

Dialogue

An Interview with Patricia Grace

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Conspiracy, Class, and Culture in Oceania: A View from the Cook Islands

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Oceanicism, the South Pacific version of orientalism, has been, like its Northern Hemisphere equivalent, a homogenizing project of power and discourse that has created racialized identities, essentialized mentalities, and cultural typologies. While popular publications such as *Pacific Islands Monthly* and *Islands Business* perpetuate and naturalize a colonially observed and structured territory, academic journals—*The Contemporary Pacific*, *The Journal of Pacific History*, and *Pacific Studies*—confer on it scholarly legitimacy. This is not to suggest that Oceania is, in truth, an unnatural or academically illegitimate creation; rather, it is to emphasize that differences between Oceanic societies may be as profound as those between Oceania and other imagined regional communities. In recent academic writing, two of the most powerful homogenizing visions of Oceania have been those of an insider, Epli Hau‘ofa. In 1987, Hau‘ofa imagined his region as culturally integrated at the elite level and divided into traditional “subcultures” further down. In 1994, he saw Oceania as integrated lower down, at the proletarian and peasant level, while elites continue to think small and perpetuate colonial and neocolonial divisions. In this invitation to dialogue I offer a critique of Hau‘ofa’s two visions in order to develop an argument about class and culture in the Cook Islands and, by extension, the wider South Pacific. In particular, I question the theoretical and political value of Hau‘ofa’s elite analysis and argue that it misrepresents the agency, cultural distinctiveness, and cultural nationalism of a Cook Islands middle class. While I do not extend my argument to French Polynesia, Hawai‘i, or New Caledonia, the inappropriateness of Hau‘ofa’s perspective for an understanding of the Cook Islands suggests that it may also be of limited value in interpreting the role of elites in these and other decolonizing societies in the region.

CONSPIRING ELITES OR AN URBAN MIDDLE CLASS?

The central argument advanced in Hau'ofa's 1987 article, "The New South Pacific Society: Integration and Independence" is well known. It is that government officials, businesspeople, professionals, and intellectuals are the main beneficiaries of the economic flows that they directly and indirectly manage, and although they differ in terms of strict occupational criteria, these groups are closely integrated into a single, privileged stratum to the extent that they "have a great deal more in common with each other than with members of the other classes in their own communities." Among this elite "there is homogeneity throughout the region through the sharing of a dominant culture"—cultural differences are said to be analogous to variations among exotic dishes at a bourgeois dinner party (1987, 3). Cultural diversity is more common among the underprivileged, especially those remaining in rural areas where the poor adhere to their traditions out of necessity. While doing so, they must endure the added indignity of having other traditions thrust on them as part of a determined effort by elites to maintain social stability and, "secure the privileges that they have gained, not so much from their involvement in traditional activities, as from their privileged access to resources in the regional economy. In such a situation, traditions are used by the ruling classes to enforce the new order" (1987, 12).

A parallel binarism is at work in Hau'ofa's writings almost ten years later. However, by this time it appears that the poor have assumed greater control over their vast world, now imagined as Oceania. While the privileged, particularly those involved "directly or indirectly in the fields of aided development and Pacific rim geopolitics," continue to perpetuate the view that Oceania comprises "tiny needy bits." "Far beneath them 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" (Hau'ofa 1994a, 159; also in Waddell, Naidu, and Hau'ofa 1993).

There are, as before, "two levels of operation" (Hau'ofa 1994a, 148); on the one hand are politicians, bureaucrats, statutory body officials, diplomats, military personnel, representatives of financial and business communities working in conjunction with donor and international lend-

ing organizations and advised by academics and consultancy experts. On the other are the “ordinary” “grassroots” people, like Hau‘ofa’s Tongan friend, an entrepreneur who buys and sells kava, T-shirts, and seafood for friends and relatives in Fiji, Tonga, and California.

The rhetorical force of Hau‘ofa’s visions owes a great deal to a seductive binarism and the identification of a homogenized common “oppressor,” and he relies heavily on a conception of power as something exercised by elites rather than a property inherent in the practices and structure of the capitalist state and global economy. In an insightful review of the way “elite” as a concept has been used in social science, George Marcus pointed out that the term is surrounded by considerable ambiguity: “Clear in what it signifies but ambiguous as to its precise referents, the concept of elite in general usage has a certain force; it locates agency in social events by evoking the image of a ruling, controlling few, while being intractably vague” (1983, 7).

Marcus suggested that the resonant images evoked by talk of elites are shaped by three broad qualities: agency, exclusivity, and a dichotomous relationship to nonelites (1983, 10–12). In what follows I consider each of these qualities in turn and draw on my understanding of the Cook Islands to highlight the limitations of Hau‘ofa’s apparently more Tonga-centered views.

Agency

In Hau‘ofa’s discussion of the manipulation of tradition by elites for their own ends, there is a strong sense that elites have set out to deceive the poor by encouraging them to adopt inauthentic traditions for dubious ends. While this may have been true for the Tupou dynasty in Tonga, as a general argument it ignores the many nonelites throughout the region, who are intent on preserving or reviving traditions for their own well-thought-out reasons, and reduces the entire complex process of tradition-alization to a single unsavory motive—domination. In the Cook Islands the better educated and relatively privileged have indeed recently assumed leading roles in revivals of tradition. However, they have not been the only people engaged in this process, and their motivations have been varied and complex—certainly not reducible to the maintenance of elite privilege and social order.

The Cook Islands has, since self-government in 1965, been through two periods of politically initiated cultural revival, the first between 1974 and

1978, and the second beginning in 1989 (Sissons 1997). During the first period, Albert Henry and political leaders belonging to the ruling Cook Islands Party undoubtedly encouraged traditionalization with a view toward retaining power. I have discussed elsewhere Albert Henry's bid to increase support for the party by forming a new advisory council of local-level traditional leaders that would complement (if not substitute for) the existing House of Ariki (Sissons 1994). The thirteen holders of *ariki* titles, representing islands or districts of Rarotonga, tended to support the opposition Democratic Party, whereas the more numerous holders of *mata'iapo* and *rangatira* titles, representing subdistricts, were, in general, more supportive of the government. By establishing a council of *mata'iapo* and *rangatira* (termed *koutu nui* or great council) Henry was elevating these local-level Cook Islands Party supporters to the status of guardians of the nation's cultural heritage.

All this seems to accord well with Hau'ofa's argument that tradition becomes, in the hands of elites, an instrument to enforce a new order. That is, until it is recognized that *mata'iapo* and *rangatira* were by no means elites, if by this is meant members of an exclusive, culturally distinct group who were the main beneficiaries of regional economic flows. A significant motivation of *mata'iapo* and *rangatira*—many of whom were “grassroots” people who spoke Māori, worked in manual occupations or for the government, and had never attended a bourgeois dinner party in their lives—was the restoration of their local authority and control. In other words, for many, a greater recognition of traditional status was directed, not toward enforcing the new order, but toward changing it. Further evidence that their agency was distinct from that of the government is apparent in the spectacular increase in the frequency and elaborateness of *akamarokura* (title-investiture ceremonies) following Henry's defeat in 1978 by Tom Davis's Democratic Party. Despite the new government's open antipathy toward the *koutu nui*, there was a fourfold increase in the number of *akamarokura* in the period 1978–1982 compared to the previous five years (Sissons 1994, 387).

In 1975, with an eye to future tourist development, the Cook Islands Party introduced a new secondary-school curriculum that accorded greater weight to Cook Islands “culture.” Traditions such as dancing, carving, weaving, storytelling, and *umu*-making were promoted in the national interest and, ultimately, in the interest of “elites” in the tourist industry. However, the teaching of Cook Islands culture was also passionately

taken up by local (as opposed to expatriate–New Zealand) teachers, who saw in the new “decolonized” curriculum an opportunity to inculcate in pupils a greater pride in being Māori. One teacher described this period to me as one of great excitement during which he encouraged his pupils to seek out traditional knowledge from their elders in the hope that the school would begin to strengthen rather than weaken links between generations.

To reduce the process of traditionalization in the Cook Islands to the agency of elites would be to fail to address or even raise the question of why so many others participated in this project. It would be to assume that traditional leaders and local teachers were working against what they believed to be their own interests because they had been deceived or were being compelled to do so. Neither was the case. Traditionalization was a contradictory project that brought together and focused a diverse range of interests, some of which would ultimately come into conflict. This was also true during the second period of cultural revival that began in 1989.

During the preparations to host the Sixth Festival of Pacific Arts in 1992, the projects of traditional leaders, individual artists, government employees, tourist operators, teachers, and the media converged, yet retained their distinctiveness. While outer-island villages cooperated under the direction of traditional leaders in the construction of oceangoing canoes, they also unwittingly participated, as visual images, in the marketing project of the Tourist Authority. When employees of the Ministry of Cultural Development encouraged outer-island people to build canoes and local artists to compose music and design posters in the national interest, they were also serving the individual interests of members of the artistic community. Yet tensions were also evident between the ministry, traditional leaders, and individual artists. Artists complained of too much administrative interference, and traditional leaders were wary of the hegemonic designs of the central government. Traditionalization was also pursued quite independently of the festival and tourist marketing: *marae* were reconstructed for strictly local, “private” title-investiture ceremonies, and new *marae* were established reflecting local political factions.

To argue that traditionalization in the Cook Islands constituted an integrated elite project would be, therefore, to grossly misrepresent a complex and constantly changing set of alliances and conflicts between different agents engaged in the traditionalization process. Certainly, for some Cook Islands Party politicians, the retention of power was always a significant

motivation, but it was hardly of significance for all those engaged in the process. Sadly, subsequent economic developments suggest that, rather than deceiving the poor, many may have been deceiving themselves in relation to future benefits.

Elites are widely credited with what Marcus termed a “phantom-like” agency, especially in situations of systemic crisis. It is assumed that a quiet domination of the many by the few, through manipulation and deception, is at the root of major system breakdowns, especially those of an economic nature. The counterargument, familiar to anyone who followed the Miliband-Poulantzas debate on the nature of state power in the 1970s, is not that elite agency is ever absent or unimportant but that its presence is always strongly constrained and enabled by convention (Giddens 1986, 73–75). Elites in the Pacific Islands and elsewhere “act” through the conventions of trade, lending practices, aid diplomacy, bureaucratic procedure, and party politics, as well as through local “tradition.” Thus, when these elites were described by Hau‘ofa as “locked to each other through their privileged access to and control of resources moving in the region and between the South Pacific and other regions of the world” (1987, 3), he credited them with too much independence from the structures that unite and divide them. How much control over resources do senior public servants have in the present economic crisis in the Cook Islands, for example? Is it not their *lack of control* over falling tourist numbers, capital flight, interest rates, lending criteria, airline routes, French nuclear testing, and the “wine-box” inquiry in New Zealand that characterizes their position in the region in relation to others with greater control in New Zealand and elsewhere? Elites in Oceania are as much locked into each other through lack of effective agency as the reverse.

Exclusivity

Elites are, as Marcus noted, commonly viewed as an exclusive group, largely invisible to the wider population whom they manipulate. Hau‘ofa reproduced this common understanding, proposing that the Pacific Island elite stratum maintains its exclusivity and solidarity through an extraordinarily high level of cultural sharing. I suggest that, in general, this view both understates the high level of cultural sharing between those in positions of power and others of the wider middle class and overstates the level of cultural sharing between the middle classes of different Oceanic nations.

It is indisputable that English is widely spoken by Pacific Island power-holders and that this practice facilitates regional cooperation if not integration. However, it is obvious that English is also widely spoken by millions of lesser mortals within and beyond the region. In other words, English speaking is not a cultural practice peculiar to Oceanic elites alone and cannot reasonably be considered a distinctive component of an elite culture. In the Cook Islands, English and Māori are official languages, and both are spoken in the public service at all levels. English is the main language used in official reports, and despite efforts to promote greater use of Māori in the public service, the informal day-to-day use of English continues alongside it. English is also increasingly the first language of young Cook Islanders living in New Zealand and Australia and thus serves as a medium of regional integration in a much more generalized sense than Hau'ofa assumed. Indeed, English speaking has probably had as significant a role in the development and integration of proletarian cultures throughout the region as it has had in perpetuating elite exclusivity.

If Pacific elites are not culturally distinct in terms of a shared language, are they perhaps more so in terms of ideology and material lifestyle? Again, to argue that this is the case is to presume too limited a degree of cultural sharing within many Pacific Island nations. Certainly in the Cook Islands beliefs in the value of representative democracy underpinned by nationalism and individualism are by no means confined to those in positions of power. Nor do contradictions between these and aspirations to greater participatory democracy, localism, and tradition-based collectivism correspond in any simple way to class divisions or an opposition between elites and nonelites. As I have noted elsewhere, party politics has so deeply penetrated Cook Islands social life that the discourses of democracy and tradition are of intense and immediate interest to powerful and powerless alike (Sissons 1994). Ideologies that underpin labor and anti-colonial movements (if not New Right economics) have held sway among both leaders and supporters at different periods over the past half century.

The possessive individualism characteristic of bourgeois lifestyles has been generalized to much of the western world. While downtown Rarotonga is clearly not downtown Auckland or Sydney, newish cars, smart clothes, and videocassette recorders abound there too. Rather than signaling participation in a regional elite network, possession of such material items and participation in the associated lifestyle simply means that their

owners live in the same world as their relatives in Auckland or Sydney—a world of movement and mixture, of globalizing flows of people, money, and commodities.

Paradoxically, globalization incites and reinforces localism. Not only do arguments about elite exclusivity in Oceania underestimate globalization and cultural sharing *within* nations, they also overstate the level of cultural sharing *between* them. While it is true that the speaking of English is common to public servants and businesspeople throughout the Pacific Islands, it is obviously not the case that they speak only English and thus belong to only one language community. English speakers also speak Bislama, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Māori, and many other languages. These languages are part of cultural heritages that separate as much as unite English speakers. True, Hau'ofa did concede that there were local variations throughout the region “due to physical environment and original cultural factors” (1987, 3), but he dismissed these as minor. I suggest that they remain significant, and that those in positions of power have usually had more in common with members of their own national middle class than with each other.

Dichotomous Relations

While binary distinctions between privileged and underprivileged, rich and poor, exploiters and exploited, powerful and powerless possess a certain rhetorical force, they gain it at the expense of analytical power. Thus, when urban proletarians and rural peasants are put into a single container labeled “the poor,” on whom the dead weight of tradition is pressed, not only are historical and cultural differences between the two groups erased, but different forms of rural and urban participation in the regional economy are also obscured. Similarly, when administrators and teachers join bankers and businesspeople as members of the privileged club, antithetical interests and distinctive relations with urban proletarians and metropolitan bourgeoisie are glossed over.

Ironically, one of the concerns expressed by Hau'ofa in his 1987 article was the strong reluctance on the part of the regional privileged “to recognise the emergence of modern classes in the island world” (1987, 11). In seeking to excuse this reluctance, Antony Hooper proposed that “issues of class and inequality” were absent because they had simply been “exported to New Zealand” (Hooper 1987, viii). This was a very curious

argument indeed, because it would surely have been more plausible to argue that class ideologies, inequalities, and lifestyles were exported *by* New Zealand to MIRAB states with return migration, remittances, and aid.

One of the few writers to have explicitly addressed the relative strengths of elite and class analysis in the Pacific Islands is Vijay Naidu, who noted that elite theories such as Hau'ofa's "disregard the fundamental importance of social classes, considering them as another social category on a par with race, religion, regional and cultural groupings" (nd, 15). Naidu proposed instead to distinguish between a metropolitan bourgeoisie, a governing class, a supportive class, a working class, and a peasantry. One of the advantages of this model is that it problematizes relations *within* Hau'ofa's privileged strata (the metropolitan bourgeoisie, governing, and supportive classes) and *within* the exploited poor (working class and peasantry). Of particular significance for an understanding of changes in Cook Islands society has been the expansion (and recent contraction) of Naidu's supporting class, that is, the largely tourism and aid-funded public service.

Tourism-led economic expansion during the 1980s in the Cook Islands saw the rapid growth of a white-collar salariat that, by 1990, constituted 25 percent of the workforce. Salaried workers earned, on average, more than double the pay of the average wage earner (CISO 1989, 12). This growth is reflected in tables 1 and 2, which give an indication of changing and current class composition. Table 1 shows that over the period 1981–1990 there was a 30 percent increase in the number of professional, technical, managerial, and administrative workers (while the number of clerical employees increased by 35 percent). Table 2 shows that in 1993,

Table 1. Employment in Professional, Technical, Administrative and Managerial Occupations in Rarotonga

	1971	1981	1990
Professional and technical	569	549	684
Administrative and managerial	72	145	219
Both categories as percentage of total workforce	16.9	19.9	25.5

Source: CISO 1971, 1981, 1990.

Table 2. Average Weekly Earnings by Employment Sector

	Number	Percent	Average Weekly Earnings (nz\$)
Legislators, senior officials, managers, professionals	1,549	24.1	320
Technicians, associate professionals	614	9.6	259
Clerks	804	12.6	220
Others	3,439	53.7	169
Total	6,406	100.0	

Source: CISO 1993.

legislators, senior officials, managers, and professionals (24 percent of the workforce) earned almost twice as much as “other” Cook Islanders (54 percent of the workforce).

Naidu’s supportive class in the Cook Islands constitutes about a quarter of the Cook Islands workforce, and a significant number share the cultural attributes that Hau’ofa assigned to the Pacific Island elite stratum. They speak English among themselves and to their children, were educated at New Zealand colleges and universities, the University of the South Pacific, or the University of Hawai‘i, and they pursue relatively affluent material lifestyles. Yet to describe their relationship to urban proletarians and rural peasants as one of exploiter to exploited or dominating to dominated would be to misrepresent their position in Cook Islands society. What is most interesting about the members of this group is not the way they dominate or force traditions on the poor in order to maintain social stability—“that is to secure the privileges that they have gained”—but the ways they express their class position in both the Cook Islands and the region. Foremost among such expressions are nationalism and cultural revival.

TRADITIONALIZATION AND CLASS ALIENATION

My argument, then, is very simple. The initially persuasive binary logic that underpins Hau’ofa’s 1980s Oceanic vision and 1990s revision—exploiting,

controlling elites and exploited, controlled poor—is theoretically weak and politically unhelpful in understanding the Cook Islands in that it misrepresents the agency, cultured exclusivity, and class position of the majority of those identified as belonging to the privileged stratum. The majority of those whom Hau‘ofa would identify as belonging to a cultured elite foisting tradition onto the poor are better described as belonging to a growing middle class engaged in postcolonial nation-building. In directing their cultural and political agency toward nationalist ends, however contradictory this activity may be in a globalizing economy, they have been engaged in a form of ideological response to neocolonialism.

The same “mobile, internationalised middle class” that Hau‘ofa credited with providing “intellectual and ideological leadership to social movements,” such as the Pro-Democracy Movement in Tonga, is, in the Cook Islands, engaged in traditionalization (Hau‘ofa 1994b, 425). While in particular political contexts traditionalization can serve hegemonic ends in Oceania (Lal 1992; Lawson 1996), it may also be deeply contradictory. In the Cook Islands, as I have already noted, it arises out of the convergence of state and business projects directed toward tourist development and more popular projects directed toward greater local autonomy and postcolonial identity. These latter projects have especially engaged the passions of one fraction of Rarotonga’s middle class—Naidu’s supportive class. A scan through my 1992 fieldnotes strongly suggests that “tradition” is now a middle-class identity project that is strongly embraced by salaried public servants, teachers, and artists. Of those I personally knew to be significantly engaged in the revival of language and tradition, six were senior public servants, six were middle-ranking public servants, two were tertiary educators, three were secondary teachers, two were artists, two were working in the media, and one was a former space scientist turned prime minister. Six of these also held traditional titles.

It is no coincidence that this middle class shares many of the characteristics attributed to people at the forefront of new social movements elsewhere. As Claus Offe noted, many of the active participants in women’s movements, environmental movements, and peace movements are tertiary educated and employed in community service professions (1985). Just as it would be wrong to suggest that the actors in new social movements are, in truth, seeking conservative ends, so it would be equally wrong to argue that the Cook Islands middle class participates in cultural revival in order to encourage social stability. Rather, my discussions with people engaged

in projects of traditionalization lead me to highlight quite different motivations.

One artist had returned to the Cook Islands from New Zealand, where he had been strongly influenced by the “Māori renaissance” of the 1970s and 1980s. Through his art and teaching he was especially concerned to correct what he saw as a devaluation and misrepresentation of pre-Christian Cook Islands culture by church leaders. In this endeavor he was quietly supported by other teachers and writers, although most were very reluctant to openly challenge church orthodoxy. A senior public servant, and holder of a *mata‘iapo* title, saw the 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts as an opportunity to increase knowledge of and pride in the traditional history of his *ngāti* (descent group), especially among its younger members. To this end, he and other leaders of the *ngāti* organized the construction of a *marae* and, with government assistance, an oceangoing *vaka* (canoe) that would participate in the festival. Rituals associated with the *marae* and *vaka* were consciously designed to enhance *ngāti* unity and were part of ongoing efforts by traditional leaders to secure greater local autonomy from the central government. A probation officer promoted and designed armband tattoos, modeled loosely on those currently popular in Tahiti, among young Cook Islanders. Strongly critical of a colonial cultural legacy that can undermine the self-esteem of local youth, he was also active in promoting the Cook Islands’ pre-Christian heritage through art and ocean-voyaging projects.

These and other middle-class Cook Islanders engaged in revivals of tradition, expressed a strong desire that they and their fellow citizens be “proud to be Māori.” In other words, the cultivation of a postcolonial national identity that proclaimed independence from New Zealand was actively and consciously pursued. Related to this was a strong desire to be recognized as belonging to an independent Polynesian nation in a wider Pacific and Polynesian community. Both desires were manifested in a high level of participation in the hosting of the Festival of Pacific Arts in 1992. Babadzan and others have been highly critical of the “fetishistic reification” of culture that is effected and perpetuated through such festivals because they “conceal the nation’s domination by and dependence on the former colonial power, on international aid and on the world economy in general” (Babadzan 1988, 223). But who is being deceived here? Certainly not the middle-class participants from the Cook Islands, for whom participation represented symbolic rejection of neocolonialism and depen-

dency. None seriously believed that the country had miraculously, as a result of the festival, freed itself from aid dependency and the world economy. Quite the opposite. The festival heightened awareness of the country's ongoing colonial links, in the context of which participation and support for the festival was, for many, a conscious political act of (temporary) disengagement from them.

Neocolonial aid and tourist development have widened class divisions in the Cook Islands. Higher levels of disposable income among members of the middle class have encouraged less dependence on local kin and community and greater personal autonomy. Combined with more affluent lifestyles and greater access to global information flows, this increasing autonomy has contributed to an increasing alienation of the middle class from their local kin and community, sources of security and identity. Return migrants have also experienced this sense of (class) alienation, particularly those who are tertiary educated. One response to this class alienation has been a conscious reidentification with kin and nation through participation in projects of national identity and cultural revival. While it may be tempting for some to view participation in such projects as self-serving mystification—an attempt by members of the middle class to ideologically erase class division and so preserve their privilege—this would be to falsely impute a sociofunctional motive to the actors. Rather, actors understand their own participation as a form of cultural resistance, or at least cultural response, to colonialism and neocolonialism. In identifying with kin and nation, albeit in a distinctly conscious way, members of the middle class are both addressing their own class alienation and reinforcing cultural differences between themselves and former colonizers. Instead of gaining economic or full political autonomy, an increasingly alienated Cook Islands middle class pursues greater *cultural* autonomy.

Elsewhere in Oceania the pursuit of cultural autonomy takes on different forms depending on levels of neocolonial dependence. In New Zealand, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Hawai'i, where colonial relations remain most pervasive, close parallels with developments in the Cook Islands are evident. These parallels are less obvious where nations have achieved greater political independence. But wherever middle-class alienation has developed in the context of neocolonial dependency, people have turned to tradition as a source of common identity.

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