
Renaissance in the Pacific is a fine collective statement about the quest for identity on the part of a multitude of peoples adrift on a great ocean. It is about collectivities who are heirs to a lasting human experience but who exercise limited influence in the modern world; people who have been obliged to (re)discover themselves through books written by others; people struggling to reappropriate their traditional languages, which, in their written form and often in their very meaning, have frequently become prisoners of the Bible. It is about people who, in order to survive collectively, must chart a path between knowledge and understanding, science and wisdom, seeking a way to accommodate themselves to the outside world without losing their souls. Finally, it is about people who, in the maelstrom of the modern world, seek not only to know themselves but, above all, to be known and respected by others.

Renaissance in the Pacific is also a statement about power, since culture and power are inextricably related. Indeed, this fact accounts in large part for the painful history of the publication. It was prepared in 1983 with a view to being published by a French journal, Recherche, Pédagogies, Cultures in time for the Fourth Pacific Arts Festival, planned for the end of 1984 in Noumea. The festival was, of course, canceled for political reasons, and this collection became one of the many casualties, the editors struggling for five long years to retrieve their manuscript from another press!

Politics apart, the difficulties they experienced are to be explained by the originality of the publication. It is in many respects an intellectual “happening,” witness to a convergence of island cultures, of metropolitan languages, of scholars and politicians, of locals and expatriates, all concerned with issues vital to the destiny of the peoples of the Pacific—Who am I? What values do I have? Where do I belong?—formulated in a spirit of dialogue and offering a multitude of bearings but no easy answers. It is clearly conceived in a humanistic tradition, rather than narrow academic scholarship, by sensitive geographers concerned to let Pacific Islanders and those with a long-term commitment to the islands speak for themselves. In many respects it takes up that call to the world that Albert Wendt penned a decade and a half ago in the UNESCO Courier: “The Angry Young Men of Oceania: Young Writers and Artists Are Leading a Cultural Reawakening in the Pacific” (Feb 1976, 4–11, 32), while evoking at the same time the passage from the artist and creator to the decision maker and activist. In this sense the collection bears tribute, by the overall thrust of its reflection and by his presence within its pages, to Jean-Marie Tjibaou, whose violent death was announced at the very time it was going to press.

The volume is, not surprisingly, very much a mixed bag—of interviews, of analyses, of programmatic statements,
and of testimonies. The twenty-one texts are grouped into three sections of more or less equal length, “Identity in Danger,” “Vindication of Identity,” and “Affirmation of Identity,” covering individual Pacific experiences that range geographically from New Zealand to Hawai‘i and from Guam to French Polynesia. Language as a primary expression of identity is a dominant theme in a third of the texts and is seldom absent from the others.

While a logical evolution is clearly expressed in the subtitles, the differences between the texts included in each section are less evident. All, in one way or another, deal with issues of marginalization, dismemberment of traditional worlds, the trivialization of culture, and the concern to find a place in the sun. Some texts are full of sadness, others of anger mixed with naivety, and yet others invoke the contradictions inherent in our own lives. John Kolia proposes a rather painful soliloquy on creative writing and the fate of the author in the modern state of Papua New Guinea. Haunani-Kay Trask celebrates a beloved (and largely idealized?) Hawaiian past and struggles, as a radical feminist, ideologically rooted in the Western world, to liberate “her” people. Otto Manganau Nekitel, in his capacity of linguist, reflects on the implications of the decline of vernacular languages in Papua New Guinea. In the process he bears witness to the agony of an intellectual for whom Abu’, his mother tongue, has been progressively reduced to an object of academic interest. Subramani speaks of a people thrust into the Pacific by imperial design, of something that is emerging rather than something that is a survivor of the past and hence a quest in which the desires of Indo-Fijians converge with those of other Islanders because as he says, quoting Albert Wendt, “we are all in search of that heaven, that Hawai’i, where our hearts will find meaning” (46).

If I must choose, three contributions stand out by the breadth of a reflection that is rooted in a profound familiarity with both the traditional and modern worlds and the necessary reconstruction of island cultures. Permanent Secretary Leonard Maenu’u, in a text marked by a rare intelligence, writes of the destruction of “the very social fabric upon which Solomon Islands’ societies have been built over hundreds of years” (32). The structure and the laws of the modern state are so endowed with the heritage of colonial administrators and Christian missionaries that “the gods, the tribes, and the land so basic to indigenous association and community structure have all disappeared, leaving the people exposed and vulnerable” (35). Geographer Gabriel Tetiarahi evokes the confrontation and the convergence of cultural patterns in Pape‘ete, of the birth of new, urban Maohi who “find in (the Protestant) religion a spiritual comfort which helps them in their material unhappiness” (81). For him, the future is necessarily a mix of both the past and the present, a syncretic product that nevertheless produces something authentically Maohi. Finally, politician Jean-Marie Tjibaou, in an interview given in 1984, speaks of the parallel “search for identity and the acquisition of elements from other cultures” (78),
the need to fully grasp the configuration of self in order to handle the confrontation with other. He reflects on the revalorization of "Custom" as a strategy for self-recognition and dignity: "It is in its totality that tradition must give a sense to the life of a Melanesian" (76). But at the same time he sees this reappropriation of the past not as an end in itself but as providing "models for the integration of the traditional and the modern" (76).

Where Maenu'u signals a terrible loss, and where Tetiarahi proclaims the existence of a new, albeit painful, identity, Tjibaou makes a plea for reconciliation, not only between Kanaks and non-Kanaks, but also between the town and the country, the state and the tribe. In so doing he invokes themes which are present in many of the contributions to Renaissance in the Pacific but which he alone has the capacity to translate into one broad and fundamentally generous vision of the world. Now that he has gone one can only hope that we will have more time to linger on his words.

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This is an important book, being one of the few published works by Maori on the ferment about race relations in New Zealand during the last twenty years. The Maori demographic resurgence, urbanization, education, new forms of organization and revival of old ones, together with a consciousness of decolonization overseas, have given rise to increasing Maori protest against loss of identity and the threat of assimilation. Dr Walker has been both a leading participant in that protest and a skillful discussant of its objectives. As an associate professor of Maori studies at the University of Auckland, for many years chairman of the Auckland District Maori Council and a member of the New Zealand Maori Council, and a founding organizer of the Mana Motuhake Party formed in 1980 to contest the four Maori seats in the New Zealand parliament, he speaks with considerable authority. Since 1973 he has contributed a regular column, Korero 'discussion' in the New Zealand Listener, the country's weekly journal of media programs and debate. Nga Tau Tohtohe brings together in a single volume most of the important Korero columns over a span of fifteen years.

Walker vehemently rejects the official New Zealand ideology, "We are one people," in favor of a biculturalism in which fundamental features of Maori culture serve Pakeha (white) New Zealanders as well as Maori in overcoming inequalities, alienation, and confusion in urban society, and the "excesses of capitalism." Many New Zealanders would agree, and it is fair to say that in terms of recognition and respect for the Maori language, investigation of historic grievances, devolution of authority to Maori institutions, and recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi in domestic legislation and in the courts, considerable progress has been made, very much as a result of the