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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HEALING TOGETHER: INDIGENOUS NAGA AND PASIFIKA PATHWAYS

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Abstract
The predominant concept of empathy in Eurocentric culture has profoundly shaped healing methodologies worldwide. This influence, facilitated through humanitarian agencies providing economic and psychological aid, has perpetuated a narrow and limited perspective on empathy. Entrenched in the colonial mindset, such model of empathy prioritises individualism and neglects historical, political, and social contexts that shape both human suffering and wellbeing, revealing a lack of concern for issues of oppression and injustice. It is ahistorical, apolitical, and hierarchical in nature. Conversely, indigenous communities particularly the Nagas and the Pasifika cultures prioritise collective wellbeing and relationality and embrace a holistic understanding of healing. They emphasise communal welfare without stigmatising and labelling individuals by adopting a non-hierarchical approach that views communities and the broader cosmos as interwoven and interdependent. This paper seeks to initiate a dialogue about empathy which consults indigenous healing practices exploring resources from the Naga and the Pasifika cultures. By doing so, it aims not only to critique the Eurocentric notion of empathy, but also to offer a broader perspective on healing that is more holistic and attuned to communal wellbeing and promotes more inclusive and effective approaches to healing.

Keywords
healing, colonial, empathy, indigenous, holistic

Introduction

The Eurocentric framework of empathy, with its focus on individualism, has shaped global healing methodologies and overlooks historical contexts of oppression and injustice. The colonial mindset prioritises individual cognitive and emotional understanding over communal relationships and collective wellbeing. Conversely, indigenous communities like those of the Naga and the Pasifika cultures emphasise relationality and holistic healing. They stress the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and the cosmos, using non-hierarchal approaches to foster collective welfare. This paper explores these indigenous practices, critiquing Eurocentric notions of healing and offering insights that promote more inclusive and effective healing approaches through the integration of indigenous wisdom.

Dominant Narrative of Healing and Empathy as Individualistic and Ahistorical

Empathy, in the Eurocentric understanding, is one-sided, with its focus solely on an individual's emotions and cognitive understanding of another person's feelings at the expense of the broader socio-political and historical contexts that shape those experiences.

The word empathy, which was originally coined by German aestheticians in the early twentieth century as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, 'feeling into', came to 'denote the power of projecting one's personality into the object of contemplation and has been a useful term in both psychology and aesthetics' (Garber 2004, 24). In psychoanalysis, Carl Rogers, the founder of humanistic psychology, defined empathy as, 'the therapist's sensitive ability and willingness to understand the client's thoughts, feelings and struggles form the client's point of view... to see completely through the client's eyes, to adopt his [sic] frame of reference' (1980, 85). Similarly, Heinz Kohut, an Austro-American psychoanalyst and founder of self-psychology, defines empathy as, 'the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person' (1984, 82). This individualistic notion of empathy does not address the systemic realities of historical oppression that influence Indigenous people's experiences and collective wellbeing.

Empathy's ahistorical nature ignores the deep-seated histories of colonisation, oppression, and systemic injustice that continue to affect marginalised communities. Hence, it is superficial and shallow as it fails to address the root causes of suffering. This lack of awareness not only diminishes the depth of empathic connection but also hinders the potential for empathy to contribute to meaningful healing and social transformation. Therefore, it can be limited or irrelevant in non-European contexts where communal relationships and historical context are critical. To ignore such experiences is to continue subjugating the Indigenous communities. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends, 'To ignore

these historical contexts is to misunderstand the depth and nature of Indigenous people's experiences and needs' (1999, 28). For Indigenous peoples, whose oppression and resilience are deeply entrenched in their community and history, this individualistic approach falls short in addressing the collective nature of suffering and healing central to their culture.

Empathy as Hierarchical and Apolitical

The hierarchal nature of Eurocentric empathy positions the empathiser in a place of power who understands and feels for the less privileged, reinforcing existing power dynamics and perpetuating a sense of superiority and dominance. This is evident in its focus on the empathiser's emotional experiences rather than that of the person or community who is the object of the empathy. Such a hierarchy fosters authoritarian attitudes and actions that further marginalise those who are already vulnerable, reducing their complex experiences to mere objects of tokenism. This approach perpetuates the colonial legacy of power dynamics where the voices of the marginalised are muted and ignored.

Additionally, Eurocentric empathy is largely apolitical as it focuses on immediate emotional relief without engaging with the broader socio-political structural contexts that shape and perpetuate the individual and collective experiences of suffering. This apolitical stance on empathy is ineffective in addressing the root causes of suffering, because it detaches the empathiser from the political actions essential for challenging and transforming the conditions that perpetuate injustice, inequality and marginalisation as Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) posit. Empathy without political engagement leads to shallow solutions that fail to address the underlying structural inequalities sustaining social issues. This apolitical approach limits empathy's potential to drive meaningful social change, reducing it to passive emotional responses rather than promoting concrete action or systemic reform. By discounting the political dimension of suffering, this model of empathy inadvertently upholds the status quo, allowing cycles of oppression and inequality to thrive.

Humanitarianism Shapes Empathy

Humanitarian aid, while offering vital economic and psychological relief, has limited empathy in a narrow and transactional way. The focus tends to be on addressing immediate needs or crises rather than fostering deep, longstanding relational understanding. Such an approach emphasises the act of helping based on immediate emotional responses to suffering, rather than engaging with and addressing the broader historical, cultural and social contexts that contribute to that suffering.

By prioritising short-term relief efforts, humanitarian frameworks reduce empathy to an emotional reaction and charitable act. Such action does not address the deeper, systemic issues, but rather reinforces a model of aid where those providing help

are seen as superior and the recipients as passive beneficiaries. In discussing the limitations of empathy, particularly in humanitarian efforts, Paul Bloom (2016) argues for a more rational, compassion-based approach to helping others. Bloom maintains that empathy, often seen as a moral compass, is defective and can lead to unethical behaviour. He also adds that instead of promoting fairness, empathy is selective, biased, and can actually reinforce inequality, driving decisions that may feed injustice rather than fostering ethical outcomes.

In a similar vein, Didier Fassin (2012) asserts that empathy, as used by many humanitarian agencies, can limit the scope of aid, since its focus is on immediate emotional responses to suffering rather than structural injustices. The representational strategies portray victims of humanitarian crises as helpless, reinforcing a narrow scope of empathy that is both selective and biased in nature. Humanitarian empathy addresses only the symptoms but not the root causes of inequality and suffering. For Carolyn Pedwell (2014), global humanitarian efforts frame empathy only as an emotional reaction that often distances people from systemic and long-term injustices and structural inequalities, a position also shared by Ilan Kapoor (2013). Empathy, though often celebrated as a virtue, can distort one's view by focusing too narrowly on immediate individual suffering at the expense of the deeper systemic issues. In humanitarian work, empathy addresses the surface-level symptoms, such as hunger or displacement without tackling the root causes like colonial exploitation or political oppression. By concentrating on short-term relief, selective empathy obscures long-standing injustices, failing to challenge the structural inequalities that perpetuate suffering. Consequently, empathy is reduced to temporary fixes rather than sustainable and transformative change. For Angela M. Eikenberry and Roseanne Marie Marabella (2018), modern philanthropic tactics, including 'philanthrocapitalism' and effective altruism, adopt market driven strategies rooted in neo-liberal ideologies which reinforce the existing power dynamics rather than challenging and addressing systemic change. They critiqued that, 'Increasingly, social problems are treated as philanthropic or market opportunities rather than as political questions' (Eikenberry and Marabella 2018, 1).

Healing Practices in the Pasifika and Naga Traditions

Indigenous cultures offer relational and holistic perspectives on healing, prioritising collective wellbeing and recognising humans, non-humans, and the natural world as interconnected parts of a larger community. Unlike Eurocentric approaches that often emphasise individualism and dualism, separating humans from the natural world, Indigenous practices focus on reciprocity, respect, and the interdependent nature of exitance. Rooted in concepts of relationality, collective responsibility, compassion and

mutual care, these frameworks emphasise the deep connections between individuals, their communities, ancestors, land, and the environment. This stands in stark contrast to the Eurocentric hierarchal and emotionally isolated notion of empathy. Indigenous healing practices integrate physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions aiming to restore balance and harmony for the individual and the wider community. In what follows, I will explore this holistic perspective as reflected in the practices of the Nagas and Pasifika cultures.

Interconnected Worldview in Indigenous Cosmology

Indigenous cosmologies recognise humans as integral parts of a larger web of life. This is captured vividly by Wati Longchar who writes, 'Everything is organically related to each other' (2012, 41). This interconnected worldview forms the foundation for Indigenous practices of relationality and interconnectedness, shaping how individuals relate to themselves, each other, and the cosmos. Shawn Wilson expresses the interconnectedness of Indigenous thought in this way, 'As indigenous people, we "are" our relationship with other people' (2013, 313). In Indigenous cultures, healing is a communal process deeply rooted in relationships with the community, land, and ancestors. It goes beyond emotions, recognising suffering as shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. Healing focuses on interconnectedness, tying individual wellbeing to the health of the community and environment, emphasising relational and collective approaches over isolated personal responses. Kirmayer, Tait, and Simpson attest to the importance of cultural context in understanding and addressing suffering in Indigenous communities and affirm that '[t]he wellbeing of indigenous people is intimately tied to the health of the community and the land. Healing is not just an individual process but a communal one, where the interconnectedness of all members plays a critical role in the recovery and maintenance of health' (2009, 21). In Indigenous worldviews, relationships are understood to nourish life and are central to their cultures and practices. Relationality is a way of life that recognises all things as inherently interconnected, making it unimaginable to conceive existence outside of this web of relationship. Such understanding influences how Indigenous communities operate and function.

In *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach,* Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2006) delves into Indigenous Fijian knowledge systems and the importance of community and reciprocal relationships in maintaining wellbeing. Nabobo-Baba explores the role of *vanua* in sustaining life and its impact on individual and collective health, highlighting the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment. The concept of *vanua* (translated as home, village, or land) in Fijian iTaukei culture represents a deep bond between the people, their village, and the natural environment. *Vanua* encompasses

the land, community, and nature, all of which are central to the iTaukei identity and wellbeing. This connection emphasises values like reciprocity, kindness, and relatedness vital for both individual and collective healing. Nabobo-Baba asserts that maintaining harmony with the *vanua* is critical for self-healing, as the health of the land is believed to directly impact the health of the people. Disruptions in natural elements such as rivers and forests result in a decline in community wellbeing, underscoring the need to protect the *vanua*.

Collective Responsibility and Relationality

In Indigenous communities, healing is seen through the lens of relationality and collective care. In Pasifika cultures, the concept of *vā* refers to the nurturing space between people, essential for maintaining harmony. Suffering is understood as a shared experience, with collective care prioritised over individual emotions. *Vā* encompasses physical, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, underscoring the importance of fostering and respecting relationships to ensure communal wellbeing. Healing, therefore, involves nurturing these sacred spaces and acting with respect and responsibility to maintain community balance. Upolu Lumā Vaai (2017) emphasises the centrality of *vā*, a concept that structures the interconnectedness of life in the Pasifika context. According to Vaai, *vā* underscores the importance of nurturing and honouring relationships, not just among people but also with the land and ocean, underlining how Indigenous worldview is deeply relational, where every aspect of existence is interwoven, forming a network of connection that must be respected and maintained. The power of *vā* lies in the understanding that 'land, ocean, and people' are inherently linked rather than separate entities as everything is structured relationally (Vaai 2017).

In Samoan culture, the concept of *vā* and *faaaloalo* refer to the 'face-to-face reciprocity and respect for relational space' which is a vital concept for understanding the ways Samoans relate with one another and the world at large. This involves a conscious effort to engage with others in a way that preserves harmony and respect within the community. This principle underscores the significance of nurturing these spaces to maintain unity within the community (Vaai 2017). Albert Wendt, in his work, *Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body,* elaborates on this concept, stressing its essential role in Samoan culture and communal wellbeing:

> *Vā* is a space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meaning changes as the relationships/the contexts change ... A well-known Samoan expression is ... 'la teu

> le *vā*'. Cherish/nurse/care for the *vā*, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism: who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of *vā*, relationship. (1996, 42)

Vaai contends that *vā* encompasses most, if not all life, and thus Pasifika people are born into a multidimensional flow of life, enhanced and protected by relationships that are not created but continued. Although articulated variedly in different island cultures, what is common is that relationality holds life in balance and harmony (2017). For Vaai (2017), the centrality of *vā* in the Pasifika worldview highlights the interconnectedness of all life where harmony is maintained and these relationships are seen as continuous or inherited. *Vā* as a relational space emphasises 'love, service, spirituality, respect, reciprocity, collective responsibility, gerontocracy and humility that are felt and enacted' (Anae 2019, 9). Thus, the concept of *vā* provides a rich framework for understanding relationality and communal harmony. It requires a commitment to maintaining respectful and nurturing relationships, thereby ensuring the wellbeing of the entire community.

Indigenous approaches are about relational accountability and the recognition that individual wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of the community. Compassion and care in this setting become an active engagement with both the physical and spiritual health of the collective. In this view, relationality reflects the understanding that all beings, including humans, nature, and the spiritual world are connected through dynamic relationships. Healing, therefore, is about restoring balance within these relationships. Collective care shifts healing from individualised care to a shared community responsibility, where everyone plays a role in supporting each other. Instead of isolating emotional responses, this approach frames healing as a communal duty, ensuring that the entire community both contributes to and benefits from the collective wellbeing.

Historical and Cultural Context of Healing

Indigenous healing practices are deeply rooted in historical and cultural memory, addressing both individual suffering and collective trauma caused by colonisation, displacement, and cultural erasure. Rituals and ceremonies often seek to heal not just the present wounds, but also deeper longstanding intergenerational traumas passed down through generations. These rituals aim to heal the collective trauma inflicted by colonisation, recognising that the entire community has been affected and must be healed together.

Among the Nagas, healing practices are inherently or intimately connected to the land, ancestors, and communal life, all of which were deeply disrupted by British colonisation. The British introduced new systems of governance, education and religion (namely Christianity), which altered Naga society and caused cultural displacement.

British colonisation dislocated Naga land rights and governance, leading to displacement and imposition of colonial systems (Longchar 2012).

Naga healing practices include rituals that honour the ancestors, focus on restoring communal harmony and healing. Despite the impact of colonisation and the introduction of Christianity, the Nagas have maintained and integrated traditional healing ceremonies into Christian practices. These customs are reflected in many festivals celebrated across tribes, earning the title as 'land of festivals'. During festivals, ancestral rituals, collective prayers, sacrifices, and storytelling are incorporated to reconnect with the land and ancestors, experience communal healing and preserve cultural identity, thereby addressing the losses caused by colonisation. Through these practices, the Nagas commemorate their resistance and ensure the survival of their traditional knowledge and collective identity. Having endured colonial oppression, displacement and cultural loss, the Nagas utilise collective memory as a means of healing and resistance. Through religious, social and political rituals, they preserve their history, honour their ancestors and restore social cohesion.

Historical memory among the Nagas is not just a passive recounting of the past but an active process of re-engaging with our cultural identity. Events such as commemorating past struggles or honouring the legacy of our ancestors serve as forms of healing, especially in the context of historical trauma. For instance, annual festivals and commemorations of resistance against colonial forces become spaces where the community affirms its collective identity and shared history. These rituals are vital in navigating ongoing challenges related to identity and political sovereignty. The Hornbill Festival common to all Nagas is held every year in December to mark the cultural heritage of the Nagas and also stands as a symbolic assertion of Naga identity in the face of past colonial attempts to suppress it. More importantly, it is a celebration of harvest honouring the land. Such collective gatherings foster a sense of unity, strengthening communal bonds and preserving Indigenous values across generations. The festival becomes a platform for showcasing traditional songs, dances, and practices that connect the younger generation to the experiences of their elders.

Ritualistic practices that are dismissed by colonisers as mere cultural performances hold deep political and social significance for the Nagas. These rituals are acts of resistance, affirming the Indigenous people's rights to cultural preservation and self-determination and re-establishing their connectedness to land and its resources. Through ceremonies, storytelling, and communal prayers, Nagas resist the erasure of their identity and express solidarity within their communities. Such rituals invoke the memory of colonisation and the struggles of autonomy, reinforcing communal care as members collectively share the burden of their historical suffering. The novel, *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered* explores Naga resistance during the British colonisation and includes

elements of storytelling as a form of cultural memory and resistance that continue to serve as a mechanism to educate the younger generations (Kire 2018).

Colonisation also altered the trajectories of evolution for the Pasifika island communities. Cluny Macpherson and La'avasa Macpherson (2013) provide the ways in which the Pasifika societies are being transformed by the forces of colonisation and the influence of the outside world. In the Pasifika cultures, healing is understood as a communal and holistic process that integrates spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions. Colonisation brought significant changes to land ownership, social organisation, and health systems, disrupting the traditional relational worldview that sustained these societies for generations. Pasifika islanders like the Samoans practice forms of healing that address not just individual distress but also the colonial traumas that their communities underwent. The Samoan *ifoga,* i.e., a public apology and reconciliation ritual, aims to restore social harmony disrupted by colonial injustices. These ceremonies go beyond individual grievances and address the collective trauma of colonisation, reinforcing cultural traditions and restoring balance within the community (Macpherson and Macpherson 2005).

Among both the Naga and Pasifika islanders, storytelling serves as a key method of preserving cultural memory and transmitting knowledge. These stories often recount the trauma of colonisation, thereby offering a collective space for healing. In Naga culture, oral histories that recount battles with the British or stories of resistance help to keep alive the memory of historical trauma, while offering a means of processing it. In the Pasifika context, Indigenous stories of creation, land and genealogy help heal the wounds caused by the displacement of people from their lands due to colonisation. These narratives connect Indigenous people to their ancestral lands, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity despite the upheavals caused by colonisation. As Epeli Hau'ofa, (2008) discussed in *We are the Ocean*, Pasifika islanders' identity is deeply rooted in their connection to the land and sea, and story-telling reinforces that bond.

Both Naga and Pasifika healing practices focus on reclaiming cultural practices disrupted by colonisation, using ceremonies and rituals as tools of resistance against the erasure of Indigenous identities. These practices emphasise relationality, collective responsibility, and the preservation of cultural memory, with an aim to heal the communities by restoring connections to the land, ancestors and the cosmos. By remembering historical trauma and reinforcing communal bonds, they foster resilience and social cohesion. Rooted in ancestral knowledge, Indigenous healing practices acknowledge the political, social, and historical dimensions of suffering and work toward long lasting restoration of balance within individuals, communities, and the broader environment.

Reciprocity and Mutual Care

Reciprocity and mutual care are foundational principles in both Naga and Pasifika cultures, deeply embedded in community solidarity, collective wellbeing and shared responsibility. Among the Nagas, these values are expressed during key life events such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as in daily social and economic exchanges. For example, during the agricultural season, community members collaborate in planting or harvesting, knowing that the help will be reciprocated. Similarly, at weddings or funerals, families receive communal support in the form of food, labour and resources with the understanding that it will be reciprocated. This ensures that no one faces hardship alone, strengthening a culture of interdependency and collective wellbeing. In times of grief, such as during the death of a loved one, the community engages in collective mourning, sharing both the emotional burden and practical responsibilities through communal prayers, rituals and material support.

This interwoven relationship between reciprocity and care is reflected across various Pasifika cultures. In Fijian community, the concept of *veiwekani* (kinship) emphasises the obligation of mutual support to ensure that social, emotional and economic assistance circulates within the community. Asesela Ravuvu's works, in particular *The Fijian Way of Life* (1987) and *Development or Dependence: The Pattern of Change in a Fijian Village* (1988), highlight reciprocity within the Fijian communities. Ravuvu maintains that '[r]eciprocity in its various forms is the very fabric that holds Fijian society together', underlining the cultural importance of mutual support in both ceremonial and everyday life (1987, 47). Through collaborative efforts, such as agricultural aid and ceremonial events, these reciprocal exchanges reinforce social harmony and communal responsibility, strengthening the connection between individuals' wellbeing and the overall health of the community.

Action-Oriented Compassion

In Indigenous healing practices, compassion goes beyond mere emotional resonance, calling for tangible actions that alleviate suffering. Indigenous concept of compassion, like the Lotha Naga concept of *khonzan*, emphasises a collective responsibility to address both emotional and material needs especially during challenging times. *Khonzan* transcends the Eurocentric notion of empathy, which focuses on passive emotional connection. Instead, *khonzan* requires active participation in rituals, communal support, and acts of service, reinforcing communal duty and reciprocity. The Lothas believe that individual wellbeing is inseparable from the collective health and wellbeing of the community, creating a dynamic system of care where healing is communal and relational.

A similar practice is also found in the Fijian culture in the concept of *veiwekani* which emphasises mutual care during ceremonies and collective farming, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and community empowerment. Traditional rituals, such as the *yaqona* (kava) ceremony, provide platforms for collective support and guidance, reinforcing emotional solidarity within the community. Ravuvu (1987) observes that these rituals not only strengthen social bonds but also ensure that compassion is actively expressed through practical support during crucial life events.

These practices in both Indigenous cultures demonstrate how action-oriented compassion is integral to communal healing. They ensure that support extends beyond emotional empathy to include practical, collective responses for the wellbeing of the individual and the community fostering resilience and cohesion.

Conclusion

Indigenous healing frameworks, such as those found in Naga and Pasifika communities, move beyond Eurocentric individualistic notions of empathy, embracing a collective, action-oriented model entrenched in relationality, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. These systems of care view healing, not as an isolated personal experience, but as a communal endeavour, intertwined with the cultural, historical and environmental context of the community. Unlike Eurocentric approaches, which often focus on the emotional responses of individuals and can be disconnected from the broader social or political realities, Indigenous practices emphasise active community involvement in restoring balance and wellbeing. Healing is understood as a shared responsibility, where every member plays a role, ensuring no one is excluded. These practices challenge the Eurocentric tendency to address symptoms for holistic and sustainable solutions grounded in collective care.

By integrating historical trauma, cultural memory and collective action into their healing practices, these Indigenous approaches challenge the limitations of Eurocentric models. They call for a more inclusive, holistic framework that fosters mutual support, acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals and their environment and addresses the broader political and historical dimensions of suffering. In this way, Indigenous healing is not only a form of resistance to colonial disruptions but a pathway towards long-lasting social justice, collective empowerment and sustained cultural identity.

Incorporating these perspectives into a global framework of care and psychological aid can enrich our understanding of emotional support, moving beyond isolated empathy towards a more communal and culturally relevant model of healing that fosters resilience and honours the lived experiences of marginalised communities. Such an integrated approach can offer a more equitable, compassionate, and restorative pathways to both individual and collective wellbeing and the cosmos.

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