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## We Are the Ocean

Hau`ofa, Epeli

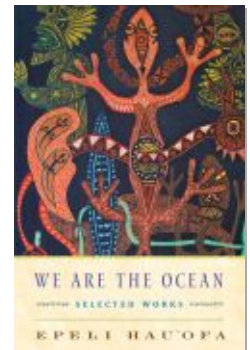
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# Blood in the Kava Bowl

In the twilight we sit  
drinking kava from the bowl between us.  
Who we are we know and need not say  
for the soul we share came from Vaihi.  
Across the bowl we nod our understanding of the line  
that is also our cord brought by Tangaloa from above,  
and the professor does not know.  
He sees the line but not the cord  
for he drinks the kava not tasting its blood.  
And the kava has risen, my friend,  
drink, and smile the grace of our fathers  
at him who says we are oppressed  
by you, by me, but it's twilight in Vaihi  
and his vision is clouded.

The kava has risen again, dear friend,  
take this cup . . .  
Ah, yes, that matter of oppression—  
from Vaihi it begot in us unspoken knowledge  
of our soul and our bondage.  
You and I hold the love of that inner mountain  
shrouded in mist and spouting ashes spread  
by the winds from Ono-i-Lau,  
Lakemba, and Lomaloma  
over the soils of our land, shaping  
those slender kahokaho and kaumeile  
we offer in first-fruits to our Hau.  
And the kava trees of Tonga grow well,  
our foreheads on the royal toes!  
The Hau is healthy,  
our land's in fine, fat shape for another season.

The professor still talks  
 of oppression that we both know,  
 yet he tastes not the blood in the kava  
 mixed with dry waters that rose to Tangaloa  
 who gave us the cup from which we drink  
 the soul and the tears of our land.  
 Nor has he heard of our brothers who slayed Takalaua  
 and fled to Niue, Manono, and Futuna  
 to be caught in Uvea by the tyrant's son  
 and brought home under the aegis of the priest of Maui  
 to decorate the royal congregation and to chew for the king  
 the kava mixed with blood from their mouths,  
 the mouths of all oppressed Tongans,  
 in expiation to Hikule'o the inner mountain  
 with an echo others cannot hear.

And the mountain spouts ancestral ashes  
 spread by the winds from Ono-i-Lau, Lakemba, and Lomaloma  
 over the soils of our land, raising fine yams,  
 symbols of our manhood, of the strength of our nation,  
 in first-fruits we offer to our Hau.  
 The mountain also crushes our people,  
 their blood flowing into the royal ring  
 for the health of the Victor and of Tonga;  
 the red waters from the warm springs of Puluotu  
 only you and I can taste, and live  
 in ancient understanding begat by Maui in Vaihi.

The kava has risen, my brother,  
 drink this cup of the soul and the sweat of our people,  
 and pass me three more mushrooms which grew in Mururoa  
 on the shit of the cows Captain Cook brought  
 from the Kings of England and France!

### Notes

This poem was originally published in *Mana Review* 1(2) (1976):21–22.

Tangaloa and Maui are well-known Polynesian gods, and Vaihi (Hawaiki) is

the legendary ancestral homeland. The *kabokabo* and the *kaumeile* were long yams sent as first-fruit tributes to the Tu'i Tonga, the semidivine ruler. (Orators refer to the monarch as the "Hau.") Takalaua, the twenty-third Tu'i Tonga, was killed by two men, whom his son caught, took to a special kava ceremony, forced to chew the dry roots of the kava plant for the king's kava bowl, and then had butchered for distribution to the assembled chiefs of the realm. Pulotu, the paradise, was presided over by Hikule'o, the goddess of fertility, whose earthly representative, the Tu'i Tonga, received (on her behalf) the annual first-fruit tribute. To Pulotu (and hence to Hikule'o) went the souls of dead chiefs, and from Pulotu came the great long yams—the sons of Tonga.