

# Océanitude and Pacific regionalism in the wake of climate change

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**Abstract:** The ocean is a shared space for all Pacific Island States and the common element that renders Pacific identities unique. Today, low-lying atolls are potentially exposed to rising sea levels threatening their very existence. Instead of precise borders, the ocean that washes Pacific shores could be considered as a blurry and inclusive space. Pacific identities are shaped by a network of relations unfurling across the ocean. This is echoed in Epeli Hau'ofa's regional identity, Maurer's Océanitude, and Titifanue's grassroots regionalism. This paper rethinks Pacific grassroots regionalism in the wake of climate change and its impacts in Oceania. In addition to contesting the Western narrative and raising awareness among local communities, the Pacific Climate Warriors are trying to reconnect traditional inter-island links through a transnational network.

**Keywords:** climate change, Oceania, regionalism, océanitude, indigenous movements, Pacific Climate Warriors

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Figure 1: One of the banners of the last campaign "Matagi Mālohi - Week of Action" that took place from September 20th to 27th, 2020.

## Introduction

Travelling across the Pacific is not new. The *genealogical history* of the Austro-nesian peoples, a history of continuous movement and settlement, confirmed regular historical voyages between Pacific islands (Jolly 2007). Yet, when speaking of and imagining Oceania, our view very often implies isolation, smallness, cultural and racial differences, and boundedness. These imagined boundaries do not coincide with Islanders' vision of their island homes. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that the ocean is the principal element of Pacific identities: an element that renders them unique from others (Hau'ofa 1998). The ocean is the shared space of all Pacific Island States. National borders, established during the colonial time and reinforced with the independence movements, do not always confine Pacific Islanders.

Considering the serious threats posed today by environmental changes to the Pacific Island States, is it possible to rethink a new Pacific grassroots regionalism in the wake of climate change in Oceania? In this paper, I argue that instead of precise borders, the ocean that washes Pacific shores could be considered as a blurry, inclusive and connective space (DeLoughrey 2001). Moreover, Pacific identities are shaped by a network of relations unfurling across the ocean. This echoes the regional identity proposed by Hau'ofa (1998), considered to be a useful means to unite Pacific Islanders and to make Oceania prosperous and able to act when necessary as a united body, bound by cultural ties: the same grassroots regionalism concept proposed by Titifanue et al. (2017). The similar idea of *Océanitude*, as explained by Maurer (2019), could be defined as the valorization of mobility (through the ocean) as a source of cultural rootedness; or, as stated by Clifford (1997:2), dwelling-in-travel.

This study uses a discourse analysis methodology, combining interviews with key respondents and activists. The analysis examines indigenous strategies and narratives regarding climate change in the Pacific Islands region. Information is gathered through online sources such as 350.org, and the 350 Pacific official webpage, and social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Further information also stems from past research experience in New Caledonia in 2018. The aim of the paper is twofold: first, to explore climate change in Oceania as an imag-

inative idea (Hulme 2009), a form of cultural creativity (Favole 2010), fostering resilience, resistance and grassroots agency. Second, I propose to consider the Pacific Climate Warriors' activities against climate change and their campaigns to protect Pacific environments as a new form of regional identity. Before turning to these issues, ideas of Pacific regionalism are briefly presented in the following section.

## Pacific regionalism

Hau'ofa's 1998 founding paper on Pacific regionalism, *The Ocean in Us*, combined with his 1994 piece, *Our Sea of Islands*, sparked a fundamental paradigm shift in the view of the Pacific Islands as "tiny, isolated dots in a vast ocean" (Hau'ofa 1994:153). These publications echoed the cultural effervescence that drew public attention during the 1970s and 1980s all over Oceania and which were substantiated by the Pacific Way, defined as a trait of peculiarities, "a core of basic ideas and emotional responses" (Crocombe 1976:3) common to many Pacific communities. The amount of studies on the *Pacific Way* is very extensive and it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze such a concept, nonetheless it is interesting to note that the ideals of the *Pacific Way* are not shared by the totality of Pacific intellectuals (Lawson 2010). For instance, Simone Durutalo (1992:552) defined it as "a condition of false unity among potentially conflicting groups", highlighting the risk of idealization and uncritical positioning in a post-colonial world. Social movements rapidly developed to contrast colonialism and to gain independence from the former imperial powers, using cultural traits to reiterate a *native* identity and local characteristics. In those same years, the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement was founded (1975) to fight against nuclear experiments and hegemony in the Pacific. Another important festival, Melanesia 2000, organized in Nouméa by the Kanak political leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou took place in 1975, to present the local culture to non-indigenous inhabitants of New Caledonia and to fight for independence from France (Levallois 1995). This cultural turmoil led to the emerging perspective of "cultural studies for Oceania" (Wood 2003; Teaiwa 2001) consisting of the prominent use of Pacific epistemologies and the distinction

of different roles for local intellectuals and non-native researchers.

In this sense, in the 1990s Hau'ofa proposed that a common and uniting element of all Pacific cultures could be the Ocean. The inheritance of this element and the strong value of its protection (not least from climate change) enable the formation of a common identity: that of Pacific Islanders. It is important to highlight that Hau'ofa did not propose a homogenization of Pacific cultures. Such common identity grounded in the Ocean does not mean homogenization but diversity into sameness. Oceanic identity is added to the *national* or local one. Moreover, this form of regionalism was an independent and native initiative, not led by colonial powers, post-colonial powers or institutions for their interests as was the South Pacific Community (SPC). Founded in 1947 by the colonial powers to sustain the development of Pacific Island States and Territories, the SPC dwindled the Pacific Islands. In fact, SPC meetings originally only included colonial powers with interest in the region. Moreover, the main goal was to provide technical advice on economic and social issues, with political issues being omitted (Shibuya 2004). For this reason, the independent Pacific Islands' countries decided to give birth to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 1971, comprising exclusively sovereign states, to decide on their own goals without the interference of the colonial powers (mostly France). There is a large literature on Pacific power and diplomatic agency, focusing on the region-building activity for Pacific societies (see for example Fry 2019; Holz et al. 2016; Ivarature 2013) that is not analyzed in this paper. Yet, the concept of *affinity geopolitics* is extremely useful in the analysis proposed below. As defined by Davis (2015:3), "affinity geopolitics is an approach to international relations where security does not require domination", instead at the core of the geopolitical relations are respect and mutual aid among communities.

Mobility is a key issue of Hau'ofa's interpretation of cultural regionalism, as the ocean is considered to be a waterway connecting the islands, allowing the creation of kinship and commercial relationships to develop. It does not mean that Pacific communities and their cultures do not take into consideration

the land, the other element at the base of Pacific Islanders' identity. The land and the ocean are fundamental elements of Pacific societies. The articulation between *roots* and *routes* proposed by Clifford (1997, 2001) and the metaphor of the tree and the canoe to exemplify traditional identity suggested by Bonne-maison (1985) can help explain the connection between these two elements. The land is usually a symbol of attachment to place in Pacific Island cultures, the homeland in which indigenous people are rooted (Bonne-maison 1985; Clifford 2001; Farbotko et al. 2018; Kempf, Hermann 2014; Kim 2020). The ancestors, the cornerstones of Pacific societies, are buried in the land, and in this sense it symbolizes where one comes from, strengthening the idea of belonging. Yet at the same time, although significant, land does not delimit Pacific spatial, political and cultural values (Farbotko et al. 2015, Di Piazza et al. 2007). In this sense, mobility could be considered as a way to be rooted (Clifford 1997). As explained by Maurer (2019), and as it can be observed spending some time in Oceania, mobility does not represent a dispersal, a dissolution of local peculiarities lost to the meshes of the global system. Instead, mobility can express added value through the links of local identities and cosmopolitan Pacific Islanders' identities. We could affirm, with Clifford (1997), that mobility and travelling are a form of a dwelling or, as stated by Maurer (2019:117) "c'est le déplacement qui fonde l'autochtonie" (displacement is at the base of autochthony). Differently from other forms of regionalism, such as the *Négritude* in the Caribbean proposed by Glissant (see Maurer 2019), *Océanitude* is not an exclusive movement founded on specific characteristics and/or racial traits, nor is it founded on an archipelagic identity. *Océanitude* represents an open and inclusive identity. This is a direct consequence of the end of colonialism: the Small Island States (or Large Ocean States, if we embrace the shift of paradigm) are recent products, created in the 1980s by the will of ex-colonial powers. Before the independence process, and even before colonialism, the Ocean was an open waterway, a blurry and inclusive space, connecting, not separating, Pacific shores. Furthermore, *Océanitude* is not exclusively based on the movement of people and the diaspora as the only peculiar trait of that identity. Mobility and rootedness

are complementary and not exclusive: they are the basis of an oceanic identity, composed of a web of relationships unfurling through the ocean. Mobility in Oceania is not the exception, rather it is the rule. In modern times, travel is more accessible because of a particular historical conjuncture: on the one hand, the period from the 1960s to 1970s represented a powerful boost for the development of independence movements in different countries; on the other, Pacific communities witnessed globalization and the quest for modernity. In this sense, we can think of the Pacific Islands and Islanders as cosmopolitan citizens *ante-litteram*. As explained by Maurer (2019), ethnonyms such as Kanak or Mā'ohi were initially used negatively by the colonizers, to differentiate the native peoples from themselves. Between the 1960s and 1970s, these names were appropriated and re-signified by the natives and are now commonly used to refer to themselves and their cultures with pride (e.g. the festival named Melanesia 2000). Indigeneity is therefore not a form of tribalism, nor a form of cultural homogenization. Rather, we could think of it as an articulation (Clifford 2001) of cultural forms. This means not only acknowledging cultural and historical diversities of all the realities that composed Oceania but also of its similarities.

### Re-imagining climate change

It is said that climate change and the impacts it entails, among them sea level rise, are a real threat, especially for small Pacific Island States (Nunn et al. 2020; Klöck et al. 2019). Always considered remote and marginal, Oceania seems to confirm, in the mainstream discourse, its vulnerability in the face of inevitable global phenomena. The possible scenarios proposed by the latest IPCC report (2018) predict that sea level rise, sea surface warming and consequent coral bleaching, and an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme climatic events, like cyclones, will jeopardize the habitability of coral atolls in the long term (Barnett & Adger 2003). A rather persistent and still circulating idea is that the Pacific islands seem destined to disappear underneath the ocean, swallowed up by the waters. This thought promotes an alarmist and simplistic scenario. Nevertheless, the history of ecological crisis is linked with a multiplicity of different factors of which the current extreme weather events are only a tangible consequence.

Different kinds of assessments could be added to this set of environmental problems, including social and juridical ones. From a legal and institutional point of view, the possible scenario envisioning the future uninhabitability of the low-lying islands threatens international standards of justice and security in a new way (Barnett & Adger 2003). How is it possible to combine the idea of loss of places and the disappearance of entire nations with the high mobility (on whose inevitability some authors disagree, see for example Kelman et al. 2015) of local communities? Migration could be considered as the failure of *in situ* adaptation measures but also as an adaptation strategy itself.

If this is the most common (yet catastrophic) reality pictured by the media when talking about climate change, it is also true that "not only climate change is altering our physical world, but the idea of climate change is altering our social worlds" (Hulme 2009:xxviii). In this paper, I would like to imply a different perspective than the one usually used and presented above and, following the analysis of Hulme (2009:xxvii) arguing that climate change could represent an "inspiration for a global network of new, or reinvigorated, social movements". The creative potential for societies inherent in climate changes should be further emphasized. The plasticity of the concept allows one to think about it as an imaginative resource around which we could re-build our personal and collective identities and shape political, economic and cultural projects. Using climate change as an imaginative idea implies the opportunity to stimulate scientific research, e.g. green and sustainable energy sources, or inspire artistic representations; promoting new lifestyles, rethinking the urban environment and so on. More profoundly, this signifies a change in our thinking about nature and the future. In the words of Hulme (2009:326):

"[...] rather than catalyzing disagreements about how, when and where to tackle climate change, the idea of climate change should be seen as an intellectual resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can form and take shape. We need to ask not what we can do for climate change, but to ask what climate change can do for us".

I argue that thinking about climate change as an imaginative idea provides

a focus on indigenous mitigation and adaptation strategies, and to represent new possibilities for social movements and Pacific regionalism. This hypothesis resonates with the theory of cultural creativity proposed by Favole (2010). Following Sahlins and his critique of *despondency* and *dependency* theories (see also Sahlins 1999), Favole overturns the ethnocentric vision about native communities as subaltern victims of the imperial West, claiming the idea of cultural creativity. In this context, creativity is understood as “the capacity of human societies, in a particular condition and bypassing numerous constraints, of creating unforeseen, emergent new forms” (Favole 2010:IX). Today, researchers face new challenges to investigate how indigenous people reconstruct, re-elaborate, and re-imagine their societies by analyzing them in relation to the outside world. In recent years, numerous societies seem to experience a period of intense artistic, political and cultural fervor in the wake of climate change. In the Pacific region, this Oceanian Renaissance (Hau’ofa 1994; Friedman 2007) was possible because of the re-establishment of trans-national connections through migration, the diasporas and globalization which, even if usually criticized, represents, especially after World War II, a new opportunity for intercultural exchange (Favole 2010:XI). Climate change could then be understood as a new challenge: even though its impacts threaten the Pacific islands and their very existence, it could be used as a cultural device, a means to reinvigorate trans-Pacific connections and a new form of regionalism. After the long invisibility and immobility due to colonial politics, the Pacific Ocean can finally be thought of as a “sea of islands” (Hau’ofa 1994) in connection. Such connection is supported by the articulation of external and internal, global and local elements. Creativity is, in fact, a process that thrives in the encounter, but also in situations of coexistence, in the relationships between different cultures and societies (Favole 2010). It is not only a product of ties and connections but also of friction (Tsing 2005). Creativity can be understood as a tool to abandon the centre-periphery logic and to represent a new mode of appropriation of modernity, which indeed develops hand in hand with globalization. As stated by Bonnemaïson



Figure 2: Banner and screenshot of a Zoom meeting, part of the Pacific Pawa Up Fellowship (2020)

(1991:119), “an island is habitable only when it is not considered either the centre or the periphery, but rather part of a line that unites it with the world”. Following these suggestions, we could argue that Pacific Islands’ weakness was crafted by colonialism, development, and globalization; at the same time, these processes have allowed new connections. Studying the processes of creativity means attributing agency and the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013) to the communities in question. Faced with the flows of globalization, native societies do not limit themselves to opposing strategies of resistance and counter-hegemony, but they give life to new and unexpected cultural forms. One example is the indigenous response to climate change explained in the following section.

### Strong winds from Oceania

The Pacific regionalism proposed by Hau’ofa in 1998 drew inspiration from the ocean and its protection as a common inheritance. The idea of *Océanitude* proposed by Maurer (2019) as a literary movement, highlights an ecological consciousness that aims at marine environmental protection and mobility as a common Pacific trait. In this sense, the Pacific Climate Warriors, a

grassroots organization fighting climate change in Oceania, are well-positioned to represent this new kind of transnational and regional identity (Fair 2020; Steiner 2015; McNamara, Farbotko 2017). The network, founded in 2011 and linked to the international environmental movement 350.org, is composed of young indigenous adults who want to create awareness about the vulnerabilities of Pacific islands, both locally and internationally. They are active in more than fifteen Pacific island countries and also in the diaspora (Australia, New Zealand and the United States). The Pacific Climate Warriors embrace environmental values, such as protection of the ocean, and Pacific values, such as mobility, working as a catalyst for both identity and spreading ideas, working as custodians whose task is to maintain and nurture human relationships with the cosmos (Koya Vaka’uta et al. 2018). They made themselves known through their 2014 Newcastle Canoe Blockade in Australia. Cultural elements, such as those mentioned by Kiss (2021 in this volume) are strategic tools for activists to explain scientific issues to local communities through campaigns; the goal is to foster resilience and agency in the population to protect the islands from climate change and also to pro-



Figure 3: Storytelling series “Matagi Mālohi - Strong Winds” to promote the homonymous campaign (2019).

mote a deep understanding of mitigation and adaptation measures. Shifting the “doomed fate” (McNamara & Farbotko 2017) attributed to them by the catastrophic future scenarios of climate change, the Pacific Climate Warriors embrace what Appadurai (2013) has defined “the capacity to aspire”, which is the cultural capacity to contest of the present situation, and to imagine an alternative future.

Climate activism as promoted by the Pacific Climate Warriors is supported by the use of new media. New media represents a tool through which the activists reiterate their agency, make their voices heard and mobilize a growing number of people to fight against the impacts of global climate change. At the same time, such campaigns to raise awareness on environmental changes are creating a new sense of regionalism, of Pacific Islanders’ identity, and are uniting activists living in numerous Pacific Islands. The new media platforms perform an informative role as many people today gather information on the internet. They also have a communicative role because they are used by the activists to exchange information in real-time. According to Titifanue et al. (2017), social media platforms could be used in different ways:

they are useful in creating multimedia contents such as videos or photos; they can circulate information and invitations to live events; they give their messages and actions major visibility through the use of hashtags (#). These activities foster a new kind of grassroots regionalism and environmental consciousness in the Pacific region. This was recently made visible through the organization of the first Fellowship Program (the *Pacific Pawa Up Fellowship*) organized online by the Pacific Climate Warriors. This program aimed “to coach Pacific climate activists by equipping them with essential skills needed to make a positive impact in a rapidly changing landscape” (350.org 2020a), and merged into the 350.org campaign for a just recovery from Covid-19 (350.org 2020b). The latest campaign, the *Matagi Mālohi Week of Action* that took place from September 20th to 27th, 2020, gathering Pacific Islanders throughout the region and the diasporas (Australia, New Zealand and the United States). Pacific Climate Warriors are also hosting many online and offline events for a *Just Rekavary* (just recovery). Examples of such events include organizing art exhibitions and community clean-up in New Caledonia, planting medicinal plants in Tuvalu, and

sponsoring a No Car Day in Tonga, just to name only a few activities. In this sense, information and communication technologies (ICTs) turn out to be very useful tools to mobilize Pacific Islanders in numerous situations. New technologies are used by the Pacific Climate Warriors as a tool to aggregate Pacific Islanders, the underlying aim already proposed by Hau’ofa (1998) and Maurer (2019): a call for a grassroots regionalism, which is a broad and powerful movement not limited to fight against climate change or advocate local impacts but to be guardians of Pacific environments. The Pacific Climate Warriors could be identified as *passeurs culturels*, defined by Favole and Aria (2010) as social actors moving along borders, and between different universes of meaning. Even if they come from Pacific Island States, many activists currently live in the diaspora allowing them to connect with international networks and build relationships with organizations such as 350.org, which have similar claims. At the same time, this privileged position risks to distance their campaigns from people living in the outer islands. Taking into account the articulations and disarticulations (Clifford 2001) within the movement discloses a certain dif-

ference between the activists and local communities: the Pacific Climate Warriors live in cosmopolitan towns or are members of the diaspora in Australia, New Zealand or the United States, while the majority of Pacific Islanders reside in rural areas. While on the one hand, the cosmopolitanism of cities enables activists and leaders to connect their movement and its ecological and environmental concerns with broader realities and perspectives, on the other hand, this same cosmopolitanism risks alienating ordinary people from the movement, which ironically defines itself as a grassroots organization. Although this dichotomy between cosmopolitan cities and rural areas is certainly too rigid, I think it is useful to further question the connections and disconnections amongst the movement and its supporters. It is necessary to question the activists' positioning and also their ability to act on the edge of two different worlds: perhaps it is the city itself, as a hybrid space, that has given rise and allowed the development of transnational movements reclaiming a form of Pacific regionalism, understood here as an articulated tradition (Clifford 2001). This relationship is made possible due to the kinship and diplomatic connections with neighboring nations. At the same time, mobility placed the activists in a dynamic relation between the cosmopolitan city and the rural areas and/or outer islands. Cities are laboratories in which indigenous worlds and modern practices intermingle. The urban dimension, even in Oceania, led to an articulation of environmental and eco-critical ideas with place-based environmental knowledge from rural areas in Pacific islands. This articulation paved the way for student associations, grassroots movements and transnational organizations. What remains to explore is the relationship between these movements and people from rural areas. On the one hand, this situation could lead to the perpetuation of the centre-periphery dynamics. This critique was first proposed by Durutalo (1992:253), who feared the *Pacific Way* to be an uncritical idealization of Pacific identity. Such idealization, in his thought, risked to obscure the diversities of Pacific cultures and identities and to hide power inequalities. On the other hand, island studies scholars are trying to rethink this dichotomy in an archipelagic way (Baldacchino 2008;

Favole & Giordana 2018; Borgnino & Giordana 2020) or according to what has been defined as *tidalectics*, which is an oceanic worldview reflecting the rhythmic fluidity of water (Brathwaite 1983; DeLoughrey 1998; Hessler 2018).

### Conclusion

Other than just contesting the Western narrative and raising awareness among local communities, the Pacific Climate Warriors are trying to reconnect traditional inter-island links through a transnational network, renewing the economic, political, and kinship relations, which suddenly disappeared due to the divide and conquer politics of the colonial era, later replaced by the creation of new national boundaries and through the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). The Pacific Climate Warriors seek to reconnect Pacific communities through their campaigns and initiatives, overcoming the previous colonial borders of the Nation-State and making mobility useful as a local resource instead of seeing it as a negative quality. This has been done before by other movements, such as the Polynesian Voyaging Society which aimed to pass on traditional voyaging methods that risked to be lost due to colonial banning. There was also the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific movement, and the regional protests against the resumption of the nuclear testing in Moruroa in 1995. The protection of the environment is at the core of the *affinity geopolitics* (Davis 2015) supported by the Pacific Climate Warriors, a system based on cross-ocean linkages of affinity and solidarity. The

concept of *warrior* as a classic male figure in the Pacific is re-imagined for all genders (see also George 2019; McNamara & Farbotko 2017). A warrior is anyone who will stand beside Pacific Islands' environmental activists, as warriors defend their homes and their world (Gard 2018). In this sense, I argue that climate change and all the consequences it entails, such as sea level rise, represent a new possibility for Pacific Islanders. Rather than seeing it only as an inevitable catastrophic event, climate change and the connection it could make throughout the *sea of islands*, could be considered as a new form of creativity and resilience (Favole 2010; Hulme 2009).

Nevertheless, some questions still need to be further discussed: how do the leaders of the movement, urban dwellers, connect with local communities, especially with those living on outer islands? Can these leaders who have an assumed knowledge of the land accurately have a positive effect on the islands? Can we assume that the movement is not well-rooted in the local social fabric, but represents instead an exogenous model imposed by foreign influences? And if so, to what extent it is not a real imposition on the local social fabric but rather an adoption or re-appropriation of this exogenous model by the activists themselves? Can the city be thought of as a social laboratory within which different practices meet and collide, giving rise to new forms of protest or resistance? On the other hand, can urban centres also be seen as places that reproduce social inequalities reflected in different ways?



Figure 4: Pacific Climate Warriors protesting at the Climate Strike (September 27th, 2019).

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