

'Epeli Hau'ofa: The Magical Metaphor Man

By Karlo Mila-Schaaf

Oceania

is her name

goddess of water

the blue taupou

smile, serene green

budda beautiful

her energy flies

peacock butterflies

resting bright on black

winged days

she is the dream

of slate blue clean

sea turtles for memory

sea horses for change

on grey washing days

I dream her

(Mila, 2008, p. 70).

Unlike many of the people gathered here today to remember the man, I only ever met 'Epeli Hau'ofa on the page. I have no personal anecdotes, no human touches, just the experience of meeting someone's mind on paper. I have engaged only with the quality of his thoughts. It is a testament, perhaps, to the power of the written word and the impact of ideas; that 'Epeli has come to mean so much to me.

After the recent Tsunami, the shock of the loss and devastation, it was in 'Epeli's words I sought comfort. He wrote that the ocean is what we have in common, that it has always shaped and continues to shape our cultures (Hau'ofa, 2008). He writes:

"We draw inspiration from the diverse patterns that have emerged from the successes and failures in our adaptation to the influence of the sea... We may even together make new sounds, new rhythms, new choreographies, and new songs and verses about how wonderful and terrible the sea is, and how we cannot live without it." (Hau'ofa, 2008, p. 57)

Inspired by 'Epeli, his thoughts and thinking, I wrote the following poem.

We are reminded
in the most brutal way
that we are all connected.

We are reminded
in the most brutal way,
that our relationship
with the ocean
is never
on our
own terms.

We are reminded
in the most brutal way
why dominion over nature
was never a part
of our epistemology.

We are reminded
in the most brutal way
why we know ourselves to be
simply a part
of a sacred continuum
of sacred relationships
where even
the ocean is alive,
where even
the night birds feel,
where even
the rocks have spirit,
where even
the blood red waves
know why they are red.

We are reminded
in the most brutal way
the balance of life between

is sacred, va tapuia,
endlessly interconnected
across distance, space, time, species, life, death.

We are reminded
in the most brutal way
why long before
Christ arrived
on these shores
we have always been
a people of spirit
a people of faith.

As a writer, as a young Tongan woman of commoner descent, of dubious “hafa kasi” heritage, who grew up in Palmerston North, far from Tonga, language-less and uprooted – both privileged and disadvantaged by the same set of circumstances – ‘Epeli’s greatest gift to me was an expansive mind and an inclusive metaphor.

For ‘Epeli realised – long before it was fashionable – long before we had regional conferences on epistemology and long before Benedict Anderson (1991) coined the term “imagined communities” that “human reality is a human creation: And that if we fail to create our own, someone else will do it for us” (Hau’ofa 1993, p. 128-9).

Growing up in Aotearoa, being born and bred here, I have become attuned to the ‘small violence’ of being imagined through mainstream New Zealand’s eyes. I have become overly familiar with the narrow range of ways that Pacific peoples are imagined here over and over again using the same depleted stock of metaphors. It is such a slim and limited repertoire of images (rugby players, overstayers, street kids, hip-hop dancers – and you only have to look at the recent National Party government delegation to the Pacific to get a sense of how we are imagined). We are churchgoing. We are fat. We are fat women in colourful island dresses that make jokes about our private parts and unmentionables and avoid smear testing and laugh too loud. We are young men in hoodies with strong, muscular, dangerous bodies who fit *Crimewatch* profiles. We are good at sport and singing and on the rugby field we contribute speed and brawn and natural flair and talent rather than brain or discipline.

How we are imagined, inevitably can become the cage in which we become captured. How we are imagined, as well as *how we imagine* counts. The way that we imagine ourselves, as Pacific peoples, and *who is in* and *who is out*, and whose behaviour exceeds the limits of our comfortable criteria and ideas about “who” and “what we are”. This is contested and political. Do you happen to be too white, too feminist or too liberal, too gay, too self-mutilating, too outrageous, too much of a stickler for time or too upwardly mobile to comfortably fit within the boundaries of the Pacific social imaginary?

The power to impose your vision of the world upon others is what Bourdieu (1985) calls “symbolic struggle” over the cultural production of meaning. It is a struggle over the way that we imagine ourselves, include and exclude, it is about the power to produce human reality and to “determine, delimit, and define the always open meaning of the present (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 728).

According to Bourdieu, "To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making" (1989, p. 23). 'Epeli Hau'ofa understood how important our social imaginary was to us. When other smart minds and bright young stars in the Pacific turned themselves to law and medicine, economics and politics; 'Epeli devoted himself to the way that we imagine ourselves. He battled. He was a lone warrior for a long time, upon the contested terrain of social reproduction and the social imaginary. He saw that it was worth fighting for. He thought that the way we imagine ourselves *counted*. He believed that this has political and practical, as well as deeply spiritual, implications.

His enduring legacy will be the ocean as a transformative metaphor. For here was a man that understood the power of metaphor! Milan Kundera writes in his book "The Unbearable Lightness of Being": "Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love." (Kundera, 1984, p. 11) 'Epeli hoped a single metaphor could give birth to a regional identity that changed the way we imagined ourselves. As a Tongan, perhaps it is no surprise that he did not trifle with metaphors, but rather understood the magic of their power. A Tongan word close in meaning to metaphor is *heliaki*. The anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler (1993) writes of *heliaki* and Tongan society:

"The important aesthetic concept here is *heliaki*, indirectness (to say one thing but mean another), which requires special knowledge and skill to compose and understand. The composer manifests *heliaki* in metaphor and layered meaning, skirting a subject and approaching it repeatedly from different angles. Hidden meanings must be unraveled layer by layer until they can be understood, for one cannot apprehend the poetry by simply examining it. The most important Tongan arts are verbal, incorporating social and political philosophy and encapsulating the ideal of indirectness" (Kaeppler 1993, p. 497)

Metaphor, like the ocean, is something we Pacific peoples share. As in many other societies whereby relationships between people are pivotal to survival and sustenance, to use Augsberger's words:

"A rich and elaborate code system of metaphor and simile may communicate arguments with complex and colourful rhetorical content that serves profound social purposes." (Augsberger, 1992, p. 31)

Comparative research shows a preference for "indirect verbal interaction" among collectively oriented cultures, in contrast with the preference among individualistic cultures for "straight talk" (Ting Toomey, 1988).

I am someone who grew up exposed to both influences: highly individualistic as well as having a deeply collective inheritance. I am someone who is, and who has always been, committed to speaking and writing and telling a truth - of sorts - committed to finding and articulating my own awkward and sometimes painful truth. 'Epeli models a way of speaking truth safely, a way of speaking truth through metaphor; by taking the long, colourful way, the scenic version, but never being afraid to pull a *heliaki* punch. He was never afraid of salting his work and peppering his words with insights that flavour somewhat dangerously what is being spoken, served and swallowed. The loud message of 'what cannot be said' booming with muscle behind the rhetorical dancing and ducking of 'what can be said': the fist of his truth connecting, every time.

Although 'Epeli, more than most, sought to explain how there were many truths, preferred truths, flexible truths, different versions of reality that existed for different purposes in Pacific cultures. And despite recognising the multi-dimensionality of truth, still more than anyone, it is 'Epeli who models the magic of metaphor, the speaking of the unspeakable through multi-layered, elusive and murmuring words and images (often somewhere near the Nederends). He was a master of arts and farts. But he helps us to learn to make our beasts beautiful enough, camouflaged enough, and well-armored enough to speak them out loud. Our beasts become chameleon-like and clever, so that we can speak those bull-rushing words, those bleeding words, in a context of intense interconnection, of needing to save face, not only yours, but those whom you are relationally and genealogically connected to.

How do we speak our awkward truths, so raw that they glimmer and glisten, so painful that we cannot carry them inside us silent? We do this through metaphor. Fellow poet, Fijian and Tongan writer Tagi Qolouvaki describes this ultimately liberating but also dangerous creative process in the following poem:

Untitled/secrets

I release

Relinquish

These secrets

This one

And this one

About my mothers

About myself

I will peel the skin off this secret

Spoon out its soft

Insides

Feed them

To you

This one I will crack open

Like a coconut

Under the blunt edge of a machete

I will pour out its juice

And bathe you in it

So you awaken

And I heal

I will re-seed

My center

Fill my

Insides

Anew

With sweetness

Grow new skin

Soft and brown

I will retrieve

My soul from

Sunlit

Stained glass

Temples

Of childhood

And peace will leak

Through my pores

Like sweat

The scent of guava

(Courtesy of Tagi Qolouvaki)

I think it is no accident that Pacific women, in particular, proliferate in poetry. Queen Salote, Konai Helu-Thaman, Momoe Von Reiche, Grace Molisa, Sia Figiel, Tusiata Avia, Teresia Teiawa, Selina Tusitala Marsh, Serie Barford, Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabard, and a growing thicket of young emerging voices: Leilani Tamu, Grace Taylor, Helen Tionisio and Courtney Meredith. You'll find us in the narrow lines of poetry. That's where the girls are. Here we are saying the things that can't be laid bare, cloaked in the suggestive shimmy of simile. We are mobilising the metaphoric ambivalence of the maybe. We are veiled in allusion. We dance, move, mimic with our words, suggestive and sensuous. We say nothing straight, but we say everything that needs to be said. Everybody hears us, which version they feel is dependent and multi-possible in the wonderful fluidity between fiction and truth-telling. This is where we speak ourselves. This is where we find each other. As Sia Figiel writes in her poem, for young artists:

"To a Young Artist in Contemplation"

Y(our) anguish
is a flame
only the night
understands
a journey
with no beginning
no middle
no end

y(our) pain
a child of the salt
in the sea
that surrounds you
a journey
with no beginning
no middle
no end

listen to the stars
for like the night
they too know of
your loneliness
and to the waves
in the distance
for they alone
hear you cry
in silence
the moon will
touch the part of you
- no one else sees
the one that cries
in the day

between your smiles
your laugh
birds will bring joy
from far away
you will hear it
on the tongues of leaves
-eternal joy of
the free spirit that you are
press it gently
to your heart
it is y(our) only possession
the one that will
carry you
carry you
carry you
throughout y(our) journey

and when no one else listens
and when no one else understands you
go back to the sea
and scream
(in silence)
And the mana of salt
will heal
over and over
as you begin y(our) journey
again
and again
and again

(Figiel, 1998, pp. 1-2)

It is no surprise that Sia turns to the metaphor of ocean, to the healing power of salt, to the ever-flowing source of all of y(our) journeys. The alternative to speaking and writing ourselves and our secrets, the anguish of silenced tongues is captured in a poem

I wrote called "Paper Mulberry Secrets". This describes for me the violence and internal wounds of collusions of silences and the appeal instead for the thin veneer of appearances.

Paper Mulberry Secrets (where the real stories are)

Women sit
among each other
and beat heartwood
into the finest veils
of ngatu.

Stories stripped, sun-dried
soaked, scraped clean.
bark beaten lean.

Fragile layers
so thin
the tapa is barely connected
to its own self.

If you sit quietly in a village long enough
you hear this silence in the distance
mallet on anvil
like the beat of a headache.

Spider-webbed
paper promises
drying on dyed wooden blocks
like second skins
draped over the midribs
of leaves
in backyards.

Pages pasted
like hands clasped in prayer
to be decorated
with natural dyes
and elaborate strokes
suggesting symmetry
and perfect painted order.

You see,
you cannot peel this back
to the heart
without breaking it.

(Mila, 2008, p. 29)

But there is something much worse than silence. And this is something 'Epeli understood very well. That is someone else imagining you 'for you'. Someone else imposing their vision of the worlds over everything you do. Someone else telling your stories and dreaming words coming out of our mouths. Someone else writing us, dreaming us, small, insignificant, backwards, native, simple, loud, poor, history-less, savage. Someone else dreaming us with their own limited repertoire of metaphors, stereotypes, grass skirts, and what Shigeyuki Kihara so appropriately encapsulated in the word: "ooga booga". As 'Epeli said and I repeat it: "Human reality is human creation. If we fail to create our own someone else will do it for us by default." (Hau'ofa 1993, p. 128-9)

'Epeli's enduring legacy, for me, was purposively taking charge of our social imaginary, caring for it, investing in it with the magical power of metaphor. His inclusive metaphor, aimed to transcend the territorial ways we imagine our identities, rooted in land, vested in fonua / whenua / vanua. 'Epeli, in conflict ridden Fiji, understood that a vision of unity could not be found in a land-based metaphor. He understood that an inclusive identity had to move beyond our existing and ancient metaphors often rooted in associative rights to land and land tenure. And although we are attached to the magic and power of our land-derived identity metaphors and although they will endure, the less attractive practices - such as strategic burying of the dead to settle land claims and disputes and so on, do come to mind.

'Epeli looked to the vast, expansive and inclusive ever-movement of the ocean. He did this also in a context of being familiar with how the Pacific region was perceived on a global stage. He had enough international experience to see how it was constructed and imagined on the level of the global economy, as speaks of atolls, resource poor, scattered, tiny islands; mere specks on a global stage. He drew on the power and vastness of the ocean. He writes:

“It is shared by all... It is the inescapable fact of our lives. What we lack is the conscious awareness of it, its implications, and what we could do with it. (Hau’ofa, 2008, p.54).

The Pacific Ocean is the largest and deepest ocean in the world. It covers more than a third of the earth’s surface and provides more than half of its free water. ‘Epeli was clear that he was not merely talking about the sea as an economic development resource but also as an imaginative one. He wrote:

“The sea is not merely our omnipresent, empirical reality, equally important it is our most wonderful metaphor for just about anything we can think of.” (Hau’ofa, 2000, p. 51).

As a writer, as a young Tongan woman, of commoner descent, of dubious “hafa kasi” heritage, who grew up in Palmerston North, far from Tonga, language-less and uprooted, the ocean is also *my metaphor*. ‘Epeli’s metaphor is vast enough, wide enough; open enough, to include even me.

Far from the soil of Tonga, my fonua burned in a hospital furnace (as was the practice here). Born in Aotearoa and trying to learn the trick of standing upright here, in a land where I have no ancestral claim or connection to. As New Zealand poets before me, such as Allen Curnow wrote:

Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year
Will learn the trick of standing upright here.

(Curnow, 1997, p. 220).

And as Glenn Colquhoun (1999) expressed so well in his book, “The Art of Walking Upright”, the challenge of belonging to the land in a context of not being tangata whenua or Maori is a defining issue for most thinking / feeling people who came here as immigrants and feel the ache of the land, who feel the injustice of the history which has bequeathed the land to us, in quarter acre buyable blocks.

But ‘Epeli offers us the fluid hope of the ocean. The ocean is another source of sustenance, connection and identity for those of us in the Pacific. It is the all encompassing and inclusive metaphor of the sea. No matter how much we try to divide her up and mark her territory, she eludes us with her ever-moving expansiveness. The ocean is what we have in common.

I will end with a final poem called: “A Place to Stand” and hope to honour ‘Epeli in my own choice of metaphors.

A place to stand

it was on the marae atea
in the blue-veined moonlight
somewhere near Halcolm
I learned
turangawaewae

i felt the earth
beneath me tremor

a wiri
a wero
a haka

it was
named
known
sure of itself
connected
to awa
maunga
iwi

rich red mud
shuddering

haemoglobin
in the soil

transforming
landscape entire
into urupa

i
could not
stand upright
there

'ka mate ka mate'
beating eardrum

in the earth

enter

Oceania

her blue body

promising

distant shores

a blue taupou

follow that star

seek

unfamiliar

constellations

speak alien tongues

follow the bloodlines

to the terra incognita

of your own body

flat-footed

i began to swim

(Mila, 2008, p.9)

References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London; New York: Verso.
- Augsberger, D.W. (1992). *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1985b). The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups. *Theory and Society*, 14(6), pp. 723-744.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social Space and Symbolic Power. *Sociological Theory*, 7(1), 14-25.
- Colquhoun, G. (1999). *The Art of Walking Upright*. Wellington: Steele Roberts.
- Curnow, A. (1997) 'The skeleton of the great moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch'. In *Early Days Yet*. Auckland: AUP.
- Figiel, S. (1998). *To a young artist in contemplation: poetry and prose*. Fiji: USP.
- Hau'ofa, E. (2008). *We are the Ocean: Selected Works*. Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i.
- Hau'ofa, E. (1993). Beginnings. In E. Waddell, V. Naidu & E. Hau'ofa (Eds.), *A new Oceania: rediscovering our sea of islands* (pp. 2-16). Suva: USP.
- Kaeppler, A. (2002). The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth design: Imagery, Metaphor and Allusion. In A. Herle, N. Stanley, K. Stevenson & R. Welsch. (Eds.), *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning* (pp. 291-308). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kundera, M. (1984). *The unbearable lightness of being*. California; Harper and Row.
- Mila, K. (2008). *A Well Written Body*. Wellington: Huia.
- Qolouvaki, T. (2009) *Untitled / Secrets*. Unpublished poem courtesy of Tagi Qolouvaki.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). Intercultural conflict styles: A face-negotiation theory. In Y. Kim & W. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp. 213-235). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.