Against Tradition

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In 1994, Albert Wendt was a member of a Pacific Advisory Committee, based in Auckland, that was convened for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa)—a new national museum in Wellington that opened to the public in 1998.[1] I was on a team charged with developing new Pacific Cultures exhibitions for the museum.[2] A key moment in the consultation process occurred in one of a series of meetings we had with the Auckland-based committee, which consisted mainly of academics including historian Mālama Meleiseā and Albert Wendt. We were discussing possible themes in one of our exhibitions, when Wendt requested that terms like "traditional art" be abandoned in our display signage. "Traditional means nothing to me!"[3] he said. Some time later, at an academic conference in Wellington, I was listening to a presentation about Māori and Pacific arts and not surprisingly, the word "traditional" was used. A split second later I heard an interjection from the floor: "Terrible word!" shouted someone loudly from two rows in front of me. The presenter stopped, looked confused, and, straining to see past the stage lights, said, "Sorry, Albert, what did you say?" "Terrible word, tradition!" repeated Albert. On both occasions, I didn't understand what Albert was talking about.

In this essay, I reflect on Wendt's small but vocal protests "against tradition" and demonstrate how they have had implications for the representation of Pacific Cultures at Te Papa. With the passing of time, it has become apparent to me that his views on "tradition" gained traction in Te Papa and at least one other arts organization, at critical points in their history, and, coincidentally, when he was actively engaged in governance or advisory roles within them.[4] His views have subsequently shaped our work as curators of Pacific Cultures collections in the museum but also as brokers of cultural projects within government and the wider community.

As mentioned, at first I didn't quite understand Wendt's demands to

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avoid using "tradition" in our exhibitions. Nor did I imagine the impact his statements would have on my future work. When I joined the museum as a Pacific intern in 1992, I was a recent anthropology graduate. In 1994, I was seconded from my collection management role to act as "objects" researcher for a "Pacific" exhibition team led by prominent archaeologist and curator Janet Davidson.[5] The term "traditional" was in my lexicon of most-used anthropological and museum phrases. Working in a museum with Pacific collections, "tradition" and "traditional" referenced the old, the authentic, and the most-treasured artifacts and cultural practices. The books we referred to in our work and the people we consulted and trained with regularly used the term. To hear Albert Wendt speaking "against tradition" was perplexing. He was an author, an academic of standing, and as a Samoan, someone I would have expected to be a steward, indeed a stalwart of tradition. However, here he was tearing a page out of my anthropological handbook!

At this point in time, we were working for a museum that was undergoing great change—a new location, a new building, new conceptual underpinnings, and new ideas about how to exhibit the collections, making them accessible to a wide audience. It was only in the previous year that the former National Museum now rebranded as Te Papa had decided to manage its Pacific collections separately. For most of the institution's history, Pacific material culture formed a significant part of what was called the Foreign Ethnology Collection. Today, Te Papa's Pacific Cultures collection represents most of the Pacific Islands, including Papua New Guinea but excluding Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia. Since the 1990s, there have been major developments in the representation of Pacific peoples in New Zealand's society and its national museum. For the last twenty years, the primary focus has been on collecting the art and material cultures of Pacific peoples living in New Zealand. What began as a comparative collection of ethnographic "specimens" has broadened to include contemporary artworks by "known" artists.

About "Tradition"

Many anthropologists working in the Pacific will be familiar with the academic debates around tradition and cultural invention. The substantial scholarship on this topic can be traced through *The Contemporary Pacific* and elsewhere.[6] A key publication documenting work in this area was the special edition of the academic journal *Oceania,* titled *The Politics*

of Tradition in the Pacific (Jolly and Thomas 1992). The case studies in the issue expanded our knowledge of the way tradition is put to work in a number of Pacific contexts. The politics of tradition play out in many areas of social life, in government, economics, and perhaps most visibly in the creative arts. They are also reflected in ethnographic writing, posing challenges for authoritative and accurate representation. Like anthropologists and historians, curators of Pacific collections deal with public representations of Pacific peoples across time and space. The politics of tradition influence our practice in numerous ways.

The use of "tradition" that I discuss here overlaps with but is only a small part of the larger debates around the term and its politics. Writing by anthropologists in the Pacific reflects critical and uncritical use of the term. Of course anthropologists, like the people we study, are not all the same. We have different schools of thought and theory, different interests, and even differing "traditions" of research approach and method. One of the key problems with the way "tradition" is used is that it implies an evolutionary linear progression from the past to the present, but there is also a timelessness associated with the term. "Tradition" can be used to conveniently describe a "non-time-specific" way of life. People talk about "traditional" societies and practices as if they are somehow pure and untouched by the outside world. For the uncritical writer, the arrival of Europeans in the Pacific disrupted the "traditional" societies of its peoples. Around this "moment of contact" with Europeans, everything before their arrival is "traditional" and all that follows is degeneration and deviation from a life more constant and coherent. As Pacific historians will tell you, in reality the "moment of contact" with Europeans extended over long periods of time. The circumstances and complexities of these encounters varied. Some interactions were intense and prolonged, others intermittent. They were often destructive encounters, even devastating. However, for many Pacific peoples, Europeans were not the first outsiders to sail over the horizon. There were centuries of outside intrusions on these seemingly isolated Pacific Island societies. The canoes of other Pacific peoples appearing offshore preceded many moments of contact and disruptions of supposedly "traditional cultures" long before the arrival of explorers from Europe.

The Aborigines of Australia have been described by anthropologist James Urry as having a "long past" (at least 40,000 years) but "only a very brief history" (1979, 2). Urry wrote this in an essay about anthropological studies of Australian Aborigines and the concept of traditional culture

(Urry 1979). His remarks lead into a detailed critique of the absence of history in anthropological writing about the Aboriginal past. Published in the *Journal of Australian Studies,* this article has probably gone unnoticed by many anthropologists of the Pacific, but his arguments are relevant for ethnography within the Pacific Rim that Australia borders, not to mention anthropological writing about "traditional societies" in general. Urry linked interest in "traditional" Aboriginal society to the nineteenth-century origins of anthropology, and in particular the interest of scholars in preserving records of "dying" cultures "before it was too late." He accused Australian anthropologists of the 1970s of still being on this "quest for 'traditional' features of aboriginal cultures" long after most of the groups had experienced massive alteration. He said that "anthropologists have confused the claims and actions of the people they have studied with their own models of an unchanging world; it is a Dreamtime of their own invention" (Urry 1979, 15). Urry argued:

> The term "traditional" when applied to human groups is highly anomalous. It pre-supposes that culture and society can be defined a whole, as a functioning well-ordered system which remains constant over time. Such a view of society should have little appeal to historians, interested in the discontinuities between ideas and actions and in the importance of individuals and the consequences of events. But the vision should also be meaningless for anthropologists with any experience of the nature of human society. . . . writing an account of "traditional" society is impossible, but more importantly it involves a view of society that is untenable. (1979, 14–15)

Regrettably, Urry's arguments apply to contemporary anthropological writing in the Pacific, in some areas more than others. A key dichotomy compares and contrasts what is traditional with what is contemporary or modern. This is a problem when trying to understand histories of cultural production. In his book *Oceanic Art,* Nicholas Thomas wrote that the "most regrettable stereotype concerning tribal societies is the idea that indigenous knowledge is dominated by the reproduction and perpetuation of tradition. This would deny the interpretation and innovation always present in Pacific cultures" (1995, 36).

A Samoan notion of "tradition" is probably best encapsulated by the concept of fa'a Sāmoa (the Samoan way). But as a set of cultural practices and values, fa'a Sāmoa is regularly contested and reformulated to suit the needs of those who practice it. For example, the tulafale (orators) are widely seen as the guardians of fa'a Sāmoa—advocates of a seemingly

unchanging set of ideas and practices of Samoan culture. But in reality they are among the most active agents for its reinterpretation. They have to be, in order to deal with the changing political and social issues that their role in society entails.

For many contemporary Pacific Islanders and those who study them, the "traditional" in art and culture is seen as something to recover, to preserve, as model examples. For others, tradition has been an ideal to draw inspiration from, an "authentic" foundation for their own creativity. This is understandable where there is significant cultural loss, but the way people connect to the past in these situations is partial. In these situations, notions of "tradition" are dependent on ideas of what is "authentic" and what is "inauthentic"—what is "traditional" and what is "contemporary," or what is "tradition" and what is "change." Ultimately, tradition becomes a reality when people choose to act on it. While this reality may be connected to actual past ideas or practices, it connects to them in a highly selective way. In fact, it remains difficult to untangle ourselves from the way in which the concept of tradition dominates even discussions of change (Urry 1979, 15); even Wendt himself has found this entanglement unavoidable (Wendt 1983).

The Colonial Chill

Years before the debates relating to tradition in the Pacific were playing out in mainstream academic publications, Albert Wendt wrote his essay "Towards a New Oceania" (1976). He wrote, memorably, "Any real understanding of ourselves and our existing cultures calls for an attempt to understand colonialism and what it did and is still doing to us" (1976, 50). He asked a series of questions:

> (a) Is there such a creature as *traditional culture?*
> (b) If there is, what period in the growth of a culture is to be called *traditional?*
> (c) If *traditional cultures* do exist in Oceania, to what extent are they colonial creations?
> (d) What is authentic culture?
> (e) Is the differentiation we make between the culture(s) of our urban areas (meaning *foreign*) and those of our rural areas (meaning *traditional*) a valid one? . . .
> (f) Why is it that the most vocal exponents of *preserving our true cultures* live in our towns and pursue life-styles which, in their own terminology, are *alien and unpure?*

(g) Are some of us advocating the *preservation of our cultures* not for ourselves but for our brothers, the rural masses, and by doing this ensure the maintenance of a status quo in which we enjoy privileged positions?
(h) Should there be ONE sanctified/official/sacred interpretation of ones culture? And who should do this interpreting? (Wendt 1976, 52; italics in original)

Wendt answered these questions by challenging the idea of "traditional cultures" and cultural essentialisms. He criticized corruption and the use of "tradition" by political and cultural elites. He wrote with passion, and anger, "There is no state of cultural purity (or perfect state of cultural *goodness*)," and warned of stagnation, "an invitation for a culture to choke in its own bloody odour, juices, and excreta" (1976, 52, 53; italics in original). Writing in the 1970s, a formative period for Pacific literature, new art forms, and markets, Wendt urged us to recognize cultural diversity across the Pacific and within nations. He saw artistic activity as a means of "breaking from the colonial chill and starting to find our own being"—with self-expression "a prerequisite for self-respect." While embracing change and opportunity, Wendt nevertheless treasures the past as a precious source of inspiration but restated, "The only valid culture worth having is the one being lived out now." He reminded us, "No culture is ever static and can be preserved . . . like a stuffed gorilla in a museum" (Wendt 1976, 58, 53, 52).

In e-mail correspondence I had with Wendt in early 2008, he said that his thinking around tradition had its roots in his Teachers Training College and university days in New Zealand. Here he developed a political awareness about colonialism and its impact on Pacific Islands and indigenous cultures around the world.[7] He wrote:

> I came to feel very uncomfortable with terms such as traditional, folk history, folk art. . . . Colonial scholars and researchers used them whenever they referred to us but not to their cultures. Such terms I concluded were part and parcel of the Euro-centric colonial vocabulary. Traditional inferred our cultures were/are so tradition-bound they were static and slow to change; that they weren't dynamic and growing and changing; that because they were slow to change and fixed in history they were "simple and easy to understand." Traditional also had implications about how we were viewed as people even to the extent that, because we were tradition bound, we behaved out of habit and past practice and [were] slow to adapt to other ways or change our own ways, that we didn't want to think for ourselves, or were incapable of individual thinking and expression. Such terms are also part of that view that our "real"

> Pacific cultures are true only in what are in the museums. Right from my early twenties, I've never trusted writing or studies about us by outsiders and by our own people who've been successfully colonized! (Wendt, pers comm, 21 March 2008)

By Wendt's own admission, the reaction to his public protestations about tradition and other anticolonial statements irritated a number of academics, anthropologists, and administrators. Older Pacific Islanders and Māori didn't like it either "because they didn't like the colonial status quo to be disturbed . . . not at that time." While he acknowledged that the situation has now greatly changed, the hostility toward his views at the time was fresh in his mind. He recalled:

> I was not liked by many academics who were earning their living from studying (and becoming "experts" on) us. At many conferences on Pacific things, they were hostile. I was usually the only Pacific Islander there and they treated me condescendingly. But I battled on. One instance: I was at a conference on museums in an Australian city. No Aborigines had been invited, so I think I was the only brownie there. I gave a very anti-colonial paper about colonialism and museums in the Pacific. The mainly white audience grew quieter and quieter—with a hostility I could carve with a sapelu [bush-knife]. And when I finished, the applause was limited and scattered. And then, lo and behold, the white Australian who was chairing my session—the Vice-Chancellor of a university—in thanking me, said that what I'd said about Australia and colonialism in the Pacific was "very unfair." He went on to [imply] I'd been very, very ungrateful! (Wendt, pers comm, 21 March 2008)

Decolonizing the Museum

Significantly, Wendt's writing on tradition as presented in "Towards a New Oceania" predates the Pacific-based academic discussions on cultural invention by several years.[8] My own trajectory through the debates around tradition relates directly to my work in Te Papa, although I picked up on Urry's essay as a postgraduate student in the late 1990s. It took some time for me to understand Wendt's objections to "tradition" and to appreciate how uncritical use of the term could affect my work in the museum. As my curatorial responsibilities have increased, working "against tradition" has become a key part of my practice. However, "tradition," like most "traditions," persists in many ways. Indeed the practices and "traditions" of the museum itself are difficult to dislodge.

Wendt was concerned that we decolonize the language we use in our exhibitions, particularly as the exhibition team included people of Pacific Island descent. In his view, the word "traditional" as used in categories such as "traditional arts" and "traditional practices" was the vocabulary of Western ways of writing about and cataloguing indigenous peoples. We in museums had bought into it, and our communities had internalized it. These terms obscure our histories and creativity and give the impression our cultures are static and unchanging—in effect, "without history" (Jolly and Thomas 1992, 241; Jolly 2000, 274). As Wendt says, when we talk about European art, we talk about it with reference to its moment in time and its association with places, particular art movements, schools of painting, and particular artists and events. We speak about the mainstream European art movements with historical specificity. They are described according to locality, movement, people, and dates. However, the same standards are lacking when we describe Pacific arts. Minority cultures in Europe are also sometimes subject to the same simple categorizations of folk art and traditional practices. How apt is Wendt's reference to museums and the cultures within them as being as still and lifeless as a "stuffed gorilla." His critique and call to validate the cultures "being lived out now" supported our collecting practices at Te Papa—to account for people, their material cultures, and their practices as not static but changing. For more than fifteen years, our collecting has moved beyond the classic typologies. We still seek out "specimens" documented in early to mid twentieth century material culture studies. These volumes are important benchmarks of their time for comparison, but they are also of another era of anthropological inquiry. They are not checklists nor do they set limits for what we acquire today and how we think about the past and present.

One item in our collection, controversial for some museum visitors, and one that I have written about elsewhere (Mallon 2007), bears mentioning again here. Presented to the museum in time for the opening in 1998, it highlights tensions at work in representing contemporary Pacific peoples in the museum. After Te Papa's opening, I led tours for Pacific studies, museum studies, and art history students from local universities. After a slow walk around the Pacific Cultures exhibition "Mana Pasifika: Celebrating Pacific Cultures,"[9] I liked to surprise the students, to wake them up and get them thinking about objects and the exhibition subtexts. To provoke interest I'd point out a palau, a drum from Niue created from a paint tin and given to Te Papa in 1996. Possibly because the palau's most prominent feature is the "British Paints" logo on its side, randomly

smeared with a splash of white paint, it is an object museum visitors don't expect to see in the hallowed halls of the national museum. The palau sits in a large glass display case next to a beautifully crafted nineteenth-century tatai (wooden drum) from the Marquesas Islands, decorated with coconut-fiber cordage.

Admittedly, the palau is not the most attractive object. Students are puzzled, and some are shocked that it is in a display case at all. Some are genuinely offended that a drum crudely fashioned from a paint tin should be considered a museum piece. It's as if its presence somehow shows a lack of respect for the other items on display. However, when I mention that the palau was presented to Te Papa by the Reverend Lagi Sipeli, a Niuean elder on our Wellington Pacific Advisory Committee, there is silence, and more puzzled looks. In many Polynesian societies, elders are considered the custodians of cultural knowledge and expertise. The temptation is to blame the curator "gone mad" for this disrespectful inclusion, but when the selection is found to be supported by a recognized cultural authority outside the museum, an elder and a reverend minister, the quick-fire critics stop in their tracks. When I am asked, "Why is it significant?" I admit I asked myself the same question when I first saw it. However, a drum made from an empty paint tin may appear ordinary, but it may be a significant element in Niuean cultural performance. Its value may be not in its material components but in the sound it creates, the performances it mediates.

There were other examples in "Mana Pasifika" that highlighted the tensions between accurate ethnographic representations of current cultural practice and reified "traditional" representations. In most art gallery settings, the emphasis is different from our approach. An object such as the palau, with strong cultural significance, may not necessarily make the cut where aesthetic qualities are celebrated. Significantly, on the same exhibition floor as "Mana Pasifika," in the New Zealand art exhibition "Parade," other curators were criticized by the art elite for juxtaposing a work by celebrated painter Colin McCahon with a Kelvinator brand refrigerator. In a museum such as Te Papa, broadly representing art, history, culture, and natural sciences, there are agendas for collecting artifacts as specimens of culture as well as examples of high artistic quality or craftsmanship. In the Pacific Cultures collections the demarcation is blurred on the exhibition floor as well as on the storeroom shelves.

There is a need to collect the extraordinary, the old, the ancient, as well as the mundane, the contemporary, and the innovative. There has to be, to represent a world that is more mobile, where the traffic in people,

objects, and ideas is more intense—to represent a cross-section of society, not just the social and cultural elites. In addition, the communities we represent in museums are more transnational than they were in the early twentieth century. As curators of collections, we struggle with representing Tonga and Sāmoa when these cultures and their practices are present in the Islands, but also in large cities such as Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Sydney, and Auckland. How will Pacific people of the future learn about Pacific people of today if museums don't grapple with these conditions, and the cultural products that exist beyond the "traditional" centers and forms and modes of production?

For curators writing about and exhibiting Pacific art and cultures, the simple dichotomy of the traditional and contemporary obscures our histories and specificities of the locations where our cultures are expressed. Perpetuating stereotypes such as "traditional art" or "traditional cultures" in museums doesn't safeguard our cultural practices or sustain them; it stifles them. Since consulting our Pacific Advisory Committees in the 1990s, we avoid the use of the term "traditional" in our Pacific exhibitions text. Wendt's request in 1994 led to an unofficial ban on the term within our exhibition team. Although it is not a formal policy in the museum, to this day there is sensitivity among some of the museum's writing team around its use.

Exhibition labels illustrate well the change in our approach to writing about the Pacific. There are hierarchies of museum signage, and assumptions about how much text a visitor to an exhibition will read. Sometimes we are required to sum up a subject like "Pacific warfare" or "The impact of Christianity in the Pacific" in one hundred words or less. In these situations, terms such as "traditional" may seem convenient as a gloss that maximizes word count. A label titled "Traditional Pacific Warfare" conveys a piece of quite general information. "Tradition" indicates a vague past, "Pacific" a general geographical region, and "warfare" an activity. However, a line of text saying "late nineteenth century warfare in Fiji " is simply more accurate. If we are talking about carvings we no longer say "traditional" carving. We will say "nineteenth-century carving" if that is the case. If more precise information is available, we might say "carving in the late 1880s." Avoiding the term "traditional" allows us to be more specific in time, but it also demands specificity about people, geography, and locality. If we know the names of the makers, their hometown or village, their date of birth and death, we will include them. In other documentation, we are rigorous about detail when we acquire new items and develop

our collections to represent the changing world. Needless to say, this is good practice in any museum.

But museums have not always been good at these very basic processes or have not necessarily had the resources to keep them in order. They require organization and have administration costs. Curators cannot always rely on donors or vendors to have accurate—or any—information about an object. As we collect and create new records, our attention to specifics and accuracy of provenance is paramount. As we upgrade catalogue records, the research effort focuses on collating a solid foundation of information from our archives and published sources. We have to ensure accurate accounts of objects, their creators, and the individuals and families who have copyright, intellectual, and ownership rights over such works. Success with these processes scratches through the timeless veneer of "tradition."

Yet, while attention to our vocabulary and precision improves historicity and accuracy of our work, the power of tradition persists in our curatorial practice. A problem with replacing the term "traditional" is that it communicates a range of meanings that are part of the vocabulary of many of our museum visitors. When people read the word "traditional," a widely shared range of meanings is transmitted. In Te Papa, we have tried to work around "traditional" and its connotations in our exhibition texts by replacing it with "customary." In an e-mail message to me, former Te Papa head writer Michael Keith, who joined the Te Papa project midway through, remembered that in relation to the Māori and Pacific exhibitions, "the 't' words were considered to be associated with a static view of culture—a view fixed on a notional past, in which the culture itself was unchanging. It was a view represented by case-bound museums. Custom and customary on the other hand were considered to sound more dynamic and to have the connotation of things that endure but also adapt, so a 'kastom dance' might feature at specific occasions but the content of the dance might change" (Keith, pers comm, 6 April 2009).

Arguably, "customary" is a euphemism for traditional, but I agree with Keith that it sounds more dynamic. This highlights a tension between a curatorial sensitivity to stereotypes and the concerns of our varied audiences. Some visitors will be familiar with issues around these terms and other cultural stereotypes, while others will not, or won't care. Communicating the academic underpinnings of our work to a diverse group of visitors is a constant challenge.

In the Pacific Advisory Committee meetings, Wendt also suggested we avoid italicizing indigenous terms, and that where possible we privilege them over other English translations or glosses.[10] For example, instead of

"whale-tooth necklace ('ula lei)," he would insist we write "'ula lei (whale-tooth necklace)." However, we can't always determine the precise region or language group from which an object originates—and glosses are not always useful. As ethnographers know, translating cultural concepts or names of objects in concise terms is not a word count–friendly exercise. Where possible we have named objects in the language used in its place of origin—if known. Why not expand our general visitor's vocabulary and respect those visitors whose cultural artifacts we are putting on display? These are small adjustments but they have significant implications. Even tweaking the term "Pacific Culture" to "Pacific Culture*s*" in our job titles and business cards influences the politics around our work as curators. I have been asked countless times for the "Pacific cultural view" on an issue, as if the Pacific were a culturally homogenous region. I sometimes joke that I can offer a New Zealand–born, part Samoan-part Irish view. I accept that there are times when a collective Pacific voice is a loud and politically powerful one. However, giving visibility to the heterogeneous nature of Pacific peoples in New Zealand and internationally is important in museums, where cultural differences and connections are represented and contested in a most public way.

Beyond writing texts, we have become almost hyper-aware of working with and around stereotypes in our displays. In exhibition development meetings, we jokingly ban the vocalization of stereotypes such as vibrant, colorful, and exotic. Of course these terms are often accurate descriptions of the island environments of Pacific peoples and their cultural activities; but in a museum they can be limiting and problematic representations. An example, regrettable in hindsight, is our use of color in our original exhibition "Mana Pasifika: Celebrating Pacific Cultures." From the outset, there was a desire to create "the Pacific" in the exhibition space we were allocated. A graphic designer came up with a Pacific color palette of oranges, yellows, greens, and, of course, an ocean blue. Unfortunately, the effect of this color scheme on our exhibition space was to drown the objects in a blown-out background of overwhelmingly "hot orange" color—with a great blue wall (sky or ocean) covered in letter-cut Pacific greetings with a replica coconut tree to one side. Of course, as a team we were party to these decisions; we consulted with a small group of Pacific designers about some of our decisions and were guided by directives to create a "wow" factor. On reflection, the color scheme probably reveals our internalization of the visual cues of the Pacific and how we overemphasized their importance in the museum environment. We had stepped back to the diorama-style displays of the past. Here the attempt was not to recreate

a Pacific village scene, or place objects "in situ," but rather to locate the whole exhibition space "in situ"—in the Pacific, with "orange" sunshine, blue water, and the odd piece of corrugated iron as an urban marker.

I understand how stereotypes are important in visual communication and design, but overworking them in this case backfired. The vibrant, Pacific colors of the exhibition environment overwhelmed the artistry, style, and design of the atua, costume, and other artifacts on show. In retrospect, it seems we couldn't even untangle *ourselves* from our own institution's long established "traditions" of museum display.[11] After a ten-year presence on the museum floor, an opportunity arose to refurbish the existing space and re-present ourselves—but we didn't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Our new long-term exhibition,[12] "Tangata O le Moana: The Story of Pacific People in New Zealand" (2007), was designed with a new brief and exhibition concept. The expected visual cues and motifs of the Pacific are still present in the exhibition signage and graphic design. The difference is that they are greatly toned down, and more subtly present. The walls are plain and dark in color with careful lighting emphasizing the cases, objects, and signage. The design efforts were not about recreating a Pacific environment, but about creating an elegant functional exhibition space, with a focus on beautiful objects illustrating engaging historical narratives. We worked with the stereotypes but didn't allow them to dominate. Nevertheless, when we were briefing museum hosts about this new exhibition just before it opened,[13] one person, looking confused with eyes rolling, asked me, "Where is the vibrancy and color of the Pacific in here?"[14]

"Traditional" Practices

Aside from exhibitions, other Te Papa projects highlight the politics around tradition in New Zealand's Pacific Islands communities. The debates are not purely academic or framed in academic jargon. People outside universities and museums, artists, choreographers, dancers, tattooists, and even orators are struggling with the "traditional" in "traditional Pacific arts" and the limits it places on their practices. An example comes from the Te Papa Press–produced book *Pacific Art Niu Sila: The Pacific Dimension of Contemporary New Zealand Arts* (Mallon and Pereira 2002). A chapter by Lisa Taouma discusses Auckland's Secondary School Polyfest, an annual competition of Pacific Islands dance. In this event, involving

thousands of students, Auckland schools send teams to perform on island group stages—the Cook Islands stage, the Tongan stage, the Samoan stage, and so on. Cultural experts from each community assess their performances according to agreed criteria. The politics of tradition play out every year. In relation to performances at the Samoan stage, Taouma documented heated debates over keeping dances "traditional" or allowing them to incorporate modern styles and influences such as hip hop. She quoted choreographer Keneti Muaiava as saying, "This is a new millennium and the judges have to realise that we wake up in the morning and see completely different things than they did back in Samoa, and dance should be all about that—expressing where you're living and what you see around you" (Taouma 2002, 137).

Similarly, in the production of Samoan tatau (tattooing) in New Zealand, proscriptions of what is "traditional" or "authentic" practice have fueled criticism of tufuga ta tatau (expert tattooists) and tattoo recipients. While tufuga have been active agents for innovation in their art form, they have had to endure criticism from members of the Samoan community for receiving cash payments for their work and for tattooing non-Samoans with Samoan tatau. They are accused by some people of breaking with tradition and not being true to fa'a Sāmoa—despite the facts that cash has played a central part in many other Samoan ceremonial exchanges and that non-Samoans have been tattooed since the late 1700s (see, eg, Va'a 2001). In an interview I had with the late Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo, he said that if he was to abide by his critics and seek fa'a Sāmoa (ie, traditional) forms of payment, then he could demand a house or anything else he saw fit as payment for his work. He said, "They criticise me for going commercial here, but if I go back to the real Samoan way, there would probably be families sitting on the road under a tree without houses here, because if I like a house I will say, 'I would like to take this house with me,' but it is not just a house it's anything . . . anything" (Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo interview 1999).

Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo managed his practice to suit the circumstances of life in New Zealand. He had to consider the ability of clients to source 'ie toga (cloth for toga) and other Samoan exchange goods or cash as well as their capacity to pay all at once or over time. During a symposium called "Samoan Marks: Sacred Marks" held in April 2008 at Unitech in Auckland, his brother Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a Petelo said that New Zealand–based Samoans were the first to insist on paying for tatau in "nontraditional" forms of payment—yet they were the loudest critics! In the sum-

mer of 2008, he had never seen so many Samoans from New Zealand coming to Sāmoa for tatau but wanting to pay in cash!

It is not only the tufuga who are caught up in the politics of tradition; tatau recipients are also scrutinized. Some are subject to comments about the "authenticity" of their tatau, whether it was done "traditionally" (Mallon and Fecteau 2002, 21–37). Questions relate to whether a Samoan did the work or a pālagi, and whether it was rendered by machine or Samoan tattooing tools. There is cultural capital to be claimed through wearing "authentic" marks made "traditionally" in "the Samoan way," by "traditional Samoan" tools. Unchanging motifs, symbols, and practices such as these are important social and political resources for cultural elites. Knowledge and control over what is "tradition" justify claims to titles and social status within our communities.

It shouldn't be surprising that highly visible expressions of culture such as dance and tattooing are mediums through which the politics of tradition are contested. There are other ways in which artistic mediums play a role in what is considered traditional and contemporary. For example, Thomas noted that while "carvings and videos are among the works created by Maori, . . . the former are often described as traditional and the latter as contemporary, because one medium and genre has local and precontact antecedents, while the other does not" (1996, 17).

Popular ideas of traditional arts often locate them and their associated practices in the Island homelands and within a limited range of material and creative possibilities. The farther an ethnic community is from home, the more cultural authenticity is perceived to be under threat, and the more the community members have to struggle to assert their distinctiveness. Works made by Pacific peoples in New Zealand tend to be considered less traditional and more contemporary almost purely on the basis of geography. There are some notable exceptions. Tokelau cultural groups visiting New Zealand to compete in dance have been less culturally conservative than their New Zealand counterparts, incorporating foreign dance moves and styles into their performances. These social pressures around the cultural producers in our communities will inevitably shape the collections and future exhibitions we develop to represent them.

Toward a New Oceania

Most of the developments I have described in this essay go unnoticed by the majority of museum visitors. People who regularly visit exhibitions

are conditioned to expect certain kinds of information with particular displays. Museums have their own cultures and jargon, their own "traditions" and visual vocabularies. In 1994, when Albert and the Pacific Advisory Committees helped us conceptualize "Mana Pasifika," a change in the categories and language we use to represent Pacific peoples in New Zealand museums was overdue. New Zealand's historical relationship with the Pacific Islands, their geographical proximity, and the fact that there are thousands of people of Pacific Islands descent in the country, meant that old stereotypes and models for "other" societies and cultures had to be reexamined.

The same could be said today for some museums in the United States and its territories as well as parts of Europe with strong ties to the Pacific. Although technology and cyberspace are bringing Europe and the United States closer to the Pacific, the connections run at different speeds; they are intermittent and partial. The audiences in the United States and Europe are diverse, some unfamiliar with the Pacific and their countries' colonial ties; the geographical and cultural distances remain huge; and the processes of decolonization are slow, uneven, and complicated. An example of the conceptual distance between differently located audiences can be seen in a book by Auckland Museum anthropologists Roger Neich and Mick Pendergrast that was produced in 1997 and published in New Zealand under the title *Pacific Tapa* (Neich and Pendergrast 1997a); in Europe, it was released as *Traditional Tapa Textiles of the Pacific* (Neich and Pendergrast 1997b). The term "tapa" as a generic term for various forms of decorated bark cloth in the Pacific region probably has little meaning for most Europeans unless they have an interest in Pacific arts. I appreciate the advertising requirements needed to reach markets beyond the Pacific—but this re-titling suggests that change in the categories and language through which Pacific peoples are represented in Europe may be a long time coming.

Albert Wendt's "Towards a New Oceania" was published in 1976. Unknowingly, from 1994 we were putting some of its demands into practice, because the author was in a meeting room, face to face with us, challenging us to do so. We had a modest allocation of space in the new Museum of New Zealand, and an exhibition that perhaps more than anything else celebrated our cultural survival in this institution that represented New Zealand as a nation. Pacific Islanders were still in the frame—as exotic Islanders, yes, but as Islanders who had living art forms and cultural practices with histories. In our diverse Pacific communities' shared presence in

"Mana Pasifika," cultural distinctions were evident. The Island greetings on the ocean-blue wall signaled a multilingual, multicultural welcome—a diversity also captured in Michel Tuffery's giant mural for the exhibition entrance. Old and new were displayed together. Ethnographic specimens and cultural treasures were side by side. As uncomfortable as these juxtapositions initially were to our anthropological and curatorial sensibilities, they have anchored a new approach to our practice. In the current exhibition, "Tangata o le Moana," the story of Pacific peoples in New Zealand, we have moved forward in our thinking about Pacific cultures, their histories, and how they can be displayed.

Increasingly, museums are places where the popular and the academic come together. Reworking the operational vocabulary of our curatorial role has served us well, but the burden of "tradition" remains. It is a part of the language of our visitors and the communities we represent. We have to account for this in our collections, our curatorial work, and our exhibitions. In our representations of the Pacific, of Oceania, in the museum, we need to educate and expand the imagination, and speak *with* our audiences as well as *to* them, or risk alienating some of them. Reflecting on Wendt's annoyed utterances "against tradition," it is heartening to know that his angry words were part of a bigger project, a vision that he committed to paper in a small Pacific literary journal more than thirty-five years ago. His participation in creating a Pacific space, in a public space, in a museum like Te Papa Tongarewa, has moved all of us here a little closer toward a new Oceania.

Notes

1 A second committee was based in Wellington.

2 The team was led by archaeologist and curator Janet Davidson (now retired), with fellow intern Pandora Fulimalo Pereira, exhibition interpreter Grace Hutton, and myself as the core exhibition team.

3 Wendt's comments were recorded in the minutes of the committee meeting held 14 March 1996.

4 In the mid 1990s Wendt had advisory and governance roles in New Zealand's arts funding organization, Creative New Zealand (CNZ). During his time, the funding category "Traditional Arts" was re-titled "Heritage Arts." The Māori arts funding organization also changed its category descriptions. Although space restricts my discussion of Wendt's role in these developments, it is worth noting that his involvement with Te Papa occurred during the same period.

5 As the first Pacific Islander interns, we trained with Davidson. From the late 1980s to her retirement in 2002, her pioneering efforts addressed the challenges of exhibiting, collecting, and describing contemporary material cultures from the Pacific.

6 See Linnekin 1992 for a comprehensive theoretical overview.

7 Wendt's master's thesis was on the Mau, a resistance group that emerged during New Zealand's colonial administration of Sāmoa in the early twentieth century (Wendt 1965).

8 However, Margaret Jolly cited an earlier work on Fiji (France 1969) as a "prescient Pacific antecedent" and also mentioned Wagner 1975, which was republished in 1981 (Jolly 2000, 289n1).

9 The exhibit "Mana Pasifika: Celebrating Pacific Cultures" (1998–2007) was succeeded by "Tangata O le Moana: The Story of Pacific People in New Zealand" in 2007.

10 In Wendt's 1999 article "Afterword: Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body," Samoan language terms are italicized, but whether this was an editorial or authorial decision is not clear.

11 It should be noted that Pacific Advisory Committee members wanted to avoid drab cases and dull walls, and the museum project management team insisted that the only way to get people into the exhibition was to make it colorful and exotic.

12 A long-term exhibition at Te Papa is of ten years' duration.

13 A Te Papa "host" is the equivalent of a docent or guide in US museums and galleries.

14 The exhibition was curated by Kolokesa Mahina-Tuai and myself, designed by Clayton McGregor (lead), Andy Irvine, and Walter Moala (graphics); it received the Silver Award in the Exhibition Design category at the Asia Pacific Interior Design Awards in 2008.

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Abstract

Albert Wendt's career as a writer and academic is well documented. Less widely known are his contributions to cultural development through his service on advisory groups and boards for different institutions. To these roles he brought a strong intellect and influential voice as a cultural activist and administrator. In the early 1990s, Wendt was an adviser for two of New Zealand's leading cultural institutions. One of his key interventions was to critique the use of the terms "tradition" and "traditional" in the representation of Pacific arts and cultural practices. In this article, I reflect on Wendt's written and vocal protestations against the uncritical use of these terms by Pacific Islanders and others in cultural discourse in New Zealand. In particular, I analyze his influence on the curatorial representation of Pacific peoples at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

KEYWORDS: museums, representation, exhibitions, New Zealand, tradition, Albert Wendt