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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE *VOSA MANA* OF THE *VANUA*: READING MATTHEW'S GOSPEL IN THE HIGHLANDS

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Abstract
This paper explores the possibility of hearing the *vosa mana* (word of power) of the *vanua* (the land and its people) in the biblical text, arguing that the Hebrew concept of *eretz*—like the *vanua*—is not merely a backdrop but an active, speaking agent in Matthew's Gospel. Drawing from *iTaukei* concepts such as *yavutu* (ancestral foundations), *tawa* (sacred places), and *nomo* (silence as agency and voice), the paper reinterprets Matthew through textual and oral sources, resituating Jesus' ministry within a spatial-theological framework. It explores the Gospel's use of *topos*, focusing on its seven-mountain structure, and identifies a theological topography where the land is revelatory for both the location and vocation of the Anointed One. The study also shows how Matthew's narrative tells the biography of the people in the land through its opening *tuva kawa* (genealogy) and *talanoa makawa* (ancestral storytelling) woven throughout the text. By returning Matthew's Gospel to its *yavutu*, this paper challenges disembodied and dis(em)placed interpretations, calling for an eco-relational reading of the text—one that listens again to the *vosa mana* of the *vanua* within the sacred narrative: a theological topography linking the identity of 'land and people' to past, present, and future generations.

Keywords
theology of the land, Pasifika hermeneutics, place-based theology, orality and textuality, relational epistemology

Introduction

In Rewasau, up in the Naitasiri highlands of Viti Levu, after *sevusevu,* the son of the *Turaga ni Mataqali* shared a story during *talanoa* around the *tanoa*. The story he told was part of a larger story cycle of two brothers who left the highlands and embarked on a long journey across the ocean. Before leaving the *koro*, the brothers received the gift of a box containing the *vosa mana* (the 'word of power') of the *vanua*, an auspicious beginning to their travels far and wide until eventually reaching Peritania (Britain). Upon opening the box on the other side of the world, expecting to hear the *vosa mana* of the *vanua*, they found, to their surprise, the Bible (talanoa, Mataqali, Rewasau, 2023).

This paper was conceived as something like a return journey from Peritania back to the *koro* to return the biblical text back to the land. To do so, I argue that the *vanua*, the land, *eretz*, far from being a passive backdrop, is an active, speaking agent in the sacred narrative, what might best be described as a theological topography. By engaging a place-based hermeneutic informed by both oral and textual sources, I demonstrate how Matthew's theology of place reveals a spatial-theological framework in which the land speaks throughout, even in its silence, echoing the *vosa mana* that can also be heard in the relationality of the iTaukei tradition. In my efforts to understand, or at least *begin* to understand, the deep concept of the *vanua*, I have relied on a rich tradition of scholarship—Asesela Ravuvu's 1987 *Fijian Ethos as Expressed in Ceremonies*, Ilaitia Tuwere's 2002 *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place*, and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba's expansive 'Vanua framework' developed throughout her works but especially in her 2006 *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach*. I have also consulted, by interview and *talanoa*, three oral sources—one elder and two knowledge holders who have both confirmed what I have been learning from the texts as well as guided me in new directions through which to hear the *vosa mana* of the *vanua*.

The *Vanua* and the *Eretz*

Although there are cognate words and concepts throughout Pasifika (e.g. *fanua* in Samoa, *fonua* in Tonga, *fenua* in Maohi Nui, *whenua* in New Zealand, *hanua* in the Solomon Islands), for this paper I will confine my discussion to my neophyte understanding of the iTaukei concept. It is both true yet simplistic to say that the *vanua* is 'the land', for it is that, and so much more. According to Nabobo-Baba (2006, 38), for example, it is a relational epistemology and ontology grounded in the cosmological intersection and interconnection of three realms—*lagi* (heavens), *vuravura* (earth), and *bulu* (underworld). Here is perhaps one of many examples of what Manulani Meyer calls 'mutual emergences' (Meyer in Vaai and Casimira 2024, 51), a three-ness evident in wisdom traditions around the world, not least the Hebrew tradition and its tripartite pattern for creation as the

original cosmic temple. And just as a temple process from Holy of Holies through Holy Place to Outer Courts, the three realms are all constantly influencing each other with the fluidity of ceremony, the flow of *mana* between the realms, as a lifeblood connection between *na veika bula kece ga* ('all things alive') (Nabobo-Baba 2006, 38–39). And this macrocosm is further reflected microcosmically in the 'whole of life' intimacy between spirit, soul, and body (1 Thess 5:23), a body analogy that works the other way as well. As Tuwere succinctly puts it: 'Without the people, the *vanua* is like a body without a soul' (Tuwere 2002, 35), for '*na vanua na tamata, na tamata na vanua* (land is people, people is land)' (Tuwere 2002, 121). *Vanua* is all of this (Ravuvu 1987, 15); the land, yes, but also the relationality that ties the communal self not just generically to a 'sense of place' but to specific 'places' of identity and belonging (*i cavuti*).

Where I come from, land is viewed either as Crown land or as private property—either owned by the King or by individuals or families. Creation becomes property, bought and sold like any other commodity as little more than a backdrop, the 'set and scenery' for the real *dramatis personae* that are human beings. Here in Fiji, however, to the iTaukei, people do not have land; the land has people. Neither is the *vanua* voiceless, like the non-agency of the 'set and scenery'. It is not even subaltern, marginalised as a 'damsel in distress' that only knows how to cry for help. The *vanua*, in fact, has many powerful voices—*vosa mana*. One surprising voice I heard was at a funeral I attended, where not one but three eulogies were given, one by a *Marama* (matriarch) who gave the 'eulogy from the *vanua*', recounting the narrative of the dearly departed's connection back to the *yavusa* (clan) and his *yavutu* (land 'foundation'). Another surprising one that I am newly attuning my ears to is silence, *nomo*. When I first encountered this concept in Unaisi Nabobo-Baba's book *Knowing and Learning*, it made sense of so much that I had been observing. Far from being evidence of non-agency, the *vanua's nomo* speaks with a silence that can convey sacred presence, authority, or resistance, the distinction of which all depends on close attention to context. And silence is itself relationality, the *vanua* speaking: 'The *vanua* is said to have *mana* when it is *vakanomodi* (encompassed in deep silence)' (Nabobo-Baba 2024, 94). Ilaitia Tuwere agrees: the silence of the *vanua* is the 'rest', 'Sabbath', and Shalom that the land invites us into (Tuwere 2002, 200–203).

All of this may seem obvious, even basic, to my colleagues and Toloa (students) at Pasifika Communities University— "Pasifika Eco-relationality 101"—but for this recent arrival, it has been a lot to take in. But this has also sent me back to reread my sacred text. Although a very different context, the eco-relationality of the land is nothing new to the biblical narrative. Walter Brueggemann's seminal work, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith,* is in fact all about this. To summarise, the land, *eretz*, YHWH's gift to his covenant people, is also a layered landscape where the *shekinah*

presence and human experience intersect. The land is not merely a physical space but a sacramental one, the original 'means of grace' that mediates the divine Presence and that shapes a people's identity through covenant, their movement or displacement closely correlated to the breaking or making of that covenant. But it also means the people. From the opening chapters of Genesis, the *adamah* teems with life and brims with hope for the descendants of the *adam*. In Hebrew there is a clear 'ground' of being semantic connection between the 'earth' and 'the earthling', the 'humus' and the 'human'. The *eretz* is also replete with what my Celtic heritage calls 'thin spaces'—places both feared and revered for the immediacy of their power—where profoundly spiritual things take place that must be carefully and ritually negotiated.

Importantly, and to the point of this article, the *eretz* speaks. Throughout the Psalms and Prophets, creation's fields exult, trees clap, hills sing, and in Pasifika, 'our sea of islands', it roars! Creation is animate, like the *adam*, physical yet imbued with Spirit—the *ruach* of God. Despite what certain theological systems try to tell us, the same *ruach* that breathed into the *adam* in Genesis 2 *still* breathes through all of creation in Psalm 104. And as the Psalmist states: 'The Earth is the Lord's' (Ps 24:1), not only the 'fullness thereof' but it is also the Lord's 'place', his very dwelling, the cosmic temple and pattern for the tabernacle; and who, indeed, can ascend *that* holy mountain? Far from being the absentee landlord of Enlightenment deism, YHWH is the Sovereign One of all creation who delights in his 'upper chambers', and who rides on the winds and the water cycles (Ps 104:1–4) alongside his cosmic *betes* (priests) and *batis* (warriors)—the 'messenger winds' and ministers of 'flaming fire'. The *eretz*, in reply, responds to both YHWH and humanity, sometimes rejoicing and pouring out blessings, and at other times grieving and lamenting. In extreme cases, the *eretz* is so repulsed by human depravity that it 'vomits out' its inhabitants—a dire warning we would do well to heed in the twenty-first century. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the land undoubtedly is inhabited by divine Presence possessing both voice and agency. Post 70 CE, however, this Hebrew vision of the land abruptly shifts into a universalising one, a narrative extracted and almost entirely abstracted from its original 'sense of place'. And dis(em)placed theologies very quickly give way to disembodied ones. The heuristic I have set for myself here is to see if the original Hebrew *vosa mana* of the *vanua* can still be heard, even if by echo, in the New Testament as well.

An 'Indigenous' Gospel

It may not be possible to try to find an original 'indigenous' gospel, as extant texts are all in Greek, already a cultural degree of separation from the origins, but I am going to try to do so anyway. Contrary to all modern scholarly consensus, because I accept both the orality

of the text and the traditions of my 'elders and knowledge holders'—the Early Church Fathers—it is my view that Matthew's Gospel, *in some form*, was written first. As Irenaeus of Smyrna, the disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was the disciple of the Apostle John, explains in *Adversus Haereses* 3:1:1:

> Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke, the companion of Paul, recorded the Gospel preached by him. Finally, John, the disciple of the Lord, who leaned upon His breast, published a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia. (Schaff 2001a, 415)

Two centuries later, Eusebius of Caesarea (c 260–340 CE) in *Ecclesiastical History* 3:8:1–5, affirms this early Irenaean tradition along with an even earlier one from Papias (now lost), which describes Matthew's Gospel as originally a Hebrew λόγια or 'sayings' gospel. So, while Mark's *Greek* manuscript may well be the earliest extant to us, it appears clear that there is no single textual source (i.e., the elusive *Q* or *ur-Markus*), but rather, multiple early, geographically distinct, co-existing families of oral traditions, much like the safeguarded traditions of the *yavusas* ('clans') of a *vanua*. This orality can still be seen behind the suture lines of the text. So, for the sake of this article, as far as the elders and knowledge holders of the earliest—and importantly, Eastern—Christian communities are concerned, Matthew's Gospel *in Hebrew or Aramaic* came first. I choose to believe the elders over the scholars.

Most will readily agree that, in content, Matthew is the most 'Jewish' of the four Gospels (with John as a close second), frequently referencing the Hebrew Scriptures, usually by allusion and without editorial explanation, assuming a shared communal understanding among its readers of the text, language, and land. If Matthew is indeed the most 'indigenous' of the four (and Irenaeus is clear that there are only four), my theory is that it may still contain the *vosa mana* of the *vanua*, even if it has become 'the Bible' while away in Peritania. My aim here is to reread Matthew in the *vanua* not as a series of episodic vignettes to be put under an exegetical microscope, but like the panoramic vista up in the Naitasiri highlands, as an expansive narrative of the land and its people. In doing so, I hope to put the text 'back in its place', so to speak, to once again hear the *vosa mana* of the *vanua* before it went 'out into all the earth' and became the Bible.

Tuva Kawa

According to Talatala Marika Bale (Baleidelabaci, interview, 15 October 2024), in the

vanua, it is a vital communal activity to recount genealogical ties, *tuva kawa,* to the *vanua*. This can be a narration of a smaller family lineage (*vuvale*), a group of families (*tokatoka*), or a larger clan's lineage (*yavusa*). Genealogies in the *vanua* serve not as a list of names but as foundational narratives establishing intergenerational connections back to revered ancestors, including totemic human or animal ones, and to specific regions of the *vanua*. Closer relatives can recount these genealogies in *mata ni katuba* meetings between familial villages, or distant ones may engage in *cara sala* ('clearing the path') to try to discover common ancestry through root narratives. Genealogies are more than mere name recitation; each name acts like a zip file, linking to much larger story cycles that have shaped the *veiwekani* (kinship group) across centuries. And just so, the opening verse of Matthew, in Fijian: *'Nai vola ni kawa i Jisu Karisto na Luve i Tevita, na luve I Eparama*'. The *tuva kawa* in Matthew 1 also establishes geographical continuity, connecting Jesus back to the *vanua* through Tevita and Eparama—David to Jerusalem (2 Sam 7) and the purchase of a certain 'threshing floor' (2 Sam 24) that would become the Temple Mount (2 Chron 3); Abraham to Shechem (Gen 12), Hebron (Gen 17), Mount Moriah (Gen 22), traditionally, also the Temple Mount. This connection underscores the legitimacy of his claims and ties to the land through an unbroken lineage back to foundational ancestors.

The structure of the opening *tuva kawa* also suggests origins in oral performance. One can easily imagine it being re-enacted in Fiji, around the *tanoa*, with the narrator perhaps a *matanivanua* ('face of the land', a communal representative) reverently holding the *yaqona* root reciting the *vanua* story. It is a stylised genealogy, to be sure, organised around a simple mnemonic device: 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to Exile, and 14 from Exile to Jesus. It is also an idealised lineage, with gaps between generations, such as between Josiah and Jeconiah and between Shealtiel and Zerubbabel. Scholars mired in the 'hermeneutic of suspicion', still labouring under the false equivalency of 'inspiration' and 'inerrancy', have built whole careers on the idea that anomalies like these prove error, textual corruption. As in indigenous communities the world over, they simply reflect an original orality, a multivocality before it was text, and the fact that it was first orally performed within the early Jesus communities.

Despite its convention, the genealogy is also surprisingly subversive in its inclusion of four women, scandalising patriarchal norms (Tamar in verse 3, Rahab, and Ruth in verse 5, and Bathsheba, referred to as the 'wife of Uriah' in verse 6). Notably, three of these women were *goyim* ('gentile') and known to be 'immoral' or in some way sexually compromised. This inclusion both looks backward and forward, telegraphing anticipated themes that resonate throughout the subsequent stories of Jesus' ministry, including the scandal of his own birth. This is a radical inclusion of the least likely, and the 'least of these': women, Gentiles, 'tax collectors and sinners'. The text, in turn, raises a number of

questions that can be posed back to the *vanua*: How does *vosa mana* function within the gendered structures of the *vanua*? In what ways do matriarchal expressions of authority parallel the genealogical subversions in Matthew's Gospel? Similarly, if Matthew's Gospel challenges Jewish exclusivism by incorporating *goyim* into the redemptive story, how might this speak today to the *vanua's* historical encounters with *vulagi* (foreigners)? The relatively recent arrival of 'blackbirded' or Girmitiya communities in Fiji, for example, marked a major reconfiguration of the *vanua*'s relational space, raising tensions between kinship-based identity and the integration of outsiders. Does the *vanua* allow for ongoing negotiations about who is included within its sacred relational networks? Can *vosa mana* extend to *vulagi*; if so, under what conditions?

'Nai talanoa ni nodra tawa vanua na neimami qase': Recounting the Ancestral Story

With *tuva kawa* established, the Matthean storyteller begins to recount the ancestral story of the *vanu*a. I first read about the Lutunasobasoba story, the 'Kaunitoni migration', in Tuwere's book (Tuwere 2002, 21–22). When I inquired about it up in Rewasau, the *Turaga ni Mataqali's* son gave a terse reply: 'That is not our story' (talanoa, Mataqali, Rewasau, 2023). Without presuming to provide further details, as these are not my stories either, I mention this simply to highlight what Tuwere refers to as *ai vola tamata* ('book-in-people'), which recounts the earliest origins of the *veiwekani* through formative stories and narratives. When a child asks an elder about the ancestors and their journeys, they are not asking for just any stories; they are asking for *our* stories, *i talanoa ni nodra tawa vanua*. For these are not just any elders, but *our* elders, *neimami qase*. The purpose of this kind of storytelling (*talanoa makawa*) is to galvanise clan identity, renew communal memory, and strengthen social cohesion. This storytelling structure is usually etiological, incorporating cosmogony, progenitor myths, and navigational myths. The word 'myth' here, is not used in the typically pejorative Modernist sense implying 'falsehood', but rather as a powerful collective, dream-language way of conveying communal truths. Like *tuva kawa*, these stories also strengthen land claims through *veiweikani* cohesion anchoring the *yavusa* in a specific location. In Fiji, ancestors remain tied to the land, including ancestral totems such as flora and fauna, all of which are encoded in the origin stories (for a good example see Ravuvu 1987, 263–68).

Matthew's gospel, similarly, is an intricate root system of intertext, some of which are 'taproots', linking Jesus back to the Exodus, Moses, Israel, and the Promised Land. Although still often overlooked, a number of scholars have identified these (see for example Keener 1999, 154–56, citing also Goulder, Kensky, and Wright), narrating Jesus in the footsteps of both Israel and Moses, 'true Israel', the second of Deutero-Isaiah's 'servants',

and the 'New Moses' as the long-promised 'Prophet' raised up 'from among their fellow Israelites' in Deuteronomy 18:18. Matthew's Jesus story is a new story interwoven with an old one. Daniel Boyarin has persuasively argued that John's Prologue is, similarly, a Midrash-like interweaving of Torah in the 'warp' of *davar* ('Word'), Aramaic *memra* (also 'word') theology, and the 'weft' of personified Wisdom (*chokhmah/Sophia*) traditions of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon (see his chapter 'The Intertextual Birth of the Logos' in Boyarin 2004, 89–111). I very much agree with this reading as this is a time-tested Hebrew storytelling tradition, and would add that similarly, Matthew's narrative portions (n.b. not the 'discourse' *logoi* sections) carefully interweave Jesus' story with Israel's—from the Exodus to the Promised Land—redefining the people's destiny now through him.

Just as Fijian *veiwekani* is reaffirmed through storytelling, Matthew also crafts a narrative where Jesus walks in the footsteps of Moses and Israel—retracing the Exodus, passing through the waters, facing wilderness trials, and delivering a new Torah from the mountain. This is not just any story, but *nai talanoa ni nodra tawa vanua, our* founding story retold about *our* elders, *neimami qase* for a new generation. There is a miraculous birth, but more importantly, a miraculously saved child escaping a tyrant's decree—the Pharaonic/Herodian slaughter of the innocents (Ex 1:22; Matt 2:16). Joseph the dreamer takes up the flight to Egypt and then returns, for 'Out of Egypt I have called my Son' (Hos 11:1; Matt 2:15). This tightly woven narrative moves next to the Baptism story. Many have puzzled over the theological meaning of the Baptism, for if Jesus is the Sinless One, as all Christians believe—and must believe for Christian soteriology to make any sense—what sins did he need to wash away in this *mikvot*, and how does this 'fulfil all righteousness'? Matthew's answer is implicit, not explicit: Because Jesus is retracing Israel's Exodus, he, too, must pass through the waters (Ex 14:21–22; Matt 3:13–17) into a new, or rather, *the* New covenantal vocation. The action then leads directly into the wilderness. But where Israel wandered in disobedience and unbelief for 40 years, Jesus, as not only YHWH Incarnate but Israel Incarnate, resists temptation with perfect obedience for 40 days, 'quoting Deuteronomy to the devil' (Num 14:33–34; Matt 4:1–2). This is immediately followed by the new Moses ascending the mountain—not to receive the Torah, but to proclaim the new one (Ex 19:20–21; Matt 5:1–2).

We know this to be the New Torah not only because of Jesus' 'You have heard it said... but I say unto you' formula but also because Matthew's narrative is then structured into exactly five discourses—no more, no less—mirroring the *Ḥamishah Ḥumshei Torah* ('five fifths of Torah'). Each discourse is thematically structured and landmarked by the formulaic 'When Jesus had finished saying these things...', signalling a new phase in his ministry and teaching. Perhaps here is a clue to the original source material of Papias' Hebrew *logia* ('sayings') gospel? The five discourses of the New Torah are: the Sermon

on the Mount (Matt 5–7, ending at 7:28), the Missionary Discourse (Matt 10, ending at 11:1), the Parabolic Discourse (Matt 13, ending at 13:53), the Community Discourse (Matt 18, ending at 19:1), and the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24–25, ending at 26:1), the woes of the last of these corresponding nicely to Deuteronomy's blessings and curses. This is masterful storytelling with didactic sections carefully structured, embedded, and 'tap-rooted' into the ancient yet renewed national narrative. As it unfolds, Matthew's *talanoa makawa* both reroots *and* reroutes.

Tawa and *Tabu ni Vanua*

The entire *vanua* is sacred, but certain locations are *tawa*. In the *vanua, tawa* are spiritually significant places both feared and revered for the immediacy of their power. Bale emphasises this, stating:

> These places are filled with the presence of our forebears (passed on but still present). When we pass or cross our old *yavu*, we greet them by saying '*dou sa yadra vinaka na qase keitou se takoso mada*' (good morning, please allow us to pass). When we pass their houses (graves), we say '*tilou*', and if we intend to collect coconuts from their graveyards we normally ask for their permission first. (Marika Bale, interview, 15 October 2024)

These are places negotiated through ritual processes (Nabobo-Baba 2006, 38–39, 45–47), acknowledging the *mana vanua* as part of a broader relationality within the cosmos. Leadership, in part, is the conduit for this, the *tui turaga* endowed with chiefly *mana* through which *Kalougata* ('the blessing of God') flows to the people, promoting communal prosperity (for more on *tawa* see Nabobo-Baba 2006, 45–47). Specific locations are the keys that possess powers that link a people, a *yavusa* to particular geographies (on mana, Tuwere 2006, 52–53).

Matthew's Gospel similarly reflects *tabu ni vanua* throughout its narrative—rivers, seas, wilderness all being important loci of divine revelation. In the Gospel, *topos* denotes both physical and metaphorical spaces where significant revelatory and eschatological events unfold. These include references to the land (14:13, 14:15), the Temple as reflective of the original creational topography (24:15)—even Peter's sword has its 'place' and, more to the point, must be put back in its place (26:52). Notably, also the Resurrection is not merely an event but a *topos*—another reconfiguration of sacred geography (28:6). It is fitting that I first began this rereading of Matthew up in the highlands of Viti Levu, for one specific topographical feature above all provides both location and vocation for Jesus the *Tui* (king), *Bete* (priest), and *Parofita* (prophet). Mountains are central to Matthew's theological topography, a thematic seven mountain narrative to be precise (Donaldson

1985) that mirrors the creation week in Genesis 1, an unmistakable six-plus-one pattern.

The mountains that narrate Jesus' location and vocation are: the Mountain of Temptation (Matt 4:8), a testing ground for the True Israel to succeed where the nation failed; the Mountain of the Sermon (Matt 5:1—7:29), where the New Moses announces the New Torah; the Mountain of Prayer and Solitude (Matt 14:23), where the Son seeks relational renewal with the Father, Kalou; the Mountain of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1–8), where a figure greater than Moses and Elijah reveals his radiance; the Temple Mount (Matt 21:12–17; 24:1–2), where, as Malachi 3:1 prophesied, 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple'; and the Mount of Olives (Matt 24:3; 26:30), the site of prophetic rebuke aimed at an unfaithful nation and its leaders, heralding also an impending eschatological announcement. Matthew's mountains are narrators themselves, appearing like characters at pivotal moments and marking shifts in Jesus' mission. As *tawa* they are the rocks that cry out, and that split, sympathetically, when the temple veil is torn (Matt 27:51), once again revealing tabernacle to be intimately linked back to the Cosmic Temple of Creation. As Isaiah prophesied, 'the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth' (Isa 55:12) heralding the eschatological expectations of a renewed Zion, the central motif of a transformed and reconstituted people—all of which brings us to the seventh mountain.

Neitou Yavu

On a recent drive to Pacific Harbour with an elder, someone I call both a 'living library' and a 'living legend'—a living interpretive key to an oral map of the *vanua*—narrated the biography of the land, its topography, how land use has changed since his childhood, and the narratives behind the names on signs passed along the way. Two settlements he pointed out in particular were named after other locations in very different parts of the country. He explained that these names were connected to an original *vanua* in the islands or the highlands, and when part of the *yavusa* moved to this region, they brought their name with them. This was done with the requested permission of the *yavusa*; the *yavutu* ritually and narratively extended. They remained part of the *yavusa* and knew exactly where they would call *neitou yavu*, 'our foundation'. When I asked for more of the story, the 'living legend' wisely told me that I would need to talk to their elders and knowledge holders since those are their stories (Dan Lobendahn, interview, 20 August 2024).

In the *vanua*, as I read in Tuwere, the *yavutu* refers quite literally to the land base, the foundation. It is recognised and honoured by other *yavusas*; even when a *yavu* is empty, it 'remains the properties of the families concerned' (Tuwere 2002, 33). Sometimes, as Tuwere describes, clans 'were forcefully removed from their yavu' due to 'modernity and the rule of law', but 'Wherever they were resettled they were always known and called

by their *i cavuti*' (Tuwere 2002, 95 and 49). In a fascinating theological application of this concept, Tuwere describes how the Word Incarnate as the feminine 'Wisdom' also had to come from another place to establish *yavu*, a 'place where she enters to take root' (Tuwere 2002, 114). Once rooted and recognised by the *vanua* and other *yavusas*, the *yavu* is never lost. According to Ravuvu, these are:

> the ancestral house platforms ... where the ancestral gods (Kalou vu) are still believed to dwell. Being close at hand and accessible to their worshippers, their cooperation and assistance are sought, and they are placated so the wishes of the people may be fulfilled. (Ravuvu 1987, 254)

As is true of diaspora communities around the world, people of a particular *yavutu* will often name their new settlement, even many thousands of miles away, according to their root *yavu* and *i cavuti*. Like the brothers of Rewasau in the opening story, they still belong to an original *yavu, neitou yavu*. This connection is made even more intimate through the burying of the *vicovico* (the umbilical cord), both a literal and symbolic connection of the child, even as they become adult children, to both land and heritage. New diasporic settlements are not the problem; the problem is when the link back to the particularity of the original land base is severed—stories forgotten and the land devoid of its people. This is the deepest loss of all, as Tuwere puts it, 'like a body without a soul' (Tuwere 2002, 35).

Say to *This* Mountain

In Matt 21:18–23, Jesus curses a fig tree, 'and the fig tree withered at once'. He follows this with the startling statement that if the disciples have enough faith 'and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," it will happen' (Matt 21:21–22). The question is, which mountain? Because the tradition has been so far removed from its *yavu*, most who read this passage today can no longer hear the *vosa mana* of the *vanua*. We often hear preached in generalities how the power of faith can 'move mountains', but when we put the passage 'back in its place', in its *yavu* in the *vanua*, Jesus is presenting a challenge that cuts to the very core of Hebrew identity. Its meaning shifts from generic metaphor to the very specific location of the next verse: 'And when he entered the temple ...'. The *yavu* and its *i cavuti* in the land was about to be 'thrown into the sea'.

Almost certainly, he is invoking Psalm 46, the famous, 'Be still and know that I am God' Psalm: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of

the sea' (Ps 46:1–2, NRSV). And he is also referencing numerous prophetic texts referring to the Gentiles, the nations, as 'the Sea', as for example in Isa 17:12–13, Dan 7:2–3, Ps 65:7, Ezek 26:3, Jer 6:23, and Isa 60:5. At the same time, he is pronouncing the severest of judgement on the Temple and its administrators *and* pointing to the seventh and final mountain of his narrative. Since this passage appears in the fifth and final discourse—the 'Deuteronomy' section of the New Torah—the Matthean storyteller is calling the land to bear witness, as the mountains of 'blessings and curses', Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. In the *talanoa makawa* of Deut 11:29, Moses instructs the people that when they enter the Land, they are to 'proclaim the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal', a command repeated in Deut 27:11–14 and fulfilled in Josh 8:30–35. In Matthew's narrative the Mount of Olives sits directly opposite the Temple Mount, the Kidron Valley bears solemn witness between them. And 'On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley... And you shall flee by the valley of the Lord's mountain' (Zech 14:3–5, NRSV). And flee the early Christians did, to Pella, just before the Temple's final destruction in 70 CE (France 2007, 711). A *vanua* reading of the text transforms the simplistic preacher language about 'faith moving mountains' into a complex 'pedagogy of place'. As the master of all storytellers, Jesus is both performing as well as speaking this teaching. That is the powerful *vosa mana* of the *vanua*!

Here, then, is the seventh and final mountain, the casting of the mountain of blessing, the Kingdom of God, into the sea—the Gentile nations—repeated didactically in Matt 28:16–20: 'Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them'. In keeping with the Exodus-to-Promised Land theme, it is noteworthy that Jesus, also called Yehoshua, promises his followers, 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age', the self-same promises made by Jehoshua to another Jehoshua in Josh 1:5. The conclusion of the story arc, then, is not about the new Exodus but about entering the new Promised Land, leaving an original *yavu* and becoming scattered into diaspora, the 'casting' of the prophetic mountain into the sea. Dan 2, like Ps 46, also refers to kingdoms falling and mountains being cast into the sea, a declaration of judgment on Empire that moves the *yavutu* base for the Rock 'not cut by human hands'. 'The stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth' (Dan 2:34–35), to which Daniel adds, 'And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people' (Dan 2:44–45). The Kingdom of God is 'the mountain of the Lord's house [that] shall be established as the highest of the mountains' (Isa 2:2–3, NRSV). Even still, the original *i cavuti* and *yavutu* remains.

Conclusion

The *vanua* has been speaking all along, with a *vosa mana* that requires ears reattuned to hear the rocks crying out, as indeed the Moana, the 'voice of many waters' (Ezek 43:2); a paper for another time. And as Nabobo-Baba's 18-point taxonomy (!) of *nomo* epistemology has reminded us (Nabobo-Baba 2006, 95–96), sometimes that voice can only be heard in the silence, the 'silence God speaks', the 'silence the neighbour speaks', and the 'silence the Land speaks' (Tuwere 2002, 177–206). All of these are the *vosa mana* of the *vanua*. And as with the final redaction of the Greek Gospel of Matthew, at some point, the *vosa mana* of the *vanua* crossed oceans, or rather was 'cast into the sea' and became the Bible. It has taken a return to the *vanua*, back to the *koro,* to the *yavutu*, to begin to hear it again, the orality behind the text. And the *Tui, Bete*, and *Parofita* revealed on the mountains still calls us today, out of our disembodied and dis(em)placed theologies and into life-giving eco-relational ones, brimming with the hope of the restoration of all things: 'Let anyone with ears listen!' (Matt 11:15, NRSV).

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