An Interview with Albert Wendt

Albert Tuaopepe Wendt is an acclaimed novelist, poet and short story writer from Western Samoa. Born in 1939 in Western Samoa, he is a member of the *aiga* (extended family) Sa-Tuaopepe and he was brought up in Apia (Western Samoa). He got his German name from his grandfather. His grandmother was known to be a great story teller, which is at the origin of Wendt's taste for writing. At the age of thirteen, he was granted a government scholarship to study in New Zealand, where he stayed until the age of twenty-six, travelling back home every third year. He studied history at the University of Wellington, where he obtained an M.A.. Throughout his life, he taught in the South Pacific area (Western Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand). He is nowadays the most productive writer of the South Pacific and the most stimulating for the other writers of the region. He has a major responsibility in Oceanian literature: the primary material for the modern image of the South Pacific, which is more realistic with its positive and negative sides. Wendt is a cultural ambassador for his country, an editor and a publisher. In 1980, he won the New Zealand Wattie Book of the Year Award for *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*. In 1992, he was awarded a Senate Certificate by the Senate of the sixteenth legislature of the state of Hawaii in recognition of his talents as a writer and his contribution to Pacific and World literature. In 1993 he won the Commonwealth Book Prize for the South East Asia and the Pacific region.

Albert Wendt is currently a professor of English at the University of Auckland (N.Z.) and the central protagonist of the creation of a written Pacific Islands literature. As I was preparing a research work on his novel *Pouliuli*, I had the opportunity to speak with Albert Wendt, at the University of Auckland on February 24, 1997.

CHRISTIE MICHEL[1]: About *Pouliuli,* can there be a balance between freedom and power in a group and for an individual living in a group?

ALBERT WENDT: That is the problem right through the novel. He [Faleasa] is one of the most powerful men in the village at the beginning of the novel. He believes in the group, in the power of the group. At the beginning of the novel, Faleasa wakes up and he starts vomiting [laughs], he is actually vomiting out the novel: I explore why this old man, who is at the last stages of his life, decides that he is disgusted with his society. Why does he decide to pretend that he is mad? Because that is the only way he can escape the scrutiny of society. That is how the novel begins. The novel explores how power is shared or manipulated in this society. Faleasa pretends he is mad and then uses his friend Laaumatua Lemigao and his son Moaula to manipulate society and try to counter the forces that he does not like, represented by the modern politician Malaga. He represents forces in society which are very European and very foreign. New forces, political forces, economic forces which change society radically.

CM: One important theme in *Pouliuli* is the conflict between appearances, masks, and reality. Do you agree with the fact that this conflict leads to real madness?

AW: He pretends to be mad, for in a communal society there is total scrutiny and surveillance by the group: even Samoan *fales* in those days were built in such a way, and still are. The only way you can escape scrutiny first is to leave that society and go away, but he does not want to go away because it is his life; and if you decide to stay in that society, the way to escape it is to cut yourself off psychologically. So he pretends he is mad and he also knows that once he pretends he is mad he can scrutinise the people who are scrutinising him. If you notice, as the novel develops, they begin to ignore him, and they even talk in front of him as if

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[1] Christie Michel is currently writing up a doctoral thesis at the University of La Réunion on the existentialist side of Albert Wendt's fictions.

he was not listening, even saying bad things about him. He knows that the camouflage of being mad allows him to scrutinise and learn the truth about the people around him, even his own children. He begins to find out that tragically, some of his children are not very faithful or helpful to him and he finds out that the only person who is very loyal to him is his son Moaula.

CM: The circle of *Pouliuli*, set up by the old man is not perfect (because of Faleasa throwing away the centre). What is the symbolism of this circle ? Does it stand for perfection ? For the existentialist void ?

AW: It is the favourite question that most people have about the novel. What is the symbolic meaning of the circle of stones or pebbles and when the centre of the circle — the central pebble — is thrown away, the circle collapses. The circle is very important in Samoan philosophy: if you look at Samoan houses, they are built in circles, the main *fale* or the meeting house is a circle. If you look at the way the villages are constructed, they are usually built in circles. And if you look at Samoan proverbial sayings, the circle plays an important role. It is a holistic symbol because philosophically we believe that things are interrelated.

The action of breaking the circle signifies that the culture has been broken: I mean I do not believe cultures can be destroyed unless you wipe out the people completely but I believe cultures change and they have to change in order to survive. I do not believe in the usual Western notion of the fatal impact. It was very important in the nineteenth century, early twentieth Western thought about the Pacific, when they believed that, when cultures come into contact, the technologically superior culture destroys the smaller fragile culture and that is what led them to believe that all smaller cultures of the Pacific were going to die out because they were being faced by these superior [laughs] Western cultures. Some Pacific cultures survived and survived very well despite their size. That is another theme I explore in the novel. For instance, even though you have the circle there, when the centre is thrown away the old man goes mad, signifying the culture is broken; which is not, only in this case because the culture continues; and at the end the vision is

very pessimistic, with the take-over of culture by people who are unscrupulous, dishonest and corrupt. When I first wrote the novel, one of my friends, who became a leading politician in Samoa — he actually became Prime Minister — was really disturbed by the ending. He told me "it is not true, it is not what is happening in Samoan political life" and I said "I think you should have another look." A few years later, he told me he agreed with me. The novel foresaw what was going to happen in Samoan political life and it has come true in a very sad way, for political life in Samoa is now very corrupt. The other thing that people asked me is why the old man is compelled to build those circles. It is a reciprocal action, he steals something from the village and he puts the circle in as reciprocity.

CM: Sir Francis Bacon said: "it is a strange desire to seek power and lose liberty; or to seek power over others and to lose power over a man's self." What is your comment?

AW: That is very appropriate because even in a communal culture, there is a fight for individual leadership, the struggle goes on between different groups and different individuals. One of the features of our culture is public, you have to present a public face, a face that is very placid, harmonious, and caring. And like in other cultures, there is another face of people competing for power, struggling to stay alive.

CM: There is a large number of suicides in your work: Mose (Lemigao's son) in *Pouliuli*, in *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, in *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree*...

AW: When I was young I was fascinated by suicide. Because it is a feature common to all cultures. In some cultures, at certain stages, suicide rates are very high among the young. For instance, if you look at the Samoan society, suicide is very high in the persons of eighteen, it is the highest number of suicides in the world! I was fascinated by that because it is one major option that we have for our life: I do not like what

the gods are doing to me, so I commit suicide. The only thing I own is my life so I can do what I like with it. Then you will find out that if you look at the group there is limitation to it. At one stage of my life, I was very interested in Existentialism, especially the version of Existentialism as explored by Camus. I have developed my own philosophical view of the world using Samoan philosophy combined with the Western things that I know. I no longer romanticise suicide but it is a defied act in most of the characters I have. When Faleasa leaps into the darkness, he in actual fact risks his life and loses it at the end. He actually goes mad. There are many things that a writer does not realise until years later, when he rereads his work and finds out new elements (laughs). No one has ever said to me that there are a lot of suicides in my work but in fact, there are. It is true [laughs].

CM: Why is Faleasa's new self so difficult to be accepted by himself and by the others?

AW: *He is free in madness*. He is going to observe his society but he takes risks, which eventually destroys him. You cannot escape your culture permanently, unless you go mad or you leave the culture completely, so in many ways his self is now being reborn.

CM: What about the power and freedom of Albert Wendt as a writer, in terms of creation, Samoan style creation and mythoclasm ?

AW: My own writings try to plot and discover my own way of looking at the world and my own reaction to the world and the way I shape the world in which I live. I love Samoa and I love the way of life I knew as a boy, but there are also a lot of things that I question. Now I am middle-aged and it is easier.

There is no such thing as being caught between cultures. When I was very young, people would say "those young generations of Samoans or Kanaks or Tahitians, they are very unlucky, they are caught between two cultures, they do not know where they are" [laughs]. That is a consequence of the fatal impact theory where people tended to look upon

cultures as pure elements. There are no mixtures. So when two pure cultures are meeting, it is Caucasian culture that is viewed as a superior culture. They think that the indigenous cultures are going to die out or be destroyed. I have never believed that, like I have never believed that people can be caught between two cultures. We all travel whatever mixtures we are and the mixtures that we are, are not blood-mixtures (laughs). Even the word race is totally out of date, there is no such thing as race. All cultures are made up of a mixture of other cultures and in many ways those "superior" cultures themselves are. Over the last centuries, we have been trying to resolve the enormous problems caused by colonialism. Some cultures want to take over other people's way of life, destroy their languages and everything else. I feel totally comfortable when I go to my village in Samoa, but I cannot live in it totally because I cannot live in a culture that is totally communal and where there is little privacy. That is my own choice. I am not caught between cultures! [laughs].

The words that I object to violently are these words that describe us as outcasts and the latest version of it is the term "hybrid," which is the term literary theorists have adopted and are now promoting as a beautiful term for literary analysis. They do not realise that the term is not new, it is just another extension of the racial theories which I have just described. For instance *I* am not hybrid; why is the literature of the West Indies described as a hybrid literature, why is not it just called West Indies Literature? When Picasso developed cubism, which was a mixture of what he borrowed from African art and Polynesian art, that was not called a "hybrid" development but a *new* development in Western art. The word "hybrid" seems to be applied again only to cultures which were supposed to be mixed. The people were very upset when I started to talk a little about it at the conference I went to in Spain. Because a lot of them used the term hybrid and hybridisation (laughs); they did not like it because I sort of challenged them. Even Samoan culture is mixed, it is borrowed from other cultures and the Samoan culture of today is very different from

the Samoan culture of my father's generation; but it does not mean it is less Samoan. All it means is that it is a different culture[laughs]!

CM: Thank you very much, Mr Wendt.

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