

A Melanesian Novel of Historical Emergence: Rexford T. Orotaloa's "Two Times Resurrection"

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IN THE BEGINNING OF *Two Times Resurrection* (1985), one of the two novels from the Solomon Islands,¹ Rexford T. Orotaloa describes a village feast on an artificial island in a Malaitan lagoon: "The smell of cooked pig and other good food floated . . . in the air, while fleets of canoes could be seen gathering around the island. Men and women . . . wore their best costumes. Dancers of mighty power blew the pan-pipes, and when . . . men trod on the ground in the men's arena . . . the whole island shook" (4). After a pan-piping competition of epic proportions, the village "big man" distributes pork and taro, while handsome young men and women eye one another as prospective marriage partners. Finally, old men tell stories about "the many happy times of other feasts in years before." The stories make them weep because they fear Christianity will destroy "the old way of life—the feasting and doing things together as they were done in this village" (5). The old men are right. Not long after the feast, the newly converted islanders desert their homes and move to a Christian village on the coast. The feast is the old village's last communal event, and it both celebrates and mourns a way of life, only remnants of which still exist in the Malaitan lagoons.

One finds the elegiac tone of Orotaloa's description in numerous Pacific Islands novels: the Samoan writer Albert Wendt has suggested that an "enormous sense of loss" is the most common sentiment in the region's literature (202-04). This sentiment pervades *Two Times Resurrection*, which depicts the capitalist transformation of the Solomon Islands and an individual's struggle to survive that transformation without losing what he values in traditional Melanesian society. In this Melanesian

Bildungsroman, Orotaloa closely connects changes in his hero to changes in Solomon Islands society. *Two Times Resurrection* thus, I shall argue, is a Melanesian instance of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "novel of historical emergence."

Bakhtin's description of this genre appears in a suggestive fragment, all that remains of his "Novel of Education and Its Significance in the History of Realism." When German bombs destroyed the Soviet Writer publishing house, they destroyed the book's manuscript; only some notes survive—those Bakhtin did not use for cigarette paper during the war (Clark and Holquist 272-73; Holquist xiii). The fragment begins with Bakhtin's description of various novel genres in which the hero does not evolve: the travel novel, the "novel of ordeal," and the "novel of biographical time" (Bakhtin 10-19). The last of these leads to the *Bildungsroman* or "novel of human emergence." Bakhtin categorizes *Bildungsromane* according to their "degree of assimilation of real historical time" (21).² In the "most significant" category, "man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence" (23). In other novels of emergence, the world remains stable, or, if it changes, the changes do not significantly affect the hero's growth; in novels of *historical* emergence, on the other hand, the hero

emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man. The organizing force held by the future is therefore extremely great here—and this is not, of course, the private biographical future, but the historical future. It is as though the very *foundations* of the world are changing, and man must change along with them. (23-24)

Bakhtin's description can help us understand better the two existing Solomon Islands's novels, for both are *Bildungsromane* set against dramatic historical changes. The earlier, John Saunana's *The Alternative* (1980), takes place in the late 1960s, a decade before the Solomons gained independence from European control, an event that, to use Bakhtin's term, is the novel's "organizing force." The beginning of *The Alternative* is set in a

mission primary school, with a European teacher asking the hero, Maduru, to play the part of Mary in a Christmas play. He refuses, and she slaps him, saying that "[i]n European society men are taught to honor women." The teacher's husband, also an expatriate, is the headmaster; he tries to discipline Maduru in front of the assembled students, explaining that "in European society men are expected to . . . act with courtesy toward women. 'I'm not a European,'" Maduru retorts (9-11). Despite this defiance, Maduru manages to stay in the school and to gain admittance to a prestigious, government-run secondary school. The school exists because a "civil servant in far-off Whitehall had . . . awoken from a slumber in which he had dreamt that the little-known-of Solomon Islands might have to be given its independence one day" (46). The students know that some day they will govern their own country; and they see the school as belonging to them rather than to their expatriate teachers. After Maduru hears on Radio Japan that students have rebelled in France and Japan, he leads a strike to remove an ineffective European teacher, Mr Molehead (61). The strike succeeds, but Maduru is expelled. The expatriate community blacklists him, and he is unable to find work; he becomes a *liu*, one of the many unemployed young men in Honiara, the Solomons' capital. After Maduru breaks a ban on natives in an expatriate-owned hotel, he becomes a leader of these men and of the labourers who live in the city. The novel ends with his election to the Legislative Council (106-07) and leaves little doubt that the hero will be a leader after independence: his struggle against the Europeans has fitted him for the job better than the school would have.

Much of *The Alternative* is transparently autobiographical: Saunana attended King George VI Secondary School—thinly disguised in the novel as Prince Edward School; he was elected to the Legislative Assembly, and after independence, served as minister of education. *Two Times Resurrection* is also autobiographical: Orotaloa grew up on the Malaitan lagoon of Lau, which, like the lagoon in the novel, has a number of artificial islands; his characters occasionally speak Lau. As in *The Alternative*, Orotaloa's protagonist attends schools easily recognized as corresponding to those attended by the novelist. Unlike

Saunana, however, *Orotaloa* makes explicit the autobiographical nature of his novel. Throughout the book, the protagonist is called Toga, but before he leaves his village to attend a mission primary school, his father tells him he is named after the warrior Orotaloa. The name means "power which overcomes other powers," and Toga's parents tell him this to inspire him (22). His education is a battle: "Orotaloa was a warrior and you are named after him. The education you are seeking is really a battle. You must win in the battle, Orotaloa" (22). After the hero wins this battle, the novel becomes explicitly autobiographical again. The hero returns to his home village—a Christian village on the coast of a large island—and he is asked by a group of boys to tell the story of his education. He demurs, saying, "[y]ou can read a little book which I am thinking of writing. I shall call the book 'Two Times Resurrection,' since during my time at school, when I was seeking an education, I was expelled twice. But even then I didn't give up. I managed to get into other schools and finally won what I had sought" (82).

Like *The Alternative*, *Two Times Resurrection* ends with a personal triumph for the hero; yet the two endings, in fact, are quite different in tone. The difference results from the different futures represented—what Bakhtin would call the novels' "organizing forces." In *The Alternative*, the future is national independence, and the protagonist's triumph reflects Saunana's completely favourable view of it. In *Two Times Resurrection*, the future is that of a more Westernized Solomon Islands, in which a cash economy may replace entirely subsistence agriculture. Like most Solomon Islanders, Orotaloa has divided feelings about this transformation; these feelings colour the final scene, set in a village transformed by capitalism. In the hero's absence, an iron-roofed church has replaced one made of sago palm leaf; there are new stores and houses, made of fibreboard, with corrugated iron roofs. The villagers have bought the building materials rather than taking them from the bush, and the village literally, physically, is part of the cash economy. The value of these physical changes is ambiguous—Solomon Islanders argue about the merits of so-called "iron houses"—but Orotaloa plainly condemns the accompanying social changes.³ Elsewhere, he blames

the cash economy for food shortages (42), alcoholism, divorce, and child abuse (27). In the conversation preceding Toga's triumphant declaration of his education's completion, we learn that his uncle is in prison because of a fight sparked by a land dispute, resulting from the new cash economy:

—What is this new thing? asked Toga.

—People stop some people making kumara gardens on their lands but allow others. . . .

—Yes, because people want to make projects like cocoa, cattle schemes and copra and live mainly on cash. Cash economy, Toga ended. (82)

Land disputes and their resultant social disruption are not new in the Solomons, but the introduction of capitalism has increased their number and severity, especially on densely populated islands such as Malaita. Enormous social disruption results from these disputes; in matters of land use, there is a direct conflict between the traditional system and the cash economy (see Burt; Gegeo).

By raising the spectre of these social problems, Orotaloa qualifies his hero's triumph: both the hero and the novelist have become part of a Westernized social order of which they do not fully approve. A tension pervades the novel, producing a tone different from that of *The Alternative*: conflict in the colonial world of *The Alternative* is clear, political, and primarily external; conflict in the postcolonial world of *Two Times Resurrection* is murky, cultural, and primarily internal. In this, *Two Times Resurrection* resembles other recent Pacific Islands literature, which often focuses on the problems of what Melissa Miller has called "bi-cultural" identity (134-35). Unsurprisingly, Aboriginal Australian, Maori, and native Hawaiian writers frequently explore these problems: for these writers, the larger conflict is between minority and majority social groups, with individuals struggling to maintain their identities as they negotiate between cultures; literature by these writers thus often resembles that produced by ethnic minorities elsewhere, by African-Americans, for example, or—to cite a more analogous example—Native Americans. Perhaps surprisingly, writers from recently independent island nations also focus on problems of identity and on the necessity

and difficulty of negotiating between Western and indigenous cultures. These problems do not result from being part of an indigenous cultural minority—they result from being part of a Westernized élite.

In the only critical survey of Solomon Islands literature, Julian Maka'a and Stephen Oxenham describe how those who write in the Solomons, "almost without exception," are part of that élite (5). The current prime minister, Solomon Mamaloni, wrote the radio drama series that Maka'a and Oxenham consider the "gem" of Solomons literature (9), and, as I have mentioned, a minister of education wrote one of the two Solomon Islands novels. Other writers from the Solomons may not have held high government offices, but in a country with a literacy rate of 13 per cent (according to the US Department of State), writers almost inevitably are part of the educated ruling class. This status distances them, mentally and often physically, from the world of the rural villages, where most of the country lives. Even if they chose to do so, however, writers in the Solomons could not ignore that world: the country is too small, the division between the literate élite and illiterate masses too new. Most Solomon Islands writers grew up in rural villages and regularly return there, a situation that produces the "bi-cultural" bind represented in Jully Sipolo's *Civilized Girl*, which describes a young woman alienated from traditional village life by her education and by "town life" (see also Miller 137-39).

The sense that life in the capital is not authentically Melanesian is widespread in the Solomons. In Solomon Islands Pijin, for example, *ples* ("place") means village, and islanders occasionally describe Honiara as a *ples blong waet man* or "white man's village." In using the phrase, they do not mean primarily that many Europeans live in Honiara—though this is true; they mean that, in the capital, Solomon Islanders live like Europeans. Precisely because of this sense that town life does not represent the life of the authentic Solomon Islanders, Maka'a and Oxenham's survey of Solomons literature eagerly anticipated the publication of *Two Times Resurrection*. Orotaloa's short fiction promised that, unlike other Solomons writing, his novel would not focus on problems of the urban élite: "[h]is stories . . . follow rural themes in

contrast to the more urban concerns of many other writers" and thus offer "a glimpse of what might come to be seen as writing with a truly Solomon Islands mark" (8). As a sample of Orotalao's fiction, Maka'a and Oxenham cite a village scene in which the narrator's grandfather tells a story about Erelifoia, a powerful *ramo* or "big man."⁴ *Two Times Resurrection* begins with this story, but it follows the protagonist to Honiara, thus highlighting the difference between village and town life. The hero cannot sleep on his first night in Honiara, and in the morning, a cousin discovers him huddled beneath a tree:

—You found me at the right time. I was very tired this morning. The smell of oil, the noise of the lorries, the dust on the wharf, the reflections from the iron buildings—all made me feel sick as I waited under the tree where you found me. . . .

—Yes, this place is not like our village. You saw the house with a sign "Honiara Fish Shop"? . . . You *buy* fish there. You don't go and ask them to give it to you free. In our village you ask and anyone will give you what you ask. (26)

As Maka'a and Oxenham predicted, Orotalao's novel focuses more on village life than does most other Solomons literature, but because the novel defines the village in opposition to Honiara, town life is also part of the story.

We could easily describe *Two Times Resurrection* using such oppositions as town versus village, communalism versus capitalism, traditional culture versus Western culture. If we limit ourselves to this synchronic dimension, however, we miss Orotalao's representation of historical processes. The passage quoted above, for instance, does not end with the cousin's simple opposition between village communalism and urban capitalism. Toga responds by saying,

—I know the change you are telling me about. Now we all must buy. The farmer sells his crops and he gets money. Then he goes to a shop and buys. So everyone buys and sells.

—Yes, we are changing for the worse, Toga's cousin said. . . .

—Our customs too are changing. These days girls sit close to boys. This is tambu according to our old way of life, Toga said.

—Yes, but we too are changing now, spoke Toga's cousin. (26)

This exchange does not portray a static opposition between Western culture, in which girls may sit next to boys, and tradi-

tional culture, in which they may not—traditional “customs . . . are changing.” Neither does the exchange portray a static opposition between urban capitalism and village communalism: the cash economy is not limited to Honiara; it is part of a “change” that involves “everyone.” The cousin’s refrain—“we too are changing”—shows that the transformation is occurring within individuals as well as in the society as a whole.

The question posed by both transformations is whether or not anything of the past will survive. At the beginning of the novel, Toga’s break with his past is “brought by two strangers,” who arrange for him to go to a mission primary school (8). The awkward way these missionaries paddle their canoe, their bizarre appearance and voices (9), and the reaction of the village pet—a heron whose “eyes seemed angry” and who “seemed to be saying,—You intruders! Why have you come here?” (10)—all signal that the hero’s “new life” (8) will differ radically from his old one. He cannot return to that life in any event: not long after the missionaries depart, the villagers desert their island. Their action suggests a complete rupture with the way of life mourned by the old men at the feast. That way of life had two salient features: first, it was an integrated whole—feasting, net fishing, ancestor worship, the old men’s storytelling and singing were all part of a single fabric; second, and most important, the fabric was bound to a specific place. The villagers destroy this fabric when they desert their island, leaving behind the physical and spiritual material of their old life: the “big custom nets” used for traditional fishing, the “tambu houses” that were part of their religion, the ancestor spirits, who now mingle with “wild ghosts” as the village turns into jungle (13).

With his novel, Orotaloa recovers the past, of course, but this recovery raises its own questions: what kind of past is being recovered, and for whom? To answer these questions, we need to consider Orotaloa’s intended audience, which at times seems to be one that has no connection to the past portrayed in the novel. Orotaloa’s characters often seem to be speaking to Western readers rather than to one another, for they explain in detail features of Melanesian life that would be understood immediately by the other characters and by Solomon Islands readers.

In the conversation quoted above, for example, Toga's cousin is overly explicit when he says, "[i]n our village you ask and anyone will give you what you ask." Toga knows this, of course, as would any Solomon Islands reader, since the village already has been described as fairly traditional: the communal *wantok* system still holds sway in most villages, and even urbanized Solomon Islanders are familiar with it. Most Solomon Islanders also know about formerly widespread, now-disappearing *tabus*, such as the one against girls sitting next to boys: if Orotaloe were writing only for Melanesians, he need not have Toga explain that "[t]his is tambu according to our old way of life."⁵ Yet Orotaloe's public actions show his commitment to writing for Solomon Islanders: he was active in a project to include Solomon Islands writing in the primary school curriculum, and he contributed to a collection of stories widely used in the secondary schools (Maka'a and Oxenham 8). The ending of *Two Times Resurrection*, in which the hero tells a group of village boys that they will read the novel, further indicates that Orotaloe considers Solomon Islanders his primary audience. His characters may be overly explicit in talking about traditional Melanesian life, but this does not necessarily indicate that the novelist wants to address a Western audience; rather he wants to address future generations of Solomon Islanders.

If Orotaloe is trying to recover the Solomon Islands' past for these generations, his representation has more importance than it would if he had intended it for a Western audience. For Westerners, traditional Melanesian life is necessarily remote. Will it seem equally remote to future generations of Solomon Islanders? To what extent will Solomon Islanders feel connected to their past? The answer will depend, in part, on whether the current generation of Solomon Islands writers represents its own, immediate past as a vanished Golden Age or as something with a necessary historical connection to the present. In *Two Times Resurrection*, Orotaloe explicitly connects the traditional Melanesian past to the Westernized present. The hero thinks of his education as a battle, and the spirit that drives him is the same as that which inspired his warrior ancestors (22). Toga's desire for knowledge does not come from Western education: he literally

ingests it when his grandfather—the character in the novel that most represents traditional Melanesian life⁶—gives him the red wisdom betel-nut of his tribe. “This betel-nut has had special incantations said over it,” Toga’s grandfather tells him, “and it will give you a thirst for wisdom. You will never be satisfied and will seek learning until you lie still in the grave” (11). At the end of the novel, after a discussion of Toga’s tenacious pursuit of his education, a friend asks “to hear about the present your grandfather gave you . . . when you were still a heathen boy” (82). When Toga says that the story is too long but that he will tell it another time, Orotaloa leaves the reader with the impression that the story of the grandfather’s gift is the story of the novel, that the hero’s transformation is as much a product of the traditional past as of the Westernized future.

This impression seems to contradict my contention that *Two Times Resurrection* is a novel of historical emergence, for, as I suggest at the beginning of this essay, Bakhtin believes such novels have the “historical future” as their “organizing force” (23). Yet novels organized by the historical future can also be concerned with the historical past. In Bakhtin’s view, the best novels of emergence represent the present’s necessary connection to the past. Bakhtin points to Goethe as the exemplary novelist of the genre and describes Goethe’s “dislike for the *estranged* past, for the past in and of itself”: for Goethe, the importance of the past was its “*necessary connection*” to “the living present”; he sought “to understand the *necessary place* of [the] past in the *unbroken line of historical development*” (33). Rexford T. Orotaloa seeks the same understanding in *Two Times Resurrection*, and in so doing evokes the Solomon Islanders’s past inhabiting their present and, perhaps, their future.⁷

NOTES

¹ The other, John Saunana’s *The Alternative* (1980), is discussed below. Like other Pacific countries, the Solomon Islands have produced more short stories than novels. Subramani believes that short fiction has been favoured in part because of the facts of South Pacific publishing—more journals are printed than books—and in part because of that genre’s relation to the traditional tale.

² In *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Morson and Emerson provide a useful outline of Bakhtin’s classification of novels in the *Bildungsroman* essay (412-13).

- 3 For the effect of Western technology on Solomon Islands village life, see Tutua's "Machines and Rural Society." In *Two Times Resurrection*, Orotalua highlights some benefits of capitalism by giving his hero poor eyesight, for Western technology offers Toga a chance to overcome his physical infirmity. Orotalua's position resembles that of Mazrui (239-47) and Ngugi (*Decolonising* 66-67): capitalism provides immense technological benefits but damages traditional culture. In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Karega epitomizes the conflict: "I don't want to continue worshipping in the temples of a past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature" (323). For a discussion of the conflict in Ngugi's novel, see Sharma's "Socialism and Civilization: The Revolutionary Traditionalism of Ngugi wa Thiong'o."
- 4 The tradition of powerful "big men" is particularly strong on Malaita. The most famous of these *ramos* was Basaina, whose murder of a British district officer resulted in the horrifying retaliation known as the Malaita massacre.
- 5 Glass explores similar oddities in the narrative and dialogue of Vincent Eri's *The Crocodile*, the first novel from Papua New Guinea. Glass believes that these result from the difficulty of addressing both Melanesian and Western readers.
- 6 Toga's grandfather combines two of what Keesing describes as the three most respected positions in traditional Malaitan life (Keesing and Corris 17, 20-21): the grandfather is a traditional priest and feastgiver; and the stories he tells his grandson recall the third most important position, the warrior or *ramo*.
- 7 A version of this essay was presented at the 1994 MLA convention, at a session arranged by the Division on Anthropological Approaches to Literature.

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