

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Spaces Hermeneutics: Integrating Mutual Philosophies of the Mats of the Ao-Naga and iTaukei

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Abstract

This essay presents a hermeneutical tool that integrates the worldviews of the Ao-Naga and the iTaukei communities and is rooted in the “mutual philosophies” of weaving indigenous mats. While these communities belong to different geographical locations and ethnicities, indigenous mats are significant to both. Mats are woven to express their ways of life and symbolise the existence of relationships and interdependence that represent and reflect nature, humans, and God’s coexistence. Weaving mats is also considered a sacred practice among these communities, and there are deeper philosophical derivations of mats in their sociocultural milieus. The tool of the weaving process provides the theoretical framework called the *interwoven spaces framework*, and the mutual philosophies embedded in the indigenous mats are revealed as their principles. The development of the ‘negotiating spaces hermeneutics’ aims to strengthen indigenous identities and values and embrace its resources. Researchers may adopt this framework and hermeneutical tool while approaching or interpreting critical contextual issues that remain crucial to the communities with a ‘whole of life’ relevance.

Keywords

mats, mutual philosophies, interwoven spaces, negotiating spaces, integration

Inception

Mats are intricately woven and utilised in numerous indigenous communities worldwide, playing a fundamental role within these societies. They come in diverse shapes, sizes, and patterns tailored to their specific purposes, with each community upholding distinct values and traditions. These organic mats embody profound knowledge and philosophies that extend beyond their use as mere floor coverings, serving as an integral part of the community’s identity and wellbeing. In this context, it is imperative to probe into the significant strengths that contribute to the communities’ identities and sustenance of indigenous knowledge. This essay seeks to integrate the knowledge of mat weaving from two distinct indigenous communities, the Ao-Naga of India and the iTaukei of the Fiji Islands, to uncover the mutual philosophies embedded in their

cultural values. The purpose of this undertaking is to develop a framework and hermeneutics that can mutually benefit the communities with a ‘whole of life’ relevance and wellbeing. While materials, processes, patterns, uses, and values may differ due to distinct ethnicities and locations, there is a broader opportunity for a shared understanding of indigeneity by acknowledging and embracing mutual philosophies.

Probing the Meaning and Uses of Indigenous Mats

A mat may be described as a piece of material, a fabric or a textile used as a floor covering or placed with specific intentions. Indigenous mats are made from a range of natural fibres and come in various sizes and types, depending on their intended use. In the context of the Ao-Naga and iTaukei communities, bamboo skin fibre and pandanus leaf fibre are used, respectively. Each community has its own large mats—pakti¹ (Ao), and ‘iluvatu² (iTaukei).

According to Guru Marlepden Jamir, an indigenous knowledge holder from Ungma village of the Ao tribe in Nagaland, India, the term “pakti” is derived from “pak” meaning putaka (being exposed), and “ti” meaning tokzuka ayuba (taken out), signifying “to place flat on the ground” (Marlepden Jamir, interview, 11 September, 2024). On the other hand, Sereima Volivoli Naisilisili, a Pasifika indigenous knowledge holder from the tribe of Cu’u in Wainika village at Udu Point at the northern part of the island of Vanua Levu, Fiji, states that “iluvatu” is derived from “ilu” signifying the process of returning the weaving strands by interlacing the edges of the strands back into the mat, and “vatu” meaning “stone” or “edge of stone” (Naisilisili 2012, 93, 155–156). This indicates that ‘iluvatu means “to spread out on the floor.” It is evident that both traditions have distinct meanings related to their names, even though they refer to the similar act of spreading and placing the mat on the floor.

The utilisation of mats varies across different communities. The Ao community weaves pakti (mats) for a multitude of purposes, including sitting, sleeping, blocking wind, using as a shawl, drying grain and food in the sun, and as a form of protection for house walls and roofs. Traditionally, they were also used to wrap the deceased as a sign of respect before placing them in their final resting place, but this practice has transitioned to the use of wooden coffins and traditional wool shawls woven by women. Among the Vanua of Cu’u, ‘iluvatu mats are generally used to place on the floor for sitting and sleeping, although special kuta³ mats are used to wrap the deceased before burial. The use of mats during modern funerals is also a part of their enduring traditions. In both contexts, the mats symbolise unity and interweaving connections between people and nature.

In reflecting on the significance and diverse uses of mats, it is important to recognise their profound importance. A mat is more than just a floor covering; it embodies deep-rooted values and serves as a communal space where people can gather and sit together. This spirit of inclusiveness has been central to the purpose of mats since ancient times (Naisilisili, interview, 10 September, 2024). They play a crucial role as a unifying platform for various family and community activities, providing a sturdy foundation for individuals to come together (Vakamino, interview, 4 October, 2024). A mat is not merely a practical object intended for

¹ Pakti is a type of mat traditionally woven by men, but it does not exclude women from practicing the craft and applying their various skills. According to legend, our ancestors, while transitioning from living in caves, tree shelters, and other environments to more open spaces, started weaving with tree ropes and plant strands to create tools to cater for their daily needs. Through this process, they honed their skills in mat weaving for various purposes (Jamir, interview, 6 October, 2024).

² ‘Iluvatu is “a floor mat that is woven with special skills by the women of Cu’u and neighbouring areas [in Fiji]. The mat is characterised by its thickness and strength, which provides its long-lasting value” (Naisilisili 2012, 12). It is generally woven by women, although there are no restrictions for men to weave as well.

³ Kuta mats are special tender mats woven with river reeds (Vakamino, interview, 11 October, 2024).

traditional use; it is valued as a familial entity that represents interconnected values (Jamir, interview, 11 September, 2024). This perspective emphasises that a mat is not just an inanimate object but a symbolic and essential component of the life and culture of the communities it represents.

In both cultural contexts, ancestral mat weaving practice has passed down a rich tapestry of indigenous knowledge, encompassing a diverse array of skills, weaving patterns, and utilitarian uses for their creations. Despite the unique characteristics of each tradition, there exists a shared understanding of the profound meaning and intrinsic values embodied within the act of weaving. It is imperative to honour and recognise our ancestors for their profound knowledge, values, and practices of living in balance. While written accounts of their origin may be scarce, oral traditions have been instrumental in safeguarding and maintaining the indigenous wisdom of weaving mats across successive generations in both contexts. Consequently, it is evident that the knowledge and philosophies interwoven with the art of mat weaving transcend mere material objects and implement profound meanings that relate it to a living entity within the fabric of the two communities.

Weaving Process as a Theoretical Framework

While the mat is regarded as “life” in both communities, the question arises as to what process of weaving transforms “a mat” into “a life.” Each community employs different sources and processes, which appear to contain both contradictions and mutualities. In other words, there are *mutual contradictions* that need to be embraced, as they provide a space for communities to recognise and realise them in the process of wellbeing. Upolu Lumā Vaai understands the concept of *mutual contradictions* as a cognitive framework that embraces *both-and* thinking over *either-or* competition.

An illustration of this concept is revealed by a hypothetical village scenario in which various dichotomies such as material and spiritual, life and death, and stability and change are interdependent and mutually informing. This perspective allows for the coexistence of seemingly contradictory elements and creates a space for negotiation and continuity within these contradictions (Vaai and Casimira 2024, 32–33). When this approach is applied to the weaving process of two Indigenous communities, it fosters an environment where mutual philosophies can be explored, acquiescent, and integrated, leading to the emergence of new and dynamic cultural expressions.

The intricate process of mat weaving consists of a series of seven meticulously executed stages (see Table 1: The Weaving Process). In various indigenous communities, this craft is often perceived as gendered knowledge, attributed specifically to women, men, or occasionally both. However, this essay aims to explore the approaches to mat weaving without delving into specific gendered contexts, focusing instead on the nuances and significant aspects of the process across different cultures.

In the Ao community, the initial step involves gathering the necessary materials, such as bamboo or cane, from designated harvesting areas. Each phase of this process carries cultural significance, as specific times and types of bamboo must be collected for the weaving of pakti. This essential knowledge is traditionally transmitted across generations, with community members learning to interpret the seasons according to an indigenous calendar. Once the bamboo is harvested, it is processed into skin strips in an open space, typically a house courtyard, while still fresh. During this preparation stage, the removal of spikes and extraneous strands is carried out with precision.

The weaver must then identify the warp and weft among the strips, separating them in anticipation of the weaving phase. The prepared strips are either bundled or laid out to dry in the sun. After drying, the

strips are cut into the required shapes and sizes. Once these preparatory steps are complete, a suitable area is selected for the actual weaving of pakti. The weaving process begins by incorporating the desired patterns, with the weaver skilfully selecting appropriate strips at precise moments. The weaver possesses an inherent understanding of when to pause and when to continue weaving. When the desired length and dimensions are achieved, the edges are securely locked to signify the completion of the mat. The finished mat is referred to as pakti, symbolising its integral role within the community's cultural fabric.

The process of mat weaving within the iTaukei communities, particularly among the people of Cu'u and surrounding areas, embodies a rich tapestry of cultural significance and spiritual practice. The initial step involves the meticulous collection of pandanus leaves, selected for their ideal qualities, whether fresh or dried. This selection process is imbued with reverence, highlighting the sacred nature of the craft from its inception through to completion. Once gathered, the leaves undergo careful preparation; thorns and extraneous strands are precisely removed to ensure the integrity of the weaving material. The subsequent stages include the identification of the warp and weft of the pandanus fibres, which are then rolled and boiled to enhance their pliability.

A critical drying process follows, where the fibres are exposed to sunlight to ensure they are adequately dried before use. The actual weaving process of the 'iluvatu mat commences in a thoughtfully chosen space, emphasising the importance of the environment in this cultural practice. The weaver employs traditional techniques to weave the mat, adhering to specific patterns that reflect the community's identity and values. This involved process requires not only technical skill but also patience and a keen attention to detail. At the culmination of the weaving process, the final interlacing of strands reaffirms the mat's structure and integrity. The 'iluvatu mat thus emerges as a significant member of its community.

It is important to note that the knowledge and techniques associated with mat weaving are not universally accessible within the community. Certain types of mats may be woven by anyone; however, others are classified as "closed knowledge," reserved for specific clans, groups, or families, often imbued with particular cultural or ceremonial purposes. Thus, the woven mat transcends its physical form, becoming an integral member of the community, reflecting deep spiritual significance and serving as a testament to the artistry and commitment underlying its creation.

Table 1: The Weaving Process⁴

Stages	Ao-Naga	i-Taukei
First	Seasoned bamboos are collected	Pandanus leaves (fresh or brown) are collected
Second	Bamboo skin strips are made when fresh and their spikes and extra strands are removed	Thorns and extra strands are removed
Third	The warp and weft are identified	The warp and weft are identified, the leaves are rolled and boiled in water
Fourth	The strips are dried in the sun, then shaped and cut into size	The leaves are flattened and dried in the sun, then shaped and cut into size
Fifth	An open space to weave is located	An open space to weave is located

⁴ The stages outlined in the table do not cover every detail of the process, but they do follow a common path to accommodate the essential processes. When applying this framework to research, it is important to consider the specific context and materials to develop a comprehensive framework. This process has been considered in consultation with Vakamino (Vakamino, interview, 4 October, 2024) and Jamir (Jamir, interview, 11 September, 2024) to indicate the basic process of weaving in the two contexts, within a mutual framework.

Sixth	The mat is woven as per the intended pattern	The mat is woven as per the intended pattern
Seventh	The mat weaving is completed	The mat weaving is completed

The process may appear straightforward at first glance, as indicated in Table 1, but it demands meticulous preparation and unwavering attention to detail. Every single fibre must be carefully positioned to create the intended pattern. Both men and women actively participate in advancing the process, each within their own unique contexts. Young observers learn from their elders, while the latter serve as mentors, offering guidance on the correct techniques (Naisilisili, interview, 10 September, 2024). This collaborative effort underscores the importance of coordination, interdependence, and interrelationships among the weavers, mentors, and strands.

Interwoven Spaces Framework

Drawing inspiration from the traditional process of weaving indigenous mats in the two communities, the current framework is termed the *Interwoven Spaces Framework*. Each community features various spaces that exhibit similarities in their weaving methods. There is a relationship and interconnectedness between the weaver and strands, warp and weft, fresh and dry materials, weaving processes and pauses, weaving knowledge, and spiritualities, among others. This distinction contributes to the uniqueness of the proposed framework, as it encompasses two communities that, while culturally diverse, can be recognised through their shared weaving practices, thus establishing interwoven spaces as a viable framework. This does not imply that the two communities are culturally related or interconnected; rather, the rationale is that any researcher engaging with a culture outside of his or her own requires interwoven spaces to relate meaning.

While, in this framework, the first and second stages are designed to introduce the concepts and understand their foundation to undertake the research interest, the third stage is the selection process and identifies the warp and weft, which will assist in preparing the research framework as per the weaving context. The fourth stage is to expose the mat to the sun, then shape and cut the size, which would mean addressing the question of why indigenous hermeneutics is necessary. The fifth stage is to locate the space to weave, which would mean exploring the hermeneutical principles that are embedded in indigenous mats. The sixth and seventh stages are the weaving of the integrated patterns, applying the hermeneutical principles of mutual philosophies and finishing the mat, such that the outcome is offered to spread on the floor for the wellbeing of the community.

The description of the weaving process above suggests that both theory and practice can coexist in establishing the theoretical framework of hermeneutics. The indigenous context provides a framework that connects sociocultural realities with the actions of their worldviews, which have been woven to accommodate both human and non-human participants for a common cause, through a mat. Therefore, this framework represents factual knowledge within the realities that underpin peoples' life experiences in an indigenous context.

Need for a Negotiating Spaces Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, as the science of interpretation, continuously adapts to meet the needs of researchers, readers, and listeners by extracting meaning within a particular context. It also serves as an art of interpretation, providing space for knowledge to integrate what is within its scope. In this context, it is appropriate to begin by raising a basic question: *why a "negotiating spaces hermeneutics"*?

Zhodi Angami argues that “tribal scholars face serious problems in identifying and reading out context—we tend to see our world through a western lens ... which we have been taught to see” (Angami 2014, ix). The issue here is that if indigenous worldviews (embedded in activities such as weaving mats) are only understood from a Western perspective, the communities will not truly relate and interconnect with the meaning and values of the mats. Angami posits that indigenous hermeneutics “has to begin by breaking the colonial mentality and undoing the Western influence in the academic and socio-cultural life of the people” (Angami 2013, 38).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith upholds that “when indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed” (1999, 193). This can be understood in the context of developing frameworks and hermeneutics by indigenous peoples, which will change the narratives of research itself, because the emphasis is drawn from the lived realities of the communities rather than being observed and assumed knowledge. As such, developing hermeneutics is both critical as well as challenging, especially when this is an attempt to integrate two distinct communities. Nonetheless, it is our responsibility to create our own tools, theories, and principles to interpret our realities. Speaking of tools, Kathie Irwin asserts,

We don’t need anyone else developing the tools which will help us to come to term[s] with who we are. We can and will do this work. [The] Real power lies with those who design the tools—it always has. This power is ours. Through the process of developing such theories we can contribute to our empowerment ... moving forward in our struggles for our people, our lands, our world, [and] ourselves. (Irwin 2019, 70)

This understanding of developing hermeneutics is pertinent to indigenous communities because this is where negotiating spaces are critical in weaving mats. Every detail in the weaving process is an act of negotiating spaces to produce a profound mat. Indigenous mats embody a way of life in which nature and humans relate and interconnect within specific contextual realities. Indigenous communities that share practices such as mat weaving must engage with a space to discover mutual philosophies that strengthen broader spiritual relations. Therefore, the development of indigenous hermeneutics is crucial to grasp the original context of these communities. This is necessary because the indigenous ways of thinking and ways of doing were marginalised by “the so-called-civilised” agents of colonisation in the past. Even though such understanding requires critique, the intention to develop hermeneutics is multidimensional—it emphasises the space of mutuality rather than devaluing other perspectives.

To grasp the viewpoint expressed above, let us examine the perspective on weaving presented by William T. Brigham in 1906. Brigham wrote the following: “Hand-made mats, baskets, nets are found everywhere among savage races in one form or another, and however perfect the handicraft, however beautiful the form or decoration, we recognise the process as of a lower order of civilization” (1906, 1). This statement can be viewed as a product of the Western worldview that devalued the rich indigenous knowledge, practices, and values that have been woven into the fabric of indigenous communities for centuries.

In the Pasifika context, Upolu Vaai argues that the Eurocentric value system based on *either-or* thinking reflects a competitive mindset, where one is denigrated while the other is elevated (Vaai and Casimira 2024, 32). In this mindset, indigenous weaving mats are denigrated while Western civilisation is elevated. Further, indigenous communities with the knowledge and traditions of weaving mats are labelled “savage races,” which reflects the Western belief that their own civilisation is superior to that of indigenous people. However, in indigenous communities, the ways of life are guided by mutual respect rather than competition

in the face of differences, emphasising mutual relationships rather than devaluation. This highlights the importance of developing a “negotiating spaces hermeneutics” grounded in mutual philosophical principles.

Contextual hermeneutical tools do not displace the existing hermeneutic circle; instead, they expand the realm of hidden positive possibilities and illuminate the positive significance of weaving mats. Additionally, indigenous hermeneutics are essential for interpreting subject matters beyond previous interpretations and deriving appropriate meanings for a specific context, such as Ao-Naga and iTaukei realities. This is the negotiating space where the hermeneutical principles of the two communities are identified before integration takes place.

Philosophies Embedded in Indigenous Mats: Hermeneutical Principles

One of the central features of indigenous communities is the well-defined roles revealed in oral lore that are deeply rooted in their philosophies. Indigenous philosophies encompass the ideas and knowledge of indigenous people about creation’s existence, human existence, nature, spiritual beliefs, ethical knowledge, myths, oracles, traditional wisdom, proverbs, and so on. These philosophies represent organised expressions of human activities that have been passed down through generations. They are primarily transmitted through oral traditions and form the core values and principles of indigenous cultures. This transmission is crucial for preserving philosophies in oral forms (Longkumer 2023, 62–63).

Additionally, there is a practical aspect of philosophies that is demonstrated through living with and practicing them. As Aisake Casimira comments, “We realise our power to emerge and stand on the ground where our elders once stood, with the power to read our experiences and data in a different way” (Vaai and Casimira 2024, 15). It is quite relevant that the ancestors’ knowledge and philosophies in the form of mats are the experiences and data that we possess today, which has the power to interconnect “then and now” realities. Both oral and practical aspects are interdependent, and without them indigenous philosophies lose their significance.

An example of these philosophies is the knowledge and values associated with weaving mats. In this context, indigenous philosophies are lived philosophies where communication takes place through verbal and nonverbal language to deliver their meaning and purpose. With this understanding, we will look into the philosophies that are embedded in indigenous mats of the two communities highlighted in this study, which will be derived as hermeneutical principles. The study of the underlying principles inherent in indigenous mats recognises the Ao-Naga and iTaukei communities as the rightful custodians of their own knowledge. The subsequent principles, though not exhaustive, are integral to the scope of this essay.

Indigenous Self

One fundamental aspect of indigenous philosophies is the indigenous self, which is influenced by thought patterns. This involves bringing to life inherited realities, taking into account the spatial relationships of our ancestors and the sacredness of a whole being, where the concept of weaving mat inception originated. It is the mind and the environment that provide the foundation for indigenous ways of thinking, and when realisation occurs there is a consciousness of the indigenous self. This can be seen as the core of indigenous hermeneutics.

In this context, an individual belonging to a specific family, attached to various other entities such as clan, village, and community, naturally intertwines with these entities through different processes. This thinking process aids in comprehending and rationalising the significance of the indigenous self for both

existing and new knowledge. This implies that the mat results reflect the thought patterns of indigenous communities, which epitomise the intricate processes and resources involved in weaving.

Further, the notion of “identities” within the indigenous self is multifaceted, encompassing a diverse array of meanings and unique attributes. When an individual fully acknowledges and embraces his or her identity as an indigenous self, this signifies a deep connection to indigenous worldviews and a comprehensive approach to navigating life’s myriad situations. This distinctiveness is underpinned by indigenous philosophies, enabling the indigenous self to engage in thoughtful contemplation and a wholehearted immersion in the indigenous world. Whether at the individual or collective level, an indigenous being consistently lives according to the guiding principles of indigenous philosophies.

For example, the philosophy of weaving mats serves as an embodiment of the indigenous self, as those who embrace this philosophy impart knowledge through the act of weaving, fostering connections among humans and non-humans. Metaphorically, the practice of weaving mats symbolises the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the divine, creating a web of relationships that enrich the fabric of existence. Moreover, when a mat is intricately woven, it acquires an identity as an indigenous creation, carrying a meaningful role within a family or community. This interconnectedness fosters a mutual space where all aspects of communities can partake in and experience the indigenous self. The spaces of land, water, sky, bodies, and spirits belong to the whole community.

Interconnected Relationships

Indigenous communities do not believe in the existence of independent bodies within a community, but rather in an interconnected and relational way of life. The foundation of communities in a specific location is rooted in the philosophies of mutual coexistence and interconnectedness. The relationships are generally mutual, where each individual’s way of thinking contributes to strengthening the existence of life in and around the community. According to Koloma Makewin, “Communality is a way of life that gives value to relationships between siblings, cousins, and the entire kinship structure in society” (Makewin 2021, 256).

This reality of communality is central to indigenous society and is not limited to humans but is closely connected with nature as well. As Yanghakao Vashum points out, “The indigenous worldview is creation-centered and is characterised by understanding the interdependence and the interrelatedness of all creation, including human beings” (2012, 40). Upolu Vaai argues that “All of life is an ‘assemblage of relationality,’ meaning that it is structured according to relationality. ... Relationality encompasses all. It creates harmony. It reciprocates love. It is not a system *per se*. It is life” (Vaai and Casimira 2017, 26). This means that there is always a relationship key to life’s existence, which flows naturally. Where there is a relationship, there is a responsibility as well. Relationships are not only about human-based connections but also include nature-based relationships, where the spirit of bonding has become a part of that reality.

The knowledge of weaving mats is profoundly significant because it represents the interconnectedness between humans and nature. This symbiotic relationship is evident throughout the entire process, from the initial stages of preparation to the final creation. Even after the mat is completed, the connection between humans and nature remains intact. Nature relies on humans to undergo various processes of preparation before becoming an integral part of human life.

The value of mats within indigenous communities is also deeply rooted in their cultural significance, which is also a sacred significance. As Sereima Naisilisili affirms, “[A] mat is sacred and it is relational. For instance, there is a space between a chief and people which is the sacred space, and through the mat they are

interconnected” (Naisilisili, interview, 10 September, 2024). When mats are viewed as more than just objects, they contribute to the sense of family and community, symbolising unity and togetherness. This understanding of interconnected relationships is a fundamental principle of negotiating spaces hermeneutics, reflecting the undergirding philosophies of these communities.

Affirming Belongingness

Belonging to a community is a profoundly meaningful experience rooted in a sense of communality. This experience encompasses both self-acceptance and communal-acceptance, both of which are equally vital in affirming a sense of belonging. Whether utilising bamboo skin fibre or pandanus leaf fibre, the art of weaving a mat involves two fundamental components: the warp, consisting of a strong vertical fibre, and the weft, made of a less strong horizontal fibre. Despite their differing strengths, both elements are equally crucial in the weaving of indigenous mats. Their significance lies not only in their individual qualities but also in the manner in which they complement each other to create mats of exceptional strength.

This process underscores the value of synergy and collaboration, as the combined strength of the warp and weft results in the emergence of communal mats that are resilient and enduring. Furthermore, this weaving narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the intrinsic human connection to nature, and nature’s reciprocal connection to humanity. It highlights the natural sense of belonging that is interwoven within this intricate process, showcasing the deep bond between human existence and the natural world.

A sense of belonging can be fostered by embracing diverse ideas, individuals, resources, and voices. These components are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural process, which we refer to as experience. I have written that “The awareness of a person’s experience through socio-cultural metaphysics completes the process of being human ... the process takes place in the actual human condition” (Longkumer 2019, 145–146). This comprehension aims to cultivate a space where respect cultivates a sense of belonging that goes beyond individual spaces and roles to encompass fundamental existential aspects, both tangible and intangible, including the non-human aspects of life.

According to Naisele, there are four dimensions of *vanua* (the Fijian term for land, including ancestors, people, and environment): the physical dimension—land and water; the social dimension—social structures and relationships with responsibility; the cultural dimension—values, beliefs, and acceptable ways of doing things; and the spiritual dimension—the presence of spirit gods that make the *vanua* sacred (Naisele 2024, 195–198). These dimensions are essential in affirming belongingness for both nature and humans. In this context of multidimensional realities, the knowledge of weaving mats emerges to affirm its roots in the *vanua* and its interconnectedness with the world around them.

Negotiating Spaces

There is always space for negotiation, and if one is not apparent, it can be created. When it comes to the art of weaving mats, not only knowledge, skills, and patterns are required for the craft but also the incorporation of the entirety of indigenous realities. The knowledge, skills, and patterns of various mats have emerged as a result of negotiating spaces that were initiated at a certain point in their development. This means that “Negotiated spaces are creative, liberating, and transformative” (Havea 2023, 100). These spaces are crucial to the collective knowledge system among indigenous communities.

In relation to collective communal knowledge, Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka’uta identifies three bases for conceptualisation: open knowledge, which refers to a “broad and holistic common-knowledge base

transmitted to children within a specific community;” closed knowledge, which is “passed down within specific family and clan lines and not shared outside of these boundaries;” and negotiating knowledge, which refers to “levels of knowledge or degrees of knowing that can be attained through traditional requests to the holders of that knowledge” (Vaai and Casimira 2017, 70–71). The first two types of knowledge have their own distinct roles and positions within the community. However, the contradictions can find resolution when the third base, negotiating spaces, comes into play.

The process of weaving mats is tied to the negotiation of physical and cultural spaces, as each stage unfolds within specific contexts. Mats serve as a vibrant expression of indigeneity, intricately linked to the overall community, symbolising unity within natural diversity. The mat transcends its traditional role and becomes an active participant in the accumulation of community knowledge, embodying the essence of a community member. This space is characterised by its inclusivity, allowing for diverse activities while remaining tailored to the specific needs of the community it serves. In addition, the concept of negotiating space in mat weaving extends to integrating indigenous philosophies and prioritising inclusive research activities that honour the cultural heritage and wisdom inherent in this practice.

Integrating Indigenous Mutual Philosophies and its Prospects

The selected hermeneutical principles described above are fundamental concepts rooted in the traditional art of weaving mats. When considering the cultural contexts of the Ao-Nagas and i’Taukei, it is evident that while there are similarities in the process of weaving and its significance, there are also differences in available resources and their practical uses associated with particular values. The four principles—indigenous self, interconnected relationships, affirming belongingness, and negotiating spaces—are crucial, laying the foundation for the development of “mutual philosophies” as integration efforts unfold.

Recognising the importance of integration, it becomes evident that it offers the potential for the emergence of “mutual philosophies” that contribute to the ways of life and wellbeing of communities, irrespective of geographical, cultural, ethical, and ethnic diversities. This attempt at integration is for research purposes, particularly on the grounds of the research framework and hermeneutic proposed above. Within this scope, I am intentionally constructing a hermeneutical tool based on the underpinning theoretical framework of mat weaving and hermeneutical principles that reflect the profound influence of cultural values and interconnectedness. Through this work, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these cultural elements have shaped and continue to shape these communities.

Building Relationships

Both indigenous communities highlighted in this essay demonstrate a deep connection to the natural world through the knowledge of weaving mats, considering nature to have life. This philosophy underlines why people view land, forests, water, animals, and all aspects of nature as life. As nature is considered life, akin to the mats they weave, this necessitates interconnected relationships that allow for the emergence of broader communities. Nature provides a space for indigenous peoples, demonstrated through hermeneutical principles. The indigenous self is described as strengthening the self because each fibre in the mat builds relationships with distinct roles. The self-identity in the form of fibre needs to merge with other fibres to strengthen the mat. Although the fibre of each mat can originate from different sources, integrating with other fibres forms a purposeful mat.

The underlying philosophy behind this insight reveals that each community believes in the development of broader relationships that are central to the knowledge of weaving mats, which is open knowledge. Through building relationships based on similar knowledge systems, interconnected relationships can take place. For example, our family is in Fiji among the iTaukei and diverse communities from Pasifika, following our vocation, and the weaving (ways of life immersion) is underway to build relationships. This embodies the ‘mutual philosophies’ wherein each fibre is significant.

At the same time, there are challenges regarding the recognition of intellectual contributions by Western anthropologists and historians. The term “intellectual” has historically been associated with those who write, suggesting that the ability to produce written work is a reflection of intellect. However, if we consider the practical skills and creativity demonstrated by indigenous people through their ways of being and doing, such as weaving mats, it becomes evident that their work is indeed intellectual. Disregarding the intellectual wealth of indigenous philosophies by the “assumed” more dominant groups has been a way of devaluing these philosophies.

For this reason, indigenous communities need to assert their own intellectual identities, moving beyond the assumptions made by others. In this context, the sacred knowledge of weaving mats and the finished mats themselves can be seen as intellectual expressions, which have been demonstrated through building relationships among the strands and weavers. In other words, mats are not just objects, but representations of life that are not fully understood in Western philosophies. Moreover, the integration within indigenous communities can depend on how new relationships are built based on the open knowledge of weaving mats, which expands through negotiating the spaces at hand.

Embracing the Values of Indigenous Mats

Indigenous peoples naturally weave through a relationship with the natural world, considering every space around them to be sacred. Their ways of life are characterised by interconnectedness and interdependence with all creation. Indigenous communities are renowned for practicing and preserving their rich cultural values, including the knowledge of weaving mats. Despite the availability of modern technologies and mat products made from synthetic fibres, the sense of spiritual attachment, belonging, and identity is not the same as weaving with indigenous sources.

This highlights the integral role of culture in indigenous life and emphasises the importance of retaining its associated values, which can be considered as closed knowledge. When cultural traditions are understood and upheld within communities, this contributes to strengthening a sense of embracing and affirming the community’s values and belongingness. This sacred knowledge exists for the wellbeing of the communities, achieved through co-creation. This space of belongingness is central to each community.

When indigenous individuals feel a deep connection to their people and surroundings, this provides them with a sense of identity and security. This feeling of belonging allows them to recognise their interconnectedness and interdependence with everyone and everything around them. In this way, every member of the community, including non-humans, co-exists within a shared culture. It is the shared philosophical foundation that creates a space where every value is appreciated and sustained within the community. In this context, embracing indigenous mat values comes naturally because each person is aware of the community’s unique ways of knowing, doing, and relating to them.

Weaving Inter-Indigenous Communities

The concept of communities can be understood in various ways. This essay approaches the idea of communities in a broadly conceived sense, recognising the sanctity of all existence within a specific geographical area and attempting to integrate the weaving mat traditions and values of the two selected communities. It is commonly believed that communities, even those lacking strong cultural ties, can unite by emphasising shared spaces. This could be experienced, for example, in the negotiation of spaces that revolve around their mutual mat-weaving cultures. This integration can occur through the creation of opportunities that foster interaction between the two cultures.

Such negotiations can be contextualised, for example, within both biblical and contemporary environments to identify common ground. Such integration need not encompass physical cultural connections or interactions, but a negotiation of knowledge and underlying philosophies related to mat weaving can further the purpose of weaving inter-indigenous communities' cultural values. This understanding can be cultivated through collaborative spaces among indigenous knowledge holders. This article serves as an example of such a negotiating space.

For indigenous communities, metaphors hold deep spiritual significance and are therefore essential. Among many, for example, the metaphor of weaving is especially relevant for transcultural theology, where the concept of mutual weaving serves as a vital metaphor for a new form of theology (Ashcroft 2014, 10–11). Similarly, the interpretation of the fale (traditional Samoan or Tongan house) as a metaphorical representation of both ecological and economic spaces has been undertaken by Pasifika theologians (Vaka'uta 2015, 59). Additionally, the application of the metaphor of 'reweaving the relational mat' has been applied to the problem of domestic violence in Pasifika communities (Filemoni-Tofaeono and Johnson 2006, xii).

Metaphors thus play a crucial role in shaping thoughts and actions. This highlights the importance of understanding the audience when effectively conveying a message. To grasp indigenous philosophies, it is essential to recognise the metaphors that are central to their thinking and behaviour. Weaving, for instance, symbolises strength and the creation of sacred communities. Indigenous groups adapt to changing seasons and embrace diversity with mutual respect. The intentional act of weaving mats unifies their inter-indigenous processes.

There are two perspectives in understanding the significance of inter-indigenous weaving traditions which reflect a 'whole of life' values and relevance. In the Ao-Naga context, as Jamir states, "Paktibo pakti sa lir, asen ali meiemchir aser alima-yim kulemi ali tashibo ano maneni takyonga amshia alitsü" (Mats will be mats; as long as humans and nature coexist in this world, they will continue to be woven and used) (Jamir, interview, 11 September, 2024). In the Fiji context, Naisilisili states that the mat "is unique and more than a mat because it represents iTaukei 'whole of life' culture and identity with its deep values that are sacred to my communities [humans and non-humans]. Overall, a part of me is in the mat itself" (Naisilisili, interview, 10 September, 2024). These two indigenous philosophical statements do not necessarily need interpretation but can stand connected and related metaphorically and naturally.

Conclusion

Indigenous philosophies extend beyond written or printed texts; they represent lived philosophies that cannot be fully replicated. In my effort to convey the essence of the organic mat, I recognise the challenge of doing justice to its profound spirituality and significance for both communities referenced in this essay. Nonetheless, I have sought to expand the boundaries of knowledge in this research area by developing an *interwoven spaces*

framework and a *negotiating spaces hermeneutics* that draw from the weaving process a theoretical framework and hermeneutical principles inherent in the crafting of indigenous mats. It is essential to understand that these frameworks and hermeneutics are context-specific, intricately woven to serve their respective purposes and values.

This essay has delved into the integration of philosophies from two communities that are not culturally, ethnically, or geographically related. However, the interwoven spaces framework and negotiating spaces hermeneutics have facilitated an exploration of their integration, revealing underlying mutual philosophies. Through the examination of mat weaving among the Ao-Naga and iTaukei communities, it is clear that there exists potential to foster relationships, uphold the values embedded in indigenous mats, and nurture inter-indigenous communities founded on concepts of open knowledge, closed knowledge, and negotiated knowledge. In conclusion, it is crucial to recognise that indigenous mats are not merely objects; they serve as active participants in the overall wellbeing of communities where humans and non-humans coexist for the greater good.

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