

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can Pasifika Theologians Convert Neoliberal Cannibals?

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Abstract

This article reinterprets the colonial trope of the “South Seas cannibal” to critique the dynamics of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Nineteenth-century European explorers, missionaries, and travel writers frequently portrayed Pacific Islanders as “savage cannibals,” a colonial discourse that anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere calls “cannibal talk.” Such representations functioned ideologically to justify colonial expansion under the banner of the three Cs: Christianity, Commerce, and Civilisation. Drawing on historical and anthropological scholarship, the article argues that what has been described as “ritualised anthropophagy” in Pasifika societies was neither indiscriminate nor without limit but embedded within complex cosmological frameworks governed by concepts such as mana and tapu, where ritual consumption symbolised the regulated transfer of power and the restoration of relational balance.

The article then reverses the mission by applying the metaphor of cannibalism to modern economic systems. Drawing on theorists such as John Elkington, David Harvey, and Nancy Fraser, neoliberalism is described as a form of “cannibal capitalism” that consumes, without limit, its own social, ecological, and political foundations. This extractive logic is further analysed through Nikotemo Sopepa’s critique of necropolitics in the Pacific context. In response, the article highlights emerging Pasifika theological and ecological frameworks, including *Reweaving the Ecological Mat* and Sopepa’s “mana ethic,” which propose relational, land-centred alternatives grounded in reciprocity, limit, and the flourishing of life.

Keywords: neoliberalism, pasifika theology, decolonial theology, indigenous ecological ethics, soteriology

Introduction

The historical trope of the “South Sea cannibal” has long shaped Western constructions and discourse about “savagism.” Now, with centuries of evidence aggregated, the extractive logic of neoliberal “cannibal capitalism” emerges as the far more pervasive and, arguably, more deserving form of the “man-eating” narrative. One of the earliest figures to shape European perceptions of a cannibalistic Pacific was Captain James Cook. The published accounts of his voyages, bestsellers in their day, are a mixture of admiration and dread, as Cook describes the people of “Fidgee” as “brave, savage, and cruel” (Obeyesekere 2005, 283), known for eating enemies killed in battle. And just like that, with no other voices to contradict him, Fiji became known as “the Cannibal Isles.” The name caught on, circulating widely through travel narratives, maritime

gossip, missionary correspondence, and popular literature. For example, for the delight and titillation of her readers back home, writing under the *nom-de-plume* “a Lady,” Mary Wallis juxtaposes her own delicate self to “Life in Feejee” as “Five Years Among the Cannibals” (Wallis 1851, reprinted 1983).

But what if the deeper story of cannibalism in the modern world was emerging not from the Pacific Islands, but from an island in the North Atlantic? It was Captain James Cook’s own island nation that had taken one of the world’s oldest institutions, consumed the labour and power of peoples on an industrial scale, and then, within a single generation, abolished it. Ironically, it was a defender of slavery lamenting its abolition, George Fitzhugh, who first made the cannibal connection back in 1857: “All good and respectable people are ‘Cannibals all,’ who do not labor, or who are successfully trying to live without labor, on the unrequited labor of other people ... quite as much as any Feejee chieftain who breakfasts, dines, and sups on human flesh” (Shoemaker 2019, 157).

We are blessed to now be living in the dis“orient”ing days of “reverse mission,” so with this paper I pose the following question: Two centuries ago, missionaries believed they were converting “savage” cannibals to the three C’s of Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce. In the year of our Lord 2026, can Pasifika theologians return the gaze, reverse the mission, and confront, convert, and dare, we dream, to disciple neoliberal cannibals?

While at first blush this might sound like an *argumentum ad absurdum*, is it really that absurd? Consider that never in human history has a ravenous few become so obscenely wealthy, living off the life and livelihood—the mana—of so many. An Oxfam study in 2019 reported that “the 26 richest billionaires own as many assets as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of the planet’s population” (Elliott, citing Oxfam 2019). To put a finer point on that, in 2020 it was reported that the “22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa” combined. Why? Among many reasons, “women and girls put in 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work each and every day—a contribution to the global economy of at least \$10.8 trillion a year, more than three times the size of the global tech industry” (Oxfam 2020).

“Cannibal Talk”

Europeans arrived in the early nineteenth century with stories of savagery already looming large in their imaginations, shaping not only what they saw but how they wrote about it. The European fixation on cannibalism functioned as a discourse, what anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere’s 2005 book *Cannibal Talk: The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas* calls the cultural framing of “savagism.” Obeyesekere argues that the European obsession with “pronounced anthropophagy” provided the perfect foil by which colonial powers could portray the “savage” people of the region as being in desperate need of civilisation. Historian Patrick Brantlinger, in *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians* (2011), broadly agrees while expanding the range of his source material, further showing how the figure of the “cannibal” became a powerful rhetorical tool within Victorian racial ideology.

In many ways, all this “cannibal talk” revealed more about European anxieties than the Pacific. As the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, the British reading public were moving to rapidly expanding cities of factories, smoke, child labour, and increasingly regimented daily life (Brantlinger, see especially “Shadows of the Coming Race” 2011, 180–202). Cook’s memoirs and other ‘exotic’ travel narratives offered an escape into distant worlds of danger and spectacle, even as their own lives were being slowly consumed by the harsh realities of mines, shipyards, and “dark satanic mills” (William Blake’s famous phrase from his poem “Milton,” written ca. 1808). Cannibalism thus became a displaced horror, the ultimate placeholder for “savagery.” In

effect, Europeans arriving in the Pacific, whether mercenaries or missionaries, brought with them the baggage of their own cultural nightmares.

In Fiji, everyone knows the story of the untimely death of the Wesleyan missionary Rev. Thomas Baker in the Naitasiri highlands in 1867, or at least some version of it. While other missionaries, such as Williams and Chalmers, met similar fates elsewhere in the Pacific, Baker was reportedly the only European missionary in Fiji to die in that particular way. These became powerful martyr hagiographies used to raise funds “back home” for mission. Meanwhile, also “back home,” a new form of globalised commerce was taking shape in the imperial corridors of power as plans were already underway for the largest social engineering experiment in the history of humanity: the movement of tens of thousands of indentured labourers many thousands of miles away from their homes. It was also the ultimate rebrand in history as, post-abolition, indenture would continue to provide exploited labour for the justified theft of other peoples’ resources—whether land or labour—to feed an insatiable appetite for sugar.

By the late nineteenth century, Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and its vision for *laissez-faire* economics had become almost canonical. But on the obverse of that, the “tails” to the “heads” of Smith’s *laissez-faire* was *laissez-mourir*. This is what Hill and Montag call “necro-economics,” the mechanism by which the “government of life” through the market necessarily includes a “place of death” as a functional element of economic growth (Hill and Montag 2015, 262–263). The same system that made some people rich also, of necessity, placed the means of survival “just out of reach of a certain number of the earth’s inhabitants” (Hill and Montag 2015, 287).

The death of Thomas Baker became an absolute gift to the justifications of empire. Within a few short years, with the stroke of a pen, the Deed of Cession of Fiji in 1874 converted the so-called “Cannibal Isles” into the Crown Colony of Fiji, a resource colony now open for business and ready for extraction. In short order, within the next few decades, Indian indentured labourers, 60,537 of them to be precise (for the British were remarkably good at keeping those kinds of records) would arrive in the hopes of a contractually bounded agreement (*girmity*). Instead, they found the lash, plantation barracks called “the Lines,” and conditions, sadly, exactly like slavery. As a young courageous survivor named Totaram Sanadhya, writing in 1914, describes it, “the girmityas are treated like prisoners and dogs” (Sanadhya [English translation] 1991, 1, 14, 17, 39).

Mana, Tapu, and Utu

If the colonial narrative was largely a sensationalised projection, what was actually happening in Pasifika societies before European arrival? Obeyesekere offers the explanation that, within many Pasifika cultures, three interconnected concepts gave both meaning and boundary to what was happening: mana, tapu, and utu.

Mana refers to a generative cosmic power, a life force that permeates the whole universe. It is a spiritual energy that can reside and concentrate in certain people, places, and objects, the “creative and generative power of the gods and transferred to chiefs and nobles” (Obeyesekere 2005, 76). Mana is not, therefore, an abstract force; it is inherently relational. It means “to connect,” carrying the notion of “connecting and being connected, both to and with the others within the fenua [land]” (Sopepa 2023, 14). Lived in right relationship, “[m]ana is life. Without mana life is in disarray. ... What constitutes mana is reciprocity and mutuality” (2023, 77).

Mana flourishes only where norms of permissibility and limit are observed. Because such power could be dangerous if mishandled, it had to be carefully regulated. Tapu refers to that sacred restriction, the

boundaries governing how people relate to and handle such power. Tapu is also the practical and ethical expression of mana within community life. As Sopepa puts it, the “sacredness of tapu is captured in the spirituality of every occurrence within the fenua,” calling for responses such as “respect, forbidding, holiness, love, responsibility, and prohibition” (2023, 181).

Obeyesekere adds to these a third concept, utu, a Māori term referring to reciprocal balance. Conceptual cognates can be found throughout Pasifika, where it broadly refers to the people, land, ancestors, and spiritual forces exist within an ongoing network of exchange—an eco-relationality. In Māori traditions, for example, “utu was a pivotal dynamic” in which “reciprocal exchange required the return of hau [vitality], whether by gifts or insults;” utu’s purpose was to maintain “constant movement in the network of cosmic relations” (Obeyesekere 2005, 76–77). If something was taken, offended, or violated, something had to be returned. When an offense was committed against mana, “there had to be utu (or some kind of return). If the return gesture brought matters back into balance, the sequence of exchanges could terminate” (Obeyesekere 2005, 79).

Within this framework, ritual consumption takes on a very different meaning from the sensationalised images of indiscriminate human consumption in the colonial accounts. The historical evidence suggests that it was primarily the practice of chiefs and only within highly ritualised contexts governed by strict tapu. The evidence also suggests that it should perhaps better be understood as “theophagy”—a highly regulated, sacramental transfer of mana governed by tapu to restore relational balance (Obeyesekere 2005, 261). Consuming a consecrated portion symbolically absorbed the potency of the conquered chief or warrior, strengthening the victorious chief and community and restoring balance after conflict. In other words, it was a sacramental transfer of power within a cosmological system (Obeyesekere 2005, 261–264).

In any case, whatever was happening in early Pasifika was neither random nor indiscriminate. It had rules. It existed within a spiritual and relational framework governed by tapu and by the balancing logic of reciprocity. While traditional anthropophagy sought to restore balance through the transfer of mana, what is going on with those Oxfam statistics?

Returning the Gaze, Reversing the Mission

Here we return the gaze to neoliberal cannibals, with the help of Nancy Fraser’s *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do About It* (2022). Before examining Fraser’s more recent iteration of ‘cannibal talk,’ however, we should first consult David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) for a brief definition of “neoliberalism.”

While neoliberalism is often used loosely as a synonym for free-market capitalism, Harvey defines it more precisely as a political and economic project that seeks to maximise individual entrepreneurial freedom within a framework of strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey 2005, 2). While presented as a pathway to collective prosperity—“the rising tide that would lift all boats”—neoliberalism also brought what Harvey calls “creative destruction,” a redistribution of wealth upward while exposing vulnerable populations to increasing risk and poverty. This included the privatisation of public assets, deregulation of industry, and the reduction of welfare provisions, alongside a reconfiguration of state power toward protecting market conditions (Harvey 2005, 3).

It would be one thing if all of this were confined to Thatcherite England or the Reagan-era United States. But it wasn’t. Many developing nations had been borrowing heavily in international markets. When

interest rates soared, servicing those debts became unsustainable. This enabled institutions such as the IMF and World Bank to impose structural adjustment programmes, requiring debtor nations to privatise public industries, reduce government spending on social services, and liberalise trade in order to receive financial assistance (Harvey 2005, 28–31).

We return now to Nancy Fraser’s short, sharp metaphor: “cannibal capitalism.” She argues that “the long spell of corporate bingeing known as neoliberalism” increasingly resembles cannibalism—not the ritualised anthropophagy described above, but a system that consumes without limits the very social and ecological foundations that sustain it, shifting from bounded to boundless consumption. In business-speak, pundits euphemistically talk about “cannibalising” one product line to sustain another. Fraser extends this to the entire economic system, defining cannibalisation as “to deprive one facility or enterprise of an essential element of its functioning for the purpose of creating or sustaining another one” (Fraser 2022, xiii–xiv). “Cannibal” capitalism cannot function within markets alone. It constantly presumes right of access to resources outside the formal economy, devouring them without payment across four key domains.

The first is “social reproduction.” Neoliberal economies require workers who are fed, educated, socialised, and healthy enough to labour. Yet the work required to sustain them—raising children, caring for the elderly, maintaining households—has historically been unpaid or severely underpaid, usually carried out by women (again, the opening Oxfam statistics). The system depends heavily on this hidden labour while refusing to recognise or compensate it, feeding on the mana of billions of unacknowledged workers (Fraser 2022, 7–10).

The second domain is the natural environment. Industrial economies treat air, water, minerals, forests, and ecosystems as inexhaustible and the planet as a dumping ground. Continuous extraction places immense pressure on ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. As Fraser puts it, this sort of economy assumes a sharp division between a “natural realm” available for appropriation and an “economic realm” of value production (Fraser 2022, 11).

The third domain involves public power. Although neoliberal rhetoric criticises regulation, cannibal capitalism still relies on states to enforce contracts, stabilise currencies, and rescue failing institutions deemed “too big to fail,” even as it works to weaken the same constraints through lobbying, political influence, and threats of relocation to lower-tax jurisdictions (Fraser 2022, 12–14).

The fourth domain is expropriation from the global periphery. Cannibal capitalism depends not only on wage labour but also on its dispossession through colonial extraction, slavery, land seizure, and unequal trade. In the Pacific, this was historically blackbirding and the Girmitya indenture scheme; today it continues through outsourced labour and resource extraction from poorer nations. “Externalities” such as these, says Fraser, broker the transfer of wealth from the Global South to the Global North (Fraser 2022, 14–16). Corporate cannibalism thus sustains itself by consuming the mana of people and places through ongoing rituals of extraction. It extracts from the periphery to feed the centre, a process “inextricably entangled with imperialism and racial oppression” (Fraser 2022, 12–14).

But it does so while believing its own “hero’s journey” as a kind of soteriology: the world has been thrown into disorder by collectivism, but human freedom is realised through entrepreneurial self-interest, and the “invisible hand” restores balance and harmony. Like any religion, it has rituals (market participation, consumption), institutions (education systems, financial structures), and symbols (cash, plastic, growth charts). But in Hill and Montag’s assessment, that unseen hand also wields a whip, a disciplinary force designed to pacify (a significant word for Pasifika peoples) collective power. “Necro-economics” is at work

when the “government of life” through the market also requires a “place of death” (Hill and Montag 2015, 262–263) for those whose survival is deemed “just out of reach” (2015, 287).

Here we have two competing narratives: on one side, the historical Pasifika warrior, long cast as the “savage” cannibal but governed by tapu defining limits; on the other, the modern corporate cannibal: a system that claims to be “civilised” yet consumes ecosystems, dismantles communities, and extracts the lifeblood of vulnerable populations to enrich a distant elite. One was bound by sacred limits; the other operates with virtually none.

The 1990s Sustainability Movement

By the late twentieth century, the “wealth of nations” was in desperate need of a reframing, as environmental destruction and social unrest became impossible to ignore and a new generation began to “rage against the machine.” Enter the sustainability movement of the 1990s. A key text from that era was John Elkington’s *Cannibals with Forks*, its title a reference to the Polish poet Stanisław Lec’s wry question: “Is it progress if a cannibal uses a fork?” Despite signs of necro-economic decay all around, Elkington was writing in an age of great corporate optimism, the so-called “end of history” (a reference to Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, cited in Elkington 1994, 24, 234), after the collapse of the USSR, when globalised capitalism appeared triumphant (Elkington 1994, 27).

Traditionally, companies measured success through a single bottom line—profit. Elkington proposed that businesses need to start measuring three bottom lines instead: planet, people, and profit (Elkington 1994, 69–94), what has since been institutionalised in business schools as the ‘three Ps.’ The TBL aimed to redress some of the most glaring injustices by claiming that economic prosperity didn’t have to be accumulated at the expense of environmental sustainability and social justice.

Surely this was an improvement, even if mainly in terms of public awareness. If a multinational corporation shifts from caring only about quarterly stock prices to also measuring its carbon footprint and labour conditions, that is, no doubt, a step forward. The TBL encouraged companies to recognise that their responsibilities did not end at the factory gate or the shareholder meeting. And so companies began, reluctantly and somewhat grudgingly, to collect data about their environmental and social impacts, even creating new positions like “sustainability officers” to track the life cycles of their products and manage PR for CEOs.

But what has happened in the thirty years since Elkington’s publication? We can now turn Elkington’s question back on the TBL itself: Is it indeed progress if a cannibal uses a fork? Elkington’s proposal has undergone some revision in *Beyond the Triple Bottom Line* by Francisco Szekely and Zaheer Dossa. The sharper critique, however, comes from Julie Richardson in *The Triple Bottom Line: Does It All Add Up? Assessing the Sustainability of Business and CSR*. Despite good intentions, the TBL framework still suffers from the fatal flaw of reductionism. It takes living, interconnected systems and divides them into three separate silos, those three Ps, now measurable, reduced, and ready to be placed on spreadsheets (Richardson, cited in Henriques and Richardson 2004, 35), the qualitative quantified.

Thirty years of implementation have shown that the TBL ultimately ended up accommodating the traditional business model more than transforming it. Companies are encouraged to pursue “sustainability” only insofar as it does not jeopardise short-term profitability. The emphasis now falls on what is called the “business case for sustainability.” Doing good is worthwhile primarily because it eventually benefits the company financially. This is what feels, to the “rage against the machine” generation, like “greenwashing”—

the performative scramble to appear to be minimising harm rather than creating genuine communal flourishing.

But Elkington anticipated this. In his Preface, he provides an almost too-perfect illustration in Bill Gates, whom he describes as someone who “eats competitors with the methodical determination of a corporate Pac-Man.” Elkington himself admits that this sort of consumption will and, indeed, must continue, for while “corporate cannibalism may not be pleasant to behold ... it will remain an intrinsic part of any competitive economy” (Elkington 1994, vii).

What we have seen since is that TBL logic also encourages sleight-of-hand substitutions among its three categories, often through perverse subsidies and credit systems. A corporation might operate a heavily polluting mining project that devastates a watershed but then offset the damage by funding a new school somewhere else (Richardson, cited in Henriques and Richardson 2004, 41–42). It becomes a ritual of transubstantiation that claims transparency, operating within a “global goldfish bowl” or an “X-ray environment” (Elkington 1994, 8, 10), while serving as a “Dance of the Seven Veils” (1994, 160), where disclosure in one area (like a carbon offset) is used to mask the continued consumption of mana in another. On paper, the organisation can still report a “net positive” impact. If the TBL provides corporations with a new vocabulary of sustainability, perhaps even to obtain certification to that effect, one of those Ps continues to consume the mana of the other two. The only thing being “sustained” is the comfortable lifestyles of the few.

Returning to Fenua, Moana, and Lagi

Back to my original question: Can the descendants of those once-labelled “savages” by Western missionaries re-evangelise a secularised West? For this, we turn to Pasifika theologians, particularly Tuvaluan scholar Nikotemo Sopepa’s doctoral thesis, “Leleti Soteriology: A Whole of Life Alternative to Necropolitics within the Context of Pasifika Development,” and to a framework that seeks to reshape the development narrative in Pasifika, *Reweaving the Ecological Mat*. For Pacific Island communities, climate change and economic extraction are not abstract theories about the future; they are immediate, existential realities. Those “rising tides” that the neoliberals promised have become rising sea levels that, as we speak, are swallowing shorelines and displacing communities.

Sopepa offers a devastating critique of how global economic systems operate in the region, extending the concept of necro-economics into a broader political framework known as “necropolitics,” a term first coined by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (Sopepa 2023, 1–3). Applied to the Pacific, necropolitics describes the exercise of the trifecta of political, military, and economic power into a grim calculus that determines whose lives are considered expendable in the pursuit of global growth and geopolitical dominance. Policies and institutions presented as “development” often mask deeper dynamics of dispossession and marginalisation. The lion’s share of the benefits of global economic growth always seem to accrue elsewhere, while ecological and social costs are borne disproportionately by small island communities, whose lands, oceans, and labour are treated as expendable. As Sopepa bluntly puts it, riffing on one of the sayings of Jesus, “What seeps through the needle’s eye is the wealth of the poor built for the rich in a system that serves the rich” (2023, 204).

Sopepa identifies two dominant narratives in Pasifika. The first, the Indo-Pacific narrative, is a geopolitical and militarised struggle controlled primarily by superpowers such as the United States, in response to China’s growing presence in the region (Sopepa 2023, 3). The second, the Blue Pacific narrative, was

developed by Pasifika leaders to reclaim autonomy; yet, in Sopepa's diagnosis, it still aligns too closely with neoliberal structures. Its connection to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), incidentally originally influenced by Elkington's TBL, remains anthropocentric, measuring success in monetary terms rather than the 'whole of life' wellbeing of the fenua (Sopepa 2023, 62, 64–65). As he bluntly puts it: "Coloniality under the new proposed BP development narrative will see Pasifika colonising Pasifika" (2023, 66–67).

Sopepa categorises several tools through which these narratives operate. Debt-driven development, such as large infrastructure loans associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (Sopepa 2023, 57), creates dependency that transfers wealth to powers elsewhere while compelling local states to adopt ever more liberalising policies. As he observes, "A new form of colonisation through debt-trap-diplomacy has already begun" (2023, 67). Ultimately, he concludes that current development narratives function as a "slavery system" that turns life into a "commodity only a few can afford," with the marginalisation of Pasifika peoples treated as "externalities" because "[t]he annihilation of their existence creates spaces for the powerful to thrive" (Sopepa 2023, 50).

Officially, these initiatives are framed as programmes of development, security, and mutual prosperity. In practice, however, they represent competing projects of neoliberal expansion and militarisation. The AUKUS pact, for example, is a strategic manoeuvre in great-power rivalry, but from the perspective of Pacific Islanders it is yet another existential threat that militarises their home, treating their ocean as a potential and future battlefield (Sopepa 2023, 173, 222). Similarly, debt-driven development embeds small economies in dependency. Loans finance ports, highways, and stadiums ostensibly for modernisation and economic opportunity, but ultimately it serves larger geopolitical ambitions. Sopepa emphasises that such narratives, despite their promises, rarely translate into Pasifika wellbeing. Instead, debt-trap diplomacy secures raw materials, strategic territory, and geopolitical advantage, all while normalising the slow death of traditional communities (2023, 67, 205).

But Sopepa is a theologian, so he pushes the analysis further. The necropolitical logic of neoliberalism has had a green light to shape economic systems and geopolitical strategies because it was already present in the "received" theology of the region. As he observes: "A conventional Christian salvation narrative of saving souls at the individualistic level for heaven's sake is no longer adequate for Pasifika's current predicament" (2023, 3). The focus of his study is on soteriology, arguing that the conventional Western-influenced salvation narratives taught by early missionaries, still widely perpetuated today, have become highly individualistic and, in a strange way, deeply capitalistic (2023, 69–70).

As it turns out, certain theological frameworks, perhaps accidentally, perhaps deliberately, perfectly support the cannibalisation of the planet. Why fight a mining company destroying your mountain if your mountain ultimately doesn't matter in eternity, if the only mountain that really matters is the heavenly Mt Zion? The "heaven-and-earth" and "human-non-human" dualisms all contribute to the false division between the spiritual soul and the physical earth. Dualities such as these are deeply alien to traditional 'whole of life' Pasifika worldviews, which understand land, sea, and community as inseparable parts of a living relational web.

Sopepa argues that Western-influenced theologies feed into necro-economics by offering a "celestial salvation" that focuses on saving souls for an abstract paradise in the sky (2023, 113–115), rendering Christians increasingly indifferent to immediate, existential realities such as climate change, economic extraction, and poverty. This also encourages complacency: Doctrines such as "total depravity" and "limited

atonement,” admittedly more Calvinistic ones, can lead victims of oppression to accept their plight as divinely ordained, tragically vindicating the very systems that cause their marginalisation (Sopepa 2023, 97–100, 103–105).

In deconstructing necropolitical doctrines, Sopepa then draws on the island of Kioa (from the Fijian province of Cakaudrove) and the concept of *tautua* (service) to challenge traditional atonement theories that function as tools of control. He rejects the notion of God’s grace as ‘selective’ or ‘limited,’ which, theologically, would also cause John Wesley to roll over in his grave, reflecting necropolitical exclusion that turns the church into a “gatekeeper” of life and salvation (2023, 109). He also critiques the language of punishment and wrath in penal substitutionary atonement, arguing that it is antithetical to restoration. God’s *tautua* never aims to punish but to reconnect severed relationships (2023, 93–96).

Sopepa then presents his *Leleti Soteriology*. The descendants of those once labelled “savages” now model a sustainable Christian life, reconstructing the doctrine of salvation as the reconnection of broken relationships between God, humanity (*Ha’adam*), and the land (*eleele/fenua*) (Sopepa 2023, citing fellow PCU theologians Lusama and Aiava, 144–145). He also asserts that “the land (*fenua*) is the conscience of the Church and State” (2023, ii), rejecting the traditional Western binary separation of Church and State. For the full discussion on his *Leleti Soteriology* and how it incorporates *mana* and *tapu*, see chapter 5 of his thesis (2023, 169–199).

In short, Sopepa argues that the Pasifika Church must fundamentally rethink its theology. It must decolonise its understanding of salvation, moving beyond escapist eschatologies (escape-ologies) that have proven spiritually and socially damaging for centuries. As Jesus says, “the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2), and “the Kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21). Salvation is now. And it is here. The struggle against necroeconomics must be waged not only on political and economic fronts but also on deeply spiritual ones, in churches and seminaries. Pasifika communities are relocating from the low-lying atolls as we speak. If our salvation theologies do not include the flourishing of all the interdependent communities of *Moana* and *Fenua*, then, quite simply, they are heretical.

From the TBL to the Oikos Triplets

This is where *Reweaving the Ecological Mat (REM)* comes in, a theological and methodological framework that emerged as a Pacific Theological College (PTC) initiative back in 2016 as part of a regional project for the churches. While later articulated in a series of publications (including the 2020 volume cited here authored by Cliff Bird, Arnie Saiki, and Meratui Ratunabuabua), REM, as a truly communities-based initiative, was first grounded in extensive *talanoa* and regional consultations across Pasifika communities.

The REM text by Bird *et al.* begins with a realisation learned in the decades since the TBL: an extractive system cannot be repaired merely by improving its accounting metrics. The narrative itself must change (Bird *et al.* 2020, x, 32), a conclusion also consistently affirmed in consultation processes and community-based reflections across the region. If neoliberalism is sustained by a powerful chiefly story of individual accumulation and limitless growth, then REM calls us back to a different story of relationality, reciprocity, and limits grounded in the Pasifika household. Importantly, theology is central to that reframing, not only in the published framework (Bird *et al.* 2020, 23–34) but also in the lived theological discourse of the consultations themselves.

To reweave the ecological mat, the REM framework retrieves the concept of *oikos*, the Greek word for “house” or “household,” taking the now-familiar sustainability triad—planet, people, profit—but shifting

their centre of gravity entirely. Rather than treating these as separable domains, they are reoriented toward their shared origin in the household. This was earlier articulated in Pasifika theological work as the interrelated ‘oikos triplets’ of ecology, economy, and ecumene, a term first coined by Samoan scholar Upolu Vaai (Vaai 2019, 7; 2021, 234). In this way, they are brought into the eco-relationality described as the Pasifika Household of God (Bird *et al.* 2020, 2). This replaces the TBL’s silos and their “substitutions” (e.g., offsetting a destroyed forest with a new school).

The traditional Pasifika household does not recognise a rigid separation between the economy that provides livelihood, the environment that nurtures it, and the communities that indwell it. From this perspective, REM calls for an oikos-centered reframing of development. In the neoliberal framework, as in the TBL, despite PR campaigns, value is ultimately monetary, emerging from abstract market mechanisms and supply-and-demand curves. In the Pasifika worldview reflected in REM and its consultations, value is relational and intrinsic to the living land-sea-sky web (Bird *et al.* 2020, 25–28), as consistently expressed in community narratives and talanoa across the region.

Instead, wellbeing is measured by other indices such as reciprocity, community health, respect, and the capacity to live within the limits of nature. To operationalise this, REM introduces the concept of “intemperate ecological accounting”—intemperate meaning “pure, inviolate, or sacred.” This concept was further developed in a dedicated volume within the REM series, authored by Arnie Saiki, as a vision to relocate authority from the corporate boardroom back to the talanoa of local communities. Communities narrate their lived experiences and assess proposed development according to their relational knowledge. Indicators of success become tangible and ecological: Is the coral reef still healthy enough to sustain local fish and fishers? Have migratory patterns tracked by elders for generations been disrupted? Has the influx of wage labour undermined reciprocal sharing networks and introduced new inequalities?

In this sense, REM is not just a text but a living, dialogical process shaped by years of ongoing consultation, oral knowledge, and community discernment. Authority to define development is thus relocated from institutions like the IMF and World Bank and returned to local communities. Within the REM framework, the definition of the good life also changes. Instead of pursuing endless consumer accumulation such as bigger houses and newer cars, the focus is on balance, dignity, reciprocal care, and holistic wellbeing. Human flourishing cannot be separated from ecological flourishing. And ultimately flourishing comes down not to money but mana (Bird *et al.* 2020, 32–33).

Giving Sopepa the final word, the “good news” is his proposal of a mana ethic, one that brings theology, politics, and ecology into a single life-affirming vision. It stands as both response and resistance to the death-driven logic of necroeconomics and necropolitics. Where “unseen hand” necroeconomics disciplines through the threat of death, and necropolitics determines who among us are expendable, the mana ethic asserts an Indigenous Pasifika form of power: not domination, but the cultivated capacity to generate, protect, and sustain life in all its forms (Sopepa 2023, 33–41).

Sopepa’s mana ethic is rooted in the eco-relationality of the fenua, referring not simply to territory or citizenship but to the entire web of relationships that sustain life. In Leleti soteriology, mana is not an abstract force or private possession; it is relational, generated and recognised through right relationships within this web. Life cannot be reduced to commodity, for, in Sopepa’s words, the “Mana life ethic is in seeing the value of life in everything in the fenua” (2023, 192).

The mana ethic requires more than policy reform; it calls for nothing less than an awakening, fakaala (“to cause to wake”), a collective awakening that breaks the spell of neoliberal “success” stories. Through

fakaala, Pasifika communities rediscover their belonging within the fenua and re-immense themselves in the reciprocal obligations that bind people to land, ocean, and one another (Sopepa 2023, 12–15). Fakaala challenges imported doctrines and definitions of success that prioritise individual accumulation, while restoring the communal responsibilities through which life and mana are sustained.

Success under the mana ethic is not measured ultimately by GDP or monetary value, but by wellbeing and the principles of “enoughness,” restraint, and abstinence (Sopepa 2023, 235). It also reconfigures work itself. Rather than endless production, it emphasises rhythms of rest and resistance, practices that actively restore mana. In this sense, rest is not inactivity but ethical participation in renewal, a ‘restorative mana’ that allows the fenua to replenish itself (2023, 188). Sopepa thus replaces those “failed GDP gauges” with a focus on wellbeing and a work ethic of ‘rest and resistance’ (2023, 5), or as Saiki would describe it, “intemperate ecological accounting” (Bird *et al.* 2020, 17).

Where Nancy Fraser critiques “cannibal capitalism” for treating nature as a passive reservoir for extraction and waste, the mana ethic offers a fundamentally different ontology. Land, sea, sky, coral reefs, and forests are not inert resources but relational participants, bearers and mediators of mana, actively involved in the struggle for life. The fenua and the moana are not objects to be saved; they are living partners in the renewal of all things.

Conclusion

Can Pasifika theologians convert “neoliberal cannibals”? My hope is that they can, and they will, and that many more such Pasifika communities-based theologies and solutions will emerge. In the end, the “reverse mission” of Pasifika theologians is not merely to offer a moral critique of the West, but to lead a global *metanoia*: a turning away from the addiction to extraction and toward more ‘whole of life’ solutions, where “fenua, moana, and lagi” become the conscience of both Church and State.

Until then, communities will continue to fragment into isolated, competitive units, so that every dimension of life can be priced, extracted, and consumed. Outmigration is seen as inevitable, even desirable, whether to “heaven” or to Australia. But what happens when people simply refuse that logic? What if the most radical act of resistance is the quiet decision to stay in the “enoughness” of where the vicovico is buried, choosing deep, reciprocal relationships over profitable transactions?

What might a genuinely non-cannibalistic global economy look like? Could the highest expression of mana in the twenty-first century be a radical refusal to consume the other, a world in which power arises not from extraction but from relationship, reciprocity, and care? We will know that cannibals have been converted when success is no longer measured by the failed gauges of GDP, but by the flourishing of life within the indivisible web of fenua, moana, and lagi.

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