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Towards a New Oceania

Albert Wendt

1. A Rediscovery of Our Dead

*'These islands rising from wave's edge -
blue myth brooding in orchid,
fern and banyan, fearful gods
awaiting birth from blood clot
into stone image and chant -
to bind their wounds, bury
their journey's dead, as I
watched from shadow root, ready
for birth generations after . . .'*

(from *'Inside Us the Dead'*)

I belong to Oceania - or, at least, I am rooted in a fertile portion of it - and it nourishes my spirit, helps to define me, and feeds my imagination. A detached/objective analysis I will leave to the sociologist and all the other 'ologists who have plagued Oceania since she captivated the imagination of the *Papalagi* in his quest for El Dorado, a Southern Continent, and the Noble Savage in a tropical Eden. Objectivity is for such uncommitted gods. My commitment won't allow me to confine myself to so narrow a vision. So vast, so fabulously varied a scatter of islands, nations, cultures, mythologies and myths, so dazzling a creature, Oceania deserves more than an attempt at mundane fact; only the imagination in free flight can hope — if not to contain her — to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain.

I will not pretend that I know her in all her manifestations. No one — not even our gods — ever did; no one does (UNESCO 'experts and consultants' included); no one ever will because whenever we think we have captured her she has already assumed new guises — the love affair is endless, even her vital statistics, as it were, will change endlessly. In the final instance, our countries, cultures, nations, planets are what we imagine them to be. One human being's reality is another's fiction. Perhaps we ourselves exist only in one another's dreams.

In our various groping ways, we are all in search of that heaven, that Hawaiki, where our hearts will find meaning; most of us never find it, or, at the moment of finding it, fail to recognise it. At this stage in my life I

have found it in Oceania: it is a return to where I was born, or, put another way, it is a search for where I was born:

*One day I will reach the source again
There at my beginnings
another peace
will welcome me*

(from *'The River Flows Back*
by Kumalau Tawali, Manus,
Papua New Guinea)

Our dead are woven into our souls like the hypnotic music of bone flutes: we can never escape them. If we let them they can help illuminate us to ourselves and to one another. They can be the source of new-found pride, self-respect, and wisdom. Conversely they can be the *aitu* that will continue to destroy us by blinding us to the beauty we are so capable of becoming as individuals, cultures, nations. We must try to exorcise these *aitu* both old and modern. If we can't do so, then at least we can try and recognise them for what they are, admit to their fearful existence and, by doing so, learn to control and live honestly with them. We are all familiar with such *aitu*. For me, the most evil is racism: it is the symbol of all repression.

*Chill you're a bastard. . .
You have trampled the whole world over
Here your boot is on our necks, your spear
into our intestines
Your history and your size make me cry violently
for air to breathe*

(from *The Reluctant Flame*
by John Kasaipwalova,
Trobriands)

Over the last two centuries or so, that most fearful chill, institutionalised in colonialism, was our perpetual cross in Oceania:

*Kros mi no wandem yu
Yu kilim mi
Yu sakem aot ol
We blong mi
Mi no wandem yu Kros*

*Cross I hate you
You are killing me
You are destroying
My traditions
I hate you Cross*
(from *Kros* by Albert Leomala,
New Hebrides)

The chill continues to wound, transform, humiliate us and our cultures. 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.

This understanding would better equip us to control or exorcise it so that, in the words of the Maori poet Hone Tuwhare, *we can dream good dreams again*, heal the wounds it inflicted on us and with the healing will return pride in ourselves — an ingredient so vital to creative nation-building. Pride, self-respect, self-reliance will help us cope so much more creatively with what is passing or to come. Without this healing most of our countries will remain permanent welfare cases not only economically but culturally. (And cultural dependency is even more soul-destroying than economic dependency). Without it we will continue to be exploited by vampires of all colours, creeds, fangs. (Our home-grown species are often more rapacious). Without it the tragic mimicry, abasement, and humiliation will continue, and we will remain the often grotesque colonial caricatures we were transformed into by the chill. As much as possible, we, mini in size though our countries are, must try and assume control of our destinies, both in utterance and in fact. To get this control we must train our own people as quickly as possible in all fields of national development. Our economic and cultural dependency will be lessened according to the rate at which we can produce trained manpower. In this, we are failing badly.

In a flash he saw in front of his eyes all the wasted years of carrying the whiteman's cargo.

(from *The Crocodile* by
Vincent Eri, Papua,
Papua New Guinea)

If it has been a waste largely, where do we go from here?

*My body is tired
My head aches
I weep for our people
Where are we going mother*

(from *Motherland* by Mildred
Sope, New Hebrides)

Again, we must rediscover and reaffirm our faith in the vitality of our past, our cultures, our dead, so that we may develop our own unique eyes, voices, muscles, and imagination.

2. Some Questions and Possible Answers

In considering *the Role of Traditional Cultures in Promoting National Cultural Identity and Authenticity in Nation-Building in the Oceanic Islands* (whoever thought up this mouthful should be edited out

of the English language!) the following questions emerged:

- (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 usually make between the culture(s) of our urban areas (meaning *foreign*) and those of our rural areas (meaning *traditional*) a valid one?

Are not the life-styles of our towns simply developments of our traditional life-styles, or merely sub-cultures within our national cultures? Why is it that many of us condemn urban life-styles (sub-cultures) as being *foreign* and therefore *evil* forces contaminating/corrupting the *purity of our true cultures* (whatever this means)?

- (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 impure*?
- (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 one's culture? And who should do this interpreting?

These questions (and others which they imply) have to be answered satisfactorily before any realistic policies concerning cultural conservation in Oceania can be formulated. The rest of this section is an attempt to answer these questions.

Like a tree a culture is forever growing new branches, foliage, and roots. Our cultures, contrary to the simplistic interpretation of our romantics, were changing even in pre-papalagi times through inter-island contact and the endeavours of exceptional individuals and groups who manipulated politics, religion, and other people. Contrary to the utterances of our elite groups, our pre-papalagi cultures were not perfect or beyond reproach. No culture is perfect or sacred even today. Individual dissent is essential to the healthy survival, development, and sanity of any nation — without it our cultures will drown in self-love. Such dissent was allowed in our pre-papalagi cultures: what can be more dissenting than using war to challenge and over-throw existing power — and it was a frequent occurrence. No culture is ever static and can be preserved (a favourite word with our colonisers and romantic elite brethren) like a stuffed gorilla in a museum.

There is no state of cultural purity (or perfect state of cultural goodness) from which there is decline: usage determines authenticity. There was no Fall, no sun-tanned Noble Savages existing in South Seas

paradises, no Golden Age, except in Hollywood films, in the insanely romantic literature and art by outsiders about the Pacific, in the breathless sermons of our elite vampires, and in the fevered imaginations of our self-styled romantic revolutionaries. We, in Oceania, did not/and do not have a monopoly on God and the ideal life. I do not advocate a return to an imaginary pre-papalagi Golden Age or utopian womb. Physically, we are too corrupted for such a re-entry! Our quest should not be for a revival of our past cultures but for the creation of new cultures which are free of the taint of colonialism and based firmly on our own pasts. The quest should be for a new Oceania.

Racism is institutionalised in all cultures, and the desire to dominate and exploit others is not the sole prerogative of the papalagi. Even today, despite the glib tributes paid to a Pacific Way, there is much racial discrimination between our many ethnic groups, and much heartless exploitation of one group by another. Many of us are guilty — whether we are aware of it or not — of perpetuating the destructive colonial chill, and are doing so in the avowed interest of *preserving our racial/cultural purity* (whatever this means). Maintaining the status quo using this pretext is not only ridiculous but dangerous. The only valid culture worth having is the one being lived out now, unless of course we attain immortality or invent a time machine that would enable us to live in the past or future. Knowledge of our past cultures is a precious source of inspiration for living out the present. (An understanding also of other peoples and their cultures is vital). What may have been considered *true* forms in the past may be ludicrous now: cannibalism and human sacrifice are better left in the history books, for example. Similarly, what at first may have been considered *foreign* are now authentic pillars of our cultures: Christianity and the Rule of Law, for instance. It won't do to over-glorify the past. The present is all that we have and we should live it out as creatively as possible. Pride in our past bolsters our self-respect which is necessary if we are to cope as equals with others. However, too fervent or paranoid an identification with one's culture — or what one deems to be that culture — can lead to racial intolerance and the like. Hitler too had a Ministry of Culture! This is not to claim that there are no differences between cultures and peoples. Or to argue that we abolish these differences. We must recognise and respect these differences but not use them to try and justify our racist claims to an imaginary superiority.

All of us have individual prejudices, principles, and standards by which we judge which sub-cultures in our national cultures we want to live in, and those features of our national cultures we want conserved and those we want discarded. To advocate that in order to be a *true Samoan*, for example, one must be *fully-blooded Samoan* and behave/think/dance/talk/dress/and believe in a certain prescribed way (and that the prescribed way has not changed since time immemorial) is being racist, callously totalitarian, and stupid. This is a prescription for cultural stagnation, an invitation for a culture to choke in its own body odour, juices, and excreta.

Equally unacceptable are outsiders (and these come in all disguises including the mask of *adviser* or *expert*) who try to impose on me what they think my culture is and how I should live it and go about *preserving* it. The colonisers prescribed for us the roles of domestic animal, amoral phallus, the lackey, the comic and lazy and happy-go-lucky fuzzy-haired boy, and the well-behaved colonised. Some of our own people are trying to do the same to us, to turn us into servile creatures they can exploit easily. We must not consent to our own abasement.

There are no *true interpreters* or *sacred guardians* of any culture. We are all entitled to our truths, insights, and intuitions into and interpretations of our cultures.

No national culture is homogenous. Even our small pre-papalagi cultures were made up of sub-cultures. In Polynesia, for instance, the life-styles of priests and ariki/alii were very different from those of the commoners, women, and children. Contact with papalagi and Asian cultures (which are made up of numerous sub-cultures — and we, in Oceania, tend to forget this) has increased the number of sub-cultures or life-styles within our cultures. Many urban life-styles are now just as much part of our cultures as more traditional ones.

To varying degrees, we as individuals all live in limbo within our cultures: there are many aspects of our ways of life we cannot subscribe to or live comfortably with; we all conform to some extent, but the life-blood of any culture is the diverse contributions of its varied sub-cultures. Basically, all societies are multi-cultural. And Oceania is more so than any other region on our sad planet.

3. Colonialism: the Wounds

Let me take just two facets of our cultures and show how colonialism changed us.

[a] *Education*

Kidnapped

I was six when

Mama was careless

She sent me to school

alone

five days a week

One day I was

kidnapped by a band

of Western philosophers

armed with glossy-pictured

textbooks and

registered reputations

'Holder of B.A.

and M.A. degrees'

I was held

*in a classroom
guarded by Churchill and Garibaldi
pinned up on one wall
and
Hitler and Mao dictating
from the other*

*Guevara pointed a revolution
at my brains
from his 'Guerilla Warfare'*

*Each three-month term
they sent threats to
my Mama and Papa*

*Mama and Papa loved
their son and
paid ransom fees
each time*

*Each time
Mama Papa and grew
poorer and poorer
and my kidnappers grew
richer and richer
I grew whiter and
whiter*

*On my release
fifteen years after
I was handed
[among loud applause
from fellow victims]
a piece of paper
to decorate my walls
certifying my release*

(by Ruperake Petaia,
Western Samoa)

This remarkable poem aptly describes what can be called the *whitefication* of the colonised by a colonial education system. What the poem does not mention is that this system was enthusiastically welcomed by many of us, and is still being continued even in our independent nations — a tragic irony!

The basic function of Education in all cultures is to promote conformity and obedience and respect, to fit children into roles society has determined for them. In practice it has always been an instrument of domesticating humankind with. The typical formal educational process

is like a lobotomy operation or a relentless life-long dosage of tranquillisers.

The formal education systems (whether British/New Zealand/Australia/American/or French) that were established by the colonisers in our islands all had one main feature in common: they were based on the arrogantly mistaken racist assumption that the cultures of the colonisers were superior (and preferable) to ours. Education was therefore devoted to *civilising* us, to cutting us away from the roots of our cultures, from what the colonisers viewed as darkness, superstition, barbarism, and savagery. The production of bourgeois *papalagi* seemed the main objective; the process was one of castration. The missionaries, irrespective of whatever colonial nationality or brand of Christianity they belonged to, intended the same conversion.

Needless to say, the most vital strand in any nation-building is education but our colonial education systems were not programmed to educate us for development but to produce minor and inexpensive cogs, such as clerks/glorified office boys/officials/nad a few professionals, for the colonial administrative machine. It was not in the colonial interests to encourage industries in our countries: it was more profitable for them that we remained exporters of cheap raw materials and buyers of their expensive manufactured goods. So the education was narrowly *academic* and benefitted mainly our traditional elite groups who saw great profit in serving our colonial masters who, in turn, propped them up because it was cheaper to use them to run our countries. The elitist and *academic* nature of this education was not conducive to training us to survive in our own cultures.

Colonial education helped reduce many of us into a state of passivity, undermined our confidence and self-respect, and made many of us ashamed of our cultures, transformed many of us into Uncle Toms and reconants and what V.S. Naipaul has called *mimic men*, inducing in us the feeling that only the foreign is right or proper or worthwhile. Let us see how this is evident in architecture.

(b) Architecture

A frightening type of *papalagi* architecture is invading Oceania: the super-stainless/super-plastic/super-hygienic/super-soulless structure very similar to modern hospitals, and its most nightmarish form is the new type tourist hotel — a multi-storied edifice of concrete/steel/chromium/and air-conditioning. This species of architecture is an embodiment of those bourgeois values I find unhealthy/soul-destroying: the cultivation/worship of mediocrity, a quest for a meaningless and precarious security based on material possessions, a deep-rooted fear of dirt and all things rich in our cultures, a fear of death revealed in an almost paranoid quest for a super-hygienic cleanliness and godliness, a relentless attempts to level out all individual differences in people and mould them into one faceless mass, a drive to preserve the status quo at all costs, and ETC. These values reveal themselves in the new tourist

hotels constructed of dead materials which echo the spiritual, creative, and emotional emptiness in modern man. The drive is for deodorised/sanitized comfort, the very quicksand in which many of us are now drowning, willingly.

What frightens me is the easy/unquestioning acceptance by our countries of all this without considering their adverse effects on our psyche. In my brief lifetime, I have observed many of our countries imitating what we consider to be *papalagi culture* (even though most of us will swear vehemently that we are not!). It is just one of the tragic effects of colonialism — the aping of colonial ways/life-styles/attitudes/and values. In architecture this has led and is leading to the construction of dog-kennel-shaped papalagi houses (mainly as status symbols, as props to one's lack of self-confidence). The change from traditional dwelling to box-shaped monstrosity is gathering momentum: the mushrooming of this bewildering soulless desert of shacks and boxes is erupting across Oceania because most of our leaders and style-settlers, as soon they gain power/wealth, construct opulent dog-kennels as well.

Our governments' quest for the tourist hotel is not helping matters either; there is a failure to understand what such a quest is bringing. It may be bringing money through the middle-aged retired tourist, who travels from country to country through a variety of climates, within his cocoon of air-conditioned America/Europe/N.Z./Australia/Molochland, but it is also helping to bring these bourgeois values, attitudes, and life-styles which are compellingly attractive illnesses that kill slowly, comfortably, turning us away from the richness of our cultures. I think I know what such a death is like: for the past few years I have watched myself (and some of the people I admire) dying that death.

In periods of unavoidable lucidity, I have often visualised the ultimate development of such an architecture — air-conditioned coffins lodged in air-conditioned mausoleums.

4. Diversity, a Valued Heritage

The population of our region is only just over 5 million but we possess a cultural diversity more varied than any other in the world. There is also a multiplicity of social, economic, and political systems all undergoing different stages of decolonisation, ranging from politically independent nations (Western Samoa/Fiji/Papua New Guinea/Tonga/Nauru) through self-governing ones (the Solomons/the Gilberts/Tuvalu) and colonies (mainly French and American) to our oppressed aboriginal brothers in Australia. This cultural, political, social, and economic diversity must be taken into account in any overall programme of cultural conservation.

If as yet we may not be the most artistically creative region on our spaceship, we possess the potential to become the most artistically creative. There are more than 1200 indigenous languages plus English, French, Hindi, Spanish, and various forms of pidgin to catch and interpret the Void with, reinterpret our past with, create new historical and sociological visions of Oceania with, compose songs and poems and plays and other oral and written literature with. Also numerous other

forms of artistic expression: hundreds of dance styles: wood and stone sculpture and carvings; artifacts as various as our cultures; pottery, painting, and tattooing. A fabulous treasure house of traditional motifs, themes, styles, material which we can use in contemporary forms to express our uniqueness, identity, pain, joy, and our own visions of Oceania and earth.

Self-expression is a prerequisite of self-respect.

Out of this artistic diversity has come and will continue to come our most worthwhile contribution to humankind. So this diversity must be maintained and encouraged to flourish.

Across the political barriers dividing our countries an intense artistic activity is starting to weave firm links between us. This cultural awakening, inspired and fostered and led by our own people, will not stop at the artificial frontiers drawn by the colonial powers. And for me, this awakening is the first real sign that we are breaking from the colonial chill and starting to find our own beings. As Marjorie Crocombe of the Cook Islands and editor of MANA Magazine has written: *Denigrated, inhibited and withdrawn during the colonial era, the Pacific people are again beginning to take confidence and express themselves in traditional forms of expression that remain part of a valued heritage, as well as in new forms and styles reflecting the changes within the continuity of the unique world of our Island cultures... The canoe is afloat... the volume and quality increase all the time.*

One of the recent highlights of this awakening was the 1972 South Pacific Festival of Arts during which we came together in Fiji to perform our expressive arts; much of it was traditional, but new voices/new forms, especially in literature, were emerging.

Up to a few years ago nearly all the literature about Oceania was written by papalagi and other outsiders. Our islands were and still are a goldmine for romantic novelists and film makers, bar-room journalists and semi-literate tourists, sociologists and Ph.D. students, remittance men and sailing evangelists, UNO *experts*, and colonial administrators and their well-groomed spouses. Much of this literature ranges from the hilariously romantic through the pseudo-scholarly to the infuriatingly racist; from the *noble savage* literary school through Margaret Mead and all her comings of age, Somerset Maugham's puritan missionaries/drunks/and saintly whores and James Michener's rascals and golden people, to the stereotyped childlike pagan who needs to be steered to the Light. The Oceania found in this literature is largely papalagi fictions, more revealing of papalagi fantasies and hang-ups, dreams and nightmares, prejudices and ways of viewing our crippled cosmos, than of our actual islands. I am not saying we should reject such a literature, or that papalagi should not write about us, and vice versa. But the imagination must explore with love/honesty/wisdom/and compassion; writers must write with *aroha/aloha/alofa/loloma*, respecting the people they are writing about, people who may view the Void differently and who, like all other human beings, live through the pores of their flesh and mind and bone, who suffer, laugh, cry, copulate, and die.

In the last few years what can be called a South Pacific literature has started to blossom. In New Zealand, Alistair Campbell, of Cook Island descent, is acknowledged as a major poet; three Maori writers — Hone Tuwhare (poet), Witi Ihimaera (novelist), and Patricia Grace (short stories) have become extremely well-known. In Australia, the aboriginal poets Kathy Walker and Jack Davis continue to plot the suffering of their people. In Papua New Guinea, *The Crocodile* by Vincent Eri — the first Papuan novel to be published — has already become a minor classic. Also in that country poets such as John Kasaipwalova, Kumalau Tawali, Alan Natachee, and Apisai Enos, and playwrights like Arthur Jawodimbari are publishing some powerful work. Papua New Guinea has established a very forward looking Creative Arts Centre, which is acting as a catalyst in the expressive arts movement, a travelling theatre, and an Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. *KOVAVE Magazine*, put out by a group of Papua New Guinea writers, is already a respected literary journal.

MANA Magazine and MANA Publications, established by the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (owned/operated by some of us), have been a major catalyst in stimulating the growth of this new literature, especially in countries outside Papua New Guinea. Already numerous young poets, prose writers, and playwrights have emerged; some of them, we hope, will develop into major writers. One thinks of Seri, Vanessa Griffen, and Raymond Pillai of Fiji; of Eti Saaga, Ruperake Petaia, Sano Malifa, Ata Maiiai, and Tili Peseta of Western Samoa; of Albert Leomala and Mildred Sope of the New Hebrides; of Celestine Kulagoe of the Solomons; of Maunaa Itaia of the Gilberts; of Makiuti Tongia of the Cook Islands; of Konai Helu Thaman of Tonga. I am proud to be also contributing to this literature. Most of us know one another personally; if we don't, we know one another's work well. Our ties transcend barriers of culture, race, petty nationalism, and politics. Our writing is expressing a revolt against the hypocritical/exploitative aspects of our traditional/commercial/and religious hierarchies, colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the degrading values being imposed from outside and by some elements in our societies:

*But they cannot erase my existence
For my plight chimes with the hour
And my blood they drink at cocktail parties
Always full of smiling false faces
Behind which lie authority and private interests*

(from *Uncivil Servants* by
Konai Helu Thaman, Tonga)

*As I walk this rich suburb
full of white and black chiefs
I hear the barking of a dog
I listen to its calls*

*knowing I am that dog
picking what it can
from the overflowing rubbish tins.*

*I say to you chiefs
bury the scraps you can't eat
So no hungry dog will come to eat
at your locked gate.*

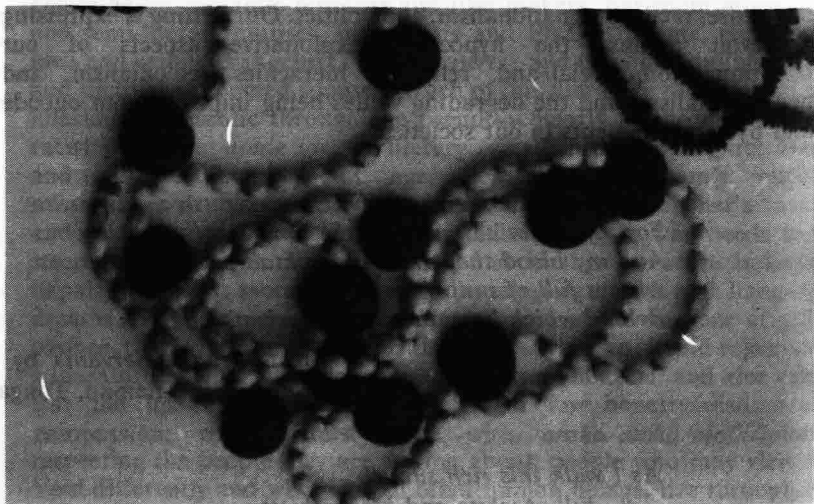
Chiefs, beware of hungry dogs!

(from *Beware of Dog* by
Makiuti Tongia, Cook Islands)

In the traditional visual arts there has been a tremendous revival, that revival is also finding contemporary expression in the work of Maori artists such as Selwyn Muru, Ralph Hotere, Para Matchitt, and Buck Nin; in the work of Aloii Pilioko of Wallis and Futuna, Akis and Kauage of Papua New Guinea, Aleki Prescott of Tonga, Sven Orquist of Western Samoa, Kuai of the Solomons, and many others.

The same is true in music and dance. The National Dance Theatres of Fiji and The Cook Islands are already well-known throughout the world.

This artistic renaissance is enriching our cultures further, reinforcing our identities/self-respect/and pride, and taking us through a genuine decolonisation; it is also acting as a unifying force in our region. In their individual journeys into the Void, these artists, through their work, are explaining us to ourselves and creating a new Oceania.



Singing in their Genealogical Trees

(South Pacific Poetry)

Pio Manoa

The more a poet sings in his genealogical tree, the more his singing is in tune. (Jean Cocteau)

South Pacific poetry is poetry that is now being written and will be written in the various islands of the South Pacific. The term is a convenient way of grouping together the various nations scattered across miles of ocean. And after all, these various nations are not so separated from each other as to bar all sense of community. In a time when people are quick at pointing out or emphasising individual differences we are becoming more and more aware of our common bonds. This does not mean that the poets now writing are consciously striving for a naive pan-Pacific unity. It simply means that the more we read poems from the other islands the more we get a sense of belonging together.

And there is another dimension to this consciousness. If our poets are successful in communicating our sufferings and joys, and execute this with art, then this gives them not only local significance but also participation in the wider community of the world. For as Albert Camus put it, *art is not a solitary delight. It is a means of stirring the greatest number of men by giving them a privileged vision of our common sufferings and joys. It thus compels the artist to avoid isolation; it subjects him to the humblest and most universal truth.* . . . The general reader of poetry can afford to be parochial and propagandist at times. The poet signs his own death warrant if he becomes so. And if he *sings in his genealogical tree* the better it would be for all concerned. For the poet cannot sing with borrowed feelings and emotions.

He has to sing with his own. That is one of the obligations he has towards himself and his art.

The most universal and most human works of art are those which bear most openly the mark of their country. *It is by becoming national* wrote Andre Gide *that a literature takes its place in humanity and acquires significance in its assembly.* This does not mean that our poets should become narrowly nationalistic, cultivating a metaphysical and religious devotion to the nation. This attitude would seek to make the mind the slave of the physiology of a race or the interests of a State. It exposes art and every virtue of the spirit to the danger of death.