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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RECLAIMING INCLUSIVE INDIGENOUS VOICE THROUGH STORYTELLING

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Abstract
Storytelling is an important technique for communicating and connecting people to a sense of belongingness. For indigenous people, storytelling is the fabric of life, the heartbeat of the culture, the web that connects people's stories and life. The colonial system in most of its aspects has countered and dismissed most of our stories in several ways; the ownership of the story is taken over and replaced with their perspective of stories. On the other hand, oral stories are considered unsystematic, giving less credibility and rather mortifying the creative minds of the people with the so-called systematic framework/consciousness of the West. The article will discuss how storytelling can reconnect to our cultural notions and validate our indigenous knowledge. How instrumental is storytelling in giving voice to the people, and how might we read stories as instructional, informing our decolonising practices? How can we reclaim our ability to talk and share our stories? To weave toward the practicality and originality of indigenous stories, begin by sharing colonial experiences and then move on to epistemic self-determination where the approach is inclusive and mutual, thereby fulfilling the motive of the 'whole of life' approach.

Keywords
colonial experience, epistemic self-determination, centring gender, 'whole of life', inclusive

Introduction

One of the cherished activities among the indigenous people is storytelling. The elders never tired of narrating stories to the youngsters who would eagerly listen. We miss those days when we sat near our grandparents, aunts, and uncles around the fireplace (coming from a much colder place, where the fireplace was the common sitting area during the evenings). During one of her presentations at the Pasifika Philosophy course, Frances[1] said, 'When I remember the story told by my grandmother, I still smell her/it.' Likewise, the indigenous people recollect those days, and those memories remain fresh always. Storytelling is an important technique to communicate with people. It is an important means of connecting people to a sense of belongingness. For the indigenous people, storytelling is the fabric of life, the heartbeat of the culture, the web that connects people's stories and lives. Stories are used as a pedagogical tool to teach about life, ethical lessons, social and cultural values. Through storytelling, we become cultural producers, in the sense that we engage in practices which not only reproduce the cultural repertoires we are provided with and need as we move through social life but are to some extent able to modify and shape them as they are passed down the unbroken chain of generations which constitutes human life (Featherstone 1997, 3).

This paper aims to search how storytelling can be used to decolonise/dismantle the stronghold of the systematic framework or narratives of the West. Thus, the indigenous people's experience of colonisation will take the lead in the discussion. This will be helpful in determining how instrumental storytelling is in giving voice to people, how we might read stories as instructional, informing our decolonising practices as a way of affirming epistemic self-determination, and how we can reclaim our ability to talk and share our stories as a way of weaving toward the practicality and originality of indigenous Christian theology. Storytelling and stories should be picked as one of the theological resources and engage in reading Christian literature/resources and our stories integrally.

Experience of Colonisation

While drawing on the experience of colonisation, there is a shared experience among the indigenous people worldwide which is still felt acutely in life, especially in how research is done. It is important to note how vocabulary plays an important role in who is the colonial and the colonised. Salma Lawrence began to use Majority World drawn from Shahidul Alam (Alam 2008), who has advocated for the use of 'majority world' since the 1990s in place of 'developing' and minority world in place of 'developed'. She deliberately used capitalised words to emphasise the magnitude. The use of 'Majority World' brings

1 Frances Koya-Vaka'uta is the Team Leader Culture for Development at Pacific Community and formerly Associate Professor at the University of the South Pacific.

into relief the inequities and injustices of a global demographic majority continuing to be subjugated in various ways by a global demographic minority. This understanding gives shape to the various demands for decolonisation that are sweeping the planet (2024, 1–2). On a similar note, it is to be seen that histories, traditions, stories, and concepts are translated into a colonised idea of how it should be. The colonised mind resides within the self, where the constant comparison and measure of self-worth to the coloniser will only ever return feelings of inferiority and self-loathing (Lee 2022, 138). What a fascinating thing life is! I have survived the many, many stories of how I think, what I know, and who I am—all told by those who are well meaning, well dressed, and well ignorant of the deeper sides of my cultural epistemology. It is a telling that has captured more than my imagination—it has, instead, held me hostage to ideas and philosophies I have had no hand in forming, and thus I have felt no real stake in its potential to inspire (Meyer 2001,124). In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o shows that colonial power is derived from the domination of the 'mental universe of the colonized, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relation to the world' (1986, 16). Recognising the colonised mind therefore requires an act of self-awareness. One way of waking to self-awareness is to write in the first person as an indigenous researcher which is characterised as decolonisation work. This also leads to finding ways of advocating and connecting to the place (Lee 2022, 139).

For indigenous peoples, the critique of history is not unfamiliar, although it has now been claimed by postmodern theories. The idea of contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities, is closely linked to the politics of everyday contemporary indigenous life. It is very much part of the fabric of communities that value oral ways of knowing. These contested accounts are stored with genealogies, within the landscape, within weavings and carvings, and even within the personal names that many people carried. The means by which these histories were stored was through their system of knowledge. Many of these systems have since been reclassified as oral traditions rather than histories (Smith 2012, 34). Under colonialism, the indigenous people's ways of thinking and research are still controlled by the Western framework and methodology. Under this framework, the oral nature of the narratives is considered to have less credibility than those contained in the text while privileging their own texts and narratives.

On the heels of colonialism was Christianity or vice versa, that positioned us as savages who needed salvation from the dark world to become children of God. Indigenous people had to learn new names for their own lands, and gradually detachment of the people from the land occurred. There is a close relatedness through naming because naming not only indicates, it also creates. It creates identity and meaning. It establishes belongingness.

The histories that are lodged in each piece of land are remembered histories. They are places where important words have been spoken and heard (Tuwere 2002, 91–92). Naming in the iTaukei culture and traditional knowledge system is constructed around meanings embedded in context. Naming is also intricately knitted in and with nature and it reveals the people's life in proximity to nature and uses nature as their guide for when to weed, prepare the soil, plant, and harvest crops. Hence the twelve months of the calendar year are derived according to these activities (Waiwalu 2024, 306).

Indicating the Pasifika people's integral relatedness with natural surroundings, especially in communication, Theresa Fox states that, in visualising, one might imagine an image depicting humans and nature in symbiotic harmony. The image could include vibrant coral reefs, lush forests, and clear skies, symbolising the communication between people and their environment (2024, 276–77). While affirming the sacred and inseparable relationship that the Fijians have with vanua, Ilaiti Tuwere wrote, what is conceptualised in the vanua is life that acquires its meaning when lived in community with others—not only with other human beings but also with ancestors, with seasons and festivals, plants and animals, land and sea and everything on it (2002, 69). While acknowledging that relationships mattered in profound ways, Meyer affirmed that relationships or interdependence offered Hawaiians the opportunity to practice reciprocity, exhibit balance, develop harmony with the land, and generosity with others (2001, 134). In the same vein, Kovach2021 asserts that personal stories reflect knowledge gained from individual experience while simultaneously signifying relationships. In the oral tradition, personal stories can never be decontextualised from the teller. Knowing the storyteller as an active agent with a relational world, situated in a particular time and context, is pivotal in gaining insight into the story being told. Because oral stories are born of connections within the world and are recounted relationally, stories braid the past, present, and future generations together. Story stirs memory and, in its telling, we know our home (Kovach 2021, 158).

Epistemic Self-Determination

Epistemic self-determination means listening to the right ideas from a broad range of sources, making sure that folks can speak for themselves and then thinking about processes for knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing and then thinking about how to make those processes accessible to everybody. Anibal Quijano, (2007) while critiquing the European paradigm of rationality/modernity, says that it is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality, and definitely from all power that is not constituted by free decisions made by the people. The alternative,

then, is epistemological decolonisation, as decoloniality is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, and as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality (2007, 177). This coloniality of knowing fuels contemporary demands for decolonisation in the international development sector. At the heart of these demands is the desire for epistemic self-determination—the freedom for individuals and collectives to know, conceptualise and re/present themselves and their worlds free of subjugation (Lawrence 2024, 3). Decolonisation would mean having the right to practice on one's own land, one's own ways of being and knowing and ethics.

By way of shovelling to unearth what was buried, there is a strong urge to affirm that 'We don't need permission to tell a different story, to tell it in the way we see it. It's our story and we will be unapologetic about it' (Casimira 2024, 14). It is fitting to recognise Pasifika as the rightful stewards of the vanua including moana, skies, peoples, and respect the sovereignty of the communities as the rightful custodians of knowledge and narrators of Pasifika stories of yesterday, today and into the future (PTC n.d., 1, 2). While doing so, there is also a consciousness of inclusivity (the following point will discuss that aspect) to make sure that no one is left out from the framework as the Pasifika people, partners and friends are urged to create space for Pasifika faith and traditional leaders, including women and youth, at the national and regional levels, to inform decision making (2024).

Kabini Sanga, while highlighting naming as vitally necessary in Pacific Relational Hermeneutics, which is done through language, affirms that naming opens new possibilities, thereby allowing people to create new agencies and find the voice, especially given the historical marginalisation, systemic neglect, and demeaning of Pacific people's senses of dignity. She reiterates that in the future Pacific People development might rename ourselves (as leaders, learners, artists, intellectuals, mentors, etc.), and rename our communities (children, women, and weaker members) who have suffered abuse and false naming. In our stories, we might rename even our tragic pasts, allowing for more transformative stories to be created (2017, 110). Besides, storytelling is what pushes a narrative. Indigenous storytelling has several distinctive qualities: a) it is linked to a particular tribal epistemology or knowledge and situated within an indigenous paradigm; b) it is relational; c) it is purposeful (most often involving a decolonising aim); d) it involves particular protocol as determined by the epistemology and/or place; e) it involves an informality and flexibility; f) it is collaborative and dialogic; and g) it is reflexive (2021, 128).

Centring Inclusivity

During the launch of the Restorying Pasifika Gender Project at Pacific Theological College, Upolu Lumā Vaai flagged some important questions to consider: Why is it that we spend millions of dollars on gender issues, but the statistics continue to rise in domestic violence, gender-based violence, and abuse of women, children, and men? Why is gender always a sensitive issue in Pasifika? Why do we experience a strong pushback from Pasifika communities when it comes to gender? Have we ever asked the question of whether gender is a thing created in Pasifika or something borrowed? Whose gender narrative are we promoting? Whose interest are we serving? Whose philosophy underpins the mainstream narrative? If it is a Pasifika thing, have we ever considered the agency and role of Pasifika philosophies, ethics, and spiritualities in gender policies? Asserting the complexity and multidimensionality of Pacific culture, it is not easy to navigate, let alone understand, the core issues underlying gender (2024). For the Pasifika gender storying, taking the metaphor of the ula, the kakala (Samoan and Tongan words for necklaces made of natural materials like leaves, flowers, fruit, shells, and most notably, whale teeth) it is through relationality that the story can be made complete. Our human relationship is compared to a garland which is made up of a variety of flowers with different scents that wither or wear out as time goes by; this needs timely rejuvenation with fresh flowers and always garland with a smile, which completes the purpose of a garland/kakala/ula.

Simultaneously, to restory/reweave means there is something unfavourable, inappropriate, or irrelevant or that has worn out in the present about what we have inherited from the past, be it from the colonials/Christianity or our culture and tradition. Therefore, the need to restory/reweave arises so that what is torn can be mended or replaced with a new one. An important aspect of restorying would be to consider how women's and youth's voices can become a force to reckon with and how these voices can claim their space and right to tell their authentic stories without being silenced. One aspect is noteworthy here: women are the ones who weave the mat, and therefore if we have to talk about reweaving, the stories and experiences of women, the gravity of climate change effects in their life and family so on and so forth should take the lead in the reweaving/restorying projects. Storytelling is the ultimate source of truth and the power to transform structural systems that curb mutuality/inclusivity and become liberating for the community. This may take time but there should be a beginning, and it should begin with storytelling, and sharing experiences.

Among the Pasifika people, there is a beautiful practice of oral transmission, storytelling which is called talanoa. Talanoa can be held at any location, but time will be taken to choose and prepare the area that is to be used. For talanoa to function in a positive and productive manner, all those involved must respect and understand the space and the

people that surround them. Talanoa is a general philosophy that promotes open discussion and respect among people (Robinson and Robinson 2005, 16). Halamalu Ma'asi[2] shares a life-soothing practice in Tonga about Faka Lekesi (mother's arm), where the children rest their heads on their mother's arms while she tells them stories that convey cultural values and norms of behaviour. This is also a way of putting the children to sleep as she chants lullabies. The same arm is used to feed and discipline the children. The mother's arm is compared to a kaliloa (a wooden headrest) used by several people.

The collective diverse voices could become the power to engage and dialogue while influencing narratives centring on gender equality/mutuality. The motive of storytelling should be based not only on hopelessness, brokenness, and dependency but should evolve from this into joy, dignity, independence and rightsholders of their stories. Linda Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2022, 34), shows that the people and groups who 'made' history were the people who developed the underpinnings of the state—the economists, scientists, bureaucrats and philosophers. That they were all men of a certain class and race was 'natural' because they were regarded (naturally) as fully rational, self-actualising human beings capable, therefore of creating social change, that is history. The day-to-day lives of the 'ordinary' people and women did not become a concern of history until much more recently. And yet, she continues, the need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance (36). Ironically, feminism which began as a critique of the dominance of men or patriarchy, feminism itself was faced with challenges by the differences within. There is still the practice of epistemic injustice by contributing to normalising and maintaining the idea that the knowledge that white feminists produce is objective and that there are those of us who do not and cannot produce knowledge (Lawrence 2024, 17). Miranda Fricker, who developed the concept of epistemic injustice as a means to understand knowledge argues that there are two elements of epistemic injustice: firstly, testimonial injustice and, secondly, hermeneutic injustice. She defines the first as occurring when a listener 'gives a deflated level of credibility to the speaker's word'. Hermeneutic injustice, on the other hand, occurs outside a specific context and consists of 'a gap in collective interpretive resources that puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience' (Fricker 2007, 1).

Decolonising in feminist storytelling is essential in reimagining how stories are told and radically changing approaches that continue to spotlight rightsholders as victims of their circumstances and not from the standpoint of their power in pushing for change (Akinyi 2023). The beauty of storytelling is that it allows the storytellers to use their own voices and tell their own stories on their own terms (Thomas 2015, 184). Therefore,

2 Halamalu Masi is a PhD research scholar in the discipline of Practical Ministry at Pasifika Communities University, Fiji.

the power/authority lies in the hands of the storyteller. It is foreseen that future stories might be contextually embedded, grounded in Pacific People's core principles, informed by pedagogical traditions and enhancing scholarship on Pasifika storytelling. Therefore, Kabini Sanga offers storying as a medium of intellectual engagement showing its worth as people-enabling, people-freeing, and just (112). In a women's workshop in Port Vila in Vanuatu, after numerous discussions on how their work and voices are hardly recognised or heard, the guest of honour during the closing of the workshop (as part of his speech) commented that sometimes what he and his wife share in their kitchen is what he shares during the kava session with other men in the community—meaning that his wife's thoughts are the ones he shares with other men as his wisdom to them.[3] Putting it in perspective, restorying of such ironic stories can be instrumental for an enhanced gender embracing; this according to me can be re-read from the perspective of partnership giving due recognition to their partner like this man. Also, it should not be women just talking in the kitchen/home and men deciding what they share, but letting women come out and share themselves. Hence, due acknowledgement is necessary here, which is why a woman's significant role as a mother/wife in the home should be dignified.

Gender Justice

The former Pacific Theological College established the Centre for Gender and Social Justice to redefine gender from the Pasifika 'whole of life' lens, which is holistic and is expected to yield positive outcomes. Gender justice issues are equally important and connected to the struggles for racial, immigration, climate justice, etc. Gender justice best signifies an intersectional approach centring on identifying diverse needs and sharing respective unique experiences and stories, especially those who are impacted mostly by gender-based discrimination, and oppression. Vaai (2024) iterates that gender justice should not be built on the notion that 'women can do it all alone' as it may perpetuate self-reliance and fail to realise gender mutuality. Justice should not just be seen as liberating the weak and vulnerable, but it is about the ability to negotiate the multidimensionality and interconnectivity of the system to serve the vulnerable (Vaai 2024). In doing so, addressing the grassroots movements and their agenda is important with the belief to impact and impress upon those that are going through grim reality in their lives. Such initiatives are expected to produce positive results that are more of equality, and balanced outcomes for all. There is a singular approach to human rights as the centrepiece for understanding gender, or any other issue, which not only promotes the violence of compartmentalisation but it is also lazy hope. Therefore, the approach should be from a Pasifika 'whole of

3 This story was shared during one of our talanoa by Leinamau Seru, a PhD research scholar in the discipline of Theology and Ethics at Pasifika Communitites University, Fiji.

life' perspective and multidimensional which is inclusive of indigenous philosophy and ethics. This will help redefine what gender justice is. The 'whole of life' approach underpins human dignity which is holistic and life-affirming. Also, healing and justice are key in addressing injustice experienced by patriarchy and colonialism which have been a bottleneck in building inclusive and safe spaces.

Conclusion

I began with the refreshing memories of storytelling that most of the indigenous peoples would dearly hold. Storytelling which is the fabric of life, the heartbeat, and the web that connects people's stories and life, has the strength to bring the unknown to belongingness. By doing so we begin to unravel how colonialism has suppressed our free hand to be creative in forming our stories. The reason is that our histories, our way of thinking, and research are still determined by the Western framework and their narratives.

In epistemic self-determination I have discussed how this can be a process of decolonising our suppressed way of thinking, deciding, and acting and affirming our right to tell our stories and be the narrators. There is awareness of inclusivity and in centring inclusivity, I argued, and by restroying or reweaving whether we are conscious that there is something unfavourable in the present system about what we have inherited from the past. Reweaving is needed when the mat is either torn or old (which needs to replace). In the restorying, one important aspect is to consider women's voices by allowing them to share their stories. The various ways of sharing stories are cited in the discussion above.

Finally, the paper summarises the consideration of working for gender justice, which should be treated as equally important as the struggle for climate justice, immigration, racial justice, etc. There is an intersectional approach to identifying diverse needs and sharing respective unique experiences and stories, which many times is taken as a threat or viewed with apprehension as if women are claiming their rights or place. On what ground then can gender justice be understood? One way of relooking is our singular commitment to the 'whole of life' approach. The complexity of gender issues is affirmed and therefore it needs perspectival responses which require also sources and stories from women's perspectives.

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