

Compassionate Exile, 60 minutes, VHS (PAL and NTSC), color, 1999. Filmmakers: Bob Madey and Larry Thomas. Suva: X-Isle Productions. Copies of the video may be obtained from Larry Thomas, Literature and Language Department, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji or email: thomas_l@usp.ac.fj.

The history of the Moloka'i leprosarium and the work of Father Damien has been well documented. The subject of several videos, films, and numerous books, Hawai'i's history with Hansen's Disease has a relatively high profile in the consciousness of the Pacific. Makogai's history by comparison has lingered at the periphery of our imaginations and memories.

Through the historical heroism of Father Damien, Moloka'i has come to represent the potential for goodwill between *haole* and *k naka maoli*: a statue of the priest dominates a courtyard before the Hawai'i state legislature. The mana of Moloka'i, then, is most powerfully felt in the space or relationship between *haole* and *k naka maoli*. The mana of Moloka'i is firmly grounded, metaphorically speaking, in the discursive space that radiates around *Hawai'i nei*. But somewhere in the shadow of Moloka'i lies another island, an island that shares a similar history as a leprosarium in the Pacific.

As Moloka'i was central to the Hawaiian archipelago, so was Makogai central to the Fiji group. Makogai, like Moloka'i, also tells a tale of the goodwill that can grow between

kaivalagi and *kaiviti*—although no statues have been erected by the Fiji government in honor of the sisters of the Society of Mary who dedicated their lives there. Makogai, however, might also be seen as an example of the injustice of colonial policies of convenience: why go to the expense of setting up leprosariums in each colony or island so that patients might be closer to their families (and if their families happened to forget them, at least they would still be in their own land)? Or Makogai might be seen as a testament to indigenous brutality: chiefs in Fiji attributed the rise in leprosy cases after 1899 to a colonial ordinance that forbade the traditional practice of clubbing lepers to death. But does the mana of Makogai belong solely to one nation? Is the mana of Makogai most powerfully felt in the space or relationship between *kaivalagi* and *kaiviti*?

Compassionate Exile represents Makogai as an unlikely but powerful microcosm of the Pacific region. From 1911 to 1969, Makogai was the principal leprosarium in the South Pacific. Many patients died while on Makogai, but many also were treated successfully, discharged, and repatriated. Over the years, the leprosarium served a total of 4,500 patients, who came not only from Fiji, but from the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati), Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, New Zealand (including Mori and Pakeha), the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), and the Solomon Islands. In their multicultural polyglot mix, these social outcasts created an early form of what many

years later Epeli Hau'ofa would dream of as “a new Oceania.”

And why might this “new Oceania” have taken root in Fiji? Dr C J Austin, an early medical superintendent on the island, drew on geographic logic: Fiji was deemed centrally placed between the Gilberts to the north, Samoa and Tonga to the east, and New Zealand to the south; being in the center of the Fiji group, “Makogai is thus admirably placed as a collective isolation and treatment centre.” Of course, Fiji’s designation as a crossroads of the Pacific is foretold in its name—*viti* or *whiti* means “a place of crossing” (Pio Manoa 1996).

The fact that an early prototype of Hau'ofa's oceanic vision emerged in a community of outcasts from around the Pacific provides an alternative trajectory for the emergence of regionalism. While Hau'ofa has traced three trajectories himself—one of bureaucratic elites (1987), another of grass-roots diasporic subjects (1993), and the third of movements in contemporary art (1997)—Makogai predates all of these. Regionalism as Hau'ofa describes it emerges out of the dialectic between colonialism and nationalism; regionalism as modeled on Makogai is the product of an ethos of compassion.

With its hauntingly lovely sound track (original music composed by Fijian musician Tui Ravai) and English subtitles, the video follows the reminiscences of four subjects—three of them former patients, and one self-described as “a child of Makogai.” Soko Tuiketeki was diagnosed with leprosy and sent away from his native island in the Lau Group to Makogai. Recalling his early impressions of the

island Soko notes, “When I saw the policeman I thought it was a prison.” Despite his fears, Makogai soon became a home that nurtured his talent as an artist and sculptor.

Polutele Fakatava came to Makogai from his home in Tonga: “In the village our house was always full of people. When they heard I was sick they stayed away.” On being successfully treated, Polutele returned to his village in Tonga but found he no longer felt at home there, and made his way back to Fiji. Susau Laiyasewa, from Rotuma, arrived on Makogai with a boatload of Gilbertese patients. She is shown in several shots leading patients in the leprosy ward at P J Twomey Hospital through their daily exercises. Interestingly, Polutele speaks fluent Fijian on camera, and while Susau speaks fluent English in her interviews, she is captured on camera conversing fluently in Fijian with the others.

All three of these former patients had left their homes as children, and in the documentary they describe being farewelled by their families with funerary rituals. The psychic horror of such treatment cannot be imagined, yet the bittersweet irony is that each survived. One cannot help but be sobered by Soko Tuiketeki's quiet reflection on his parents' gathering of mats and *kumi* to send him off to die on Makogai: “I was twelve years old. I am now sixty-nine years old.” Susau Laiyasewa recalls the certainty she felt on arriving at Makogai on Easter Sunday—“I will go back. I knew,” she smiles, “because I arrived on the day Jesus had risen from the dead.”

The fourth subject of the documentary, Elena Naduva, was not a patient

herself, but her parents had been before they both died on Makogai. Like most other children born on the island, Elena was removed from her parents at birth; this was standard practice because leprosy is not a hereditary disease. While the island administrators tried to reunite as many children as possible with their extended families, those, like Elena, whose relatives could not be found, were raised by the nuns in the Makogai “orphanage.” As a healthy child growing up on an island that was a place of exile for a horrendously disfiguring disease, Elena remembers being taught not to recoil from or shun the patients.

Indeed, she, Soko, Susau, and Polutele all agree that the greatest gift they received on Makogai was the gift of compassion. As Susau reflects, “(We) were taught to help those worse off than ourselves.” Standing in the ruins of a building that was once reserved for patients deemed to be at death’s door, Polutele describes how he was left there with an Indo-Fijian and a Solomon Islander. He recalls helplessly witnessing his two companions’ deaths, watching their bodies being taken away, and being left alone for dead once more. Under these conditions Polutele had an epiphany: “I sat on my bed thinking this is man’s plight.” That night, he says, he put his life in God’s hands.

The strength of the four subjects’ Christian faith and piety is subtly and matter-of-factly portrayed in the video documentary; they never come across as feverish or fundamentalist, nor does one get a sense that the filmmakers are “working” the Christian themes. Elena, Soko, Susau, and Polutele live

their Christianity—they attribute their survival to their faith, and they are at peace with the world. In many ways, the making of the documentary also assisted them by providing closure to their individual and collective journeys, and recording their stories for posterity.

Footage of the four returning to Makogai—to disembark on the jetty constructed for visitors and see the ruins of the patients’ jetty, to visit graves of loved ones, to survey hills and forests they knew as children, and to be welcomed into buildings that had previously been off-limits to them—is extremely moving. Polutele leads the film crew to a grove of mango trees planted by the Tongan men on the island. As he picks a mango from a tree he recalls planting himself, he softly exclaims, “This mango is very sweet.”

Even as the video attempts to reconstruct the history of the island, just as effective is its dwelling on the loss or gaps in memory. Elena, for instance, cannot tell where her parents are buried because their graves are unmarked. Susau, sitting in the middle of the overgrown cemetery, remembers the devastation she felt when a young Samoan girl who had befriended her and taught her how to play the guitar, died. Susau is not sure where she is buried either. Polutele points out three graves belonging to two Tongan girls and their brother who had been diagnosed with leprosy while pursuing university studies in New Zealand. Polutele subtly raises another dimension to the matter of memory: when graves have been marked—who is there to visit them?

Our collective neglect of this his-

tory is so different from the national and regional pride invested in war memorials, military cemeteries, and annual commemorative ceremonies for the veterans of wars that were not of our making. Makogai stands without plaques or monuments because if these were there, they would mark our region's inability to cope with radical difference, our collective fear of contamination, and most of all Pacific outcasts' will to survive and share the best of what it means to be human. The documentary includes archival footage of patients engaged in occupational therapy, playing soccer, playing in string bands, and performing the hula.

One of the most enjoyable segments involves the four subjects' recollections of fun times in the Makogai theatre with its "cinemascope" screen. Evocative of the Italian film *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), the camera focuses on the present-day ruins of the theatre, while the voices of Elena, Susau, and Polutele laughingly recreate an atmosphere of excitement—caused not only by the glamour of Hollywood films, but by the opportunity for male and female patients to flirt with one another!

Though the ruins on Makogai represent a precious and very personal past for Soko, Susau, Polutele, and Elena, the ruins should also be a reminder for historians, conservationists, and national leaders around the Pacific of a precious regional past. Thanks to the lack of historical consciousness (or conscience) in successive Fiji governments, many of the buildings fell into disrepair from neglect when the leprosarium was closed and the patients moved to P J

Twomey Hospital in Suva. Makogai was next destined to be used as a sheep breeding station, and now serves primarily as a fisheries station. During the filming of this documentary, buildings were being actively dismantled for parts by villagers from a nearby island.

Given that several prominent people and families in Fiji and the region have ties or connections to the leprosarium (Fiji's former head of state, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, served on the island as part of his medical internship), Makogai needs to be declared a national and regional heritage site. Anyone who views this video will agree.

Had the filmmakers relied solely on archival sources, their product would have been significantly different. Though the letters and memoranda recorded by the European doctors, nurses, nuns, and priests on the island paint vivid and poignant pictures of life on Makogai, though the meticulous archival photodocumentation is unrelenting in its reminder of the horror of one of humanity's most ancient scourges, though New Zealand's newsreels valuably document moments of this history, it is the voices of Soko, Susau, Polutele, and Elena that breathe spirit into this video.

Since it was premiered in Fiji in 1999, the only criticisms of *Compassionate Exile* that have emerged have been for its representation of Indo-Fijians. Such criticism is unfair, shortsighted, and reflects a peculiarly Fiji-centered vision of the region. If Makogai's history belongs to the region, and Indo-Fijians are members of our regional, oceanic community,

then *Compassionate Exile* has represented them well—far better, say, than it represented Chinese patients. The filmmakers did not set out to be inclusive for the mere sake of inclusion. They set out to tell a story, and the story that has been told here through words and images honors the Indo-Fijian experience on Makogai. In fact, one of the most impressive images in the video is archival footage of a ferry-load of Indo-Fijian men arriving to visit friends and relatives at the leprosarium.

The production of *Compassionate Exile* itself was an exercise in multiculturalism. Directed by Arab-American Bob Madey, the documentary was the brainchild of Fiji Islander playwright Larry Thomas. Thomas, whose plays consistently represent Fiji as a multicultural society, had begun research on the Makogai leprosarium six years before beginning the film project. Having spent many hours speaking with the sisters of the Society of Mary and with patients at the P J Twomey Hospital, Thomas deserves credit for identifying such articulate subjects as Soko, Susau, Polutele, and Elena. The camera work is characteristic of Banaban Aren Baoa—well known for his work on numerous South Pacific Commission/Pacific Community video documentaries like *Maire* (1999). Other members of the multicultural team who worked on *Compassionate Exile* include Samuela Ralova (sound), Sangeeta Singh (production assistant), Willie Chung (still photographer), Pat Craddock and Maraia Lesuma (sound engineering). The project was funded by a grant from the University of the

South Pacific Research Council, as well as the Leprosy Foundation of New Zealand, and the Australian High Commission in Fiji.

Yours truly has a cameo part in the video: in a surprise casting move I was asked to read a letter by one of the nuns. We had to do several takes on the recording because my voice kept choking up—the letter just kept making me cry! Had I not been associated with the video, I would certainly still have reviewed it positively.

In my opinion *Compassionate Exile* is a Pacific historian's dream come true. It is original in its excavation of a neglected historical topic, combines archival documentation with oral history, uses indigenous language, objectively represents colonial relations, avoids the nationally oriented or nationalist myopia predominant in Pacific history by describing a uniquely multicultural community, brings to the fore the experiences of ordinary people, allows room for reflections on contemporary analogies and politics, and basically tells a good story. While Pacific historians have occasionally anguished over what makes good history, the fact that this stunning video documentary was not made by professional historians speaks volumes. *Compassionate Exile* is also an educator's dream come true: it crosses the disciplinary boundaries of history, sociology, medicine, public health, and religious studies, and its pedagogical value is immeasurable.

TERESIA K TEAIWA
Victoria University of
Wellington

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