
REVIEW

Teena Brown Pulu with a foreword by Kalafi Moala. *Shoot the Messenger: The Report on the Nuku'alofa Reconstruction Project and Why the Government of Tonga Dumped It*. Nuku'alofa: Taimi Publishers. 2011. 171 pp. ISBN 978-0473205591. NZ\$30 paperback.

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TEENA BROWN PULU describes herself as an anthropologist, auto-ethnographer, and author. She is also a poet. A PhD graduate of the University of Waikato, she now works as a lecturer in Pacific Development at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Pulu's first book *Shoot the Messenger: The Report on the Nuku'alofa Reconstruction Project and Why the Government of Tonga Dumped It* is a fascinating and chilling account of the convoluted and seemingly irrational machinations of government officials, aid donors, and businesspeople in a small island developing country; it is also an exemplar of the complex intellectual, familial, and ethical challenges that can mark the relationship between the indigenous and diasporic scholar and their homeland/state.

Pulu's explanation of and speculations on why the government of Tonga "dumped" her report on the Nuku'alofa Reconstruction Project is the topic of Part I of the book; the report itself including all its appendices constitutes Part II. The report that spawned the book grew out of work for which Pulu was contracted by the Tongan government in 2011, exploring options for agricultural development. While engaged in this work, she was subsequently asked to investigate allegations of financial mismanagement by the previous government of Tonga in relation to the Nuku'alofa Reconstruction Project, necessitated by the riots of 2006. In the sixty-eight-page report that

Pulu produced, there were no findings of wrong doing by the government of Feleti Sevele. That, apparently, was the problem with her report. The government of Lord Tu'ivakano, which had succeeded Sevele's and acceded to power after historic electoral reforms, prevented her report from being presented formally in parliament and released her from all her contracts. It should be noted that these were contracts for which Pulu had not sought any payment, both because AUT's overhead charges for contract research by their employees would have made Pulu's work unaffordable for the Tongan government and because Pulu is the niece of Lord Tu'ivakano (a fact she reveals only toward the end of Part I, and with dramatic effect).

Although Pulu quotes earnestly from the late Epele Hau'ofa's visionary essay "Our Sea of Islands" on the dedication page of the report, in many ways, Parts I and II provide a twenty-first-century sequel to *Tales of the Tikongs*, Hau'ofa's collection of satirical short stories of development gone amok and awry in a small Pacific Island state. Indeed, with her irreverent wit, blunt honesty, and passionate sense of justice, Pulu seems to have grabbed the baton that Hau'ofa passed to younger Tongan and Pacific scholars upon his death and taken off running, just like her father in the snapshot she uses of him in his youth on the dedication page of the report. The other photograph is of Lord Tu'ivakano. Between the quote from Hau'ofa and the two photographs, Pulu dedicates the book to "loyal daughters of Tonga/who look to Fathers and Uncles/as heroes and builders/practical craftsmen/of hopes and dreams/that the generation of today/may keep building and improving/on the last/This work includes all of us."

Somehow, the abstract of the report, which precedes all of this, has not prepared us for the evocations of the dedication page. Most governmental and nongovernmental reports that I have read begin with an executive summary. Pulu's abstract, however, does not give away any of its conclusions or findings up front, emphasizing instead that its brief was to assess "the structure and process of governance, management and financial administration enabling the Nuku'alofa Central Business District (CBD) Project to achieve outcomes by March 31st, 2012, the final draw-down date for the concessional loan from the EXIM Bank of China funding the reconstruction." But her report does not follow standard conventions: section one opens with a comment on "Research Reality in Tonga" and immediately implicates the Prime Minister's Special Advisor on Foreign Affairs in trying to predetermine the outcomes of the study. Other subheadings in the report convey Pulu's commitment to cutting through what Hau'ofa would have called the "big bullshit": "Money Talks," "New Government—Old Politics," "The Trouble with Politicking and Buildings," "Practical Outcomes

with No Funny Business,” “Rumour Is Not Fact,” “Deprivation Is Not Development,” and “Disentangling Dysfunctional Relationships.” In spite of its maverick character, the report cannot be said to neglect the essentials: Section One outlines “The Way Forward”; Section Two is a “Guide to How the Loan Works”; Section Three is titled “Get the Facts Right”; Section Four advocates to “Separate Regulatory from Operational”; Section Five summarizes the Nuku’alofa Development Corporation (NDC) system “in a nutshell”; Section Six enumerates “Strength-based Recommendations”; Sections Seven and Eight provide details of field sites and fieldwork; and the final section consists of a “Summary of Findings.”

Having based her study on a comprehensive review of relevant government documents, correspondence, accounts, and audits; fieldwork; and interviews with the assistance of Auckland-based Tongan businessman Melino Maka, Pulu reveals a morass of intrigue, jealousy, shortsightedness, negligence, incompetence, and accusation surrounding what should have been a promising and nationally revitalizing development project. Her recommendations and findings include provisions for regulatory expertise, operational success, and sustainable development. Among the more pointed of her recommendations are injunctions to remove the Prime Minister’s advisors, the project director, and his deputy and for the project to take up an offer from the Auckland Council to assist by providing Independent Building Control Inspection, an area in which Pulu’s father works. That Semi Pulu’s business card is profiled in Section Six, signals both the inevitability and problematics of nepotism in a small society like Tonga. For Pulu, nepotism and cronyism are unacceptable whenever skill-set and due process are neglected. Her impatience with and intolerance for both elected and unelected officials in Tonga who have actively undermined systems of transparency and accountability is palpable in Part I of the book, which at times was breathtaking in its courageous flirtations with libel laws.

Shoot the Messenger is on a topic Pulu says she never expected to address. Her 2007 PhD thesis, “Kakai Tonga ‘i ‘Okalani Nu’u Sila: Tongan Generations in Auckland New Zealand,” was an exploration of history and memory across three generations of her Tongan family, structured as a three-act play. Some of the titles of other papers Pulu has written and delivered in scholarly fora in the past include “Reality Checks: Stories from the Field” (2002 Maori and Pacific Island Graduate Seminars), “New Zealand-born Tongan Women Are Different to Our Island-born Mothers” (2002 New Zealand National Council of Tongan Women’s Annual Conference), and “Sex Is Like Criticism in Tonga: Both Were Suppressed” (2001 Tonga History Association Conference).

Clearly, Pulu had paved a path as an innovative and critical voice on Tongan issues while she was still a postgraduate student. As she has acknowledged herself, however, it was one thing to talk about transnational Tongans or Tongans in New Zealand and quite another thing to write a book about politics, economics, and development back in the homeland of Tonga. If the government of Tonga had done their homework when they engaged her as a researcher and consultant, perhaps they would not have been so surprised or dismayed by her forthrightness.

In April 2012, the Pacific Studies program at Victoria University of Wellington hosted an event as part of New Zealand Book Month, featuring Pulu's book *Shoot the Messenger*. The event took place in the somber shadow of King George Tupou V's passing and the end of his short, though historic, reign. Indeed, Tupou V's death and the ensuing wranglings over the installation of a new monarch took the steam and heat off of the controversy that had begun to brew over Pulu's original commissioned report and her publication of it in its entirety in this book. However, what was never in doubt was that Pulu feels great hope and love for her homeland. In fact, in spite of being fired and publicly vilified by her uncle's government for both her report and the book, as soon as the King's death was announced, Pulu and her uncle the Prime Minister came together as kin to cooperate on their village's contributions to the funeral arrangements. As she writes, "Tonga is a resilient kin-based society undergoing transformational change. The country's transnational nature and function ensure its survival. By this, the full impact of the global economy is absorbed by sustaining networks of remittances flows and connections to kinfolk in the United States, New Zealand and Australia" (61–62). *Shoot the Messenger* will probably horrify and frustrate foreign affairs officials and anyone who prefers formalistic writing, but Pulu's experience and testimony will definitely be instructive for any indigenous academics with idealistic dreams of helping their nations develop by working with government.