

*The Dream of Joseph: Practices of Identity  
in Pacific Art*

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*for Rangihiroa Panoho*

And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told *it* his brethren, and they hated him yet the more.

And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:

For, behold, we *were* binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf.

And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? Or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and his words.

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.

And he told *it* to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What *is* this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?

*Genesis 37, 4-11*

The title of the first major exhibition of Polynesian migrant art in New Zealand alluded to this passage: “*Te Moemoea no Iotefa*” is “The Dream of Joseph” in Rarotongan, and the cover of the catalog featured a *tivae-vae manu*, or Cook Island appliqué quilt, which depicted the submission of sheafs, stars, and moons before Joseph’s sheaf. Although the specific importance of this story is not readily apparent, it is not surprising to find a biblical allusion privileged in this way in an exhibition of Pacific Islanders’ work. Those once denigrated as pagans by Victorian missionar-

ies now quite appropriately affirm their own religiosity in contrast to the heathenism of tourists in the islands and whites in America, New Zealand, and Australia. This turning of the tables, together with the indigenous uses of imported fabrics, quilting techniques, and a certain range of designs and motifs, helps to explain why, in the Pacific Islands, an anthropology that evades cultural transpositions, colonialism, and modernity seems increasingly perverse and improbable. To the same extent, however, the unmistakable localization of these introduced media, styles, and religious references permits the old views of “modernization” and “imperialism” to be dismissed as homogenizing processes determined by European or American centers. In seeking languages more apt to these developments than those of “acculturation” or “syncretism,” anthropologists have turned to ideas such as hybridization, transposition, and creolization, and there is little doubt that most Pacific Island cultures are creolized in the sense suggested by Ulf Hannerz: they draw in some consequential way on two or more historical sources, and their postcontact forms have had time to develop and integrate, to constitute a novel sociocultural language. If this is not yet the case in some rural areas, in urban centers there is certainly a “sense of a continuous spectrum of interacting forms, in which the various contributing sources of the culture are differentially visible and active” (1987, 552). Unlike Hannerz, however, I am not convinced that any tightly formulated theory of cultural creolization is likely to be adequate to the range of recombinations that present themselves; nor, in abstract conceptual terms, will it necessarily be more enlightening than ideas such as syncretism. If the metaphor is at all productive, its politicized usage in Black British cultural studies is at least as relevant to the examples I wish to discuss as the more strictly linguistic models. With respect to the process of critically appropriating elements from the dominant culture, Kobena Mercer has suggested that

The subversive force of this hybridising tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where creoles, patois and black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of “English”—the nation-language of master-discourse—through strategic inflections, reaccentuations, and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic, and lexical codes. (Quoted in Parry 1991, 40)

The suggestion that creolization is a politicized process involving assertions of cultural autonomy is certainly valuable, but this language

of resistance is unevenly relevant to Pacific histories. Cultural appropriations, such as adoptions of Christianity, have certainly led to locally distinctive forms of what could be seen as a “master-discourse,” but the extent to which they have subverted either indigenous or colonial hierarchies has been extremely variable. In many cases what is conspicuous is an accommodation between introduced institutions or practices and indigenous cultures, rather than a carnivalizing subversion of foreign and colonial imports. From a political point of view, it may therefore be premature to assume that hybridization is necessarily progressive, or has any other specific political value, just as from an anthropological point of view it is important not to shift from a fetishization of traditional cultures to an uncritical celebration of transposition and globalization. It is equally important that the politics of both traditionalist and manifestly hybrid cultures not be interpreted through a narrow model of resistance, which presumes that “dominant” and “subaltern” positions are readily recognizable and accords subaltern action a morally and analytically privileged role. What might be gained from the current array of theoretical shifts is not the substitution of one privileged bearer of culture and value for another, but a sense of the historiographic and critical practices that might permit choices to be made strategically rather than compulsively and unreflectively—that is, a sense of their contingency, of risks and gains and losses.

Moreover, a deep irony lies in the anthropological shift away from the frame of bounded, stable, original cultures, toward the scene of diversity, derivation, and improvisation: A mark of the creolization of proliferating local identities is their deployment of precisely the concept that has become discredited among western anthropologists, namely the idea of a singular culture. Although the intransigently distinctive identities of indigenous populations and Pacific Islander migrants in settler colonies such as Australia, Hawai‘i, and New Zealand may facilitate the dismissal of the idea that local cultures have been effaced by colonialism or globalization, all paradoxically have been homogenized to the extent that everyone can deploy and recognize this discourse of cultural difference. Not only in Oceania, but in Amazonia, Canada, Macedonia, and just about everywhere else, claims are enunciated through a discourse that associates a certain ethos, certain customs, and certain traditions with a particular people; in its almost museological identifications between culture and the heritages of particular ethnic or national groups, this discourse is in many

ways peculiarly modern and anthropological. In other words, all cultures may be different, but a different culture is something everyone has.

Whatever answer an anthropologist gives to one set of questions about the nature of cultural hybridization as a process, another issue must be addressed: How is the condition of creolization and transposition represented by people whose cultures manifestly have been radically altered as a result of either extended colonization or migration? Paul Gilroy has written recently about the tension in the Black British scene between an “over-integrated sense of cultural and ethnic particularity” and “the restless, recombinant qualities of our affirmative political cultures” (1991, 4). A similar opposition between essentialist and pluralistic constructions might be identified in the Pacific and Australia. There are discourses—most notably official discourses—that purvey notions of singular, original, and authentic cultural forms, and on the other hand practices and discourses of identity that deal with its innovative, creolized, and derivative constitution. I focus on the way these issues surface in Aotearoa or New Zealand, not in popular perceptions among any particular group, but in a specific and institutional context, specifically the responses of those curating museum and gallery exhibitions, people who are in a sense peculiarly preoccupied with the work of fashioning culture. Their practices are not necessarily representative of anything else, but are, I submit, important.

The single most important exhibition mounted from or in New Zealand in recent decades is undoubtedly “*Te Maori*,” which was very well received in New York and other American venues in 1984, and subsequently heavily attended in the four main New Zealand cities.<sup>1</sup> The positive reception in the United States was evidently crucial as an external validation of Māori art and culture, which Pakeha (white New Zealanders) had long been insensitive to or dismissive of; the exhibition no doubt did much to bolster collective Māori pride, and is frequently cited as a key element of the cultural renaissance of the 1980s. The importance of the show arose not only from its content, but also from the extent to which its presentation was authorized by Māori and marked by chants and rituals such as *tapu* lifting that emphasized the sacred character of the treasures. Although the groups that traveled with the exhibition in the United States were small, the opening ceremony in Auckland was attended by some three thousand people (*Auckland Star*, 28 June 1987).

For those unaware of the evolution of Māori politics over the last

twenty years, but caught up in critical debates around the exhibition of “primitive” and “tribal” arts, the progressive effect of *Te Maori* might be less striking than the rigidity of its traditionalism. The remarkable power of the carving cannot be denied; nor should the curators’ claim that the show ranked with other “great world exhibitions” such as Tutankhamen and the terracotta figures of China. I have less of a problem with this sort of assertion, which is only the kind of thing that curators say in order to stay in the aesthetics business, than I do with the presentation of Māori culture, via the artifacts, as not only unambiguously traditional, but also emphatically archaic, not only appropriately as spiritual, but also inappropriately as mystical. This primitivist (or auto-primitivizing) imagination radically excluded any sense of the history of Māori cultures, of dynamism prior to European contact, and dynamic responses to colonization. The show was devoted not to the full range of traditional material culture, but largely to carvings in wood or nephrite, produced by men rather than women, and associated with ancestors and mythology rather than with domestic life or practical activities. If this, and the fashion in which the objects were photographed in catalogues, emphasized the otherworldly character of the works,<sup>2</sup> the interest in avoiding the technical orientation of an older style of conventional ethnographic display is entirely understandable. The exclusion of neotraditional forms was so rigid that carving done after 1850 was almost unrepresented. Although a great deal of later material resembles earlier forms, and must be of comparable aesthetic quality, and though there is a continuing tradition of carving up to the present, the curators appear to have wanted to restrict, as far as possible, the number of works produced with iron rather than stone tools. If this evocation of a tribal art out of time is likely to worry outsiders such as myself, now anxious to historicize their cultural constructions and exhibitions, some insiders found the show problematic on similar grounds. A number of contemporary Māori artists questioned the conservatism and exclusions of *Te Maori*; their concerns were given form in a sculpture by Selwyn Muru, constructed from recycled wood obtained on demolition sites. “In his own eclectic and innovative sculpture Murupaenga encourages his viewer to look beyond the orthodoxy of ‘Te Maori’ to those areas of Māori art more receptive to the Western aesthetic” (Panoho 1992, 12). The piece featured the tattoos of contemporary Māori youth, and through its substitution of a metal tap for a carved penis, questioned Mobil’s sponsorship of the *Te Maori* exhibit;

the company was, at the same time, allegedly polluting traditional Māori lands and fishing grounds, and the New Zealand environment in general.<sup>3</sup>

Much the same critique might have been advanced against a subsequent exhibition, "*Taonga Maori*," which like "*Te Maori*" toured overseas (in Australia over 1989–1990) before being shown at the National Museum in Wellington. It shared the approach of the earlier show, even though a wider range of artifacts were included—notably women's fiber products as well as carvings—and the emphasis on pre- or early-contact material was less restrictive. The range of treasures was again extremely impressive; my reservations concerned the strategy of exhibition, and should not be seen to detract from the importance and value of the *taonga* displayed. Whereas the detailed entries in the exhibition catalog conveyed a limited amount of information concerning the provenances and histories of particular pieces, the exhibition captions were virtually devoid of contextualization, and thus made the objects primarily available for appreciation within a generic Māori culture, marked by its spirituality and by the pervasive mystical associations of *tapu* and *mana*. It was not suggested that this culture had engaged with outside influences, or responded dynamically to British colonization, although it was presented as the opposite of white modernity. According to the catalog's exposition of Māori culture: "To return to the *marae* from the brashness of urban life is to return to a simpler time, to a place of enduring human values" (*Taonga Maori* 1989, 27). "The Maori psyche" was said to revolve "around tribal roots, origins, and identity"; the art "reflects the total environment and the many forces that operate within it." "Although many people see contradictions in the world, the Maori view of the cosmos, the creation, and our ancestors is coherent and unified" (*Taonga Maori* 1989, 25, 45). The risk here is that the representation of Māori culture as essentially spiritual, ancestral, and ecologically sensitive does little more than draw it into conformity with an essence that has long been identified and valorized in other tribal populations—an appreciation that has always been conditional on their remaining true to that elemental and traditional nature. The negative feature of such representations is, of course, that indigenous modernity is unacknowledged and illegitimate. Although in Wellington (but not in Australia), the "*Taonga Maori*" exhibit was physically proximate to a separate large exhibition of contemporary Māori painting and sculpture,<sup>4</sup> the only recent works included in the exhibit itself were craft objects and paintings that conformed to tra-

ditional designs, suggesting that while media might change, the form and meaning persisted. While the authors of the catalog noted, for instance, that nineteenth-century weavers incorporated colored wool, as took place in many other parts of the Pacific, they immediately asserted that “what has remained unchanged by those influences is the intrinsic values” (*Taonga Maori* 1989, 52). It is noteworthy that the Sandy Adsett painting that was included sustained a similar reading—emphasizing the persistence of forms—while other work of his that might have been chosen referred directly to the struggle against British colonization and the Treaty of Waitangi. Change was thus presented as a matter of shifting media rather than historical processes, and alluded to even on the first count only in order to deny its significance.

Exhibitions of the “*Te Maori*” or “*Taonga Maori*” type could be charged with presenting a restricted and dehistoricized understanding of the art and material culture at issue; but this could be dismissed as an anthropologist’s or an academic’s problem that has little bearing on the understanding, and perhaps the empowering effect, of such shows in New Zealand. It could also be argued that the rendering of Māori culture and identity in these traditionalist terms has a legislative and pernicious effect: that the distinctly nontraditional and urban existence of most Māori can only be recognized as decay, loss, and inauthenticity. Again, this view would be inadequate if it were merely the product of a textual reading of the exhibitions, which lacked any grounding in an account of what the audience made of the shows, but critique of this kind, however crude it appears as a gloss on the debated, migrating, multivalent public displays and performances that exhibitions are, is salient to the wider antinomies of indigenous identity in New Zealand. In Alan Duff’s controversial novel *Once Were Warriors*, some characters see the poverty, alcoholism, drug use, and criminality among their own Māori people as part of the descent of a noble tradition into senseless toughness and violence. Young urban Māori are presented, in a fashion reminiscent of late nineteenth and early twentieth century representations of the deculturated native, as degenerate products of the worst elements of both indigenous and white society.<sup>5</sup> This image, which might be captioned “Not the Noble Savage,” is not foreign to the idealized indigenous culture of the “*Taonga Maori*” exhibit, but surely the other side of that coin.

This discourse of authenticity is not the only game in town. A good deal of contemporary painting has quite different agendas, and it could be

argued that these agendas are not restricted to what might be considered “the arts” in any narrow or elitist sense, but are also present in other domains such as popular music, dress, tattooing, and graffiti. Dealing with that range would involve a much longer story, and I focus here for convenience on the exhibition that I alluded to earlier—*The Dream of Joseph*, which was curated by Rangihiroa Panoho at the Sarjeant Gallery in Wanganui, but which also went to Auckland and elsewhere. In bringing forward this material, I am shifting not only from traditional to contemporary products, but also from the work of Māori to that of migrant Pacific Islanders; these situations are less remote than the categories of indigenous and diasporic would imply. Whereas an argument about the differences between essentialist and pluralist identities could have more neatly juxtaposed exhibitions of old Māori work and contemporary Māori painting and sculpture, the works of migrants raise an issue of geographical displacement, which may be suggestive in a broader way.

In his introductory text in the accompanying publication, Panoho alluded to the “stored culture,” “the material culture fashioned in the sublime,” that can be encountered in places such as the Auckland Museum, but then suggested that the old artifacts, the *taonga*, have come alive with the influx of migrants from Samoa, Tokelau, Fiji, the Cook Islands, and Tonga.

One remembers growing up with Tongan neighbours. Neatly planted rows of taro down one side of the house. The root. The smell of pale pink/purple taro boiling in the big metal pot with coconut creme. Plastic lei around Catholic pictures in the living room and sometimes huge woven mats on the floor. . . . Big extended family meetings around Christmas and mass in a strange language. . . . Samoan cricket in a Grey Lynn park in summer. Heavy body tattoos, lavalavas and people, always lots of people [see Figure 1]. Minutes away through cracks in a fence Cook Island tivaevae manu and taorei can be seen drying in a local backyard. . . . Down at Freemans Bay, Niuean women are busy cutting and assembling large amounts of different coloured plastics [see Figure 2]. Fertiliser, lunch bag wrappers, drinking straws, polybubble lei. Industrial wrapping plastic band is woven skilfully into mats, kete and hats. The umbilical cord with the islands has not been severed. The traditions are still there—the visual vocab has simply been extended. (Panoho 1990a, 4)

There may be a certain ambiguity here that is also discernible in the statements of some of the artists quoted in the same publication, as to how far contemporary art practices “simply extend” the traditions in the



FIGURE 1. Melvin Webb, *Pacifica Magnifica*, 1982. Watercolor on paper, 760 × 1670 mm. (Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui)



FIGURE 2. Lei, various plastics, mainly by Samoan women, for sale at the Tu Fa'atasi Polynesian cultural festival, March 1995. Similar lei appeared in *Te Moemoea no Iotefa*.

sense suggested here, or whether they reflect some deeper hybridization. As Johnny Peninsula said, “I don’t want to be tied in one area. Look at what you can get from both cultures and get rid of what you don’t need. . . . I’m thinking both ways—Polynesian and European” (Panofo 1990a, 33).

If all the contemporary works in the exhibition evince this cultural hybridity, in the sense that their producers have been trained in art schools and draw on a variety of European and American modernist and post-modernist styles, as well as on Polynesian motifs and subjects, the notion of “thinking both ways” becomes inadequate as soon as one reflects on its implication of an equal division of thoughts or perspectives. One painter, Ioane Ioane, who incorporated pieces of *tapa* (barkcloth) into his pictures (Figure 3) responded to a question about aspects of his work that arose from his Samoan heritage:



FIGURE 3. Ioane (John) Ioane, *Eddie*, 1985. Oil, pastel, acrylic, and tapa on board, 1000 × 1200 mm. (From the art collection, University of Auckland Library)

Apart from the material I don't deliberately go out to paint something Samoan. Whatever is Samoan in me comes out. It's inevitable my cultural back-ground reveals itself, maybe in the colours. I enjoy working with bright colours. I don't really refer to our legends. I don't feel I'm competent enough to use the material to make figurative or symbolic images. I'm a student of material. I look at the materials, work with them, other things come later. I don't use the traditional symbols. I leave that to other artists. (Panoho 1990a, 34)

An anthropologist or cultural critic preoccupied with the derivative character of postcolonial cultures and ideologies might find the depth of color, and the palette in Ioane's *Eddie* reminiscent of Gauguin—who surely has shaped perceptions of the Polynesian body more profoundly than any other artist. But the posture of Ioane's subject is radically different from that typically employed in outsiders' portraits of Islanders and is marked by what seem to be disproportionately thick legs and slender arms. Eddie is leaning backwards, away from the viewer, in a posture of relaxation; but he faces, and almost confronts the viewer, though his line of sight seems less to meet the viewer's than pass by it. Ioane said he stays "away from deep meaningful paintings" and his "works are non-political"; if the politics of vision and perspective I detect here can be disavowed, this could be the case, because the painting simply shows a man as the artist sees him, that is, as absolute presence and unavailable to, or dependent on, the viewer's desire.

Another artist, Jim Vivieaere, suggested that the distinctiveness of Pacific Islander art lay in "the freedom and the liberty to use the Polynesian motif" (Panoho 1990a, 24). Something else is arguably more conspicuous in his own work; if Ioane's portrait is of an Islander's subjectivity rather than an Islander as subject, Vivieaere deals more explicitly with the problem of the ways Polynesians have been represented. A witty piece, *6 Tahitians, 2 in Leningrad, 4 in Papeete* (Figure 4), juxtaposes an inferior reproduction of a Gauguin painting and a colonial postcard, implying that both engage in the same voyeuristic exoticism, and drawing attention to the ludicrous remoteness of the painting from the place and people depicted (the Gauguin Museum in Tahiti contains no Gauguin paintings). This underlines the extent to which Islanders have been imaged not for themselves but for others, while suggesting that ironic reappropriation can be effected by an Islander who fixes the pictures to the unmistakably indigenous space of a woven pandanus



FIGURE 4. Jim Vivieaere, *6 Tahitians, 2 in Leningrad, 4 in Papeete*, 1990. Collage and color photocopy, 405 × 285 mm. (Collection of Rangihiroa and Adrienne Panoho)

sheet.

In other cases, while a carving style may be nontraditional, the artist claims a greater degree of engagement with what is distinctly indigenous. In a statement translated from Samoan, Iosefa Leo said, “I concentrate, to feel the image, the meaning in the form of the stone. I refer to the stories of the bible, of Fa’a Samoa, the proverbs and the legendary people” (Panofo 1990a, 21; Figure 5). Fata Feu‘u similarly expressed an interest in referring to legends, in “working with the qualities legends have” but also insisted on the need to “modernise Polynesian/Pacific art/Samoan art



FIGURE 5. Iosefa Leo, *Matai*, 1990, Hinuera stone, height 1190 mm. (Collection of the artist)

because I believe that if it's not done the artform will die" (Panoho 1990a, 22–23). In his case, continuities are marked by the use of bark-cloth, tattoo, and Lapita pottery motifs (Figure 6), and the relationships to myth emerge as general evocations of "unity and harmony."

In his interview with Panoho, Sale Jessop expressed a desire to find a "personal and individual" "visual language so that you could say that's definitely a Niuean style." These propositions are rather slippery. I suggest that they mark a key slippage. I quote a longer extract from this particular interview, which, like the others I've quoted, was with the exhibition's curator, Rangihiroa Panoho.

SJ Drawing and photography are something visual that are an alternative to legends and traditions—literature and song being passed down. The visual side is another narrative to keep traditions alive.

RP Do you see other Polynesian artists as involved with similar concerns?

SJ I think most of the contemporary Pacific Island artists that I know were all born in New Zealand. I know the majority of them are frustrated that they don't know anything much about their cultural backgrounds. They haven't experienced it. I think each and every one of us are trying to find a



FIGURE 6. Fatu Feu'u, *Nuanua Malama* (Light of the Rainbow), 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 2610 × 1750 mm. (Collection of Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, Auckland)

personal and individual language that . . .

RP expresses your identity . . .

SJ Yes that's true but for me there's no prominent Niuean artist here. I'd like to find a visual language so that you could say that's definitely a Niuean style. Not that I want to discover it I just want to contribute to it. I just hope that the main thing for our art is that we don't lose the traditions.  
(Panoho 1990a, 37)

What is puzzling here is the juxtaposition of a language that is personally specific and individual with the notion of “a Niuean style” that seems to be associated with traditions and with the cultural backgrounds that, Jessop suggested, are relatively inaccessible for most Polynesian artists born in New Zealand. At one point the man interviewed here stumbles and searches for words: we are all trying to find a personal language, that . . . that does what? The interviewer prompts him: that expresses your identity. In this unstructured, conversational exchange, there is a curious mixture of overgeneralization and a very specific understanding of what figures as “identity.” Thinking of modernism's fetishization of personal creativity, one might assume that what any artist seeks is an idiom that is appropriate or true to the self that person wants to express: in this sense the missing phrase that Panoho supplied fell naturally into place, but Jessop's response had a “yes, but” structure that displaced it as a line of interpretation of his own work. Taking for granted that “identity” could only refer to his ethnicity or “cultural” background, he implied that the absence of any “prominent Niuean artist” in New Zealand renders problematic the prospect of an art that expresses this particular fraction or variant of Polynesian identity. The statement that he would like to contribute to, but not “discover,” a truly Niuean style could be taken, not as an expression of personal modesty, but as an oblique and polite way of declaring a lack of interest in that particular project—as opposed to the interest signaled by the statement about a “personal” language that could be perceived as being cut off, rather than supplemented, by the interviewer. Even though Jessop made it clear earlier in the interview that his interest—particularly in his drawings incorporating photographs—was in representing *himself* (and not, say, Niue), this might seem a tenuous suggestion on the basis of a distinctly ambiguous interview. Unless, that is, we look at his pictures (Figures 7 and 8), which are literally inscribed by highly localized and particular autobiographical references, firmly within the Auckland migrant scene, that itemize the circumstantial problems rather than cultural essentials: “my son said daddy I don't wanna go to

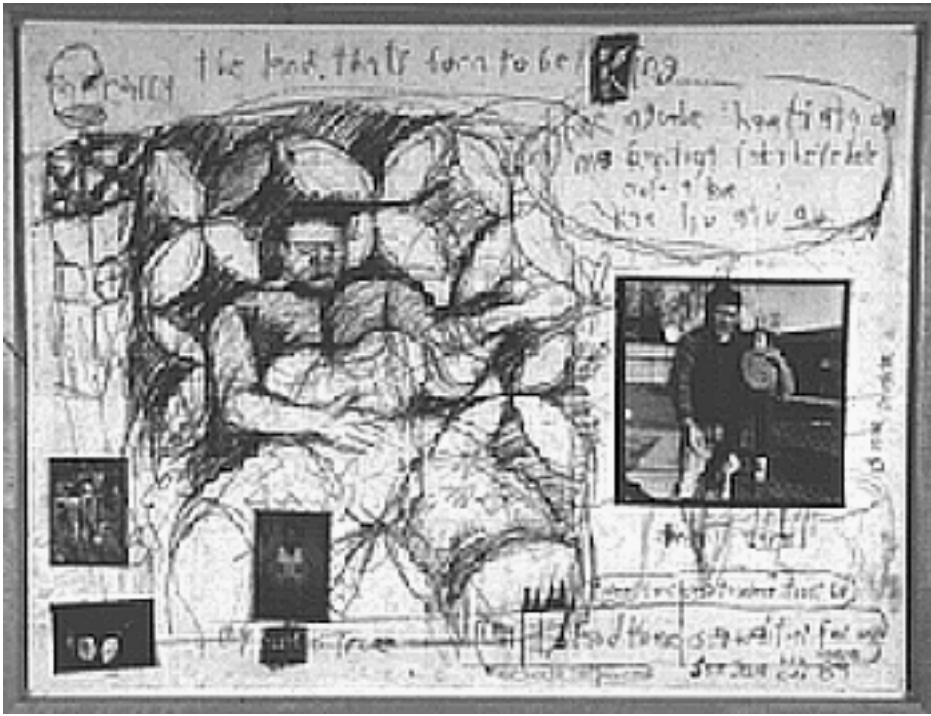


FIGURE 7. Sale Jessop, *Carry the Land that Was Born to Be King*, 1989. Collage, charcoal, pencil, and cibachrome, 760 × 1020 mm. (Collection of the artist)

school / the teachers a jerk he makes me think I'm a fool." Although these compositions possess so much energy that they could hardly be seen to be depressing or even pessimistic, many of the phrases reflect the all-too-familiar difficulties of racism and the migrant experience, bluntly conveying a sense of failure that is understood not as a social problem but as a personal one of unfulfilled promise: "dear mummy / dear daddy / you had plans for me"; "should've known better than to cheat a friend"; "wasted the chance I've been given," and so on.

A "personal and individual language": the incorporated photographs (cibachrome imitations of polaroid snapshots) itemize painters and their paintings, domestic interiors, and people with children. One assumes that these, and the litter of phrases (or snatches of lyrics) are drawn like diary entries from a very immediate environment: the same-day dry cleaning is not an arbitrarily chosen feature of the urban landscape, but a shop across the street or around the corner. The most direct expression of this

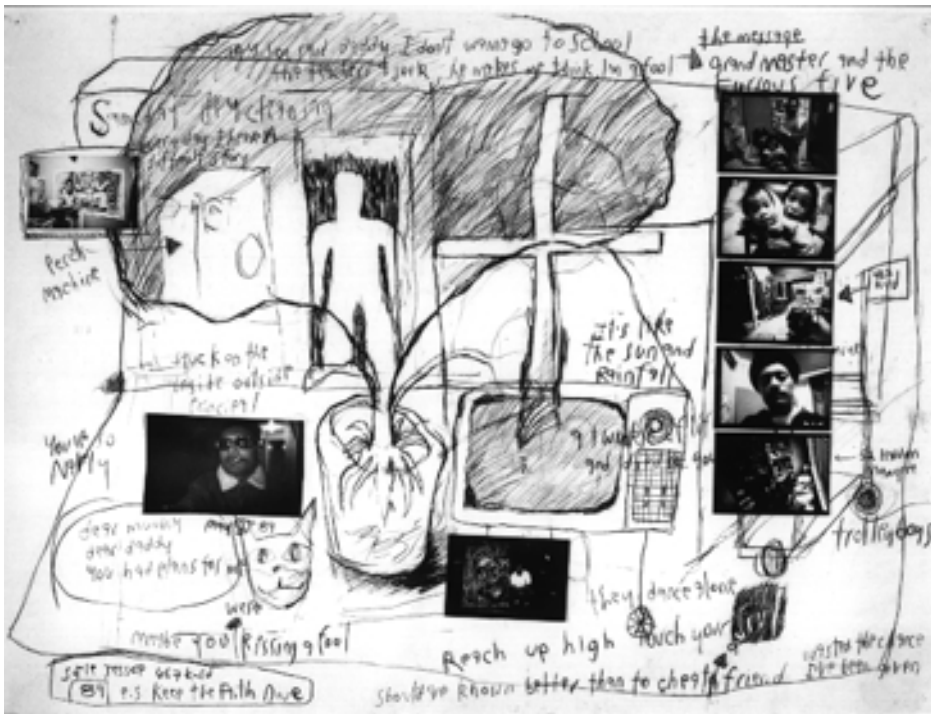


FIGURE 8. Sale Jessop, *Untitled*, 1989. Collage, charcoal, pencil, and cibachrome, 760 × 1020 mm. (Collection of Louis Vaillant)

particularization is the marking of some of the photographs with addresses, and Jessop's localization of his own signature at 467 k-rd. Given that the picture is untitled, with no master caption that authorizes one particular take among the number of possibilities, this house-numbered signature arguably provides the point of coherence. These works also have direct Polynesian references, which I will refer to again: there are prominent lines in Niuean and phrases such as “my Island home is waiting for me.” At this point the slippage between Jessop's interview statements and these images is most conspicuous. This kind of allusion does not make the picture act as a visual vehicle for the transmission of tradition (though that might be apt enough as a gloss on, say, Iosefa Leo), but renders island Polynesia as an externality or a reserve of authenticity that is separate from the painter's milieu but available to it, as a *specifically distant* reference point. Like Australian Britons, or any other creolized whites in colonies of settlement, Pacific Islander migrants in

countries such as New Zealand have a conflicted interest in the privileging of old and new “homes,” of here and there, that tends to make one country the site of their projects and notions of enterprise and the future, and the other the site of their traditions and more conservative values. The appendage of “P.S. Keep the faith Niue” to one of Jessop’s signatures might be emblematic of a response that does not so much preserve roots as parade a problematic and disharmonic association. Modernity has long played off its tangible presences against its idealized absences. For creolized migrants it is not a question of pastoral nostalgia for communities or traditions that have vanished in time, but the relation with home societies that stand and survive, though geographically remote—not “the world we have lost,” but the “island home” that will always be waiting.

*The Dream of Joseph* is far from being a homogeneous statement or argument about what is to be represented and the relation of that representation to Pacific traditions or Pacific media. It is not just an issue of continuity at one level and novelty at another—traditional themes in new bottles, or vice versa. What the interview conversations convey—to a greater degree than the pictures themselves—are tensions about identity that an idea of culture might legislate.

Not only the works that constitute *The Dream of Joseph*, but the exhibition as a whole must be considered a creative effort that experiments in playful and serious ways with geographic distance, recollected pasts, traditional and borrowed motifs, and institutional frames; and it is quite a daring effort, if not wholly coherent. Panoho rejected the reverse exclusivity that often marks ethnic identity politics, and confounded several hierarchical distinctions that generally govern curatorial practice, by drawing “four strands of art activity” into the exhibition: first, Pacific Islands material culture from museums; second, weaving and carving by Pacific Islanders currently in New Zealand; third, work by white artists “which constitutes a response to Pacific Island subject and motif”; and finally, “work by contemporary Pacific Island artists utilising a Western aesthetic—to draw on and interpret their particular island cultures” (Panoho 1990a, 2). Museum artifacts were placed with contemporary art,<sup>6</sup> folk crafts with paintings, archive photographs with contemporary images, and Pacific artists among white appropriators of Pacific style (Figures 9 and 10). The last issue was addressed specifically in one of Panoho’s inter-



FIGURES 9 and 10. Exhibition view, *Te Moemoea no Iotefa*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, February 1990. The work on the left of figure 10 is a painting by John Pule; on the right is a piece of nineteenth-century Niuean barkcloth. (Photos by Nicholas Thomas)

views with Fatu Feu'u:

FF [W]ith [Tony] Fomison I know that some of his images were derived from Polynesian things and Maori art. . . . That is encouragement to myself and Polynesian art.

RP So it was a positive thing despite the fact that these artists were appropriating motifs and subjects from an outside culture?

FF No. I cannot see it as a negative thing at all. I thought they were doing justice to the Polynesian origins of the art forms.

It seems, then, that “culture” here is not property that can be lost or stolen. For the most part, though, the transpositions, inclusions, and juxtapositions were not discussed in text made available to the exhibition viewer, still less theorized or rationalized, but were simply presented, as a highly energized field of distinct traditions and permeable boundaries, with scope for a variety of appropriations. In its implied undoing of privileged genres, and the plurality of displacements and recontextualizations, the exhibition echoed some of the interests and strategies of critical post-modernism. It could even be seen to go beyond “more sophisticated” agendas in contemporary theory in certain ways. In its space for plastic lei and bedspreads, very ordinary domestic “craft” products, things that are not in themselves signs of cultural radicalism, *The Dream of Joseph* questioned separations between household goods, commoditized artworks, and artifacts that are appropriately canonized in galleries or museums. This profoundly counterhierarchical orientation may explain the curator’s interest in alluding to Joseph’s dream, though in his speech at the exhibition’s opening he referred to the “coat of many colours” Joseph is said to have been wearing before being cast into a pit by his angered brethren. Abstracted from the narrative, the “many colours” evoke the cultural pluralism that clearly inspired the curator. Born in Papua New Guinea, having an Auckland childhood, and friends who were Tongan, Samoan, and Rarotongan, he wanted the exhibition “to talk to people about the colours, patterns, the history, the legends, the language . . . the variety of Pacific artforms . . . also the spectrum of contemporary activity inspired by that aesthetic” (Panoho 1990b). However, Joseph’s dream is also a narrative of the folly of personal hubris, which distorts kinship relations and threatens to invert the proper relations of respect between parents and children. In the context of perceived differences between the individualized Pakeha art scene and traditional work grounded in kin-

ship and families, the story may also resonate with the threat that personal egotism and creativity may appear to present to tradition and community.

If a pluralistic interest in recombinations might be thought to marginalize the political question of who can legitimately represent what, the exhibition nevertheless included a range of European images of Pacific Islanders and implied a new way of seeing them. While Vivieaere's *6 Tahitians* overtly engaged in playful reframing, similar comments and critiques were implied by the recontextualization of engravings and photographs in the space of the gallery and on walls shared with indigenous works as well as old artifacts. The juxtaposition of colonial representations with contemporary material is in some cases simply confusing: when confronted with the engraving from an edition of Cook's third voyage (Figure 11), most viewers, I think, are unable to relate this eighteenth-century interest in a classicized exotic, a Tongan expression of Oriental despotism, to other material exhibited. If it is useful in this context at all, the suggestiveness of the print may arise from its very distance and incongruity (in contrast, say, with Gauguin): out of the range of foreign symbols



FIGURE 11. Unknown engraver after John Webber, *Poulaho, King of the Friendly Islands, Drinking Kava*, circa 1784–1786. Engraving, 200 × 343 mm. (Collection of Auckland City Art Gallery)

and languages that might be appropriated, some are obviously far more salient than others.

In other cases, however, connections are more direct and significant, some at the level of explicit reference within works, others presented through caption commentary. Thomas Andrew's Samoan photographs of the 1890s are given some prominence (Figure 12), on the catalog's title page, for instance, and while these particular images are relatively appreciative, they are manifestly distancing, particularly in the specimen-like isolation of the *Samoan Chief* in the vacant space of the studio. A good deal might be said about Andrew's work, but what is interesting here is the contrast set up by the curator between this sort of colonial image and recent photos of Samoan tattooing in Auckland (Figure 13). The casualness, relative crowding, and domesticity of this image, the unselfconsciousness of the couple depicted with respect to the oddness of their own conjuncture—her full-length dress against his near-nakedness and striking tattooing—makes this a very intimate picture. Whereas there might otherwise be something incongruous about the site of this tattooing in a living room in a Polynesian suburb of Auckland, its very domesticity here suggests that cultural displacement is not a problem internal to the scene. It is perceived by the viewer, a consequence of the peculiarly rigid notions of authenticity that anthropologists find it so difficult to extricate themselves from. That familiar politics of tradition and identity that legislates differences between genuine and less genuine Islanders seems to be obviated, or bypassed, in this picture; this, at least, is a reading enabled by the gallery's invitation to compare it with the colonial images. Orientalism's law that "they cannot represent themselves" is shelved if not repealed here.

The title of Paul Gilroy's essay, which I quoted near the beginning of this paper, is "It ain't where you're from/It's where you're at." Earlier, I also quoted Ioane Ioane on the representation of traditional Samoan symbols: "I leave that to other artists." A good deal of the work I've discussed might be seen to privilege the scene of composition rather than an ancestral homeland; despite its diversity the exhibition as a whole is taken to be a powerful statement for "cross-fertilization" and "cross-cultural ebb and flow," to use the words of a New Zealand reviewer (*Dominion*, 20 July 1991). With respect to the essentialist and pluralistic positions referred to earlier, Gilroy noted that "each outlook attempts to compensate for the obvious weaknesses in the other camp but so far there has been little open



FIGURE 12. Thomas Andrew, *Samoan Chief*, circa 1895. Photograph, 253 × 202 mm. (Private collection, New Zealand)



FIGURE 13. Mark Adams, *Farrington Road, Glen Innes*, 1982. Cibachrome photograph. (Collection of the photographer)

and explicit debate between them” (1991, 5).

In the New Zealand case, too, there is no sense that the messages of the *The Dream of Joseph* and *Taonga Maori* engage one another: one is situated in a museum, the other in a gallery; the former represents an overtly creolized range of art practices and stands in sharp contrast to the latter’s powerful projection of a traditionalist aesthetic. *Joseph* privileges diasporic creativity and speaks across the racial divisions that have undone the cherished national myth of racial harmony in New Zealand; *Taonga Maori* fetishizes an unacculturated authenticity, yet gives it great political force in a national and international arena. The statements and images that constitute *The Dream of Joseph* are themselves by no means unambiguous; what is conspicuous, in particular, are the gaps between works that are thoroughly creolized, often in terms of media, style, and

content, and commentary suggesting that the art is primarily a new vehicle for enduring traditions. Despite the diverse agendas of the works produced, there is a governing sense that Polynesian artists should be expressing their ethnic identities; paradoxically, the depth of creolization is disguised by the introduced idea that identity is above all about belonging to a culture: it ain't where you're at, it's where you're from.

\* \* \*

*THIS ARTICLE was written in 1991, on the basis of casual visits to the exhibitions referred to, and readings of the associated catalogs and other material available in Australia, before I began serious research on contemporary art and debates about identity in New Zealand. The article was not published, but was shown to a number of artists and curators in New Zealand; I especially appreciated conversations with Rangihiroa Panoho and artists who participated in The Dream of Joseph, including Fatu Feu'u, Sale Jessop, John Pule, and Jim Vivieaere. It is now nearly seven years since the exhibition took shape, and the views the artists expressed at the time, or conveyed through their work, do not necessarily reflect their concerns now. I appreciate the assistance of Celia Thompson of the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, who provided a number of illustrations and facilitated permissions.*

*Although a few minor corrections have been made, the article has not been updated for publication here, and I have not been able, in this context, to respond to some useful suggestions made by an anonymous reader for The Contemporary Pacific, notably including the point that migrant artists in New Zealand are in profoundly different situations from those remaining in the islands, where they lack many opportunities and access to a gallery system and art market. I hope to pursue this issue in future publications focused on art in the independent Pacific states.*

## Notes

1 This discussion of "Te Maori" is not based on a personal viewing; I did see "Taonga Maori" in both Sydney and Wellington.

2 This was manifest in newspaper headlines such as "Back into Another Dimension," *Auckland Star*, 26 June 1987.

3 See, for example, the letter headed "Sponsors' Maori Myopia," *Auckland Star*, 1 September 1987.

4 The National Museum and the National Gallery, where the paintings were

displayed, were then on the upper and lower floors of the same building. (1995 postscript: The two institutions have now merged as the Museum of New Zealand/*Te Papa Tongarewa*).

5 See Alan Duff, *Once Were Warriors* (1990), and his more recent book, *One Night Out Stealing* (1992). (1995 postscript: Since this article was written Duff's books have been extensively discussed; see for instance Thomas (1993) and Thompson (1994). The release of the film of the same title in 1994 changes the terms of discussion very significantly: key features of the tone and plot were changed, and Māori who were critical of the book were far more positive about the film, which had a tremendous impact in both New Zealand and Australia).

6 Some of what has been selected from the museum domain itself emphasizes transcultural appropriations: the barkcloth depiction of a bicycle.

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### Abstract

This essay explores presentations of identity in two recent exhibitions of Polynesian art. The first and more widely celebrated of these, *Te Maori*, emphasized traditional artworks; the second, consisting of work by migrant Polynesians, presented contemporary culture and identity in more mobile and fluid terms. The idea that personal identity is formed by cultural background and tradition nevertheless remains dominant in individual artists' discussions of their concerns and motivations.

KEYWORDS: art, identity, Polynesia