trust Territories of Micronesia are retired, pensioned societies. Western Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati are in semi-retirement, living partly on the dole. To a greater or lesser degree all other South Pacific island countries are dependent in one form or another on foreign aid. Perhaps the only self-reliant groups of people in the island world are the few small communities in Melanesia who prefer to live in their remote and almost inaccessible localities, for example, the mountain Kwaio of Malaita, the pagans of South Pentecost and some similar groups in Papua New Guinea. These people have deliberately made the decision to keep their distance from alien influences including Christianity. Their few involvements with modern society are very restricted and highly selective.

7. Caring for members of society. The indigenous method of social security in which the elderly and the disabled are taken care of by their families is still strong and likely to remain so for a long time to come. This is just as well because so far the island states are incapable of providing their entire populations with alternative forms of social security

165

services. Nevertheless, Fiji, the most urbanised and highly developed of the island countries, already has a number of old people's homes, orphanages, and mental institutions. And beggars have started to appear on the streets of island capitals. With rapid population growth and increasing poverty in the islands, the care for the elderly, the disabled and the destitute will become a problem in the region. But this appears to be a long term prospect.

8. The demise of indigenous religions and their attendant rituals and ceremonies, the replacement of wood and bone tools and implements by imported factory products, and the passing away of the canoe and indigenous building designs, have meant the disappearance of many of the art forms of the islands, some of which have been revived in modified forms in recent years for commercial purposes, especially for sale to tourists. Indigenous forms of entertainment, once performed in communities for people's enjoyment, are increasingly deployed for commercial purposes - in connection with tourism or with fund-raising for community projects. Where once these entertainments were performed by everyone in the community who wished to participate, today we have an increasing number of professional entertainers and professional dance groups who perform at hotels and even take their shows abroad. Commercialism and professionalism go hand in hand, at the expense of community participation and amatuerism.

On the other hand, the rich heritage from the past - of carving, designs, music, poetry and mythology - is a source of inspiration for the rising number of creative artists in the islands. Modern sculptors, painters, musicians, poets and writers are tapping this wealth for their own creations. Melanesia tends to produce excellent carvers, sculptors and artists, whilst from

Polynesia come some really good poets and writers. These artists work in modern media to produce art works that are distinctively modern Oceanic in character — they are producing new images and new voices for the new Pacific Islands.

The indigenous elements of Pacific island cultures have also been deployed for other purposes. In the multi-cultural situations of Melanesian countries, national leaders appeal to common cultural elements that their people share in their efforts to forge real unity for their countries, and to create new and distinctive national identities. In Papua New Guinea Bernard Narokobi propounded the Melanesian Way in order to provide the then new nation with a philosophy for unity. In Vanuatu, Father Walter Lini, who used the appeal of Kastom to unite the New Hebrideans in their fight for independence, now propounds the philosophy of Melanesian Socialism for his country. Apart from these national political usages of indigenous elements of culture, the idea of a Melanesian Alliance based on broad similarities in the indigenous elements of the cultures of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu is in the air. In reference to the Melanesian Alliance, Father Walter Lini, in the September (1984) issue of Islands Business, had this to say.

> "What seems to be the position, as it appears in the media, is the creation of a Melanesian bloc. That there is going to be a Melanesian bloc and a Polynesian bloc. In fact, our view of the Melanesian bloc is in trying to encourage Melanesian traditions, and to try to see them more clearly. We are not talking about a political alliance. It is a misconception. We are simply talking about Melanesian ways, customs and values. It is very important to educate the young people to be able to know them again."

167

A rather stunted cousin of the Melanesian Way is the Pacific Way, which represents half-hearted attempts by some rather unconvinced politicians and regional academics to provide a form of idealogy and identity for regional unity among Polynesians, Melanesians and Micronesians. The Pacific Way comprises cultural elements, both indigenous and non-indigenous believed to be commonly shared by islanders. The Pacific Way has not yet developed into a real ideology – and is unlikely to become anything other than a convenient label for things that the mobile island elite groups share – especially their privileges. Part of the problem is that the Pacific Way as an idea is confined to the regional elites; there has been no attempt to have it rooted in island societies at large. It is probably not possible to popularise the idea beyond a small group of the privileged and the regionally mobile.

There is also a rising Polynesian consciousness. Despite great distances and centuries of isolation, the various peoples of Polynesia have maintained close cultural similarities that are rooted in a parental culture of some two thousand years ago. They share similar myths, ancient religions, languages, and physical appearances. The population mobility of recent years has brought many Polynesian peoples together in places like Auckland, Wellington, Sydney, Honolulu and other cities on mainland USA. There are of course mutual suspicion and inter-group hostilities, but there is also an increasing mixing of these peoples of the same ethnic stock.

Polynesian writers, poets, artists and scholars are now using images from each other's traditions in their own creations. Te Rangi Hiroa was probably the first pan-Polynesian man whose works on Polynesian cultures remain a milestone in Polynesian scholarship. I myself have only recently established

contacts with Polynesian scholars, writers, poets and artists here in Hawaii, and with the Maori of New Zealand as well as with those of Fiji, Samoa and Cook Islands. It is a very exciting experience – to meet people who were totally strangers but who, upon the first meeting, realise instantly a kind of affinity – a kinship of spirit – the roots of which go far, far back into mythological times.

What I'm saying here is that although the past two hundred years have done much to destroy or change indigenous cultures, the experiences of the late twentieth century have brought about an awareness of broad cultural similarities among the peoples of the Pacific islands. The Melanesian consciousness is rising, and so is that of Polynesians. It is perhaps the old gods themselves, Maui, Tangaroa, Kane and others, who have drawn Polynesians from their far flung islands to flock to Aotearoa and Hawai'i in order to help keep their ancient imprints alive. An increasing number of those who have not emigrated are establishing links that will help to keep the old spirit of Polynesians alive, well into the twenty first century.