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Abstract

Albert Tuaopepe Wendt is the most acclaimed novelist, poet and short story writer from Samoa and the South Pacific literary region. Born in 1939 in Western Samoa, he is a member of the aiga (extended family) Sa-Tuaopepe, branch of the Sa-Tuala and he was brought up in Apia where he completed his primary school education. In 1952, he was granted a scholarship from the New Zealand administration and moved to the New Plymouth Boys' High School in New Zealand from where he graduated in 1957.

CHRISTIE MICHEL

Interview with Albert Wendt

Albert Tuaopepe Wendt is the most acclaimed novelist, poet and short story writer from Samoa¹ and the South Pacific literary region. Born in 1939 in Western Samoa, he is a member of the *aiga* (extended family) Sa-Tuaopepe, branch of the Sa-Tuala and he was brought up in Apia where he completed his primary school education. In 1952, he was granted a scholarship from the New Zealand administration and moved to the New Plymouth Boys' High School in New Zealand from where he graduated in 1957. Later on, he went to the Ardmore Teachers' College and completed a diploma in teaching in 1959. In 1964, he obtained an M.A. in history at the Victoria University (Wellington) for his thesis on 'Guardians and Wards: A Study of the Origins, Causes, and the First Two Years of the Mau in Western Samoa' (political movement for independence).

Wendt worked as a Teacher for a few years, and was promoted to the position of Principal of Samoa College in Apia. In 1974, he was appointed Senior Lecturer at the University of the South Pacific and returned to Samoa to organise its new centre. From 1982 to 1987, he was professor of Pacific Literature at the University of the South Pacific in Suva (Fiji). He has been teaching at the University of Auckland since 1988. As one of the major artists in the region, Albert Wendt has played different roles: for instance, he was the director of the University of the South Pacific Centre in Apia; edited *Bulletin*, *Samoa Times*, and *Mana Publications*; and he was the co-ordinator for the Unesco Program on Oceanic Cultures. He plays a dominant role in the promotion of South Pacific Literature, encouraging and promoting the work of new writers.

As for the acknowledgement of his talent, both *Sons for the Return Home* and *Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree*² were made into successful movies. He was awarded the Landfall Prize in 1963, the NZ Wattie Award in 1980 for *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, and the Commonwealth Book Prize for Southeast Asia and Pacific in 1992. He has also written two unpublished plays. On the whole, his poetry and his novels reflect the multiple heritage of his pelagic culture. His attempt to deconstruct the South Seas myths conveyed by the exotic literature of the nineteenth century and his enthusiasm to create and promote Pacific Literature³ indicate the depth of Albert Wendt's constructive response to the 'Polynesian Void' and his commitment to the promotion of a new Pacific awareness.

Albert Wendt is currently a professor of English at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and he is at the centre of the creation of a written Pacific Islands literature. As I was preparing my doctoral thesis⁴ on his novels, I had the opportunity to speak with Albert Wendt, at the University of Auckland in 2000.



(Photo: Paul Sharrad)

CM: *Hello, Professor Wendt. I would like to begin this interview by asking you about your favourite character? Do you have one? and if so, do you think your favourite character embodies the best elements of your vision of Samoan society?*

AW: I have never thought of that because you know you develop as a writer — it is like when you start as a young writer you may like the character you are writing about, two years later, when you have more experiences, you look back and you may not like the same character. So it is a changing thing. It is like people asking what is your favourite book? I don't have a favourite book. It depends on the stage of my life — I like a book and later on I like some other book. So the choice of my favourite book or my favourite character is not that important but also it changes. You may have noticed already that there are a lot of similarities between some of the characters. The figure of the con man or the figure of the man who has been an orphan keeps appearing in my work for one reason or another. There must be a psychological reason. A lot of the main characters, I found out over the years, have parts of my past in them. A part of my grandmother keeps appearing. Some of the characters recur and some of the ideas recur. In some books I may analyse freedom and individual choice and the next books emphasise other things.

CM: *You told me that there is a new book to be published. Could you tell me more? Is it to be a new *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* or do you try another style as you did in *Ola* or *Black Rainbow*?*

AW: I have been working on this new novel [*The Mango's Kiss*] for about sixteen years on and off. I began not long after *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* was published. The style of the beginning is similar to the style of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*. But then because I have been writing it for about sixteen years, the style changed in the book. That is one of the things that I would like to keep in the book. I want readers to identify that the style changes, because over the period of time I have published lots of other works (*Ola* and *Black Rainbow*). By doing those books, which in many ways are quite experimental, I have learned a lot, so that the sixteen-year-old novel is heavily influenced by these two other books and by what I found in them. Part of the new novel, which is an older novel anyway, is not really new. Someone suggested that I rewrite the whole novel and my answer was no. I want to leave it as it is. I have published parts already. So the new novel is really a reflection of how hard the development as a writer was over sixteen years. But it is a family saga like *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, and I wanted to keep that. The novel starts in 1860 and I have written it up to the 1920s. My intention was to come up to 1967 but it was too big already. It is about 700 pages already, and I have to cut it so what I want to do is probably keep the novel up to the 1920s; but the style of writing is not historical, it is mostly contemporary.

CM: *I would like to ask you a few questions about themes that are recurrent in your books: I notice that the women in your novels are either parodies of powerful women on committees about whom you talk quite ironically, or they are not powerful at all. Except for the main character in *Ola*, your protagonists are men. Is this typical of Samoan society? Are the women caricatures? And if so, what function does this serve? Or do they have a narrative purpose?*

AW: Well, all three are true. When you are writing a book, it doesn't matter what gender your characters are. A lot of what comes out is what you are. When I was very young, I thought that a lot of my most important portrayals were of women.

It is also a growth. Every writer has this. The way you portray characters is the way you develop as a person. People forget that writers are not just writers. So as we mature, that is also reflected in our writing. Do not forget that the creation in the writing is not necessarily a reflection of real people.

We all have our versions. So my view of the characters I have in my books — and they are mainly Samoan characters — are my own versions.

You have to remember it, because I believe there is no one reality out there reflected by everybody; we create our own reality. So when someone comes and says: well, Albert Wendt's works are an analysis of the Samoan culture, I am very surprised. It is only a reflection of the culture because I happen to be writing about that country and have Samoan characters. Do you see what I mean? It is the same if I am now beginning to write about Pacific Islanders or Samoan characters living in New Zealand because I am now living back in New Zealand. *The Song Maker* is my first full-length play about a migrant family who has been living here since 1963 — the first generation, who were the grandparents, their children and their children's children — so you have three generations of this family living in New Zealand. So I am now writing about Samoans living in New Zealand. You can say that because they are Samoans, I am still commenting on the Samoan way of life and how it has transplanted itself here; but you can also say that it is only Albert Wendt's versions or depictions of a reality that is different for all people.... We forget that it is all artificial. It is a creation by a writer. We may get some idea of what the culture is like or what the people are like from the book, but to go to a novel looking for accurate anthropological answers or sociological information is a dead end. Anyway, anthropological depictions of a culture are also just versions. They are made up as well (laughs). When Derek Freeman argues that his views are authentic, I question all of that. When Margaret Mead says that her visions are the most accurate on Samoa, I question that too. When I say that this is my vision of Samoa, it is only my vision. We all have different views and different preferences; and the way women look at the world is different from the way men look at the world. Our age, our gender, our upbringing, our belief system — all influence the way we look at the world or the way a writer writes his book. So I do not go for canons, I do not go for arguing that literature is an accurate depiction of a particular culture or a particular people. We develop our own pictures of what the country must be like. The danger at the moment is that I am the only novelist and people tend to take my view of the Samoan culture (laughs) and put my words against those of Margaret Mead or Freeman. Their views are also fictions. Even if they are supposed to have done serious scientific anthropological research, what they see is also determined by the type of people they are. When I go to different countries, I see those countries through the way I am. A few years later, if I live there, after I meet a lot of people, the way I see the country is very different from when I first arrived there. I am sure people like me, going back to Samoa years later to look at the accuracy of their research, would have had a different view. It is just another view. I see very little difference between autobiography, which is supposed to be factual, and fictions — there is no real difference.

CM: *In February 1997, you explained to me that all the names in your books were chosen for their symbolism and that in Samoan language some of them were representative of the character's personality: Tauilopepe's mother's name means moon; La'au means tree: is it a genealogical tree, like the Banyan Tree, like the freedom tree?*

AW: Masina means moon, and month. When the European concept of month came in Samoa, we gave it the name of the moon, because of the way we worked on the calendar. The name for hour is *itu la*, *itu* means side, *itula* means the side of the sun; so if you say it is five o'clock you say *itula sulua*, it is the fifth side of the sun. *Itu* is a concept in Samoa that is very important in terms of relationships. Tauilopepe is a made-up name: Pepe means the youngest son, Tauilopepe means 'to select in a special way', sorted among all the other children. But you will find that most Samoan matai (chiefly) titles go back to ancient times, to old generations. Usually you have a story of how the title came about. For instance, the title of my family, our title Tuaepepe, *Tu* means to stand, *ao* meaning sun and *pepe* meaning child. The original title first began with a young child standing in day light, so when he was chosen by my family to be the head of the family, generations before, he was given the title Tuaepepe, which still continues and my eldest brother occupies.

La'aumatua means true, it means mature or the original tree. *La'aumatua* means the parent tree. Well, the symbol of the tree is common to all cultures, it is not only a Samoan symbol. It is a reflection on all the ties, the genealogical ties: all families have genealogical ties. But in Samoa, the names continue with the titles. For instance, Faleasa's son's name, Moaula means red rooster. As for Faleasa, *fale* means home and *asa* means wading through — someone who is trying to find his way home.

A lot of the Samoan names were made up, I deliberately put them together but they have meanings. You do not make up names like Soane because Soane is the literal translation of John. But there are names that I made up to reflect the character.

CM: *You also told me in 1997 that I was the first person to ask about the numerous suicides in your books. Moreover, I know that the suicide rate is very high among young Samoans. Would you say that suicide, in your work, is connected with the existentialist notion of suicide by Camus or is it connected to other Samoan symbolic values?*

AW: It started early in my work. I see suicide not in the heroic way now. In the existentialist philosophy, suicides tend to be heroic: 'I own my life and I own the right to take it away'. I don't see it that way anymore. I see suicide in relation to the Samoan way and the way of most Pacific Islands. The suicide rate is so high amongst Polynesians, among young Polynesians

or young Pakehas, that it is no longer heroic. I was wrong in many ways, it is tragic, absolutely tragic. There is something wrong in young people taking away their own life. There is something wrong with the culture, there is something terrible happening within the way of life which forces the young people to destroy themselves. So I see it in a more real and tragic way. Even though I still have characters who do choose to take their own life, they do so in a desperate way. But I don't want to romanticise suicide, like I tended to do in the past, because it is not romantic. It is real. The suicide rate in New Zealand is very high, it is very high in Samoa, it is very high in most countries.

CM: *There are also several themes that are recurrent throughout your books and that can be considered as your personal themes: I studied the final sentences in your works and there is laughter in several of them. What does laughter mean? Pepe laughs, Faleasa laughs, Galupo laughs at the end of Leaves of the Banyan Tree.*

AW: Laughter is very important in most literatures. It is one of the few ways we can get out of the tragedies and sadness and we can survive in a better way if we have a good sense of humour. That is why even in the darkest moments, in most literatures, you will find that the writer has a good sense of humour. When Galupo is laughing at the end of *Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, it is not really laughter for him, it is a kind of laughter of triumph now that he has taken power, but it is also sort of comparing him, to the dogs; it is a sort of yelping to the moon. So it is a sort of negative and a sort of very positive image at the end. In *Pouliuli* there is a lot of humour which is a dark humour. It is a very dark book, very gloomy book, but a kind of funny book. All my students think it is funny. It is very dark and gloomy and the only way to get out of the gloomy atmosphere is to have a good sense of humour, even though the characters are getting destroyed at the end. I like funny books anyway and I like humour in fictions, but I do not like light humour. The humour in *Pouliuli* is particularly dark. Laughter is also a relief, you relieve all the sadness and the suffering. It is also a laughter in the face of death or whatever — it is a sort of defiance.

Most societies have comedies because they need to have comedy to keep themselves alive, especially if it is a very authoritarian society and a very repressive society. How do you attack the people in power? ... In Samoa, you call that *faaleaitu* because in Samoa you have political comedies that go back hundreds of years. When the skit is on, in those comedies, you can attack anyone in the village. You can make fun of the pastor, of the chiefs, and they are not supposed to get angry. It is now being used in the modern Samoan comedies. You can attack anybody.

The society allows this mechanism but it will not allow you to do that in any other situations.

CM: *What does silence mean to you? Some of your characters (the protagonist of Sons for the Return Home, for example) want to escape the silences of the villages, because they are forced to face their fears. So why do some others like to stay in the lava fields?*

AW: I know what you mean. Silence is very difficult to live with. When you are silent, you can see your problems much easier. They come to you, there is nothing else to distract you. Your problems and all the other things that are worrying you come back to you when you are silent, and when nothing is silent, you feel everything else in your life, all the distractions.

CM: *The last theme I would like you to comment on is vanity: this term returns again and again: 'all is vanity' from the Bible is omnipresent; the word 'vanity' is in your titles, and in your chapters. Is the conflict for power and freedom vain and do you want to say that human life is vain and empty like the Void or do you mean pride?*

AW: It could mean both. The drive for power is a very vain drive in the sense that it is a competitive ego trip. There is another drive for power that the saints have: it is a power trip that does not harm people. It is a positive form of the ego and for humanity. A lot of the characters are vain because they love themselves. The first thing you have to do to get out of the self is, of course, to destroy the self. It is a Western idea but it is also very Samoan. All you see is yourself and you will not see anything else. That is why the prophet says all is vanity. There are different sayings, whether it is Samoan or not, but loving yourself always gets in the way. It drives people to do selfish things which destroys them or people around them. You have to have self love, so I am not saying that self love is bad. You need self love to protect yourself, to advance your own ideas and to grow. The type of self love which I find quite destructive is the very egotistic kind: everything exists just for you. We are all like that to some extent, and usually men who seek power for their own sake are like that more than most.

CM: *So would you go as far as saying that the struggle for freedom is vain too?*

AW: I think this struggle is worthwhile because you are struggling for something that is very positive. You want freedom to be yourself and you want freedom for other people, whereas the struggle for freedom in the very egotistic and vain sense is all for themselves — it is freedom to dominate other people and to exploit them.

CM: *I would not like to make a mistake, but is it proper to use the 'self' or the 'ego' in your works, because there are Western ideas and Western terms that you use too.*

AW: In Samoa terms like I, we, and us, are quite different from the Western ideas. *Oau* means 'of me', but the most important term is 'us', *matoa*, *tatua*, and you must always put them before the self. The individual defines his self in relation to the others, to the group, *itu*, the *Va* thing. You are yourself in your relation to other people and to other things. You are connected to everything. Whereas in the very Western term 'I' you can always divorce yourself from it. In Samoa, the very concept of 'I' is not. The 'I' is only the 'I' if it is part of the group, connected to the *Va*, connected to all the other things: to other human beings, to other creatures and even to other inanimate things, to trees and anything else.[...]

CM: *My next question deals with alienation. This term seems to sum up issues like the use of social masks, the issue of freedom, the issue of power and the fact that your characters are not what they would have liked to be. Would you go as far as saying that Samoan power brings alienation from within, because it is alienating and alienated? Would you say that colonialism brought alienation, with religion for instance? Are your characters alienated because of the denial of freedom?*

AW: Alienation is caused when you have a culture which moves into considering everything that you are, and everything in your life, is not worthwhile, and proceeds to destroy it. You are making people feel ashamed of their own way of life. They become more alienated from themselves because they do not know their own ways and they do not know about their own cultures because colonial governments do not teach local languages ... so where are they? They are quite lost. The recovery comes when they become aware that their culture is worthwhile and when they start to fight to make it survive. Then the process is reversed in the sense that they say to the culture that came in, we are alienating us so you can go.

The alienation of the self is very important; the Western thing of the artist being an outsider is not just particular to the West, because somehow some of us are born with the feeling that we do not belong to anywhere. Even if you grew up in a good family that loves you, you can say 'I do not feel at home here'. It is not a bad way to be. The romantic myth is that most artists feel that way, but I know a lot of people who are not artists and who feel that way too.

Anyway, the whole culture is not alienated. There are some of the ways of the past that I like, some that I do not like. What I do, and what a lot of people do, is that we create our own sub-culture. You choose friends who you get along well with, and we create a sub-culture. In that way, we feel that we belong to a group, even if we do not belong to the

bigger one, the national culture. Most societies are like that, even in small communal societies like Samoa, even in villages, we meet up with people who are like ourselves and go to the same church. But I do not like sub-cultures where churches dominate, that force everybody to be the same — or when a political group decides that the only way to live your life is to do what they tell you.

The whole alienation thing is even worse in the West in the sense that the old way of life has been totally shattered, extended families have been shattered. So you live on your own with your wife and two or three kids. You live on your own in a huge city. That is a form of alienation that becomes more and more important because the cities become larger and larger and they say that industrialised societies dominate the whole world.

Most societies began like Samoa: rural, communal. And then family ties were shattered because of people migrating to cities, trying to live a life on their own, with a few friends, a few relatives, and it is a part of the twentieth century that I do not like. You now have cities like Mexico City which are not cities: they are civilisations on their own.

CM: *I read that you were ‘an angry young man’? Are you? Were you? Why were you angry? Is your revolt against those imposed values and is it at the origin of your desire to write?*

AW: I was. But they sensationalised it. I am still basically a very angry person — about the condition of the world and how people are badly treated. I am less angry now. I used to be quite angry openly.

That was a sort of key label at the time: it was very popular in the sixties and in the seventies to call people the angry young generation. Most artists you will find and most human beings who would like to change the world are angry — they are not happy with the world as it is. The word angry is thought to be a bad word — quite negative; whereas anger is very positive. I do not like the way people treated us so I will write about that. I do not like the way I feel: why am I feeling this way? I do not like what is happening in literature. I do not like what is happening in the Pacific in relation to the colonial powers moving in. So you become labelled as an angry person. But in actual fact you are protesting certain things you believe in, and against certain things you do not believe in. If you look back at the history of art, you will find that it is one of the artist’s motivations — you can call it anger, but it is a feeling that some things are not right in the world. Sometimes you are quite angry in what you write and what you say.

CM: *As you know, I am very interested in the different forms through which freedom could appear in the Samoan psyche and in your works. It is quite crucial to know that the idea of personal choice is part of the origin*

of the creation, because from what I read, children and adults, women (Sia Figiel) and your characters have trouble dealing with freedom.

AW: Freedom is the same in most countries, but it is defined differently. Some cultures give a lot of freedom to individuals and some cultures give a lot of freedom to the group. In those groups, children are supposed to behave in a certain way, teenagers are supposed to behave in a certain way, old people are supposed to behave in a certain way. There are limits to how we should behave, which is freedom as well. Limits are put on freedom. We all learn how to manipulate it and how to use it to benefit ourselves. Some people are far more unscrupulous manipulating it for themselves. For example, some of the characters in my books are making a lot of money destroying other people. It happens in most countries. But the story of the creation and the gifts of the God is a very important story.

CM: *Could you tell me the Samoan myth of human creation?*

AW: Tagaloalagi, the supreme God, one day asked his messengers to take a piece of *fue* (vine) *tagata* and lay it out in a place called *Malae la* (sun) — this place was known as *Malaela* because of this event — and to leave this piece of piping vine in this *malaela* to see what would happen. So after time had passed, Tagaloalagi asked his messengers to go back and check what had happened. He got there and saw that the vine had turned into *ilo* (worms, maggots). Tagaloalagi came from Heaven, and he shaped these maggots in the forms of human beings: it is how human beings were created. Into them, he put the following gifts: first, *loto* which is spirit, courageous spirit; secondly *poto* which is the ability to think; *atamae* which is intelligence; *agaga* which is soul; *finagalo* which is the ability to choose, or make decisions. The last one is the ability to doubt.

Those are the most valuable things in the Samoan evaluation of human personality. All those gifts are integrated in what we call a human being. When we die, we turn into maggots again (laughs). And that is why vine is known as *fue tagata*, meaning the vine out of which human beings came. That is why that place — the *malae* of the sun (*malaela*) — is very important.

NOTES

¹ Formerly, Western Samoa. Nowadays, Independent State of Samoa.

² Best screenplay in the Tokyo International Film Festivals.

³ Current debate asks what theoretical term might suggest the specificity, the multiplicity, the historical and political background, the literary creation in this region and the literary patterns on this new literature. Theory offers many possibilities: postcolonial, postmodernist, resistant, third world, fourth world, Commonwealth, post imperial, new literature in English...

⁴ Christie Michel is currently writing up a doctoral thesis at the University of la Réunion on the major themes of Albert Wendt's fictions.