

OUR SEA OF ISLANDS by Epeli Hau'ofa

from *A New Oceania: Rediscovering our Sea of Islands*

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Extracts:

The idea that the countries of Polynesia (for geographic and cultural reasons I include Fiji) and Micronesia are too small, too poor and too isolated to develop any meaningful degree of autonomy, is an economic and geographic deterministic view of a very narrow kind, that overlooks culture, history, and the contemporary process of what may be called 'world enlargement' carried out by tens of thousands of ordinary Pacific Islanders right across the ocean from east to west and north to south, under the very noses of academic and consultancy experts, regional and international development agencies, bureaucratic planners and their advisers, and customs and immigration officials, making nonsense of all national and economic boundaries, borders that have been defined only recently, crisscrossing an ocean that had been boundless for ages before Captain Cook's apotheosis...

Do people in most of Oceania live in tiny confined spaces? The answer is 'yes' if one believes in what certain social scientists are saying. But the idea of smallness is relative ... [I]f we look at the myths, legends and oral traditions, and the cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it will become evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions... Islanders today still relish exaggerating things out of all proportions. Smallness is a state of mind.

There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean ... The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships... It was continental men, Europeans and Americans, who drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that, for the first time, confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces. These are the boundaries that today define the island states and territories of the Pacific. I have just used the term 'ocean peoples' because our ancestors, who had lived in the Pacific for over 2000 years, viewed their world as a 'sea of islands', rather than 'islands in a far sea'...

The differences between the two perspectives is reflected in the two terms used for our region: Pacific Islands and Oceania. The first term 'Pacific Islands', is the prevailing one used everywhere; it connotes small areas of land surfaces sitting atop submerged reefs or seamounts. Hardly any anglophone economist, consultancy expert, government planner or development banker in the region uses the term 'Oceania', perhaps because it sounds grand and somewhat romantic, and may connote something so vast that it would compel them to a drastic review of their perspectives and policies. The French and other Europeans use the term 'Oceania' to an extent that English speakers ... have not...

'Oceania' connotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised in this environment were at home with the sea. They played in it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked in it, they fought on it. They developed great skills for navigating their waters, and the spirit to traverse even the few large gaps that separated their island groups.

Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers. From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for the greater flow of wealth. They travelled to visit relatives in a wide variety of natural and cultural surroundings, to quench their thirst for adventure, and even to fight and dominate.

Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Rotuma, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Futuna and Uvea formed a large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly. From this community people ventured to the north and west, into Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia, which formed an outer arc of less intensive exchange. Evidence of this is provided by existing settlements within Melanesia of descendants of these seafarers. (And it would have to be blind landlubbers who would say that settlements like these, as well as those in New Zealand and Hawai'i were made through accidental voyages by people who got blown off course presumably while they were out fishing with their wives, children, pigs and dogs, and food-plant seedlings, during a hurricane.) Cook Islands and French Polynesia formed a community similar to that of their cousins to the west; hardy spirits from this community ventured southwards and founded settlements in Aotearoa, while others went in the opposite direction to discover and inhabit the islands of Hawai'i.

Evidence of the conglomerations of islands with their economies and cultures is readily available in the oral traditions of the islands concerned, and in blood ties that are retained today. The highest chiefs of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, for example, still maintain kin connections that were forged centuries before

Europeans entered the Pacific, in the days when boundaries were not imaginary lines in the ocean, but rather points of entry that were constantly negotiated and even contested. The sea was open to anyone who could navigate his way through...

Nineteenth century imperialism erected boundaries that led to the contraction of Oceania, transforming a once boundless world into the Pacific islands states and territories that we know today. People were confined to their tiny spaces, isolated from each other. No longer could they travel freely to do what they had done for centuries. They were cut off from their relatives abroad, from their far-flung sources of wealth and cultural enrichment. This is the historical basis of the view that our countries are small, poor and isolated. It is true only in so far as people are still fenced in and quarantined.

This assumption, however, is no longer tenable as far as the countries of central and western Polynesia are concerned... The rapid expansion of the world economy since the post-World War II years may indeed have intensified Third World dependency ... , but it also had a liberating effect on the lives of ordinary people in Oceania, ... The new economic reality made nonsense of artificial boundaries, enabling people to shake off their confinement and they have since moved, by the tens of thousands, doing what their ancestors had done before them: enlarging their world as they go, but on a scale not possible before. Everywhere they go, to Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, mainland USA, Canada and even Europe, they strike roots in new resource areas, securing employment and overseas family property, expanding kinship networks through which they circulate themselves, their relatives, their material goods, and their stories all across their ocean, and the ocean is theirs because it has always been their home. Social scientists may write of Oceania as a Spanish Lake, a British Lake, an American Lake, and even a Japanese Lake. But we all know that only those who make the ocean their home and love it, can really claim it theirs. Conquerors come, conquerors go, the ocean remains, mother only to her children. This mother has a big heart; she adopts anyone who loves her.

The resources of Samoans, Cook Islanders, Niueans, Tokelauans, Tuvaluans, I-Kiribatis, Fijians, Indo-Fijians and Tongans, are no longer confined to their national boundaries; they are located wherever these people are living permanently or otherwise. This is as it was before the age of Western imperialism. One can see this any day at seaports and airports throughout the central Pacific where consignments of goods from homes-abroad are unloaded, as those of the homelands are loaded.... Although this flow of goods is generally not included in official statistics, yet so much of the welfare of ordinary people of Oceania depends on an informal movement along ancient routes drawn in bloodlines invisible to the enforcers of the laws of confinement and regulated mobility.

It should be clear now that the world of Oceania is neither tiny nor deficient in resources. It was so only as a condition of colonial confinement that lasted less than a hundred of a history of thousands of years. Human nature demands space for free movement, and the larger the space the better it is for people. Islanders have broken out of their confinement, are moving around and away from their homelands, not so much because their countries are poor, but because they had been unnaturally confined and severed from much of their traditional sources of wealth, and because it is in their blood to be mobile. They are once again enlarging their world, establishing new resource bases and expanded networks for circulation. Alliances are already being forged by an increasing number of islanders with the *tangata whenua* of Aotearoa and will inevitably be forged with the native Hawaiians. It is not inconceivable that if Polynesians ever get together, their two largest homelands will be reclaimed in one form or another. They have already made their presence felt in these homelands, and have stamped indelible imprints on the cultural landscapes.

We cannot see the processes outlined above clearly if we confine our attention to things within national boundaries, and to the events at the upper levels of political economies and regional and international diplomacy. Only when we focus our attention also on what ordinary people are actually doing rather than on what they should be doing, can we see the broader picture of reality.

The world of Oceania may no longer include the heavens and the underworld; but it certainly encompasses the great cities of Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada. And it is within this expanded world that the extent of the people's resources must be measured...

... Islanders in their homelands are not the parasites on their relatives abroad that misinterpreters of 'remittance' would have us believe. Economists do not take account of the social centrality of the ancient practice of reciprocity, the core of all Oceanic cultures. They overlook the fact that for everything homelands relatives receive they reciprocate with goods they themselves produce, and they maintain ancestral roots and lands for everyone, homes with warmed hearths for travellers to return to at the end of the day, or to re-strengthen their bonds, their souls and their identities before they move on again. This is not dependence but interdependence, which is purportedly the essence of the global system. To say that it is something else and less is not only erroneous, it denies people their dignity...

The importance of our ocean for the stability of the global environment, for meeting a significant proportion of the world's protein requirements, ... global reserves of mineral resources, has been increasingly recognised, and puts paid to the notion that Oceania is the hole in the doughnut... There are no more suitable

people on earth to be guardians of the world's largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations...

The perpetrators of the smallness view of Oceania have pointed out quite correctly the need for each island state or territory to enter into appropriate forms of specialised production for the world market, to improve their management and marketing techniques and so forth. But they have so focussed on bounded national economies at the macro-level that they have overlooked or understated the significance of the other processes that I have just outlined, and have thereby swept aside the whole universe of Oceanic mores, and just about all our potentials for autonomy. The explanation seems clear: one way or another, they or nearly all of them are involved directly or indirectly in the fields of aided development and Pacific Rim geopolitics, for the purposes of which it is necessary to portray our huge world in tiny, needy bits. To acknowledge the larger reality would be to undermine the prevailing view, and to frustrate certain agendas and goals of powerful interests. They are therefore participants, as I was, in the belittlement of Oceania, and in the perpetuation of the neo-colonial relationships of dependency that have been and are being played out in the rarified circles of national politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats and assorted experts and academics, whilst far beneath them there exists that other order, of ordinary people who are busily and independently redefining their world in accordance with their perceptions of their own interests, and of where the future lies for their children and their children's children...

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.