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CONTENT

Editorial

<i>Upolu Lumā Vaai</i>	vii
------------------------------	-----

Decolonising the Institutionalised Approach to Theological Education in a Pasifika Context: Learning from a ‘Whole of Life’ Participatory Approach

<i>Gwayaweng L. Kiki</i>	1
--------------------------------	---

Our Mother Tongues: Liberating Indigenous Languages in Contextual Theology

<i>Faafetai Aiava</i>	14
-----------------------------	----

Viurogorogoci: Re-imagining a ‘Whole of Life’ Historiography for Pasifika Histories: A Baravi Decolonial Approach

<i>Marika Bale</i>	27
--------------------------	----

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

<i>Supongmayang Longkumer</i>	42
-------------------------------------	----

Can Pasifika Theologians Convert Neoliberal Cannibals?

<i>Brian Dunn</i>	57
-------------------------	----

A Fa’atoetoemuliola Reading of Mark 12:41–44 with Reference to the Methodist Church of Samoa

<i>Apineru Lafai Tavita</i>	70
-----------------------------------	----

Why Global Solidarities are a Matter of Life and Death: The Difference Religion can Make

<i>Joerg Rieger</i>	85
---------------------------	----

Original Sin and Fossil Fuel Industry Spin

<i>Peter Walker</i>	97
---------------------------	----

BOOK REVIEWS AND OTHERS

Book Review: Lydia Johnson. *Lived Theology for the Whole of Life*

<i>Nike Franken</i>	106
---------------------------	-----

Book Review: Upolu Lumā Vaai and Aisake Casimira (eds.). *ReSTORYing the Pasifika Household*

<i>Eyingbeni Humtsoe-Nienu</i>	109
--------------------------------------	-----

Poem: “You are the People of Moana”

<i>Nikotemo Sopepa</i>	112
------------------------------	-----

Contributors.....	114
-------------------	-----

The Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies (CPT).....	116
--	-----

EDITORIAL

The Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies

<https://cpt.pcu.ac.fj/>

Volume 1 Issue 2 (2026)

Bula Vinaka and Talofa! Welcome to the second issue of the Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies (CPT). I write this editorial message as the Pacific Church Leaders meet in the Pasifika Communities University (PCU) to discuss the future of the Pasifika household, which is threatened by a convergence of multiple crises, both regional and global. One of the immediate concerns is whether there is enough articulation of these crises and issues from a Pasifika theological perspective to assist our churches in their responses, and how coordinated we are in disseminating these articulations. This journal provides a response to such expectations.

In Issue 2, we are continuing with great passion on our course to bring you research articles, book reviews, and other contributions to theological talanoa from and about Pasifika. One unique thing about this issue is the passion to continue the search for alternative theological paradigms to assist the church in addressing the current issues faced by both Christianity in the Pacific and the world today. The PCU, where CPT is based, aims to be more than just an institution for higher education. Our vision is to be the home of ‘whole of life’ theological articulations, a place for sharing wisdom and transformative learning that recognises our interconnectedness with all of creation in the household of God. At PCU we are ecumenical, communities-based, relationality-focused, and justice-oriented.

At times of polycrisis, when we are facing diverse but often interconnected threats from neoliberalism to the climate catastrophe, I am convinced that it is important for theologians in the Pasifika Household of God to come together with both a sense of urgency and the spirit of hope to articulate these issues. CPT aims to amplify prophetic voices, to offer space for reflection, and to foster a Pasifika community of readers and writers that defies the narrow categories that often mark academia. In this issue, we once again bring to you a wide range of topics, from textual interpretations to real-life crisis applications.

In “Decolonising the Institutionalised Approach to Theological Education in a Pasifika Context: Learning from a ‘Whole of Life’ Participatory Approach,” **Gwayaweng L. Kiki** focuses on relational ontology as the basis for theological learning that reflects indigenous realities and knowledge systems, such as Papuan Melanesian existentialism.

Faafetai Aiava draws our attention to the fundamental role that languages play in Pasifika identities. In “Our Mother Tongues: Liberating Indigenous Languages in Contextual Theology,” he argues for linguistic reclamation as an act of liberation and calls for education and contextual theology to take languages, translations, and differences in meaning seriously.

Retelling the stories of Pasifika history, including the history of Christianity, is one of the key tasks for Pasifika scholars. In “Veirogorogoci: Re-imagining a ‘Whole of Life’ Historiography for Pasifika Histories: A Baravi Decolonial Approach,” **Marika Bale** contributes to this vital discussion, presenting a critique of Eurocentric narratives and offering an alternative indigenous reading of Pasifika histories of Christianity.

Supongmayang Longkumer’s “Negotiating Spaces Hermeneutics: Integrating Mutual Philosophies of the Mats of the Ao-Naga and iTaukei” is a deep reflection on the meaning of mats in two

indigenous communities. It offers a research framework of interwoven spaces and negotiating spaces hermeneutics that is inspired by these traditional processes of mat making.

In “Can Pasifika Theologians Convert Neoliberal Cannibals?” **Brian Dunn** subverts the trope of the Pasifika “cannibal.” He argues that rather than being an Islander from the past, the real cannibals are the neoliberals of today, who need to learn from Pasifika communities and their life-affirming worldviews.

Communal sharing and donations to the church play a significant role in the life of Samoan congregations. **Apineru Lafai Tavita**, in “A Fa’atoetoemuliola Reading of Mark 12:41–44 with Reference to the Methodist Church of Samoa,” draws on the biblical story of the widow’s offering to call for a fundamental shift in how we understand giving: from an institutional to a relational perspective.

Joerg Rieger calls for renewed solidarity that connects us with people, planet, and the divine. In “Why Global Solidarities are a Matter of Life and Death: The Difference Religion can Make,” he contrasts the shallow solidarity of the Capitalocene with the ideal of the loving, justice-oriented solidarity that can be found in the Abrahamic religious traditions.

Peter Walker applies the theological language of sin in “Original Sin and Fossil Fuel Industry Spin” to contemporary discussions of the fossil fuel industry. His contribution shows how theologians can find a language for confronting contemporary challenges and speaking truth to power.

Two books are under review in this issue. *Lived Theology for the Whole of Life*, by Lydia Johnson is reviewed by **Nike Franken**, and *ReSTORYing the Pasifika Household*, edited by Upolu Luma Vaai and Aisake Casimira, by **Eyingbeni Humtsoe-Nienu**. The issue closes with a poem by **Nikotemo Sopepa**, “You are the People of Moana.”

I hope that you will find these contributions stimulating and inspiring to sit alongside your own theological constructions and aspirations. Together, I believe, we can bring the ‘whole of life’ vision into all of the discussions where technocratic or theory-restricted reasoning currently dominates, and where more life-affirming, loving approaches are needed.

Upolu Lumā Vaai

Editor

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DECOLONISING THE INSTITUTIONALISED APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A PASIFIKA CONTEXT: LEARNING FROM A 'WHOLE OF LIFE' PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

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Abstract

In promoting learning from a 'whole of life' participatory approach, this essay responds to the controlled classroom pedagogical approaches that have defined Western institutionalised theological education in Pasifika. Western theological education curriculum, theory, and practice have shaped its epistemological approach in various learning contexts, thereby downplaying and suppressing Pasifika indigenous ways of being, knowing, and learning. In contrast, learning from a 'whole of life' participatory approach involves our communities and emphasises Pasifika indigenous realities and knowledge systems as central to a decolonial approach to theological education. Focusing on relational ontology is at the core of this participatory approach. This study therefore takes an ontological turn in presenting a participatory approach to learning which allows for Pasifika relational ways of understanding in knowledge production. It surveys a possible empirical ontology of participatory learning embedded in indigenous realities and knowledge systems that provide for learning from a 'whole of life' approach. This promotes the 'whole of life' vision of Pacific Theological College, adopted from 2019 onwards, in alignment with the new Pasifika Communities University.

Keywords: decolonising, 'whole of life,' participatory learning, ontological turn, relational ontology

Introduction

This study sets forth a conceptual consideration of what could be regarded as 'whole of life' participatory learning as an approach to decolonising teaching-learning processes in a Pasifika context of theological education, namely the former Pacific Theological College (PTC), now Pasifika Communities University (PCU). Since PTC was established in 1965, institutionalised theological education has been based on the

Western “school” model. The prevailing model of theological education in Pasifika continues to grapple with this imposed mode of teaching-learning, fashioned by Western approaches to both ontology and epistemology, which excludes and marginalises traditional indigenous knowledge systems.

The epistemological assumptions that have informed instructional choices in Pasifika have been based strongly on the teacher’s aims rather than on how learning happens, or by the future successful life anticipated by students’ hoped-for transition to university. This puts the teaching-learning experience at risk, as it does not always allow for the development of participatory skills and critical thinking. Most of the learning activities adhere to controlled classroom pedagogical approaches relating to the teacher’s expertise in course content.

It follows that theological education in the region has continued to uphold the frameworks of colonialism as a consequence of “... an epistemic monoculture based in Western scientific materialism ... the imposition of Western forms of knowledge production ... [and] a Western secular cosmology [that] resists indigenous knowledges, pedagogies, and perspectives in institutional spaces” (Kerr 2014).¹ Therefore, this study takes an ontological turn embedded in the Pasifika logic of the ‘whole of life’ wherein everything exists in the relatedness upon which knowledge is constructed.

The Ontological Turn

This section “aligns with the recent ‘ontological turn’ in educational research, a movement that is re-opening ontological questions that challenge the Western philosophical foundations of teaching and learning” (Galea and Rousell 2022). The ontological turn has captivated its proponents’ attention to ontology since the early 2000s, in several philosophical and academic disciplines. In the present study, it is seen as a shift towards prioritising ontology, at times subordinate to epistemology, which has been the mainstay of knowledge production shaped by Western philosophies of education. Mainstream education philosophies often prioritise epistemology in what constitutes knowledge production, “informed by [a] prior ‘linguistic’ turn toward texts, discourse formations, social constructivism, and cultural representation, [in which] ... the focus is on the individual, the intentional ‘subject’ and host of overlapping dualisms” (Glass 2022, 1). This can marginalise indigenous perspectives on realities and knowledge systems informed by relationality, connecting the empirical and non-empirical realms, the natural and the supernatural existing in relatedness as the foundation of epistemology.

Considering the above, the proposed ontological turn is toward reconsidering the ontological basis of the Pasifika reality of the ‘whole of life’. The common approach to epistemology (knowledge) and ontology (being) is a philosophical presentation of a theory of knowledge concerning reality and existence as respective or distinct domains. “Epistemology deals with crucial questions of what constitutes valid knowledge and how one can obtain it, whereas ontology considers questions of what constitutes reality and how one can understand existence” (Weiler 2013, 1).

In contrast, this study takes an ontological turn embedded in a Pasifika worldview that is concerned with what people know about the world—that is, their logic of the ‘whole of life’ in which everything exists in relationship. This is a relational ontology encompassing epistemology. Grix asserts that “ontology logically

¹ Although he writes from a Canadian teacher education context, Jennie Kerr’s point of view on Western epistemic dominance and colonial structures is more than appropriate for our Pasifika context of theological education.

precedes epistemology and ... both are logically closely related” (Grix 2002, cited in Kant 2014, 74). The logic of the Pasifika ‘whole of life’ framework contends that epistemology is dependent on ontology.

In a similar vein, as Sarita-Louise Kant puts it, “Ontological claims about the social and political world logically precede epistemological claims concerning what can be known about that social and political world” (Kant 2014, 74). One could argue that assumptions about ontology inform assumptions about epistemology, and both inform choices in approaches to teaching-learning. The term relational ontology used in this section implies that Pasifika knowledge systems are a unity of ontology and epistemology and are not separated in the production of knowledge.

In relation to decolonising theological education at PTC (and now at PCU), the ‘whole of life’ participatory learning approach based on a Pasifika relational ontology, as a way of being, knowing, and learning amidst the counterposing educational theories and practices of Western education and the tensions between Western and Pasifika worldviews, cannot be considered neutral. It would be unwise to suggest that participatory learning could ever be neutral with regard to either ideology or tradition. Ideology or tradition places participatory learning in a socio-religious-cultural-historical context. This draws us to an important theory that comes from a Papuan Melanesian worldview, which supports a relational ontology of ‘whole of life’ participatory learning.

Papuan Melanesian Relational Ontology of ‘Whole of Life’ Participatory Learning: A Digging Stick Context

This section approaches epistemology from an ontological stance emerging from a Papuan Melanesian philosophical premise that foregrounds a relational learning environment in which the likelihood for knowledge is provided in the ontology. “Papuan Melanesian” refers to indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea on the eastern half of the southwestern Pasifika Island of New Guinea, including the indigenous Melanesians of West Papua, an Indonesian-controlled province in the western half of New Guinea. “Melanesian” refers generally to indigenous people in the Melanesian region of Pasifika. The key to Papuan Melanesian ontology and epistemology lies not in the present or the future but in the past. In order to discern some of the general features and characteristics, one cannot avoid the Papuan Melanesian indigenous religion, worldview, and culture when describing their ontology and epistemology.

Scholars who have studied Papuan Melanesian religion, culture, philosophy, and theology include individuals such as Whiteman (1995), Narokobi (1985), Mantovani (1984), and MacDonald (1984), to name a few, who insist that we go back in time to formative realities from the past. This is not an easy step for our generation, as we belong to an era of tremendous scientific and technological achievements. There is evidence of an astonishing contemporary human capacity and ingenuity that pushes the frontiers of knowledge, which are expanding at an unparalleled rate. Nonetheless, several key points must be made in relation to indigenous Papuan Melanesian life.

First, the essential ethnographic data for understanding Papuan Melanesian indigenous people—their ways of being, knowledge, and achievements, which are the key to their future—are embedded in a history at least 9,000 years old, in which they have primarily been agriculturalists, shaped by a ‘digging stick’² culture with religious associations (Mantovani 1984, 53; Whiteman 1995, 90–91; Eliade 1984, 40; 1978, 40).

² Melanesian ‘digging stick’ culture refers to the traditional farming practice in which a very effective wooden tool—the digging stick—has been used for millennia to enable and sustain subsistence agriculture. The digging stick is not only indispensable for the cultivation of crops but is deeply embedded in the social and ceremonial roles of Melanesian peoples.

Within the traditional worldview and religio-cultural experience of Melanesia, the indigenous people have understood and revealed themselves, their character, and their purpose. The truthfulness or legitimacy of any alternative claim to know life and what life requires of them must be tested in the light of this shared understanding of their human history and place in the universe.

Second—and this point arises from the first—Papuan Melanesians are committed to a specific story of human history, of ontological approaches to knowing, viewing, and explaining the world. This is not just any story of human history, but the singular history of the indigenous Papuan Melanesian people whose ancestral origins date back some 40,000 to 50,000 years (as hunters and gatherers) before the appearance of agriculture and religion around 9,000 years ago (Biskup and Nelson 1970, 1–15; Mantovani 1984, 53). This collective sense of being and knowing as a religio-cultural experience is essentially that of their ‘digging stick’ culture shaped by their socio-economic order (Mantovani 1984, 53; Whiteman 1995, 90–91; Eliade 1984, 40; Radin 1957, 58). From a religio-cultural vantage point, Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge are deeply embedded in this ‘digging stick’ agricultural-centric experience. As Nongkas and Tivinarlik (2004, 60) say, “In this digging stick culture, everything exists and functions in relationship to one another and is experienced as one total whole”—that is, as the ‘whole of life’. As Bernard Narokobi, one of the forerunners of Melanesian philosophy, expresses,

Melanesians do not differentiate [between] religious and non-religious experience. For them, ... an experience is a total encounter of the living person with the universe that is alive and explosive. In fact, there are no religious and other experiences. An experience for a Melanesian ... is the person’s encounter with the spirit, the law, the economics, the politics, and life’s own total whole. (Narokobi 1985, 70)

It is this biocosmic religious experience of life through symbolic forms and expressions which defines Melanesian existence. Papuan Melanesian spirituality holds that people are ecologically part of the cosmos and participate interdependently in all of life, in unity with all existence. The principle here is that life is shared by all, ontologically and existentially, for it is cosmic: everything and everyone participates in it. It is a whole encounter of life, and life is the absolute concern, the ultimate and central value in the Melanesian living world of humans, nonhumans, and the whole ecosystem. This is akin to what Upolu Vaai, in *reSTORYing the Pasifika Household*, affirms in the context of the indigenous Polynesian people:

[We] are born of cosmic womb, not just human womb. I am thus a child of the cosmos. Cosmic relationality is in our blood. We came into being through cosmological relationships. Ecology is always cosmological and relational. It is not just physical but spiritual. (Vaai 2023, 77)

Therefore, the ‘whole encounter of life’ worldview recognises indigenous Melanesian people as relational eco-cosmic thinkers. Their living world’s revealed knowledge is materialised with the active participation of peoples’ intellect: physically (body), socially (interaction), emotionally (heart), and spiritually (spirit). This is an interweaving of all of the features of learning by engaging these four relational realms of knowledge, for knowledge is an act of being. As Clement states, “All true knowledge is generated in the face of problems which arise from reality” (Clement 2005, 75; see Freire 1998, 98–110, 118–119, 153).

This implies that life is a unified, interrelated experience in which knowledge is understood ontologically and experienced existentially. There is no separation of ontology and epistemology, there is “onto-epistemology”—being and knowing. Traditional indigenous ontology is a quest for meaning and purpose in nature, in everyday life, and in holistic existence. This is a relational ontology in which all

knowledge is generated in the physical and spiritual environment, arising from the learner's existential situation and critical consciousness of reality. Here knowledge is a unity of the social, economic, and religious experience of the people, because life viewed ontologically is interrelated and shared by all that lives in the material and spiritual realms. Knowing is experiential: it is embedded in practical experience as a means to achieve material and spiritual ends.

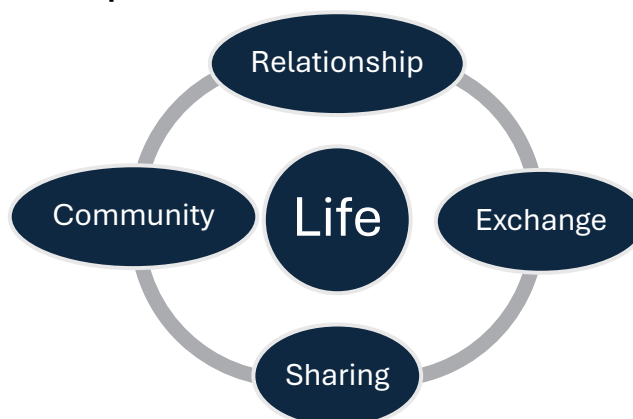
Third, in indigenous understandings of education, life is a practical process of day-to-day experiences (living) whereby the wisdom of the society is passed on to its members, while at the same time reaching out for new knowledge. Education, therefore, is practical learning of life-skill processes that prepare and equip individuals for the benefit and survival of the learner's family, clan, tribe, or community, in order to sustain, maintain, and celebrate life. In contemporary framing, "education is pragmatic and directed toward a 'better' life, meaning more opportunities and symbols for success" (Karl 2007, 39).

Education, in its various modern definitions, basically implies "the process of discovering and experiencing the meaning and purpose of human experience. ... The two queries, what and why, are always before us, goading us on" (Hunter 1978, 31). It is a powerful ontological urge at the base of the educational process within the learner: the quest for meaning and the purpose of nature, life, and all existence, that is, the 'whole of life'. Thus, education is the quest for meaning and purpose, and this means that it is a community quest, for the community is symbolic of life. The quest for meaning and the purpose of life is basic to the community and is inescapable in Papuan Melanesian existence; the community feels and responds to this pull. Thus, the people's way of knowing is their reaching out to understand life as experienced ontologically and existentially.

Fourth, the Papuan Melanesian people have always had a tightly knit community life. This life orientation is kept intact through a web of relationships. These relationships build the community and both create and sustain life. Knowing interacts with existence in the community, and the knowledge of life is translated pragmatically via socialisation and enculturation. Pragmatic interactions are initiated. Relationship and exchange (reciprocal sharing) is the most crucial interaction of Melanesian society, and it radically affects the way people think and are thought about, and their response to knowing and learning.

The three interactive components of Melanesian society—community, relationship, and exchange (reciprocal sharing)—have been given, through participatory learning, a definitive and unique expression. This is because they are not only cultural values fundamental to society but patterns and characteristics of social life which involve (or provide) participation and dialogue, and thus guarantee 'whole of life' participatory learning as a relational approach to knowing and learning. There is in education, therefore, community as well as relationship, exchange as well as sharing, participation as well as dialogue.

Papuan Melanesian Existentialism



The societal embodiment of these Papuan Melanesian patterns and characteristics underlines a reciprocal interaction that is basic to the pursuit of life for survival and existence. If the key traditional value is life, and it is found, expressed, and nourished in the community, then the wellbeing of the community is defined by good relationships and sharing. These are relationships that are built through exchange; it is reciprocal giving and receiving that expresses relationship.

In other words, being, knowing, and learning arise through relationship, exchange, and sharing. This is an interactive way of knowing, in which knowing happens in community within a traditional relational ontology. The Papuan Melanesian onto-epistemology (being and knowing) is relational and implies a system of knowing that is linked to community and its social structure, around which all other activities revolve. The social structure of the community leads to participation by people who share and relate what they know and believe and its implications for everyday life.

In contrast, an onto-epistemology which is academically abstracted from the interpretive context produces a community that does not have the qualities foreseen in ‘whole of life’ participatory learning, and such a separation can only be achieved at the cost of the community itself. The Papuan Melanesian onto-epistemology is well illustrated in the very nature of community and its interwoven relationships. Once one has understood this underlying foundational conviction of the Papuan Melanesian onto-epistemology, several implications for knowing and learning follow.

Implications for Knowing and Learning

Given the ontological assumptions of the way people come to know in the Papuan Melanesian religious worldview and cultural values, it becomes clear that learning through a ‘whole of life’ participatory approach has the potential to offer something of worth. Apart from the ‘digging stick’ cultural background, the concept of ‘whole of life’ participatory learning would be non-existent for Papuan Melanesians.

An analysis of Papuan Melanesian religious dynamics reveals that it produces a worldview that is productive of relationships in the community and the living environment. Here, reciprocal relationships based on the concept of exchange are vital for sustaining, maintaining, and celebrating life in the community. I am attempting to incorporate the religious implications of community, relationship, and exchange into an educational perspective rooted in the Melanesian religio-cultural worldview, one which “transforms individuals into something new, into what is experienced as the only way to ‘life’” (Mantovani 1995, 202).

This educational perspective emanates from how Papuan Melanesian people come to know through their relational ontology, that is, their way of knowing based on community, relationships, and sharing, which

can effectively and creatively be the means for relating formal and informal learning, providing an integration of both. This understanding of community and relationship provides the integrating centre that is embedded in ‘whole of life’ participatory learning. This learning approach is the cornerstone of theological education in the School of Theology and Ecumenism (SOTE) at Pasifika Communities University (PCU).

Implications for Learning from a ‘Whole of Life’ Participatory Approach: Pasifika Communities University

While recognising the considerable diversity amongst indigenous Pasifika peoples, ‘whole of life’ participatory learning is a common relational approach that is manifested naturally in Pasifika indigenous worldviews and is preserved and fostered through human work and activity. It is an indigenous participatory philosophy in which the experience of life permeates everything in the empirical and non-empirical realm of the Pasifika universe. This has led to a reconsideration of teaching-learning at PCU, having transitioned from PTC to SOTE. Setting forth the ‘whole of life’ relational ontologies of being and growing with communities is not simply a matter of intellectual satisfaction or an object of gaining and transmitting knowledge about communities; it is something that must take concrete shape in learners.

The Backdrop

The theological education provided at PCU examines the broader context of the Western colonial educational approach through a decolonial Pasifika lens. One of the problems with the Western education system is that it has defined how education should function in the rest of the world, in diverse fields of studies including theology. Although it may contribute to social change and economic development, Western education can also negate the cultural values and traditional indigenous knowledge of Pasifika societies that could have been preserved and integrated into the formal education system. This inherited foreign educational system lacks the widespread participation of those who will implement such change (e.g., teachers), of those who will experience its effects (e.g., students), and of those who will experience its impacts (e.g., communities).

As a consequence, the Western school-based educational orientation imposed on Pasifika has, from its very beginning, resulted in a passive approach to learning, or, as Freire puts it (1997, 62), a “banking” approach, in which all-knowing teachers “deposit” knowledge into the passive minds or “bank vaults” of students. This passive learning embedded in the imported educational system and its operational structures is a hindrance to participation and meaningful change. This Western educational model has shaped the epistemological approach in various learning contexts, in the process trivialising and suppressing indigenous ways of being, knowing, and learning. I therefore propose making use of ‘whole of life’ participatory learning as an approach to decolonise the institutionalised teaching-learning in the Pasifika context of theological education.

This decolonising project is “a reaction to the way that most explanations for the rise of capitalism and world empires in Western Europe ignore and downplay non-European people and places” (Rees 2020). Decolonising entails unbuttoning the twentieth-century ethnocentric approach to traditional residential theological education, clothed in Western culture and introduced during the missionary and colonial era. This type of theological education was inherited from Western Christianity and culture and is now embedded in twenty-first century neoliberalism, a political reappearance of nineteenth and twentieth century ideas relating to free market capitalism (Blum 2025, 1–3). As an economic philosophy, neoliberalism permeates every aspect of society and institutions, including education.

Undeniably, decolonisation poses challenges because of the complex nature of colonial structures and systems that have become part of Pasifika societies. “The legacies of colonialism have had lasting impacts on social and economic structures in the region.”³ Viewed from a postcolonial vantage point, political and other forms of decolonisation have been explored and implemented in our current and evolving structures at SOTE. This process acknowledges that what is needed is an alternative approach which can truly decolonise the theological education legacy in the Pasifika context.

Decolonisation and decoloniality are both commonly used terms in the discussion of attempts to undo the colonial infrastructures that have governed knowledge, culture, and bureaucracy in previously colonised societies. Decolonisation is typically framed as “a path forward to creating systems which are just and equitable, addressing inequality through education, dialogue, communication, and action.”⁴ Decoloniality seeks to understand the “close-knit relationship between the colonial condition and the imposition of a Western logic of ‘modernity’ as a consequence of colonialism. [It] is not so much a political project [as] an epistemological one: to ‘delink’ ourselves from the structure of knowledge imposed by the West, and then to ‘reconstitute’ our ways of thinking, speaking, and living” (Tsang 2021). Each of these terms has its own distinct emphasis, but both are concerned with the interaction between postcoloniality and decoloniality. Understanding decolonisation and decoloniality is crucial to the process of restructuring learning as a ‘whole of life’ participatory process. This has far-reaching implications for theological education at SOTE. Facilitating the process of decoloniality involves the transition to new ideas, concepts, and learning approaches that embrace ‘whole of life’ participatory learning. At PCU, both decolonisation and decoloniality concepts arise from the postcolonial critique which began after political independence for most Pasifika countries in the 1960s and 1970s, and are an ongoing process.

This means that decolonisation must continually be reflected on in specific educational settings and contexts. My purpose here is to show its connection to ‘whole of life’ pedagogy in the institutionalised theological education setting in Pasifika. Focusing on relational ontology is at the core of this participatory method. It calls for refashioning teaching-learning in a way that finds expression in a relational ontology of being and emerges with a relationally shared process of engaging “place”—that is, the communities displaying the characteristics of Pasifika ‘whole of life’ onto-epistemology. This is a process of translating Pasifika ways of being and knowing into the practice of theological education, which entails making connections between how Pasifika indigenous people know and how that relates to theological teaching and learning.

In the PCU and SOTE context, we must therefore ask certain core questions: Who is theological education for at PCU? What instructional approach is efficacious? Whose knowledge and ways of being and knowing are given priority in curriculum development and teaching? The future of theological education at PCU is not about finding ways to keep its aging classroom pedagogy educationally viable, but about replacing this pedagogy with new learning strategies that can provide teaching-learning reliability and participation vigour. The intention is to enhance learning satisfaction by using a different approach of place-based learning through community engagement with local culture, history, and natural surroundings.

This kind of theological education at the tertiary level is not anti-intellectual; it simply needs to be closely related to the people for whom it is produced. From its establishment in 1965 up to 2024, PTC worked

³ “Decolonization Resource Collection: Pacific,” National History Centre, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://nationalhistorycenter.org/decolonization-resource-collection-pacific/>.

⁴ “What is Decolonization, Why is it Important, and How can we Practice it?,” Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://www.cbglcollab.org/what-is-decolonization-why-is-it-important>.

hard for over fifty years to provide theological education consistent with training for pastoral leadership. In considering the role of PCU since PTC has transitioned to a university, we now understand that we need to work smarter, not harder. We need to work smarter in constructing a decolonising theological education that is consistent with training for leadership for both justice and care ministries, and that connects the university to communities by re-establishing and strengthening links through a ‘whole of life’ participatory learning approach. What follows are highlights of PTC’s and PCU’s visions for theological education, and how this evolved into a ‘whole of life’ participatory approach.

Visions for Theological Education: From Pacific Theological College to Pasifika Communities University

Writing about the “University Mandate” in the 2024 Pacific Theological College Report to the Special PTC Council Meeting (April 22–24), Upolu Vaai made this historical observation:

The first ecumenical meeting held in Samoa in 1961 recognised the need for a central institution which would provide theological education at a higher level than was available ... at that time, an education which in a number of ways would better prepare leaders for the churches in the new Pacific that was coming into being. PTC was established in 1965 at its current location. It was the first degree-offering institution in the Pasifika region, with its Bachelor of Divinity, since 1966. (Vaai 2024, 1)

This brief historical account refers to the establishment of PTC at its current location in Suva, Fiji. PTC developed steadily from its initial Bachelor of Divinity programme, offering its first Master of Theology (MTh) degree in 1987, a Postgraduate Diploma (PgDip) in 1993, and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in 2004. The latter was initially established in partnership with Charles Sturt University in Australia (2004–2008), but this partnership was discontinued when PTC introduced its own PhD programme in 2008 (Pacific Theological College Handbook 2024a, 14).

In 2010, it was resolved by the PTC Council to transition the college to a university, and the Strategic Plan 2020–2025 was developed in 2019 to guide this transition (Vaai 2024, ix). PTC as a higher education provider offered undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for approximately 58 years, from 1966–2024. This indicates the continued existence of an ecumenical and regional theological education vision, grounded in the founding vision that PTC would be “an education which in a number of ways would better prepare leaders for the churches in the new Pacific that was coming into being” following the colonial and missionary era (Pacific Theological College Handbook 2024b, 10).

Paralleling the initiative to move toward university status from 2019 onward, the time was clearly ripe for intensive in-house revisions of theological education programmes at PCU. Such revisions acknowledge the need to redefine competencies, especially in relation to courses, teaching-learning paradigms, and administration. This research on developing new academic programmes and courses has a potentially significant contribution to make in the area of teaching and learning for contemporary Pasifika communities’ ministries in church and society. New theological education programmes afford students the opportunity to critically connect and integrate leadership for justice and Christian ministry.

This integration process requires a high degree of interaction and organisation with local communities if the training programmes are to progress smoothly as they explore issues of justice in relation to social, political, and economic development. Those involved in theological education programmes for pastoral leadership at PCU need to explore such issues of justice in terms of the wider context of the Pasifika

region and beyond. This approach aligns with the renewed vision “to develop PTC [now PCU] as the premier regional theological institution for leadership for justice” (Pacific Theological College Handbook 2024c, 9). It is believed that students or ‘pastor-leaders in training’ will benefit considerably in their professional and faith development from this new vision.

From 2019 onward, PTC made adjustments to the vision to transition to a new university. As Vaai noted, “In ... 2019, the College’s first-ever Strategic Plan was developed under the vision ‘Towards Excellence in Theological Education for Leadership for Justice,’ which was unanimously approved by the PTC Council meeting at the end of the same year” (Vaai 2024, 1). This renewed vision necessitated an educational mission to establish a new School of Theology and Ecumenism (SOTE), one of the three schools in the new university, that could guide academic and theological reflections on ethical issues and national/regional values in Pasifika communities.

The year 2019 thus began with a restructuring of the traditional theological education programmes, with a new focus on promoting communities-engaged learning in terms of content, curriculum, and language, in order to prepare students for participation in cultural and communal life at the local and national levels. This vision envisages a ‘whole of life’ approach which “[t]ransforms the compartmentalised narrative that splits, extracts, and removes lands, oceans, and peoples for profit, and tears apart the integrated and interconnected life of the Pasifika household of God; [it] challenges the colonial idea of a split between theology and society, sacred and secular, church and the world” (Vaai 2024, 5).

While the establishment of a university is the focus of the new vision concerning ‘whole of life’, it is crucial to understand that PCU does not function as an island. Rather, it is part of the process of educational change that has been occurring for some time within the Pasifika region. It is important that any changes suggested for the better functioning of theological education should be of such a nature as not to alienate its educational stream from the education policies of the national governments of Pasifika.

In this new visionary environment, theological educators must assess the extent to which their previous classroom teaching approach distances students from their learning ecology, negatively affecting educators’ ability to communicate with and guide a group of learners. At present, few if any established teaching approaches afford students the opportunity to critically explore the integrated and interconnected life of the Pasifika Household of God, in terms of the wider contexts of community learning that inspire and enable a participatory approach to learning.

The participatory approach draws inspiration from a commitment to “whole of life learning, indigenous community wellbeing, grassroots communities’ delivery, and community shaped curriculum” (Vaai 2024, 6). Vaai further emphasises the need to highlight “the role of morals, ecumenical values, and spiritualities sidelined by the mainstream education narrative throughout its curriculum and educational structure and operations” (2024, 5). These statements imply an intentionality regarding embodying Pasifika cultures, languages, values, beliefs, and ways of comprehending life in our approaches to learning.

In other words, the “whole” in ‘whole of life’ expresses an absolute commitment to a total encounter with “life” that encompasses an ultimate experience of life, for life is shared by all humans, non-human others, and creation itself. The ‘whole of life’ is a web of interwoven systems that arise from the engagement of persons with their personal, socio-political, physical, and spiritual environments. ‘Whole of life’ learning assumes a holistic philosophy of life, an integral relation with the universe and with the development of Pasifika people, for there is no distinction between the religious and secular aspects of Pasifika life.

The ‘whole of life’ approach to participatory learning does not sideline the ancient ontological-empirical knowledge systems of Pasifika that were fully unified with the ‘whole way of life’ of the people. For example, Pasifika peoples have always “constantly associated living life with nature on all levels, and in turn, they developed detailed empirical knowledge about island ecology” (Dickie 2005, 8). The “digging stick” culture of Papuan Melanesians enabled such knowledge. It follows that learning is a life-long process and the by-product of living in communities as “places” or geographic locations in which “issues and interventions are concentrated and change is intended to occur” (Burns, Cooke, and Schweidler 2011, 6).

Making the change toward decolonising institutionalised theological education calls for a different approach to learning, shifting our understanding of theological education to a ‘whole of life’ participatory pedagogical approach of shared learning in the context of communities. This approach is chosen in order to bring theological education into the centre of the thinking, learning, and acting patterns of the people in their communities, where it rightly deserves to be. As Galindo and Canaday point out, “Shifting our understanding of Christian education toward formation in a faith community context calls for a shift in our educational approach. Theological educators have been calling for a more authentic, meaningful, corporate, and communal way of doing Christian education ... for decades” (Galindo and Canaday 2010, 21).

If PCU aspires to realise its move to ‘whole of life’ participatory learning, theological education training needs to transform its entire educational structure and approach. The transition to a university has been directed toward realising this vision. The ‘whole of life’ participatory learning approach starts with a renewed vision that emerges from who we are as Pasifika peoples. Viewed from the PTC “Transition to University Strategic Plan” vantage point, the teaching-learning process essentially involves catching the vision for what learning from a ‘whole of life’ participatory approach can do for Pasifika communities today.

Conclusion

The Pasifika relational ontology, in which knowledge is an act of being, has real relevance for epistemology. It is undergirded by a unity of ontology and epistemology, which are not separated in knowledge production. It thus finds expression through an affirmation of Pasifika Communities University’s ‘whole of life’ vision as a way of decolonising the inherited Western institutionalised approach to theological education. This requires shifting our understanding of theological education toward a ‘whole of life’ participatory pedagogical approach of shared learning in the context of communities. The presupposition is that learning from such an approach presents more than an alternative direction for theological education at the School of Theology and Ecumenism in Pasifika Communities University. Fundamentally, this approach enunciates a worldview of indigenous being and knowing which empowers Pasifika peoples to meet, interpret, and integrate reality in their communities.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

OUR MOTHER TONGUES: LIBERATING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This article examines the suppression and liberation of Pasifika indigenous languages, positioning “mother tongues” as foundational to identity, theology, and ecological belonging. Drawing on personal testimony and examples from Samoa and across the Pacific, it demonstrates how colonial education and economic systems have systematically marginalised oral traditions in favour of Western literacy. The article contends that indigenous languages are not merely communicative tools but repositories of relational life-worlds that shape spiritual imagination. It argues that language loss entails a profound dislocation of identity and belonging, and that linguistic reclamation constitutes a critical act of liberation. Ultimately, the paper calls for a reimagining of education and theology that resists colonial hierarchies and affirms Pasifika languages as central to justice and communal flourishing.

Keywords: indigenous language, contextual theology, pasifika identity, orality, eco-relationality.

*You know why I nefa
teach you Samoan Son?
cause Samoan no ket you
anyfing in life
tis is ta white man's worlt
an Enklisb is
only fink tat matta*
— “Daddy Said,” Tafea Polamalu (2014)

Introduction

Polamalu's haunting words capture the intimate rupture of language and identity loss: a father withholding his mother tongue from his son, convinced that English alone secures survival in a world structured by colonial hierarchies. This moment of suppression is not merely personal but emblematic of the broader forces that have silenced indigenous languages across generations. The "how" and "why" of this loss are rooted in systemic pressures—colonial education systems privileging literacy over orality, economic structures rewarding assimilation, and theological frameworks that often dismissed indigenous epistemologies as secondary or even irrelevant.

For centuries, formal education has reaped the benefits of standardising a common language of instruction, most often English, anchored in primary literacy cultures. Yet this elevation of literacy-based cultures over oral traditions has reinforced imperial structures and perpetuated exclusion. Oral-based cultures have always carried their own tangible forms of knowledge—song, chant, storytelling, ritual—but these have been marginalised under the guise of progress. The suppression of mother tongues has thus been both deliberate and structural, severing communities from their cultural inheritance and reshaping identities under the weight of colonial norms.

This article responds to three overlapping questions: Why liberate indigenous languages? In what ways are mother tongues inherently liberating? And why is their inclusion essential to the fundamental aims of contextual theology? By beginning with Polamalu's testimony, we acknowledge that the struggle for indigenous language survival is not abstract but lived, embodied, and deeply tied to questions of identity, dignity, and theological imagination.

Language and Identity Loss

Indigenous languages and cultures do not simply die.¹ They are methodically suppressed to the point where they are denounced by their own speakers and thereby forced into oblivion. This is a familiar experience for immigrant communities living outside of their homelands. They either adopt the dominant language of the host country and survive or continue to speak their mother tongue at their own peril.

I was fortunate to have parents who were committed to ensuring that their native tongue, Samoan, became my first language. I was taught "e mamae le tava'e i ona fulu"—that the tava'e bird is meant to be proud of its feathers. Yet within systems that privilege other linguistic forms, such pride is rendered fragile, if not untenable. Since English functioned as the sole medium of instruction in New Zealand at the time, it became the language of the learned, of economic competence, and of progress. While the Samoan language carried relational values of family, service, and respect, its currency did not extend beyond the home. English, by contrast, encoded individual achievement, productivity, and competition. The result was not mere bilingualism, but an entrenched dualism—one that divided worlds of meaning, value, and identity.

The Context of Suppression (Educational Formation and Lived Experience)

The risks of maintaining a mother tongue within such a system were not insignificant. Throughout my schooling years, I was identified as an ESL (English as a Second Language) student—as though it were a deficit

¹ For the purpose of this undertaking, the terms 'language' and 'culture' will be used interchangeably, since the two exist in symbolic relationship. In the view of Kuo and Lai, "Language stands for the whole culture because language represents culture in the minds of its speakers" (2006, 5). It is a view supported by Melenaita Taumoevalua, the Tongan linguist who argues that a people's language is able to provide deep insights into their culture, values, and belief systems "because their language is, in a very real way, their thought" (2017, 138).

that had to be disclosed to every one of my teachers. Within the home, Samoan remained the primary language of communication, while English was enforced in school contexts. This home-school dichotomy generated confusion for many second- and third-generation migrants, often resulting in estrangement from the language and culture of their parents and grandparents (Tiatia 1998; Anae 1997; Macpherson and Macpherson 2004). What appears as a pedagogical arrangement is, in fact, a deeper form of epistemological dislocation. This dislocation is not limited to diasporic settings. Across the Pacific, formal education systems replicate similar patterns of suppression.

John Roughan describes the Solomon Islands curriculum as a “dinghy tied to a mother ship,” with the latter representing educational standards derived from Australia and New Zealand (2021, 66). Such dependency denies the legitimacy of prior learning embedded within family and village life. Kabini Sanga frames this as a mismatch between In-School (IS) and Out-of-School (OS) formation. The OS world—relational, embodied, and communal—is where the child’s primary identity is shaped. Yet the privileging of IS formation produces a hierarchy between the “schooled” and the “unschooled,” fragmenting both knowledge and community (2021, 72–76).

In Vanuatu, the situation is even more complex. With over 108 languages across 83 islands, the education system operates through parallel Anglophone and Francophone structures—effectively producing “two medias of instruction, two curricula, two philosophies of schooling, and two management systems” (Niroa 2021, 157). The absence of a unified linguistic framework, alongside the marginalisation of Bislama despite its widespread use, exacerbates issues such as high dropout rates.

Historical precedents reinforce this pattern. During the German annexation of Samoa (1900–1903), Governor Wilhelm Solf mandated the teaching of German while enforcing racial segregation in education (Meleisea 1987, 163). Linguistic competence became a gatekeeping mechanism, privileging those aligned with colonial structures. The residual effects of these policies persist: educational success across the Pacific remains closely tied to English proficiency.

Forms of Denial (Systematic and Cultural Mechanisms)

These dynamics are not incidental; they reflect what Tui Rakuita describes as the “rules” of a language game. Language is not neutral—it structures thought, defines legitimacy, and determines whose knowledge counts (2014, 161). When only certain vocabularies are authorised, entire life-worlds are excluded. Within such systems, the analogy of the tava’e bird loses its force. The non-English-speaking native is compelled to mimic the language, thought patterns, and behaviours of a different flock. Rīsatisone Ete’s reworking of the “Ugly Duckling” captures this distortion: not transformation, but displacement. Similarly, Terry Pouono’s image of “coconut juice in a Coca-Cola bottle” (2013) illustrates how indigenous essence is contained—and constrained—within foreign structures.

But formal education is only one among a surplus of ways that indigenous languages are denied. It is equally manifest through the influence of mainstream media and the entertainment industry in general. Before the advent of social media, Michael Krauss made an interesting claim about televisions being like a “cultural nerve gas” (1992, 6). The dominant language not only creeps in and preys on the unsuspecting minds of the young, but it reaches even the most traditional of homes. With mobile devices becoming more affordable and accessible, the accelerated rate at which peoples of minority cultures have exclusively adopted the language of the global culture has only worsened.

What exactly is at stake here? According to K. David Harrison, the extent of what human societies lose every time a language dies has not been fully grasped. While the scope of his research is too wide to discuss here, Harrison is convinced that the world stands to lose “centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, reindeer, flowers, mathematics, landscapes, myths, music, infinity, cyclicity, the unknown, and the everyday” (2007, viii). The seriousness of such event, a view to which I concur with Harrison and his supporters, is like “dropping a bomb on a museum” (2007, 7).

Mother Tongues: Nurturing, Liberating, and Being

The universal meaning of “mother tongue” refers to the language learned in the home from older family members, or it can be applied more generally to one’s culture of origin (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2008, 6). In the Pacific Islands, it is imbued with maternal imagery and the nurturing practices within a culture. The Tongan proverb “olunga he kaliloa,” which means to lay one’s head on the kaliloa (a wooden headrest), is a metaphor for a child resting on the arm of his or her mother. From a Tongan perspective, the mother’s arm is the beginning of all instruction, cultural knowledge, values, and morals.

This view has parallels with the Samoan pastime of storytelling known as *fāgogo*, where children gather in the evening to learn and be entertained by their parents or elders. It is a practice often equated with the transfer of *mama*, which can be translated as mother or grandmother, but can also refer to the food that she chews and softens before feeding it to her young. The well-known adage in Samoa, “e ‘ai lava le tagata i le mama a lona matua” (a child eats the mama of their parents), is thus both symbolic and illustrative of what is understood by mother tongue. It is not merely a medium through which intimate knowledge and blessings are passed down from one generation to the next; it is also underpinned by the worldview that words, stories, and oral instruction are as crucial to the nurturing of children as physical sustenance.

It goes without saying, then, that language, like contextual theology, does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it consists of codes, signs, and symbols that are socially and culturally constructed. This resonates with Martin Heidegger’s view that “language is the house of Being,” and that it is “the creators of the words” who guard this home (1977, 193). Any attempt to engage with language, therefore, must also engage with the life-worlds that give it meaning across generations, as well as the relationships among its users.

Language, Land, and Sacred Ecology

One of these relationships, alluded to by Harrison above, relates to the connection between language and our sacred ecology. For instance, in various languages of the Pacific, the words *vanua* (Fiji), *fanua* (Samoa), *fonua* (Tongan), *fenua* (Maohi) and *whenua* (Aotearoa NZ), translate as womb, the placenta, and land simultaneously. To date, this imagery is maintained through language and in the common ritual of burying the placenta in ancestral lands after a child is born. A corresponding insight from Samoa is the term *palapala*, which can refer to blood as well as mud or dirt. This is not only consistent with the Judeo-Christian notion that humans are formed from dust (Gen 3:19), but also aligns with Pacific cosmology, which maintains that humans and the earth share a common ancestry (Aiava 2022).

Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, the first Indigenous Fijian woman appointed as a professor, makes this unequivocally clear in stating that, in *i-Taukei* Fijian culture, “the Self becomes the Self fully because the *Vanua* is. The Self is because the *Vanua* is” (2017, 174). This identification with the land is not only embedded

in language but also serves as a catalyst for maintaining mother tongues. Although the “house of Being” in Heidegger’s formulation refers primarily to human users of language, Pacific perspectives—reflected in the interconnected wombs of mother and Mother Earth—suggest that “being” is realised through “being-in-relationships.”

The numerous ecological references and homonyms in Pacific languages, where a single word may carry both human and non-human connotations, also imply responsibility. For indigenous communities, commitment to the earth and to the ‘whole of life’ was never intended as a recent movement or reactive measure. Rather, it has always been an enduring duty—indeed, a form of protest—for the preservation of identity and of eco-relational principles that sustain purpose and belonging.

This duty is grounded in Pacific spirituality, where body and soul are not treated as separate or in conflict, nor reduced to an otherworldly discourse. For Cruz Karauti-Fox, this spirituality is rooted in deep kinship with the moana (ocean), implying “connectedness not only of geography but also of genealogical, linguistic, ethnological, epistemological, anthropological and spiritual milieus of Indigenous Pacific peoples” (2021, 342). The notion that the fate of humankind is independent of the wider cosmic community is therefore fundamentally misplaced—a view further undermined by an overconfidence in science and its presumed monopoly on truth.

Keith Barber argues that science alone contains significant blind spots and is insufficient to address the complex issues affecting the planet. In his words:

Although it is based on a claim of objectivity and universality, the major problems afflicting the planet have at their root human-nature relationships that are neither solely objective nor solely universal. Human-nature relationships are systems of meaning that have a subjective as well as objective dimension. Their subjective dimension includes aesthetic values, emotional attachments to place, beliefs in local spirits, and the use of metaphors of human-nature reciprocity. It is attention to these aspects, and their local contextualisation, that characterises indigenous knowledge and makes it so conducive to wise environmental management. (2021, 19)

What is required, on both a conceptual and practical level, is a liberating approach that is fluid, like the ebbs and flows of the moana.

Laulaufaiva: Tongue as Distributive Learning

The Samoan term laulaufaiva (tongue) offers a critical epistemological lens. Composed of laulau (to distribute), and faiva (a catch, traditionally of fish or pigeons), it reframes the tongue not as a merely digestive organ but as a social system of distribution (Vaai 2021, 189). Within this framework, knowledge is not consumed and contained but circulated, shared, and relationally sustained.

As reflected in the notion of mama, stories and knowledge are meant to be shared and passed on rather than hoarded. The hoarding of knowledge characterises closed systems in which access is restricted and controlled. More insidiously, when language is confined to fixed vocabularies and standardised forms, it begins to function “digestively”—assimilating diverse ways of knowing into dominant epistemic frameworks. This is evident in formal education systems that repeatedly transmit universalised theories, often at the cost of eroding Indigenous modes of thought.

Read in this way, laulaufaiva is not simply descriptive but diagnostic: it exposes the limits of educational models that treat knowledge as an object of mastery rather than a practice of relationship. By

contrast, distributive epistemologies operate through lived interaction, where knowledge is embedded in environment, practice, and community, and continually regenerated through use.

The work of Sereima Naisilisili provides an empirical counterpart to this distributive logic. Through ethnographic research in a remote Fijian village, she demonstrates that the environment itself functions as curriculum. Children learn through direct engagement—observing, experimenting, and participating in ecological life—rather than through abstraction. In such contexts, knowledge is inherently relational, and language is the medium through which it is named, organised, and transmitted. As she observes,

Indigenous children learn very early that each tree, animal, plant and even the tiniest insect has a purpose in the ecological system, and so it is important to keep them there. These elements also have names, so the bush, land, and the sea are like a library for those growing up in such an environment. (Naisilisili 2023, 120)

If knowledge is distributed across relational environments, and language is the means by which that distribution is accessed, then the marginalisation of Indigenous languages in formal education constitutes a form of epistemic enclosure. It restricts entry into entire knowledge systems, narrows the moral imagination, and alienates learners from the relational worlds that form them. The restoration of mother tongues, therefore, is not simply a matter of inclusion but of liberation: it reopens access to distributed ways of knowing in which humans participate within, rather than dominate, the web of life.

It is at this juncture that the Pasifika Languages Framework (PLF) at the Pasifika Communities University (PCU) must be understood—not as an optional innovation, but as a necessary structural response. By shifting higher education beyond English-only paradigms into the 1,500 living languages of the Pacific, and by enabling postgraduate research in these languages, the PLF restores the conditions under which Indigenous knowledge can be produced and transmitted on its own terms. It positions language not as a cultural artefact, but as epistemic infrastructure.

In operational terms, the PLF reconfigures research itself: scholars are trained to work within living linguistic ecologies—transcribing oral traditions, interpreting cultural forms, and publishing in the language of home. Knowledge production thus becomes an act of revitalisation rather than extraction, ensuring that research contributes to the continuity of linguistic and ecological systems.

The argument, then, comes full circle: If the environment is a library, and language is its organising principle, then to exclude mother tongues from education is to close the library itself. The PLF represents a decisive refusal of that closure. It demonstrates that advocating for Indigenous languages is not a cultural preference but an educational, ethical, and ecological necessity.

Pacific Theologies and Indigenous Languages: On Risk and Imagination

What would Pacific theology look like if it were to include our mother tongues? In 2019, I had the privilege of examining a Bachelor of Divinity thesis written in Samoan. It was definitely a first for me, and I can attest from that experience that it stirred my imagination in areas that I did not realise had become dormant. There were areas in the work where I felt that the student's translations were too consistent with the English literature, leaving much on the table in terms of further contextualisation. In other areas, I could almost hear the author's words being uttered in my ears. It was very different from the sermons preached on Sundays, as most island pastors are in their element when speaking publicly. The author of this thesis was more exposed. Although courageous, the thesis was a risky attempt to do theology using the rules and vocabulary of a

language vastly different from its literary sources. The risk, however, paid off in more ways than one and perhaps benefitted me more than the student.

This experience convinced me that contextual theology in the Pacific has not fully come to fruition. Although its seeds have taken root—witnessed in the growing popularity of contextual theology within the region—its edible fruits have not been widely enjoyed by those living on the soil. Jione Havea argues that one of the reasons relates to the misplaced expectations of the theologian. Many contextual thinkers assume that the fruits in the new context will be identical to the fruits of the first. “When this does not happen, the context is trimmed and squeezed to produce the right fruits” (Havea 2013, 189). This symbolic “trimming” of one’s own context entails a scaling back of one’s own beliefs and thought systems to the point of condemning one’s own culture.

The famous Christian humanist and philosopher, Desiderius Erasmus, accused the Apostle Paul of doing this in Athens. He argued that Paul intentionally trimmed the elements of his new surroundings to suit the gospel message.

When he spoke to the Athenians, he twisted what he read on the altar into an argument for the Christian faith, omitting what was not for his purpose, and selecting only two from the end, ‘to the unknown God.’ The actual inscription reads, ‘to the Gods of Asia, Europe and Africa, and to the Unknown Gods, and the Gods of Strangers.’ (cited in Jasper 2004, 66)

While this is not the place to argue whether or not this approach is justified, I want to point out that this practice of “squeezing the soil to produce the right fruits” has for two millennia enabled Christianity to survive and even thrive in some contexts.

Dissatisfied with this squeezing or cursing of the context (including its implications for languages), Havea suggests that theologians “curse the text[s] or teaching[s] instead, and prune those. ... If those still do not bear fruits, let them die in peace but respect the land, respect the context, with their local wisdom and rich customs, and allow oneself to become contexted” (2013, 190). For Havea, it is a necessary shift to ensure that it is the context that sets the agenda for contextualisation instead of the (foreign) text.

As provocative as it sounds, being “contexted” is not dissimilar to the notion of being situated, that is, to be mindful of place and one’s location within it. This can be seen in the example of Paul above, or in the multiple instances where Jesus quotes the Scriptures while teaching in the synagogues. Without any proper grounding in the context, contextual theology remains tentative, as neither here nor there. The same can also be said for its intended effects on its audiences. This would be the point of departure between Havea and me with respect to contextual theology becoming “contexted.” I accept that for many years the worlds behind, and of, the text have dictated the agenda for contextual theology in the Pacific. I have also advocated against indigenous contexts and readers losing face in the process of interpretation (Aiava 2017). What I am most concerned with in terms of being contexted is not who sets the agenda, but rather the transformative possibilities that may abound for both the text and reader.

Context, Contestation, and the Gift of Particularity

When Amanaki Havea² introduced the concept of “coconut theology” at a consultation hosted by the Pacific Conference of Churches, the response was mixed and, at times, heated (PCC 1986, 21–24). Critics questioned the relevance of the coconut as a theological symbol. Etuale Lealofi, for example, cautioned against speculative re-imaginings of Jesus, noting that he was “born into a certain culture at a certain time in history” (PCC 1986, 25). Such resistance is striking, particularly given that many of the critics came from predominantly oral cultures where variation and reinterpretation are normative. It suggests that, for some, a boundary must be maintained when it comes to the gospel narrative.

Subsequent critiques of coconut theology continued in print (Prior 1993; Palu 2012). Much of it, in my eyes, either stemmed from the expectation that the fruits of the gospel will be the same in every context or from a preoccupation to maintain a “gospel kernel.”³ Amanaki’s proposal, however, found support among figures such as Ilaitia Tuwere and Oka Fauolo. Tuwere described it as a “serious attempt to find a common language,” aligning it with theology’s fundamental task: interpreting faith in light of lived realities (1986, 25). Fauolo similarly clarified that the aim was not to “over-coconut” theology, but to “coconut it enough” (1986, 26).

In retrospect, one of the consultation’s most significant outcomes was not consensus but conversation. It generated dialogue rather than indifference. The resulting plurality of perspectives has become less a source of division and more an expression of regional distinctiveness. In this sense, Amanaki’s risk mirrors Manulani Meyer’s insight that “difference is what we have in common” (2022).

This tension surfaced again in my own teaching. In an introductory course on contextual theology, a student remarked that “people only want to be contextual for the sake of being different.” Such a comment reveals a perception of contextual theology as optional—or even superficial—rather than intrinsic to theological work. Here, the contribution of Stephen Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology* has been instructive.

God wanted to share God’s very self with men and women and invite them into a life-giving relationship with the Godhead. If God was going to do this, the means of communication would have to be in a way that human beings could fully grasp, a way that expressed the reality of what this invitation into friendship and relationship was all about. And so God became flesh (Jn 1:14), and not generally but particularly. ... It comes quite naturally that if that message, through our agency, is to continue to touch people, we have somehow ourselves to continue the incarnation process. Through us God must become Asian or African, black or brown, poor or sophisticated. (2002, 12)

In both theological and secular education, the exclusion of oral inventories and indigenous knowledge systems has become normalised to the point that it has deterred native scholars from using their own languages. I have made the case earlier for why this is a justice issue. But I also want to stress, inspired by

² In the ensuing discussion, I maintain the in-text use of Amanaki Havea’s first name to avoid any confusion between his work and that of his son, Jione Havea, discussed earlier.

³ Ma’afu Palu makes the case that Amanaki Havea’s “harmful” influence on the contextualising of theology in the Pacific has led to a kind of cultural holiness instead of scriptural holiness (2012, 79). The problem with Palu’s argument is that it is condemning of culture as though the stories of the Bible and the construction of the canon were not culturally influenced, or as if culture is something that occurs outside of God. My second issue is that his argument is based entirely on Western definitions of divine revelation or what they determine to be scriptural. Unless Pacific theology is validated by this alleged authority it does not count as scriptural or revelation.

the theological agency promoted by Bevans, that the particularity of our cultures is a strength and not a weakness. In this light, our cultures can be seen as both gift and mission.

Although there is always vulnerability in maintaining our mother tongues, I argue that the severing of the link between a people and their language is akin to cutting the life-blood of their imaginations. In reimagining the Pacific Islands beyond the small dots (read: landmasses) in the Pacific Ocean, the Tongan anthropologist, Epeli Hau'ofa, preferred the designation of Oceania instead. Discontent with the global discourse and literature perpetuating Pacific Island States and Territories as being too small to effect any real change, Hau'ofa is passionately reminded of the world of his ancestors.

Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. (1994, 152)

Hailed as groundbreaking in the Pacific, Hau'ofa's work gained prominence not only because of its daringness, but also for its creative reconfiguring of ocean borders as places of shared connection and engagement.

While Hau'ofa was self-critical in admitting that Europeans did not invent belittlement, he does trace many of the belittling views of Oceania back to early European contact. Perhaps the most noteworthy admission by Hau'ofa was his acknowledgement that, after years of being convinced that our islands were somewhat hopeless, he actively participated in the belittlement of our people (2008, 30). In the remarkable introspection required to confront this openly, he illustrates perfectly how denouncing our cultural identities can be a trap for aspiring academics—a reality that haunts me daily as I continue to write and teach in the English language. The process of learning, proclaimed in the well-known maxim, begins with “knowing thyself.” Failure to do so not only spells doom for the creative and indigenous imagination, but also one's sense of agency.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, an important caveat needs to be made regarding this article's call to liberate indigenous languages. Mother tongues should not be viewed as time-bound expressions of a culture's romanticised history. Nor should the symbols and meanings of a language be seen as fixed. The very fact that indigenous languages are shared and passed down by a particular people presumes that languages change as do relations. The point I have tried to impress, particularly in the first section where I addressed the home-school dichotomy, is the need to rethink the hegemonic conventions in formal education, especially when it comes to prioritising first, second, third or more languages. As many linguists have cautioned, the full extent of what societies will lose when a language dies cannot be underestimated.

To support the view that mother tongues are liberating, I demonstrate how some of the maternal nuances in our language make it more than a mode of communication for the home. Here I make the case that words are life and that life in the Pacific comprises a multiplicity of relationships. This is one of the reasons children are inducted early into the economy of telling and retelling stories in their mother tongue. It is not only conducive to their holistic wellbeing and success but also to the continuity of their cultures and communities. Sacred views of ecology have also been noted in relation to its resonance with Pacific languages

and spirituality. The first part reminds Pacific islanders of their shared identity and commitment to the ‘whole of life,’ while the second part offers a tangible and distributive approach to knowledge beyond the abstract and homogenising theories taught regularly in the classroom.

In the third section, I tried to demonstrate why being rooted in one’s own context is fundamental to the aims of contextual theology. Therein, I made the observation that contextual theology in the Pacific is still tentative and would probably bear more fruits if it engaged indigenous languages intently. I accept that this has no overnight fix, but I remain hopeful with the possibilities on the horizon. As more institutions allow the use of indigenous languages, there is potential for another boom not just in contextual theology but in creative theologies written by and for the context using its own tongues.

To that end, Pasifika theologians should also be open to the reality that differences in translation and meaning will occur. How we deal with those differences will determine where we stand on the spectrum between the belittling and the imaginative scholar. In my view, God cannot become Asian, African, black, brown, or Pacific islander if our theologians remain indecisive about rolling out a mat and inviting God to sit and drink from our coconuts.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

VEIROGOROGOCI: Re-IMAGINING A ‘WHOLE OF LIFE’ HISTORIOGRAPHY FOR PASIFIKA HISTORIES: A *BARAVI* DECOLONIAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper aims to problematise the historiography of the narratives of Pasifika histories of Christianity from an indigenous Fijian decolonial perspective. Most histories of Christianity in Pasifika are Eurocentric histories as they were framed and constructed by Western and colonial missionaries’ approaches and perspectives. The paper concentrates on John Garrett’s narrative of Fiji’s Methodist history in *Footsteps in the Sea*, in which he recorded the changes in Christian missions in Pasifika and the emergence of self-governing Island churches, particularly during the post-World War II period. The problem that emerges constantly in the narrative are silences, representations whereby the indigenous voices, culture, and knowledge are being sidelined or misrepresented. This made the narrative a colonial tool of suppression, identification, and modification. In response to the historiographical issues, the paper presents an historical method from the Fijian context to reconstruct and re-story the history of Christianity in the island of Ono-i-Lau as an alternative history. The rationale is to let the people tell their own histories rather than relying on outsiders or colonisers to do the work for them. This is a way of healing and rediscovering indigenous values, culture, and knowledge that were downplayed by hegemonic colonial projects.

Keywords

historiography, eurocentric histories, silences, representations, suppression, colonial identification and modification, re-storying, alternative histories, healing, re-awakening.

Introduction

Histories, particularly colonial and mission histories, are so powerful that in one way or another they have overwhelmingly influenced the thinking and doing of those whose stories are narrated. In a sense, this may be regarded as the colonisers’ “political tool or a tool of power, either to the exploited or to the exploiters based on the narration of it” (Rahat-Oishy and Sarker-Shama 2024, 42). However, in this article, history is viewed as a significant tool for healing, reawakening, and reviving Pasifika indigenous voices and stories that were sidelined in mainstream mission narratives.

This view is underpinned by the Baravi perspective, which aligns with the ‘whole of life’ understanding. Baravi is basically the shoreline, the point where the land and ocean meet in a respectful embrace, in a *veirogorogoci* (mutual listening) way. Perhaps the notion of respect, embrace, and mutuality upholds a balance between the Western missionary approach and the Pasifika indigenous community-based approach. The Baravi decolonial approach used here affirms the ‘whole of life’ vision where the two different approaches (Western and indigenous) are understood in a *veirogorogoci* perspective as part of each other and not as binaries. This perspective critiques the missionaries’ one-sided approach but, at the same time, acknowledges the opportunities that have evolved from the previous narrative to reconstruct an alternative narrative from an indigenous point of view that captures untold stories and unheard voices.

This article examines John Garrett’s narrative of Fiji Methodist history in *Footsteps in the Sea*, where he recounts the changes in Christian missions in Pasifika and the emergence of self-governing Island churches. Garrett’s work has been widely recognised as foundational texts because they contain rich vital accounts of the development and progress of diverse Christian missions across the Pasifika region. However, the main issue in this narrative is the one-sided approach of historiography that depended mainly on archival materials which were based on the Western missionaries’ accounts and perspectives.

Retrospectively, from a Fijian perspective this one-sided historiography is problematic and destructive, or “*vaka e tale na ua ni loka*” (like the receding of a tidal wave). This Fijian proverb is normally “said of those who, upon returning from visiting a place, take with them everything they wish to take” (Raiwalui 1954, 7). In a way, Garrett’s one-sided histories destroy the images of Pasifika indigenous people and communities. That stated, this article is not intended to rule out the significance of Garrett’s work and his contribution to Pasifika histories of Christianity. This study aims to highlight the shortfalls of one-sided or single approaches and to argue that, in order to produce a comprehensive and balanced narrative, an alternative indigenous approach is required. Hence the concept of *veirogorogoci* is a pathway to re-imagine a ‘whole of life’ historiography for Pasifika histories.

Historiography of Fijian Histories and Methodist Mission Histories

Stories of Fijian peoples’ past have been preserved in memories that are deposited in folklore, legends, myths, and indigenous knowledge for centuries. These sources are still useful today, as “many Fijian societies still practice oral transmission, preserving diverse stories with cultural significance” (Lancini et al. 2025, 7). Each tribe and clan acknowledges and upholds its own stories with pride, and these stories guide the way they think and act.

Pasifika written histories before Jim Davidson’s era are imperial histories. Neil Gunson claims that Davidson “turned imperial history on its head” (1992, 4) in the mid-1950s when he introduced the concept of island-centric history at the Australian National University. In 1991, a three-day Pasifika Islands History workshop in Canberra highlighted the emergence of a renewed vision of doing Pasifika history among Pasifika historians. The vision indicated that Canberra no longer controlled the terrain of Pasifika histories (Hempenstall 1992, 61). Brij Lal asserted that “the centre has been de-centred” (1992, xi). The established epistemological foundations and frameworks of Pasifika histories that “were conceived in the western imagination” (Ashcroft 1993, 175) were being challenged. The narratives of histories of Christianity in Fiji were constructed and grounded on these same foundations. However, the new generation of Pasifika historians envisioned a fresh direction for Pacific History (Raman 2015, 41).

In Fiji, outstanding works that followed the new direction were written by Jacqueline Ryle, Robert Nicole, and Kirste Close-Barry in the early twenty-first century. These works paved the way for a fresh understanding and analysis of narratives of Methodist histories in Fiji. The invaluable insights they offered provide a clear direction for this article. Ryle's (2001) work on the interwoven paths of Christianity and tradition in Fiji is a masterpiece of anthropological analysis of two key aspects of the Fijian people, namely "tradition" and "Christianity."

Ryle unpacks the overarching influence of colonialism and Christianity on the Fijian traditional social structure. She states that the contemporary Fijian social structure is the result of an imposed restructuring of the traditional structure to ease the administration of the colonial government (Ryle 2001, 23). Indigenous Fijians generally accepted Christianity as the new mana and spontaneously incorporated it into the Fijian social structure, such that the missionaries became advisors to the chiefs (Ryle 2001, 25). Ryle's in-depth understanding of the interwoven paths of Christianity and tradition in Fiji and how it contributed to the national crises from 1987 to 2000 testifies to the historiographical shift that was happening in the time of her writing.

Nicole's *Disturbing History* (2011) demonstrates his transformed perspective of history in his approach to archival sources. He uncovers the nature of resistance in Fiji between 1874 and 1914 and discusses who rebelled, what they were disaffected about, why they resisted, how they went about challenging their opponents, and what happened to them as a consequence. This is an aspect of Fiji's history that was sidelined in the two previous phases of history writing. His reading against the grain, concentrating on voices from below, is groundbreaking historiography.

Kirstie Close-Barry's *Divided Mission* was published in 2015. Close-Barry realised from her fieldwork that the Methodist mission in Fiji was very much a part of the colonial landscape, and that the colonisers played a large role in fostering the divisions between the indigenous and Indo-Fijian communities which we still see in Fijian society today. This is another unique piece, an exhaustive study of colonial categorisation and influence in Fiji's Methodist Mission that triggered racial tensions in Fiji.

The works mentioned above followed a different direction as far as the narrative of Fiji Methodist Mission histories was concerned. Their works signify a growing consciousness and concerted effort to decolonise Fiji's Mission histories. This article builds on their contributions, while focusing on Garrett's narrative of Fiji's Methodist Mission histories. The intention is to deconstruct his narrative and offer an alternative history arising from the stories and voices that were sidelined in mainstream histories.

Garrett's Narrative of Fiji Methodist Christianity History

Garrett's *Footsteps in the Sea* was published in 1992, the second of his three-volume series of Pasifika histories of Christianity. This book was written during his tenure as a lecturer in History of Christianity at the Pacific Theological College (now Pasifika Communities University).

Downgrading Fijian Ways of Life

At the beginning of his narrative of the history of Fijian Methodism, Garrett appears to be rather dismissive of local people's ways of life. Words like "custom" and "practices" are typically used by the West to undervalue non-Western cultures. Note the subtle tone of denigration in the latter part of this quotation:

Material support of the church was assured by regular ceremonies, the *vakamisioneri* collections, in village after village. Saleable produce—coconuts, oil, mats and many other gifts—were presented in these *solu* (freewill offerings) in the presence of chiefs and ministers (*talatala*). Gordon's administration regarded these events as forms of ecclesiastical taxation; they objected to them; in reality they replaced pre-Christian customary practice in the presence of chiefs and their priests (*bete*) with new sacral arrangements. (Garrett 1992, 155)

Garrett's reference to Gordon's comment on the replacement of pre-Christian customary practice demeans the Fijian way of life. Gifting and presentations of first fruits (*sevu* or *sigana*) to the chiefs in Fijian culture is a relational and religious obligation known as duty or *i tavi*, which literally means 'to share,' signifying that the "chief of a village is accorded precedence and respect within the village" (Nation 1978, 6). The practice was never a missionary invention but an old religious tradition appropriated by the church. Although Garrett quoted from Gordon's administration report, he made no allowances for a change in wording, hence denoting a Eurocentric attitude of belittlement. Arguably, reading Garrett's description through a *vaka e tale na ua ni loka* perspective, the Eurocentric attitude of demeaning Fijian culture is critically destructive.

The earliest missionaries who were deployed in the Pasifika islands around the late 17th century normally referred to the people's way of life as "tradition," "custom" or "practices" rather than culture. Helen Gardner detected this when explaining the views of the Spanish Jesuits missionaries who arrived on the island of Guam in 1688. According to Gardner,

European missionaries found it hard to understand and describe the lives of the people they encountered. From high lands to coral atolls, priests and reverends reported back to Europe on the polity, the religion, or the kinship of the peoples with whom they worked, using terms such as 'tradition,' 'custom' or 'practice,' or their Spanish, French, or German equivalent, often prefaced with 'primitive' or 'savage'. (2023, 349)

Gardner noticed how the Spanish Jesuit missionaries viewed Guam's people's traditions, custom, or practices as primitive and savage, a clear depiction of degrading and devaluing long-existing Pasifika cultures. Garrett fell into the same Eurocentric pattern of belittling Fijian culture by using the words "customary" and "practice" (Garrett 1992, 155). According to Gardner, the English-speaking missionaries viewed "culture as refinement and the attainment of civilization. It was reserved for the higher classes and almost exclusively to Europeans" (Garrett 2023, 349). In the missionaries' view, culture is superior to custom and practice. In using custom and practice, Garret was classifying Fijian ways of life as inferior to the European way of life, a Eurocentric way of demeaning Pasifika ways of life.

Garrett's description of the Victorian colonial Methodist missionaries' attitude in controlling the Fijian Mission revealed another trait of colonial belittlement of Fijian culture. He writes,

After 1855, when the British Methodism transferred control of the Fiji mission to Australia and New Zealand, the missionaries from those colonies were Victorian colonial Methodists. Sporadic revivalism and moral respectability were features of their culture. Methodists opposed the use of tobacco, dancing, theatrical entertainments, and—by 1900—all forms of alcohol. (Garrett 1992, 156)

In these lines, Garrett indicates that the Victorian missionaries brought with them the refined culture of Western civilization. He goes on to point out other indigenous practices, such as sexual mores and mixed dancing (*taralala*), that were strongly condemned by the missionaries. He offered a straightforward account of the missionaries' efforts rather than a rigorous critical analysis of the missionaries' attitudes and their teachings

and practices that were “accepted without question” by the Fijians (Garrett 1992, 156). Again, Garrett falls into the inclination to classify Western culture as superior to Fijian culture. Such a binary approach follows the Hegelian systematic philosophy “based on racist philosophical anthropology ... that is thoroughly Eurocentric, whereby every other continent falls necessarily behind that of Europe itself” (Tibebu 2011, xiii).

Representations

Representation is a predominant problem in Eurocentric discourses and histories. Edward Said in *Orientalism* described representation as a Western technique of making the Orient visible and clear through representations of “‘there’ ([an ‘othered’] presence) in discourse about it” (Said 1978, 22). According to Said, Orientalism is the study made by Western scholars regarding the Orient. Amal Chatterjee attests that “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Chatterjee 1998, 5). Chatterjee’s comment supports Said’s contention that the Orient is a European construction or “production of the Other” (Spivak 1988, 24). Such fabricated and sophistic construction distorts the reality of the cultures and people represented.

Garrett’s narrative encompasses a number of representations of the Fijian people and culture. His description of the physical appearance of the people is a case in point:

Fiji’s 300 widely spread islands are culturally poised on a border between Polynesia and Melanesia. The dark and muscular physique of many Fijians seems Melanesian; the structure and expectations of the pyramidal societies, grouped as confederacies under paramount chiefs, are Polynesian. Some anthropologists have called Fijians Polynesians in a Melanesian skin. (Garrett 1992, 155–156)

The classification of Pasifika islands into the three categories of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia is a colonial construction. Garrett followed the usual colonial practice of differentiating Pasifika people based on physical appearance and culture. As Nitasha Sharma aptly argues, “White people carved this vast oceanic world into categories of race, appointing Melanesians as the Black people of the Pacific because of their dark skin and curly hair” (Sharma 2021, 38). Garrett overlooked and misunderstood the diverse complexities of the identities of the peoples of Pasifika, and such labelling has influenced Pasifika people’s view of themselves.

According to Margaret Jolly, “Indigenous visions have, since the late eighteenth century, been challenged and partially transformed through encounters with the imagined” views of the colonisers (Jolly 2007, 509). Garrett based his views on scientific conclusions of anthropological studies (Garrett 1992, 156), resulting in the common Eurocentric racist and “Polynesian in a Melanesian skin” (1992, 156) are characteristic of deceitful representations.

Garrett’s reference to Fijian ways of life as “easy rhythms of Fijian farming, hunting, fishing, kerekere (spontaneous sharing) and communal exchange” (Garrett 1992, 157) is another evidence of wrongful representation. His reference to Fijians’ ways of life as “easy rhythms” indicates his deficient understanding of communal life in Fijian indigenous communities that is centred in deep cultural and spiritual meaning. Perhaps he perceived the Fijian ways of life as incompatible with the norms of financial enterprise, accounting, and investment underpinned by the capitalistic market system. I argue that Garrett misunderstood the fundamental groundings of the Fijian communal systems that are not governed by cash and profit but by a strong sense of relationality and spirituality.

An attribute of one-sided representation is clearly seen in his account of the adoption of the British tradition of Christianity, as in “the presentation of ‘loyal address’ to the British throne. Queen Victoria’s official image—moral matriarch and protector of Protestantism—was accepted without question” (Garrett 1992, 156). He also mentioned the “adoption of ‘Anglican liturgical standards’ and the introduction of trivial ‘sacred songs and solos’ from the hymnals of Moody and Sankey and Chapman/Alexander revivals within English speaking Protestantism” (1992, 158). In so doing, Garrett yielded to the Eurocentric inclination to foreground the impact of British Christian traditions. I argue that this inclination led to numerous prejudicial representations that overshadowed indigenous elements in Pasifika islands Christianity.

Silences

Silences are also common in Garrett’s narrative. Silences creep into the process of historical production at four critical moments (Trouillot 1995, 26). These moments include “the moment of the making of *sources*, the moment of the making of *archives*, the moment of the making of *narratives*, and the moment of the making of *history* in the final instance” (Trouillot 1995, 26). One vital aspect of these moments is the historian’s choice of the stories to tell, and this is where silences arise.

Garrett’s opening lines about the coming of Christianity and the involvement of Fiji’s highest chiefs encompasses a number of silences. One example is his statement, “Tongan missionaries, with others recruited in the easterly Lau group of islands in Fiji, deferred to chiefs, especially the highest chiefs” (Garrett 1992, 155). This is a very general and one-sided Eurocentric recollection, particularly since “missionaries” specifically refers to white missionaries, and the names of the Tongan native missionaries were omitted. Josua Mateinaniu, a Fijian who was very influential in the introduction of Christianity in Fiji, was likewise not recognised. Garrett missed a lot of crucial information about indigenous leaders, men and women, who laid the foundation of independent churches. His silence regarding influential indigenous peoples’ names and their roles does not do justice to their stories.

Garrett’s citation of Cakobau as the highest chief in Fiji does not provide the full picture of political leadership in Fiji. The Fijian Methodist historian Tevita Baleiwaqa (2003) insisted that the title Tui Viti (King of Fiji) came out of Rev. William Cross’ pen. Fiji had never had a king or a unified political system, as various groups had their own similar but respective political systems. In citing Cakobau as the highest chief and Fiji’s paramount military conqueror, Garrett (1992, 155) followed the Eurocentric propensity to exalt an imperial model of Christianity, excluding ordinary men, women, and young men who contributed immensely to their communal life.

Further silences are noticeable in the account of developments in the late 19th and early 20th century. Garrett concentrated solely on the effort of the missionaries in organising the structure of the mission to cater for the native Fijians’ needs and those of the Indian indentured labourers. He dedicated a paragraph to the works carried out by certain missionaries:

Langham, who had been the Wesleyan chairman on Bau for more than twenty-five years, retired in 1895; he went to England to revise the translation of the Fijian Bible. His successor William Lindsay made way in 1899 for Arthur James Small, an experienced English-born missionary who had been in Fiji since 1879. Small set his stamp on the Wesleyan Church as surely as Langham had done. (1992, 157)

This narrative focused entirely on the works of the English missionaries but was silent on the native missionaries’ labours in the interior of the larger islands and in the outer islands as well. One example is Osaiase

Qalova, who was one of the native teachers that served among several hill tribes of Namosi and Ba during the time of Thomas Baker's death in 1867.

In recounting the progress that took place at the turn of the twentieth century, Garrett directed much of his attention to the response of the Methodist Mission to the issues faced by the Indians, who had been brought to Fiji from India by the British to work as indentured labourers on their sugar cane plantations. He devoted five pages to discussing the missionary work amongst the Indians, but mainly the work done by the English missionaries like John Wear Burton and a female missionary named Hannah Dudley. A portion of the narrative that describes the situation of the Indians and the response of the missionaries reads as follows:

Hannah Dudley did not raise her voice in protest; she left denunciation and reform to the prophets. The role of political and social watchman devolved in the years before 1912 on her fellow-missionary John Wear Burton, who went to live near sugar estates and mills at Nausori, 20 kilometres east of Suva. Burton confronted the system; Hannah Dudley addressed herself to gathering part of its human fallout into the nucleus of a small Fiji-Indian church. (Garrett 1992, 158–159)

Here Garrett offers a passionate reminiscence of the horrible dehumanising situation of the Indians and the courageous response by the missionaries Burton and Dudley. While their efforts signify a vital development of the Methodist Mission, the narrative is silent on the colonial strategy and ideology that shaped what Close-Barry called the divided mission structure that “included the development of categories that defined ethnic divisions and hierarchies” (Close-Barry 2015, 1). Efforts by indigenous Fijians and local Indians that likely took place during the same period were left out. Garrett also discounted the contribution of the people of Navatu throughout Fiji in preparation for the autonomous Fiji church, which began around the time of World War II.

Silences are problematic when they marginalise people, stories, and voices. The problem with Garrett is mainly his choice of sources and stories; his selection appears to be based on his “Big Man” approach. This makes his narrative prone to multiple silences because of the biases in approach and methodology. As Kevin Olson reminds us, “Silences constitute a systemic problem of archival evidence, testimony, voice, and information about the lives of those people who are most marginalised and subordinated in society” (2023, 92). The silences in Garrett's narrative contribute to the systemic problem of marginalising Fijians by leaving them in a fixed status of subordination.

The Damage Inflicted by Vaka e Ua Ni Loka (Eurocentric) History *Ongoing Colonial Identification and Suppression*

Colonial identification is embedded in representations that are prevalent in Eurocentric discourse. Colonisers are fond of giving names or labels to the colonised to identify and differentiate them from the coloniser by making contrasts. Construction of colonised identities is a crucial constituent of colonialism. As Serap Turkmen rightly states, “Identity is one of the indispensable components of colonialism, if we consider colonialism as a body; identity constitutes its spirit while the economic exploitation is its corporal body” (2003, 188). Turkmen's comment suggests that identity is a fundamental tool that colonisers used to position the colonised in a subordinate status. This occurs by constructing imagined demeaning identities of the colonised or the construction of the “other.” Robert Young (2001) describes this in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. The process, according to Young, involves

... do[ing] away with the institutions and cultures that have already been developed ... [the] reduction of everything. ... The territory and cultural space of an indigenous society must be disrupted, dissolved, and then reinscribed according to the needs of the apparatus of the occupying power. (2001, 82)

The doing away of institutions and cultures means relinquishing the original identities of non-Europeans by imposing colonial designations such as “dark, uncivilised, primitive, infant, backward, lazy, dangerous.” This is done intentionally to discredit their indigenous beliefs, enforcing the idea that they need to do away with their own cultural ways of being and doing in order to adapt to the coloniser’s ways. Turkmen offers further insight in his assertion that the aim of colonial identification is to make “people feel that colonialism is not an unfair perpetration; rather, it is a necessary drive, ... and these people do not deserve these lands by virtue of their notorious traits” (2003, 190).

However, this decisively promotes and establishes the colonisers’ standards to serve their own interest while indigenous cultures and traditions are being suppressed. Chris Kortright elaborates when he says, “Colonization or the colonial complex started with a forced or involuntary entry whereby the colonizing power modifies basically or destroys the indigenous culture” (2011, 5). These are all part of colonial identifications that modify or destroy indigenous cultures, or what Albert Memmi calls the “colonial situation that manufactures colonialists just as it manufactures the colonized” (1965, 56). This process has destroyed both the lives and the cultures of the colonised and fostered a culture of destruction of both peoples and the natural environment.

Colonial identification operates in Eurocentric or colonial discourses, particularly in historical narratives and in “concepts and representations used in literary texts, travel writings, [and] memoirs” (Young 1994, 191) that are used extensively as sources for historical narratives. The Pasifika historian Peter Hempenstall rightly argues that “there are thousands of ‘stories’ underpinning colonialism, thousands of ways historians and others have constructed the native through their texts” (2000, 47).

Catherine Walsh concurs with Hempenstall, writing that the colonisers recreated a new “history, plurality, and social, cultural, economic, spiritual, territorial, and existential foundation of these lands, making it—by naming it—a singular unit seen and defined from the European gaze” (2018, 22). Hempenstall and Walsh agree that colonial constructed identities of the colonised are ratified and embedded in Eurocentric discourses about them. We clearly see that traits of colonial identification are visible in Garrett’s *vaka e tale na ua ni loka* narrative of the history of Fiji Methodist Christianity, where local people, cultures, knowledge, spiritualities are suppressed.

The Pasifika scholar Steven Ratuva contends that “discursive branding through ‘naming’ is a way of shaming as well as drawing a tight boundary around a group” (2019, 7). This degrading attitude conditioned Pasifika peoples to disregard or bury their identities, cultures, and ways of life, internalising colonised standards which resulted in the suppression of their identities and cultural traditions. Ratuva also offers an intriguing observation on the impacts of objectification with regards to ethnicity as a form of sociocultural identification. He asserts that social issues in Fiji regarding class, power struggles, resources dispersal, historical grievances, human rights abuse, marginalisation, and discrimination make resistance to objectification a potent force for political mobilisation (2019, 2). Objectification, like identification, has functioned as a political tool for suppressing marginalised groups. When Garrett’s work is examined through a *vaka e tale na ua ni loka* narrative lens, its suppressive nature becomes evident, requiring a reconstruction from a Pasifika indigenous perspective.

Epistemic Tragedy

Epistemic tragedy is understood as the continuing destruction of indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing by the internalised tolerance of Eurocentric or colonial narratives. The concept builds upon Spivak's (1988) notion of epistemic violence, which refers to the denial of space for the marginalised to speak for themselves. However, the notion of epistemic tragedy as used here is the continuing tolerance of existing *vaka e tale na ua ni loka* narratives that disregard indigenous knowledges and epistemologies in neocolonial contexts. Eurocentric approaches and methods of writing history have long been accepted as the most relevant way of constructing historical narratives, while others are deemed unreliable. This is truly a tragedy for indigenous epistemologies.

Pasifika indigenous ways, philosophies, knowledge, and ways of knowing were subjugated and displaced by Eurocentric narratives. Since the introduction of Eurocentric education and ways of doing history during the Christian mission and colonial era, Pasifika indigenous philosophies, knowledge, and epistemologies have been pushed to the margins. Epeli Hau'ofa noted that by the 1980s, the 'Canberra school' of Pasifika historians had conceptualised and reconstructed our pasts based on "the temporal division of the past into precontact, early contact, colonial, and postcolonial or neocolonial periods" (2000, 455). According to Hau'ofa, "In this formulation, Pasifika had no history before imperialism, only what is called 'prehistory,' 'before history'" (2000, 455). This is to say that Pasifika peoples' history only began during the encounter with the Europeans.

Even more objectionable is the classification of what our forebearers valued as our life stories as what is now referred to dismissively as myths and legends. Vilisoni Hereniko calls this "the usurpation of oral narratives by the dominant culture's narrative fiction: fairy tales, myths and legends, short stories, novels, and biblical stories" (2000, 82). By overriding indigenous knowledge with dominant Eurocentric narratives, as Haunnani-Kay Trask rightly explains, "they seek to take away from us the power to define who and what we are, and such theft testifies to the stranglehold of colonialism and explains why self-identity by Natives provokes strenuous and vicious denials by members of the dominant culture" (1991, 162). Eurocentric narratives are indeed the stranglehold of colonialism that has continuously denied Pasifika indigenous epistemologies' legitimacy, hence my argument that Garrett's narrative is emblematic of epistemic tragedy.

Western Cultural and Ideological Hegemony

The dominant Eurocentric narratives have contributed immensely to the persistent domination of Western culture and ideology in neocolonial contexts. As the Tongan poet and educator Konai Helu Thaman has stated in her discussion of Western discourse and power,

What we might perceive to constitute Pacific studies [knowledge] therefore constitutes a type of power exercised over those who are 'studied' or 'known,' and those who produce the discourse [that is, we] have the power to enforce its validity and its scientific status and make it true. (2003, 3)

Thaman affirms the relationship between discourse and power in Pasifika studies. Most of these areas of study have been designed by non-Pasifika people using Eurocentric ideological framings. "Pasifika studies, therefore, like all types of university studies, continues to be dominated by Western, scientific, and liberal thinking" (Thaman 2003, 4). Since Western academics are managing Pasifika knowledge systems, they are still in a commanding position to subjugate and control Pasifika peoples. Tagataese Tupu Tuia expresses this reality from a Samoan perspective, focusing on education as a case in point:

Education is a major colonial influence on the Samoans. ... Inadvertently, the global changes Samoa experienced meant the role of education in the western world was duplicated in this small island nation. It also marked the era where western knowledge and lifestyle were assimilated into the school system. This blend has not been without problems as cultural values and norms have been severely tested. (2019, 53)

Tuia's comment indicates the domination of Western knowledge in Samoa's educational norms. Similarly, Eurocentric histories of Christianity in Pasifika have been a colonial tool that has shaped and influenced Pasifika theological students' ways of thinking.

Towards A 'Whole of Life' History of Christianity in Fiji: A Veirogorogoci History

The urge to construct an alternative history of Christianity in Fiji by using Fijian indigenous concepts and perspectives builds on Michel Foucault's assertion that "each society has its regime of truth ... types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (1980, 131). Recent Pasifika scholars have encouraged and supported the use of indigenous concepts, traditions, and philosophies as a framework for constructing new narratives. Hence, an indigenous Fijian veirogorogoci historical approach to re-storying Fiji Methodist Christianity history is employed here to recount a story from the most remote island in Fiji, called Ono-i-Lau.

Veirogorogoci is a "body perspective" (Vaai and Casimira 2017, 3) based on the Fijian indigenous worldview. The veirogorogoci perspective makes the narrative a people's history rather than a "Big Man" narrative. It incorporates oral traditions in sources such as arts, language, life stories, places, rituals, and ceremonies. This approach aligns with Bertolt Brecht's "history from below" coined in the 1930s (de Oliveira and Courrier 2021, 1) and Ben McCullagh's (2004) "responsible or bottom-up history" that foregrounds the stories of the people.

A Baravi Narrative from the Margins: A Case Study

The story of the arrival of Christianity on Ono-i-Lau Island is not captured in Garrett's work or by the Fiji Christian missions historian Harold Wood, but it has been preserved by the people Ono-i-Lau for generations. This history is referred to as a veirogorogoci narrative from the margins partly because Ono-i-Lau is located literally on the margins of Fiji, the farthest island distant from other Fiji islands. It is also the closest island to Tonga.

Jone Dausiga of the mataqali (clan) Bukani, in Nukuni, Ono-i-Lau shared this story: "E dua na turaga ga mai na neitou mataqali, na tukai keimami o Sailosi Wai a tiko voli mai Toga cabe yani na lotu. O Sailosi Wai vata tikoga qo e vakayaca kina o Sailosi Kepa qai mai turaga ni lewa e muri, qai vakabula yaca tale kina o tamai keitou gone duadua me yacana o Sailosi Vakacabelotu. E kauta mai na lotu na turaga na tukai keitou qo e sega tu mada ga ni kila nai cakacaka ni lotu. Tukuna o koya mai talanoataka vei tuakana na tui Ono, kaya va qo e dua ka au kauta tiko mai Toga e dua Kalou era qarava tiko mai Toga ra bula kina a tamata e sega ni laurai a kalou era sa vakabauta, ia ra masuta ra bula kina a tauvimate, ruru kina a cagi cabe kina a sautu kina a vanua. Qai taroga a tuakana a Tui Ono se vala vakaevei a masu, qai kaya ko koya era cuva sobu na yadredra me tara na qele, ra qai masuta a kalou, mani kai me valata a masu mai tawa kila ko koya ai valavala ni masu, qai kacivi tale mai na bete ni lotu ena gauna ya, qai kacivi mai na bete sa qai mai nona qaqa ni masu: 'Kemuni na Kalou mai lomalagi ni vosota niu se vakanadakui kemuni tiko, ia au sa cavuta yani vei kemuni na nodra masu era sa vakabauti kemuni.' Mai cava na masu ya. Ni sa mai vakadewataki nai talanoa ni cabe ni lotu vei noqu tata era qai tukuna vu ani yabaki ga ka cabe kina a lotu mai Toga e cabe talega kina a lotu e Ono. Ia na yabaki 1826

koya cabe kina mai Toga. O Toga o Ono rau veivolekati toka ga koya sa mani vakadeitaka kina neitou tata na yabaki a cabe kina na lotu e Ono mani mai vola talega kina.”

The English translation is as follows: *“One of the men from our clan, he is our great-grandfather, named Sailosi Wai, was in Tonga when Christianity arrived there. He brought the lotu [Christian religion] but he did not know how it was practiced. He told his elder brother, who was the king of Ono at the time, ‘I have brought something with me from Tonga. There is a god that the people of Tonga have been worshipping. They could not see him, but when they prayed to him, he saved the people from sickness, calmed the storms, and brought prosperity to the land.’ The King of Ono asked Wai to pray but he could not for he did not know how to pray. Then the priest of the traditional god was brought and told to pray, and the priest then prayed, ‘Dear God, forgive me for turning my back on you. However, I am offering this prayer to you on behalf of those who believe in you.’ That is the end of the prayer. This is the story of how my great-grandfather learned about the lotu, and how the lotu made its way from Tonga to Ono. This was in the year 1826, when he made his way from Tonga to Ono. Tonga was really close to Ono-i-Lau. This is the true story of when the lotu made its way to Ono-i-Lau, so it must be written.”*

Let them Tell their Own Stories; Let their Voices be Heard

The *veirogorogoci* narrative approach allows the people to tell their own stories. Dausiga is the great-grandson of Wai, the man referenced in the story who was responsible for introducing the lotu to the people of Ono-i-Lau. Here Dausiga shares fresh memories of a significant act of his forebearers in their history. This story is a reminder to the generations of Bukani of their forebearers’ self-determination in searching for opportunities for a better life. Dausiga also relayed that in 1991 the people of Bukani erected a memorial stone to commemorate this event, and it was blessed by the President of the Methodist Church in Fiji (MCIF), then Rev. Isireli Caucau. He said, “Caucau was the first ever MCIF president to have visited Ono-i-Lau and he came in time to bless the memorial stone. We have also witnessed God’s favour and blessing in our clan, which is the fruit of what our forebearers had done” (Dausiga 2024).

Peoples’ stories and voices can be heard when they are given the opportunity to construct their written narratives. The *veirogorogoci* approach aptly provided this opportunity in capturing Dausiga’s story in the Fijian language. Dausiga revealed that the introduction of Christianity was entirely the responsibility of the local people, as it was introduced by Wai and his elder brother, who was the King of Ono, and the bete (indigenous priest) around the year 1826. This happened without any missionaries’ involvement.

The involvement of Dausiga’s forebearers makes the narrative unique and different from the dominant mission narratives that are mainly about the “white man’s contact” (Nabobo-Baba 2004, 22). This approach contributes to resistance against ongoing colonial domination through neocolonial systems and structures in academic research and writing.

Valuing Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Culture

The *veirogorogoci* narrative also upholds indigenous ways of knowing and culture. It foregrounds stories kept in oral traditions that encompass stories, genealogy, art, names of people and places, and nature. Dausiga draws from these sources while narrating the story of his great-grandfather. Firstly, he briefly recalled their genealogy by starting his narration in this way: “O Sailosi Wai vata tikoga qo e vakayaca kina o Sailosi Kepa qai mai turaga ni lewa e muri, qai vakabula yaca tale kina o tamai keitou gone duadua me yacana o Sailosi Vakacabelotu” (Dausiga 2024).

Genealogy is a central mode of preserving stories, as shown in Dausiga's story, in which he briefly paused to explain the lineage from his great-grandfather to his uncles, identifying them by name. Such a pattern makes the narrative more profound because the stories are kept alive through different interwoven sources—lineage, relationships, and names. Dausiga's uncle's second name, Vakacabelotu, literally means "to bring or introduce the lotu," pointing to that past event when Wai brought the lotu from Tonga. Archival materials tend to solidify stories and meanings as absolute and stagnant, whereas indigenous sources, such as genealogies and naming practices, allow meanings to remain dynamic and responsive to context. The ownership of Eurocentric history belongs only to authors, archives, or libraries, while Wai's story is a community asset which is now kept by his descendants and the people of Bukani, as custodians of the story.

In the retelling of such consequential narratives, proper traditional protocol need to be respected and carefully followed to ensure that the community gives its consent and permission for their stories to be used in academic research or writing. I received such permission from the Bukani clan after presenting the appropriate Fijian protocol to Dausiga at Samuela Moceituba's residence in Nakasi. Dausiga, as an elder of Bukani, received the presentation on behalf of his people. Even though he is Wai's great-grandson, he acknowledged the larger family—the clan of which he is a part.

This process ensures that community knowledge and cultural values are acknowledged and respected. The *baravi indigenous approach* challenges destructive discourses and "offer[s] radical alternatives ... [that] restore historical agency to cultures and communities" (Dei, Sefa, and Rosenberg 2000, 87). This enables Pasifika historians to critique the Eurocentric Enlightenment scientific method "with which we are in sympathy, enough to subvert [it]" (Spivak 2012, 4). Indigenous knowledge and values are vital agencies of finding and restoring life, in a way that overturns colonial approaches, while empowering indigenous communities.

Conclusion

This work brings to light the problems of Garrett's Eurocentric or *vaka e tale na ua ni loka* history of Christianity in Pasifika. It detects how that work is connected to imperial or colonial domination that is destructive to Pasifika indigenous cultural values, knowledge, and ways of knowing. The Eurocentric narrative embedded in Garrett's well-meaning history of Pasifika Christian history has been influential in conditioning Pasifika peoples' and communities' ways of thinking and doing, which has lured them into imperial suppression and colonial historical crimes.

As an alternative method, the *veirogorogoci* decolonial approach can be used for re-righting and re-writing histories of Christianity in Pasifika. The spirit of the *veirogorogoci* embraces oral traditions, enduring cultural values, wisdom, and indigenous agency to root Pasifika histories of Christianity in Pasifika contexts. Re-rooting makes newly expressed narratives a means of cultural and intellectual "recovery, renewal, and re-awakening" (Meyer 2013, 249–260) from ongoing colonial suppression, marginalisation, and extraction to ensure wholeness and wellbeing for the 'whole of life' in Pasifika.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

Inception

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

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

Probing the Meaning and Uses of Indigenous Mats

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Weaving Process as a Theoretical Framework

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1: The Weaving Process⁴

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

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

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

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

Interwoven Spaces Framework

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

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

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

Need for a Negotiating Spaces Hermeneutics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Philosophies Embedded in Indigenous Mats: Hermeneutical Principles

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

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

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

Indigenous Self

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

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

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

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

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

Interconnected Relationships

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

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

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

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

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

Affirming Belongingness

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

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

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

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

Negotiating Spaces

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

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

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

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

Integrating Indigenous Mutual Philosophies and its Prospects

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

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

Building Relationships

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

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

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

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

Embracing the Values of Indigenous Mats

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

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

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

Weaving Inter-Indigenous Communities

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can Pasifika Theologians Convert Neoliberal Cannibals?

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Abstract

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

“Cannibal Talk”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mana, Tapu, and Utu

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Returning the Gaze, Reversing the Mission

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 1990s Sustainability Movement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Returning to Fenua, Moana, and Lagi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From the TBL to the Oikos Triplets

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A FA'ATOETOEMULIOLA READING OF MARK 12:41–44 WITH REFERENCE TO THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SAMOA

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Abstract

This article offers a Pasifika relational reading of Mark 12:41–44 through the Samoan concept of Fa'atoetoemuliola, in conversation with the life and practices of the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS). The widow's offering is often interpreted as a model of sacrificial faith and total devotion and is frequently used to encourage Christians to give generously to the church. However, in contexts where church members already carry significant financial obligations, such interpretations can become harmful, especially when they place pressure on the most vulnerable to give beyond their means. This article argues that within the MCS, the theology and practice of giving have been shaped by a complex entanglement of Samoan relational values and missionary-introduced monetary systems. While giving remains central to the life of the church, the glorification of "giving all" risks distorting both the biblical text and Samoan understandings of communal sharing. By drawing on Fa'atoetoemuliola, this paper proposes an alternative theological framework in which giving is understood not as self-depletion for institutional survival, but as a relational, life-giving practice of sharing that preserves dignity, reciprocity, and communal wellbeing.

Keywords: fa'atoetoemulioa, relationality, methodist church of samoa, tautua lotu

Introduction

The story of the widow's offering in Mark 12:41–44 is often preached as one of the clearest biblical examples of sacrificial giving. The widow is commonly presented as a model of faith because she gives "all she had to live on" (Mark 12:44). In many Christian contexts, this interpretation has been used to encourage believers to give generously and wholeheartedly to God. Yet such a reading becomes deeply problematic when it is applied in contexts where people already face significant financial burdens, and where church giving is shaped not only by faith but by social, cultural, and institutional pressures.

This tension is particularly relevant for the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS), where giving occupies a central place in the life of the church. The MCS, like many Samoan churches, is sustained largely through the offerings of its members. This article does not seek to dismiss or degrade the importance of giving to the church. On the contrary, it acknowledges that the church depends in large part on the faithful contributions of its people. However, this essay raises a critical question: Can the language of "giving all" be responsibly preached and practiced in a way that does not endanger the wellbeing of individuals and families?

As a Samoan and as someone reflecting from within the life of the church, I am concerned not simply with whether people give, but with how giving is theologically understood and culturally practiced. In the Samoan context, giving is never merely an individual act of generosity. It is embedded within relationships, kinship obligations, reciprocity, and communal identity. This means that church giving cannot be examined only through biblical exegesis or church finance but must also be understood through the relational worlds that shape Samoan life.

I suggest that the common use of Mark 12:41–44 to praise total sacrificial giving can become dangerous when it is used to normalise financial self-depletion, especially among those who are already vulnerable. In response, I propose a Pasifika relational rereading of the widow's offering through the Samoan concept of Fa'atoetoemuliola. Rather than treating giving as an isolated act of individual sacrifice, Fa'atoetoemuliola offers a framework for understanding giving as relational sharing that is tied to communal life, mutual care, and the responsibility to live life for others.

I should also note that, as a Samoan attempting to write from within my own cultural world, I do not claim that this article presents *the* definitive Samoan understanding of giving or of Fa'atoetoemuliola. Rather, what follows is a Samoan construction that draws together biblical interpretation, theological reflection, and cultural concepts in order to contribute to a wider conversation about faith, money, and relational life in the MCS. I argue that Mark 12:41–44 should not be uncritically used in the Methodist Church of Samoa as a model of total sacrificial giving, because such a reading can reinforce forms of religious and cultural pressure that burden vulnerable households. Instead, I propose Fa'atoetoemuliola as a Samoan relational hermeneutic that reframes faithful giving not as self-depleting sacrifice but as life-sustaining communal sharing grounded in responsibility, reciprocity, and the continuation of relational life.

Biblical Giving

In the biblical tradition, the practice of giving was initially centred on the religious life of Israel and directed largely inward, toward the temple and its functions. Offerings, tithes, and other contributions were given to sustain worship, priestly service, and the wider life of the covenant community (Freedman 1992). In this sense, giving was closely tied to the maintenance of Israel's religious and communal identity.

A significant development occurs, however, in the Christian ministry of the Apostle Paul. While remaining rooted in the Jewish tradition of communal support, Paul extends the practice of giving beyond ethnic and geographic boundaries through what he calls “the collection for the saints” (τῆς λογεῖας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους) (Downs 2008, 1). Through this collection, predominantly Gentile churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Galatia were invited to contribute to the needs of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem.

Paul's commitment to this collection is evident in the amount of attention he devotes to it in passages such as 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15, and Romans 15:14–32. The collection was not a minor administrative concern but a significant theological and communal act. Indeed, in Romans 15:30–31, Paul reveals the seriousness of this mission by expressing his willingness to face danger and even possible rejection in order to personally deliver the collected funds to Jerusalem.

This is important because it marks a shift in the theological imagination of giving. Giving is no longer directed only inward toward one's own religious centre, but outward as an expression of solidarity, mutual care, and shared belonging across difference. Paul's collection suggests that Christian giving is not merely about sustaining institutions, but also about participating in a wider network of relational responsibility. This broader biblical framework is important for examining how giving is understood and practiced in the life of the contemporary church.

Giving in the Methodist Church of Samoa

The practice of giving within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) has undergone significant transformation since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. As Kolia Tulia (2020) observes, traditional (pre-Christian) Samoan giving was largely qualitative and relational, expressed through the giving of food, fine mats, agricultural produce, and other forms of communal contribution. Such giving was embedded within shared values of reciprocity, kinship, and collective responsibility rather than being reduced primarily to monetary exchange.

With the arrival of Christian missionaries, however, this relational economy of giving was gradually reshaped through a Western model of monetary contribution. Giving became increasingly tied to the financial support of church structures and institutional operations. Carrington Aiolupotea (2012) notes that this shift became formalised through the introduction of the May Offering, modelled after the English practice of setting aside a Sunday in May for mission fundraising. Over time, this developed into a central feature of the economic life of the MCS.

Both Tulia (2020) and Aiolupotea (2012) show that this historical shift produced a complex intersection of theology, culture, and economics within the MCS. On the one hand, giving continues to function as an important expression of faith and commitment. On the other hand, when monetary giving is absorbed into a Samoan social world already shaped by reciprocity and obligation, offerings can come to carry meanings beyond devotion alone. Aiolupotea (2012) highlights how offerings may also become markers of family honour, social standing, and prestige within the church and village community.

Tulia (2020) builds on this concern by arguing that such practices, particularly in relation to major church offerings, can become financially burdensome for families. This burden is intensified by expectations tied to the cultural value of *tautua* (service), where households may feel compelled to give beyond their actual capacity in order to preserve dignity, belonging, and respect within communal life. In this sense, giving in the MCS cannot be understood simply as generosity or stewardship; it must also be examined as a theological and cultural practice shaped by obligation, identity, and institutional expectation.¹

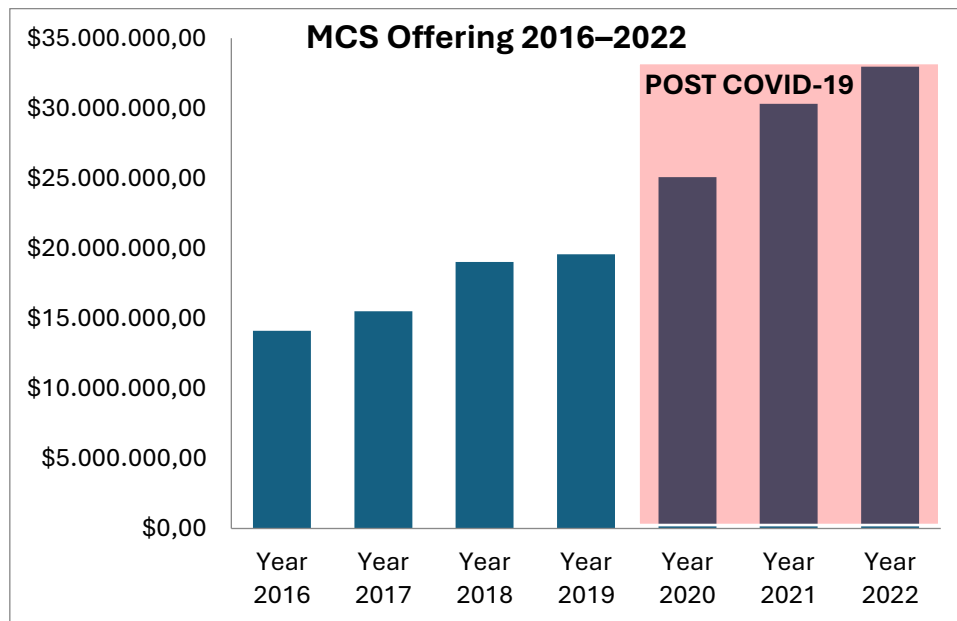
Annual Offering During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Samoa was among the countries that initially managed to delay the spread of COVID-19 until 2021. Despite relatively low infection rates in the early stages of the pandemic, the economic impact was significant. Samoa's economy, heavily dependent on tourism and remittances from Samoans living in the diaspora, faced considerable strain when international borders were closed. Restrictions on social gatherings, including church attendance, further disrupted traditional patterns of community life and economic exchange.

Given these conditions, a decline in church offerings might reasonably have been expected. However, the opposite occurred. As shown in Figure 1, annual offerings within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) not only remained stable but increased. In the 2017 MCS financial report, the annual offering reached 15.4 million tala (WST\$), marking a 9.2% increase from the previous year. But by 2022, total contributions had risen even more significantly, even within the context of ongoing economic uncertainty generated by the pandemic.

¹ The Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) consists of 17 synods across 6 countries, including Samoa, which is the Headquarters of the Church. The recorded membership of the MCS in 2022 was 35,078 individuals, with 69% residing within Samoa, 12% in New Zealand, 11% in the United States and the US territory America Samoa, and 8% in Australia (MCS Minutes 2022).

Figure 1: MCS Annual Offering 2021-2022



On one level, this increase may be interpreted as evidence of strong communal solidarity and commitment. It reflects the enduring importance of the church within Samoan society, as well as the cultural values of *tautua* (service) and *fa'aSāmoa*, where giving remains central to communal identity. For a church community of fewer than 36,000 members to sustain such levels of contribution suggests a deep sense of belonging and responsibility toward the church.

At the same time, this trend raises important theological and pastoral questions. If giving continues to rise even during periods of economic hardship, it invites reflection on the conditions under which such giving takes place. Is this increase purely an expression of voluntary generosity, or does it also reflect underlying pressures shaped by obligation, expectation, and the social importance of church participation? In light of the concerns raised by Sitivi Kamu Wright (2019), Terry Pouono (2021), and Jemaima Tiatia (1998), such patterns may also indicate that practices of giving are not always experienced as freely chosen but are entangled within systems of relational and institutional expectations.

This tension is critical for understanding the practice of giving in the MCS. While the resilience of offerings during the pandemic can be read as a sign of faith and commitment, it may also point to the need for a deeper re-examination of how giving is taught, practiced, and sustained within the life of the church.

Giving All in the MCS?

Sitivi Kamu Wright (2019) addresses the issue of excessive giving within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) through his reading of Acts 5:1–11, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Wright draws this biblical narrative into conversation with contemporary practices of offering in the MCS, particularly the widespread expectation that faithful giving requires one to “give all” to the church. Wright challenges this interpretation by arguing that the problem in Acts 5 is not that Ananias and Sapphira failed to give everything, but that their offering was marked by dishonesty. In this sense, the text does not establish total material surrender as the standard of faithful giving. Rather, it calls into question the integrity and intention behind the act of giving.

More importantly, Wright critiques how this passage has been used within the MCS. He observes that the narrative is sometimes interpreted in ways that place pressure on church members to give beyond

their means, effectively transforming what should be a voluntary act of faith into an expectation shaped by fear, obligation, and coercion. In response, Wright argues that Christian giving should remain a voluntary and responsible practice. Offering should be made from the heart, but in a way that takes seriously one's relational responsibilities, including family wellbeing and daily needs.

Giving, therefore, is not about emptying oneself completely for the church, but about participating honestly and faithfully within a broader network of relationships. Wright thus exposes a critical tension within the MCS: the shift from giving as a relational and voluntary practice to giving as a pressured expectation. This raises an important theological question for the church today, namely, whether the call to "give all" reflects the intention of the biblical text, or whether it represents a misinterpretation that places undue burden on the most vulnerable members of the community.

Economic Strain

Pouono (2021) examines the implications of taulaga (offering) within the CCCS (Christian Congregational Church of Samoa), particularly in the context of the Samoan diaspora church in Aotearoa New Zealand. He highlights the significant financial pressures that church obligations can place on Samoan families, at times pushing them toward extreme measures such as mortgaging homes, borrowing from loan sharks, or turning to gambling and other harmful means of survival. Pouono further notes the wider social consequences associated with these pressures, including domestic violence, gambling-related problems, poor educational outcomes, migration, shifts in church affiliation, and in some cases even suicide.

Tiatia's sociological-theological analysis similarly observes that "the practice of the love offering made to the pastor places financial strain on the parishioners, providing young people with a motive to reject their traditional churches" (1998, 143). Taken together, these studies show that church giving is not merely a theological or cultural matter, but one that carries significant social and economic consequences for Samoan families.

Pouono also explores how taulaga has been translated from the village setting into the urban and diasporic context of Aotearoa New Zealand. He describes this process as "re-traditionalization," where cultural practices are reshaped and reapplied within new social environments. At the same time, he questions the CCCS's responsiveness to contemporary global and social challenges, calling instead for a more prophetic and responsible theology of stewardship.

Importantly, Pouono does not argue for the abandonment of taulaga. Rather, he proposes that giving to God should be understood more holistically. This includes not only financial contributions to the church but also forms of service such as caring for the homeless, supporting safe homes, and responding to broader community needs. In this way, he reframes taulaga as a practice that should contribute to the flourishing of people and communities, rather than deepen their hardship.

Declining Membership in Samoan Churches

Alec Thornton, Maria Kerslake, and Tony Binns, in *Alienation and Obligation: Religion and Social Change in Samoa* (2010), examine how urbanisation, globalisation, and increasing economic pressures are reshaping Samoan kinship obligations and religious participation. They document how mainline churches, including the Methodist Church, have struggled to adapt to the changing socio-economic realities of their members. In many cases, Samoan churches continue to prioritise financial contributions while insufficiently addressing the growing economic strain experienced by families.

This tension has contributed to feelings of alienation among church members, particularly those who are unable to meet financial and social expectations. As a result, some Samoans are shifting toward

denominations such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) and the Assemblies of God (AOG), which are perceived to require lower financial contributions and offer more flexible forms of community engagement (Thornton *et al.* 2010). Other Samoans, particularly in urban contexts such as Apia, are distancing themselves not only from church obligations but also from wider kinship responsibilities, seeking greater independence from traditional structures.

These findings suggest that church giving cannot be separated from broader questions of belonging, obligation, and economic survival. When participation in church life becomes closely tied to financial capacity, those who are unable to give may experience exclusion, shame, or withdrawal from both church and community life.

Declining Membership in the MCS

This broader pattern is also reflected within the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS). In 2001, the MCS accounted for approximately 15% of the national population, but by 2021 this had declined to 12% (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2022). While population growth complicates the interpretation of these figures, the decline nonetheless raises important questions about participation and belonging in the church.

More striking, however, is the relationship between membership trends and financial giving. Even as membership fluctuates and, in some cases, declines, financial contributions to the church continue to remain strong or even increase. This creates a significant tension: a church that is financially sustained, yet relationally strained. This tension invites deeper reflection. If, as Wright (2019), Pouono (2021), and Tiatia (1998) suggest, practices of giving can place considerable pressure on individuals and families, then declining participation may not simply be a matter of changing preferences or modern influences. It may also reflect the lived experience of those who find the expectations of church life increasingly difficult to sustain.

In this sense, the question is not only why membership is declining, but also how the theology and practice of giving shape the conditions of belonging within the church. To address this, it becomes necessary to return to a more fundamental question: who are we as a people, and how should giving be understood within our relational world? It is at this point that the Samoan concept of Fa'atoetoemuliola becomes an important lens for rethinking the meaning and practice of giving.

Fa'atoetoemuliola

Fa'atoetoemuliola is a Samoan term derived from the *ola*, a traditional fishing basket woven from tender coconut leaves. The term itself can be broken down to clarify its meaning. Fa'atoetoe refers to the act of saving or setting aside a portion of the catch, while muli refers to the bottom of the *ola* basket. In this sense, Fa'atoetoemuliola literally refers to what is intentionally left or preserved at the bottom of the basket. Yet, as a cultural concept, it carries meanings that extend far beyond its literal sense and offers an important way of rethinking giving, sharing, and responsibility within Samoan relational life.

Like many Samoan concepts, Fa'atoetoemuliola does not have a single fixed interpretation. Mosese Ma'ilo understands the concept through the image of a master fisherman who pours out his catch for the village (20018a). In this reading, the term evokes generosity, provision, and sacrificial sharing. Ma'ilo's work itself may also be understood as an act of such sharing, offering knowledge gained abroad back to the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) as a communal gift.

At the same time, alternative interpretations exist. Aisoli Iuli, for example, interprets Fa'atoetoemuliola as referring to "leftovers," that is, what remains after the main distribution has taken place (2021). However, Samoan philosophy reminds us that "e talalasi Samoa"—there is no single telling, but 'many

tellings’ of a multifaceted story (Lavea 2023). Rather than resolving these interpretations into a single meaning, I approach them as part of a wider interpretive tradition.

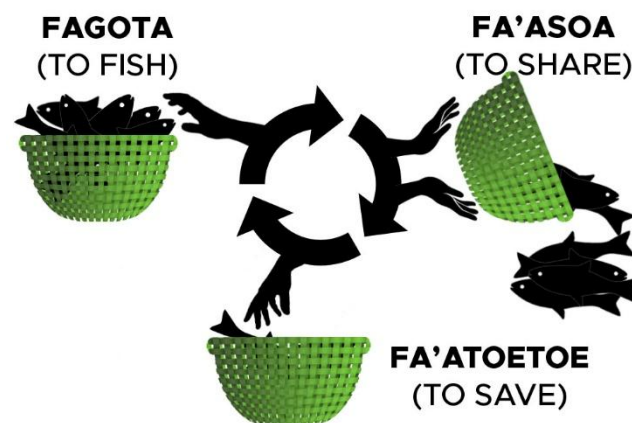
One of the legendary stories associated with the term comes from the village of Samata and concerns a couple and their three children: the twin brothers Mataitai and Mataiuta, and their sister Sina. One day the parents went fishing, and upon their return, Sina was waiting by the shore. As custom required, Sina performed the fa’asoa a le taliuta (the sharing of the receiver), receiving and distributing the catch brought back from the sea. Yet the mother instructed her, “Aua nei galo se Fa’atoetoemuliola aua Mataitai ma Mataiuta—Do not forget to save a Fa’atoetoemuliola for Mataitai and Mataiuta” (Galuluefaatasi 2023).

This proverb is significant. Galuluefaatasi asks, would a parent really save mere “leftovers” for their own children? His answer is no. However, when understood in light of the structure of the ola basket, where the first catch is placed at the bottom and later catches are layered above, what lies at the bottom is not what is least valuable, but what has been intentionally preserved. In this sense, Fa’atoetoemuliola does not refer to what is discarded, but to what is set aside with care for those who must also live (Galuluefaatasi 2023).

This distinction is crucial for the present study. While some Christian interpretations of giving glorify the act of giving everything away, Fa’atoetoemuliola offers a different theological imagination. It suggests that faithful sharing does not require the total depletion of the giver, but rather a relational wisdom that ensures life is sustained beyond the immediate act of generosity. Giving, in this framework, is not simply about sacrifice for its own sake, but about sharing in a way that preserves dignity, responsibility, and the wellbeing of those bound together in relationship.

Fa’atoetoemuliola Hermeneutics

Fa’atoetoemuliola may be understood not only as a concept, but as a process consisting of three interrelated phases: Fagota (to fish), Fa’asoa (to share), and Fa’atoetoe (to set aside or preserve). These phases are rooted in Samoan fishing practices, where emphasis is placed on venturing out to gather what is available, distributing it within the community, and intentionally preserving a portion for those who must also live. Together, they form a relational pattern of life that resists both accumulation for its own sake and total self-depletion.



Fagota (to fish)

Fagota refers to the act of going out to fish. More than simply catching fish, it involves movement, attentiveness, labour, and relationship with the sea as a source of life. In this sense, Fagota may be understood

not merely as an act of extraction, but as a relational engagement with what sustains life. The fish are not produced by the fisher, but encountered, received, and gathered within the limits of one's environment.

This phase may also be understood theologically through the concept of *itulagi* (horizon) As Upolu Vaai writes:

Our *itulagi* forms our lifeworld conditioned by our contexts, education, faith, culture, or traditions, to name a few. Therefore, every perspective is limited, or every theology is partial, because it is always constructed from one's particular *itulagi*. The task of theology is to weave these diverse *itulagi* to create a theological mat for maturing our faith into relationships. (Vaai, cited in Havea 2021, 16)

In the spirit of Vaai's reflection, Fagota may be understood as the gathering of what is encountered from within one's own *itulagi*. Just as a fisher cannot gather everything in the sea, no theology can contain every story, every perspective, or every truth. What is gathered is always partial, shaped by location, relationship, and experience. This is important for the present study because it frames the reading of Mark 12:41–44 not as a universal or final interpretation, but as one emerging from a particular Samoan *itulagi*. The *ola* basket, in this sense, becomes a fitting metaphor for theological work itself: it can hold what is gathered, but it cannot hold everything.

Literature Review of Mark 12:41–44

The interpretation of Mark 12:41–44, focusing on the generous act of the poor widow, has been subject to diverse perspectives. In traditional readings, the widow's gift is celebrated as an extraordinary example of sacrificial giving, highlighting her deep devotion and selflessness. Early church figures such as Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine praised the widow's generosity as a testament to the true spirit of giving, commending her act as surpassing that of the wealthy. This interpretation presents her as a model of faith, whose offering is seen as spiritually valuable due to its self-sacrificial nature and her humility, as she gives all she has out of devotion (Oden and Hall 1998, 176–180).

Addison Wright offers a divergent perspective, viewing the widow's act as a lament rather than a model of piety, an interpretation that has sparked considerable debate (Wright 1982, 256). Wright suggests that the widow's offering should be understood as a product of the religious system's failure rather than as an act of virtue. According to Wright, her decision to give everything she has can be seen as a tragic consequence of misguided teachings by the scribes, who have instilled in her a distorted sense of duty. This critical view positions the religious authorities as exploitative, leading vulnerable people like the widow to actions that exacerbate their own suffering rather than empowering them (Wright 1982, 256).

Further challenging the traditional perspective, Joy Parker (2015) critiques the institutional context that praises the widow's sacrificial giving. Parker argues that interpreting her act as virtuous can unwittingly endorse a religious system that places the burden of financial support on the most disadvantaged. In Parker's view, this passage reflects an unjust system that expects the poor to support its existence, thus ignoring their own needs. Parker suggests that the story of the widow underscores the consequences of a religious institution that prioritises ideological principles over genuine compassion and practical support for the vulnerable (Parker 2015, 10).

Elizabeth Malbon challenges Wright's critical interpretation, offering a reading that places the widow among a broader group of exemplary women in Mark's Gospel. Malbon asserts that the widow's act of giving is consistent with the character and faith shown by other women in the Gospel, such as the woman who anoints Jesus and the woman with a haemorrhage. Her "gospel women" narrative frames the widow not as a victim of institutional exploitation but as a figure of piety and devotion, thereby reaffirming the classic view of the widow as a heroine of faith rather than as someone misled or exploited (Malbon 1991, 589–604).

The story of the widow's offering in Mark's Gospel invites both praise and criticism, revealing contrasting perspectives on the nature of sacrifice and the responsibilities of religious institutions. While traditional interpretations view her act as exemplary, scholars like Wright and Parker maintain that the widow's gift highlights the failures of the religious establishment, questioning whether the widow's giving reflects devotion or exploitation. Malbon's perspective, however, revisits the classic interpretation, positioning the widow as part of a broader narrative of pious and courageous women in Mark's Gospel, each demonstrating selfless faith in different ways. Together, these interpretations underscore the theological and ethical complexities embedded within the widow's story and offer diverse insights into its implications for teachings on generosity and institutional accountability.

What we can gather from this brief literature review are two main interpretations of the widow's offering in Mark 12:41–44. The traditional view, supported by early church figures and scholars like Malbon (1991), sees the widow as a model of sacrificial faith and devotion, praising her for giving all she had out of love for God. In contrast, critics like Wright (1982) and Parker (2015) argue that her act reflects the failings of a religious system that exploits the poor, portraying her not as a heroine but as a victim of institutional injustice. I offer an alter(native) view from my own *itulagi* which seeks neither to praise the widow nor to view her as a victim of an unjust institution.

Fa'asoa (to share)

Within Samoan fishing practices, there are at least two common ways of distributing the catch: *fa'asoa tuafoe* and *fa'asoa a le taliuta*. *Fa'asoa tuafoe* refers to the distribution of fish while still at sea, where the catch is apportioned among the fishermen by using the oars. This distribution is not for private possession, but to ensure that no one returns to shore empty-handed. By contrast, *fa'asoa a le taliuta* refers to the distribution that takes place on land, where the full catch is poured out onto a mat, sorted, and then distributed by the village men.

The distinction between these two practices is important. In *fa'asoa tuafoe*, the fish are not poured out or sorted into categories of greater or lesser value. They are shared directly from the *ola* basket as gifts from the moana (ocean), without being ranked as superior or inferior (Tauiliili 2009, 116). This practice suggests a mode of distribution grounded not in competition or hierarchy but in relational sufficiency and communal care.

In this regard, it is important to note that *fa'asoa* in Samoa is not best understood simply as “giving.” To speak only of “giving” can imply a one-directional movement from one individual to another, often centred in the generosity or sacrifice of the giver. *Fa'asoa*, however, is more accurately understood as sharing within a community of relationships. Its emphasis is not on individual ownership or heroic generosity, but on communal participation, reception, and mutual belonging.

This does not mean that the individual is dissolved into the collective, nor that communal sharing is free from personal labour or sacrifice. To frame the issue as a choice between the individual and the community imposes a false binary that does not adequately reflect relational worldviews. As Manulani Meyer observes, there is “individual transformation through collective excellence, collective transformation through individual excellence” (Meyer 2008). The person and the community are therefore not opposing categories, but mutually constitutive dimensions of life.

Read in this way, *Fa'asoa* does not deny the significance of individual effort or cost. Rather, it situates such effort within a relational economy in which the individual is sustained through the collective, and the collective is likewise sustained through the contribution of persons. The fisherman's act of distribution may involve sacrifice, but it is not a theology of self-erasure. It is an act of participation in a network of reciprocal

life where giving, receiving, and preserving remain bound together. In this sense, Fa'asoa provides an important corrective to individualistic understandings of Christian giving. It suggests that what matters is not only what one gives, but how resources circulate within a relational world so that life is sustained among the community as a whole.

Relational Beings

This understanding of sharing is inseparable from the Samoan understanding of personhood. In Samoa, the concept of tagata (person) transcends individualism and instead reflects a communal identity deeply rooted in collective existence (Vaai 2014). A person is not first imagined as an isolated self who then enters into relationships, but as one who is already constituted by relationships with land, sea, sky, ancestors, family, and community.

This relational worldview is embedded within the Samoan language itself. As Vaai notes (2019), terms for human life are deeply intertwined with the natural world. Soil ('ele'ele), land (fanua), roots (a'a), stones (fatu), and even the placenta are linguistically and symbolically connected to human identity, genealogy, and belonging. These interconnections point to a holistic understanding of existence in which life is not compartmentalised into separate spheres but held together in a living web of relations. Vaai writes:

Pacific people are born into a multi-dimensional flow of life, enhanced and protected by relationships. We do not create relationships. Rather, we continue relationships. And through us, relationships flow. We are relational beings who are 'more' than the assumed individualised self. Because we are 'more' we are formed in relationality, and through this mystery we deliberately recondition and reconfigure the world around us. (2017, 27)

Within this worldview, giving is not simply an individual act of transfer, but part of the ongoing flow of life between persons and communities. As Vaai argues (2001), Samoan society has traditionally valued reciprocity, interdependence, and faaaloalo (respect/honour), where the dignity of others is upheld through relational acts of support. Practices such as *osi-aiga* during family *fa'alavelave* reflect this ethos, where what matters is not only the material item given, but the presence, participation, and honour embodied in the act.

Vaai (2001) also notes that the growing influence of monetary systems has increasingly reshaped Samoan understandings of giving, at times marginalising the older emphasis on presence, reciprocity, and communal support. This shift is significant for the present study. If giving becomes reduced to measurable contributions or financial sacrifice alone, it risks losing its relational depth. Fa'asoa, by contrast, reminds us that the heart of Samoan sharing lies not in the amount given, but in the sustaining of life, dignity, and relationship.

Relational Sharing

The Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS) holds its annual offering in the month of November, a timing that carries significance beyond institutional scheduling. In the Samoan traditional calendar, November is known as *Taumafa mua*, meaning "the first of plenty" or "the first fruits." The significance of this month lies in its association with the first signs of abundance emerging from the natural world. In this sense, the choice of November for the annual offering is not arbitrary but resonates deeply with a Samoan ecological and cultural understanding of abundance. As Penehuro Lefale points out (2003, 11), November is a season marked by the abundance of fish and the much-anticipated *palolo*. This abundance is not limited to the sea alone. The land also yields fruits and vegetation, while the sky contributes through the season of *lupe* (the pigeon), all of which together signal a time of plenty.

November, therefore, represents a moment when the land, sea, and sky each participate in the offering of life. This ecological interrelatedness helps illuminate why November became the month of annual offering in the MCS. Rather than being merely a church-imposed fundraising period, it may also be understood as a time that aligns with a pre-existing Samoan rhythm of ecological offering. The land, sea, and sky are already giving from their abundance; the church's annual offering therefore takes place within a wider cosmic movement of sharing.

This theological insight is made explicit in a 2015 annual offering sermon preached by Reverend Iose Semi, who described November as a season in which all of creation participates in a collective act of giving. The sea gifts its fish and palolo, the land gifts its fruits and vegetation, and the sky gifts its birds. In this way, the annual offering is framed not simply as a human obligation, but as participation in a relational cycle of abundance already initiated by creation itself. Seen through this lens, the significance of November is that it situates the church's act of offering within a Samoan cosmological logic of first abundance and relational sharing. The question, then, is not merely how much one ought to give, but how one responds as part of a world in which giving has already begun through the life-giving abundance of the land, sea, and sky.

Fa'atoetoe: An Alternative

Within Samoan fishing practice, after the catch has been distributed to the village, a portion is intentionally set aside for the family who remained at home praying for the safety of the fishing expedition. This preserved portion is the Fa'atoetoemuliola. Traditionally, the fisherman does not eat from his own catch but distributes it for the village while also ensuring that there is a portion left for the household. In this way, the fisherman's act is not one of self-erasure, but of relational circulation: the blessings of the village flow toward the fisherman, and through him toward his family.

This practice offers an important theological alternative to interpretations of giving that glorify total depletion. In Fa'atoetoemuliola, faithful sharing does not mean giving until nothing remains but participating in a cycle of provision in which life continues to flow through relationships. What is set aside is not selfish withholding but a necessary act of care for those who are also bound into the relational economy of the gift.

This alternative resonates with several theological reflections on giving within Samoan and biblical contexts. Mosese Ma'ilo (2018), Upolu Vaai (2001), and David Malick (2019) each engage, in different ways, with the theme of sacrificial giving. Ma'ilo, in his discussion of Tautua Lotu, describes service to the church as sacred, embodied, and deeply interwoven with the Samoan matai (chiefly) system. Acts such as preparing food, contributing financially, and supporting church projects reflect a profound entanglement of the fa'aSāmoa (Samoan way) and Christian theology. Yet Ma'ilo also acknowledges that this sacred service has increasingly become commercialised, blurring the line between spiritual devotion and economic expectation.

Vaai (2001) critiques how the theology of giving in the Methodist Church of Samoa (MCS), once grounded in Christ's sacrificial example, has shifted under missionary influence toward a more transactional and fear-based model. In response, he proposes a theology of *responsible giving*, one that emphasises voluntary, sustainable generosity grounded in faith, dignity, and each person's capacity.

Malick (2019), in contrast, reads the widow's offering in Mark 12:41–44 as an example of true discipleship, arguing that her act represents wholehearted and total devotion to God. While this reading highlights the depth of the widow's faith, the present study suggests that such interpretations must be held in tension with relational frameworks of sharing that do not equate faithfulness with self-depletion. Fa'atoetoe, in this sense, offers an alternative lens: not the rejection of sacrifice, but a refusal to imagine faithful giving as the destruction of one's own capacity to live and sustain others.

Reading the Widow through Fa'asoa

From a Pasifika perspective, and particularly within Samoan relational thought, the widow's offering may be read through the concept of fa'asoa. As argued earlier, fa'asoa is often mistranslated as "giving," when it is more accurately understood as sharing within a community of relationships. Yet even this requires further nuance. The root word soa suggests equality, and fa'asoa may therefore be taken to imply the act of making things equal through distribution. However, when applied uncritically, such a notion risks reducing sharing to the equal distribution of resources, regardless of context or need.

In lived Samoan experience, equality alone is insufficient for sustaining relational life. To distribute equally between the vulnerable and the secure does not necessarily produce justice; rather, it can reproduce imbalance by failing to account for difference in capacity, responsibility, and need. For this reason, the concept of fa'asoasoa becomes crucial. Fa'asoasoa extends beyond sharing as equal distribution and points to a form of relational discernment in which resources are rationed, prioritised, and directed toward those who need them most. It reflects not a perfect system but a relational ethic grounded in equity rather than sameness.

As noted earlier, there are two forms of fa'asoa: fa'asoa tuafoe, the sharing of the giver, and fa'asoa a le taliuta, the sharing of the receiver. These categories may help illuminate the widow's offering in a fresh way. The phrase "poor widow" (πτωχή χήρα) carries connotations of dependence and vulnerability, and in some contexts may evoke the posture of one who is publicly reliant on the support of others. If this is the case, then what the widow places into the treasury may be understood not simply as a private act of sacrificial giving, but also as the sharing of one who has herself lived by receiving. In this sense, her offering may be read through the logic of fa'asoa a le taliuta, the sharing of the receiver.

This reading is significant because it shifts the focus away from heroic individual sacrifice and toward relational participation. The widow does not stand outside the economy of receiving and sharing, but within it. Her act is not necessarily best understood as the isolated giving away of everything, but as participation in a wider social and theological circulation of life.

This dynamic is not unfamiliar within the Methodist Church of Samoa. Like Samoa more broadly, the MCS is deeply sustained through relational networks of support, including remittances from family members overseas. Church members in Samoa often rely on assistance from relatives abroad in order to meet church obligations, including offerings. In one sense, this reflects fa'asoa a le taliuta, the sharing of the receiver. Yet those same relatives overseas also contribute offerings within their own congregations, reflecting fa'asoa tuafoe, the sharing of the giver. Giving, therefore, is rarely a simple or isolated act. It is relational, layered, and often circulates across households, churches, and national boundaries.

This does not mean that the MCS does not itself share outwardly. The church contributes to the wider life of the nation through education, including primary, secondary, and theological educational institutions, and through initiatives such as the Women's Fellowship annual donation to the blood donation society. The more pressing question remains theological: How should the widow's offering be preached and understood within a relational economy of sharing?

Too often, the widow's offering is preached as a model of how easily she gave "all she had to live on" for God, and how difficult it is for contemporary Christians to do the same. Yet such sermons often rely on weak exegesis and overlook the actual economic value of what she gave. Craig Keener (1993, 165) notes that the widow's two lepta amounted to only a tiny fraction of a day's wage, while James Edwards (2002, 375) similarly observes that they were the smallest coins in circulation and would scarcely have purchased a simple meal. This does not negate the seriousness of her offering, but it does complicate overly romantic readings of total heroic sacrifice.

Rather than reducing the widow to either a victim of exploitation or a pure icon of self-emptying devotion, her act may be more helpfully understood through a relational lens. What she shares is materially small, yet relationally significant. In this sense, the widow's act may be read not simply as giving from absolute nothingness, but as a form of sharing that emerges from relational abundance—an abundance not measured by surplus wealth but by participation, dignity, commitment, and presence. Read through fa'asoa and fa'atoetoe, the widow's offering does not call the church to glorify depletion. Rather, it invites a rethinking of faithful sharing as that which circulates life without destroying the capacity to continue living, belonging, and caring for others.

Conclusion

The use of the widow's offering as a model for "giving all" in the life of the church must be approached with far greater theological and pastoral care. Within the context of the Methodist Church of Samoa, where giving is deeply intertwined with faith, service, honour, and communal obligation, Mark 12:41–44 cannot be read naively or abstractly. When interpreted uncritically, the passage can reinforce patterns of giving that burden those who are already vulnerable and risk turning faithful generosity into self-depleting sacrifice.

This article has argued that Fa'atoetoemuliola offers a Samoan relational alternative for reading both the widow's offering and the practice of giving in the church. Rather than framing faithful giving as the surrender of all that one has, Fa'atoetoemuliola understands giving through the logic of communal sharing, relational responsibility, and the intentional preservation of life. What matters is not simply how much is offered, but whether the act of offering continues to sustain the giver, the household, and the wider community.

Read in this way, the widow need not be reduced either to an idealised model of heroic sacrifice or to a passive victim of institutional exploitation. Instead, her offering becomes a site for asking what kind of theology of giving the church wishes to uphold. If giving is to remain a life-giving expression of faith within Samoan and wider Pasifika contexts, then it must be shaped not by the glorification of depletion, but by practices of sharing that leave room for dignity, relationship, and the continuation of life.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why Global Solidarities are a Matter of Life and Death: The Difference Religion Can Make

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Abstract

Even though the globe is moving closer together, solidarity among people appears to become more difficult. Nationalisms, racisms, ethnocentrisms, and sexism are on the rise, dividing and conquering and thereby producing false solidarities. While religion is often part of the problem, it can also become part of potential solutions. As the apostle Paul observes, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). This insight may hold true not only for personal relationships and communities but also for our global situation. The solidarity that emerges here goes deep, as it reconnects us with people, planet, and the divine.

Keywords: abrahamic traditions, capitalocene, christian nationalism, class analysis, colonialism, imperialism, privilege and power, racism, unite-and-conquer

What are We up Against?

Over the past centuries, global communities have been brought closer together by various factors. But while advances in technology have made travel and communication easier, the drivers of these developments were often rooted in colonising schemes of domination and exploitation. Such schemes can take on different forms, though the hard ones such as military conquest, enslavement, and extraction are easier to identify than the soft ones such as efforts focused on what was classified as education and civilisation. In Pasifika and elsewhere, soft and hard forms of colonialism often went hand in hand. Life and death are at stake, with native populations being decimated by the millions, including the sacrifice of those who were supposed to benefit from global expansion, like settlers and working people. In the process, any form of solidarity has become increasingly difficult if not impossible.²

¹ This article is an expanded version of a public lecture delivered by its author at Pasifika Communities University in Suva on 19 September, 2025.

² The quest for solidarity in the midst of our current troubles is the theme of my book *Theology in the Capitalocene*, particularly chapter 4 (Rieger 2022). The present article grows out of presentations given in Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand in the fall of 2025 and picks up the themes of the book in order to further the conversation.

In our search for new global solidarities, we need to begin by taking a closer look at the problems. What exactly are we up against in the early decades of the twenty-first century? While terms like globalisation, imperialism, and colonialism are still in use, talk about the Anthropocene seems to have taken center stage. Picking up on all these terms, I would like to suggest another term to describe what we are up against, the Capitalocene, as it combines some of the insights of each notion and moves us forward (Moore 2016; Rieger 2022).

The notion of the Capitalocene seeks to capture various global developments that have consequences for the future, not only of humanity but also the planet. Unlike the notion of the Anthropocene, it acknowledges that a closer look at the drivers of our geological age is needed (following the Holocene, the age in which human civilisations began to flourish after the last Ice Age eleven thousand years ago). While the notion of the Anthropocene suggests that the problem has to do with the sheer numbers of humanity, the notion of the Capitalocene talks about flows of power, with attention to the enormous flows of profit and influence at a time when the rich get richer and most people, and even the planet, are left behind.

One caveat when talking about the Capitalocene is that conversations about capitalism, especially in theological circles, have often turned into moral complaints. Typical critiques involve accusations of greed, consumerism, and selfishness, and sometimes end with demonising capitalists who should become more moral persons. Such critiques overlook the structures and relationships in place that constitute the foundations of the Capitalocene, which do not depend on individual moralities. In fact, if a corporate CEO were to turn away from the principles of capitalism, that person would be quickly replaced by another one. The same applies to the corporate leaders of the church.

Talking about the Capitalocene, therefore, is talking about the global relationships and flows of power that shape our age. It is not hard to see how relationships of power shape the current state of the global economy, and how these relationships of power also affect how politics is done, how cultures shape up, and so on. Most important for the study of theology and religion is the observation that the Capitalocene also has the power to shape faith and theological images at their very core.

Conversations about globalisation, imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and even postcolonialism can also benefit from a clearer understanding of how power flows in the Capitalocene. Imperialism, for instance, is not merely a political project pursued by specific nations or politicians; it must be understood as a broader phenomenon where power flows underground. The same is true for critiques of colonialism and neocolonialism, as colonial relations have by-and-large shifted away from traditional political schemes (embodied in governors and viceroys) to economic relationships, and talk about postcolonialism makes little sense without awareness of the kinds of economic colonial relations that continue long after the end of political colonial arrangements.

Once relationships of power in the Capitalocene are clarified, it becomes clearer that those affected are not merely minorities but the majority of humanity, as well as the planet. We must look at the big picture, since as many as 99 percent of humanity who have to work for a living in order to make ends meet and to survive are on the receiving end of how power flows in the Capitalocene. Even the middle class in various locations around the world is increasingly in trouble, finding it ever more difficult to secure jobs once taken for granted. This crisis is not just for themselves but for the next generation, whose entry-level jobs are being replaced by Artificial Intelligence and whose utter replaceability becomes clearer every day.

In the United States, for example, the so-called American Dream that promises reward for hard work feels hollower than ever. Minorities who are led to believe that it is their turn to enjoy the American Dream

are competing with white supremacists who have not yet realised that the promises made to them by politician-billionaires like Donald Trump have been empty for a long time. In Pasifika, to give another example, it is clearer than elsewhere that deep-sea mining does not benefit the many but the few, because every aspect of life depends on the delicate balance of the oceans.

What about Theology and Religion?

At first sight, theology and religion might offer spaces less affected by the Capitalocene. How much money is at stake in the study of theology and religion? While the flow of corporate power and money may be less obvious in theology and religion, in the United States big money has directly influenced Christianity since the 1920s and 1930s, and this has spread to other parts of the globe. Moneyed interests, worried that Christianity would increasingly support progressive causes in the wake of the Great Depression, began funding conservative religion.

This flow of money is what made the rise of the evangelist Billy Graham's ministries and other conservative efforts possible, and this continues into the present (Kruse 2015; Philipps 2006; Kobes Du Mez 2020; Keddie 2020). In 1959, Billy Graham spent 16 weeks in Oceania, including a brief stop in Fiji. In the wake of this marriage of money and religion, conservative Christianity picked up heat, becoming more conservative than ever before and continuing that trajectory even today. Of course, Christianity is not the only battleground for big money and religion; other so-called world religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism offer similar examples.

Well-funded efforts to shape religion trickle down into places where big money cannot reach otherwise. During my travels in Oceania and Pasifika in the fall of 2025, where the topics of this article were presented, I was surprised at how much attention the American Christian nationalist Charlie Kirk commanded, a person I had not paid much attention to before he was tragically shot in September 2025. Even theology students in Fiji, who can hardly expect to get rich off their ministries, were directly influenced by Kirk via social media. But few of Kirk's followers anywhere knew that he was not a self-made religious hero but put on the map by moneyed interests in the United States (Coates 2025).

Influences of big money and power on theological ideas are as disconcerting as influences into the life and practice of religion, embodied in faith communities. What holds the various communities of conservative Christianity together at the moment are the theological currents of *dominionism*. This is most clearly visible in Christian nationalisms, which believe that Christianity is called to determine all of life. The dominionist interpretation of the divine injunction to have "dominion" over the earth (Gen 1:28) has produced the so-called "Seven Mountains Mandate," according to which Christianity needs to subdue the mountains of family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government.

Christian nationalism in the United States promotes a particular form of theocracy, whose forms are matched by other Christian nationalisms around the globe, although they may not be as pronounced elsewhere. In this way, the Capitalocene shapes top-down images of God that, at first sight, may appear to be in continuity with traditional images of God, but which further the interests of the dominant power in new ways. In Christianity, traditional images of divine top-down power go back to the early days. In the context of the Roman Empire, Christianity soon envisioned God in the image of the Roman emperors, with royal robes and insignia. As time went on, even Christ was envisioned in this way, sitting on a throne next to the Father. The Nicene Creed's emphasis on the *homoousia*, the sameness of substance between the two, added

its own emphasis to what I have described as the domestication of Christ by the empire (Rieger 2007, Chapter 2).

In the Capitalocene, images of the divine resembling the ruling powers go one important step further. While ancient emperors and monarchs were principally committed to the welfare of all, including the poorest of the poor, modern-day CEOs are exclusively committed to the welfare of the stockholders. This is part of their job description, and CEOs insisting on the welfare of their workers can be challenged and stopped in their tracks. This is what happened to Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, when he wanted to invest some of the company's profits into better working conditions (Roe 2021).

The God of the Capitalocene, therefore, musters a specific kind of power, which transcends even the powers of monarchs and reappears in Christian nationalist visions of dominionism. This is not only an economic problem, as even politicians and church leaders are increasingly expected to act like corporate bosses. During my travels in Pasifika, I began to wonder how much this flow is shaping even traditional communities and how it is transforming traditional leadership roles in families, villages, and other institutions.

At a time when both the survival of humanity and of much of life on the planet is at stake due to the increasing unsustainability of the flow of power in the Capitalocene, such top-down power has become a matter of life and death. This has repercussions for most of humanity, with the possible exception of those who are building their own survival bunkers, with the option to retreat and live when the going gets tough for the rest of life as we know it.

Alternative Images of God and Religion

In the Capitalocene, the problems of dominionism and the concomitant images of God as wielding CEO-like power cannot be resolved by merely proclaiming somewhat more benevolent images of God as ruler. Even the friendlier bosses of the Capitalocene must stay committed to its most basic rule: the increase of the wealth of the stockholders at all costs, including the cost of the welfare of the working majority, both human and other-than-human.

In this context, it may come as a surprise that in many of the Abrahamic traditions God is often envisioned as the opposite of a typical king and ruler. The stories of creation in the beginning of the book of Genesis talk about God as doing pottery work, when God forms Adam from clay or dust. A similar story can be found in the Qur'an. In the same parts of Genesis, there is mention of God planning a garden. In all of these cases, God is envisioned as a working person, getting the divine hands dirty, as it were. Images of God as performing menial labor can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible, including metal work, agricultural work, pottery making, and work often relegated to women such as cleaning, sewing, cooking, baking, etc. (Banks 2008).

Other images of God shared by all three Abrahamic traditions include the Exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. The miracle of the burning bush, for instance, can be interpreted as the miracle of God speaking to Moses (Ex 3:1–12). While Jewish and Christian interpretations sometimes get stuck with the miraculous phenomenon of a bush in the desert that is burning but not consumed, Islamic interpretations assume that the miracle is God speaking to Moses. To take this one step further, we might argue that the real miracle is what God is saying from the burning bush, namely that God has seen the misery of the slaves, heard their cry, and knows their suffering. At times when the divine is envisioned in terms of dominant powers and empires, whether ancient or modern, envisioning the divine as taking the side of the enslaved is indeed a miracle.

Images of the divine taking the side of enslaved people not only challenge images of the divine as siding with the dominant powers sitting on thrones or situated in the corner offices of the Capitalocene. Such images of the divine also challenge somewhat more enlightened images of the divine as residing above the struggle, embodying fairness and neutrality. The God who liberates the slaves and wanders with them through the desert differs fundamentally from classical images of impartial Lady Justice, blindfolded and holding a scale in addition to her sword.

These ancient images, while having their own limits, offer powerful examples of divine solidarity with the working majority, with God joining their struggles rather than remaining unaffected and situated in higher spheres. And once God has taken sides, there is no turning back in the history of the Abrahamic religions. The only question a theologian might ask is, *what took so long?*

A final image of divine solidarity with the multitude is the miracle of Christmas in Christianity. Assuming that God had choices, Jesus being born into a working-class family is a substantial commitment, especially since Jesus being born into a family at the top of the Galilean or Roman food chains would have major advantages for the spread of Christianity. Adding to that is the odd miracle of the heavenly angels serenading day labourers in the fields who were taking care of other people's animals (Luke 2:8–14), when a display of the heavenly hosts in Jerusalem or Rome would have created an entirely different level of publicity and would have gone down in the official history of the world.

The question may, of course, be raised whether by turning images of God from their heads to their feet we are simply replacing one anthropomorphic image of God with another one. Is envisioning God in the image of working people the same mistake as envisioning God in the image of the rulers? The difference, it might be argued, is that one of these mistakes is easier to commit than the other. Those looking for a “higher power” and “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm of Canterbury) have always found it easier to look up rather than down. A Jesus accepting the offer of the devil to wield power over all the kingdoms of the earth rather than refusing it (Matt 4:8–10) would have had an easier life, probably not ending up on one of the imperial crosses reserved for revolutionaries, accomplishing what present-day Christian nationalist dominionists want.

In addition, the ancient traditions portraying God in the image of the working majority cannot be as easily explained as traditions portraying God in the corresponding dominant images of the day, which seem to be moving history and the world. This is also part of what the story of Jesus is usually about: Jesus consistently refusing to conform to the dominant images of the day. Many of his contemporaries were disappointed in him not because he claimed to be the Messiah, whose coming they longed for, but because he turned out to be different from the Messiah they expected who would come in the form of dominant power.

In sum, Christianity has a real edge here that is often ignored both by conservatives, who opt for authoritarian dominionism, and by liberals who opt for unoffensive pluralism. How might this religious edge help shape global solidarities, and what are the roadblocks we still have to engage?

False Solidarities as a Global Problem

The unacknowledged problem of the Capitalocene is that there are always more people than rulers. Talking about the Anthropocene, when humanity as a whole is supposedly taking over the planet, helps cover this up, which may help to explain why the term has become so popular.

While in classical empires, monarchies, and colonialisms top-down power is generally accepted, modern democracies can present a problem for the few because they promote the rule of the majority. How

can the few keep in power over the many in the Capitalocene and still maintain the semblance of democracy? When classical empires needed to shore up the power of the few, they typically resorted to divide-and-conquer methods—for instance, when some were declared to be more human than others, or when the different roles were clearly marked and accepted: some as workers, some as slaves, and others as born to a life of higher things. While some divide-and-conquer continues, this has become more difficult with the end of classical empires, monarchies, and colonialisms.

Compared to the empires of old, domination in the Capitalocene is more difficult to identify, even as power differentials have grown more severe than ever. As modern democracies assume their compatibility with capitalism and even create space for the inclusion of minorities (even in the United States some corporations still tend to follow the guidelines of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” [DEI], against Donald Trump’s wishes), the few seem to have more power over the many than at any other time in history.

In the Capitalocene, the few are managing to stay in power by producing false solidarities, what I have called “unite-and-conquer” methods (Rieger 2022, Chapter 4). Racism may serve as an example. White supremacy in the United States, for instance, in full force beginning with the enslavement of African Americans, suggests to white people that they are superior to all non-white people. In this way, white supremacy employs the help of white people in conquering non-white people.

This is also true for the Eurocentrism that is often observed in Pasifika and many other formerly colonised places. Under the conditions of the Capitalocene, however, white supremacy also works in the other direction by helping to conquer most white people, because it makes white people ignore the differences between bosses and workers that are at the heart of the exploitative and extractive relationships that define the structures of our age. A similar insight applies to how Eurocentrism leads to ignoring the differences between the European colonisers who accrued the lion’s share of colonialism and most of their helpers, including many missionaries.

Another example of unite-and-conquer are dominant nationalisms. In Nazi Germany, for instance, German nationalism led Germans to believe that their nationality rendered them superior to all other nations. The result was Adolf Hitler’s total war that accrued profits for the elites, including some non-German corporations like IBM, but hardly benefited most Germans, many of whom were left behind, wounded, or killed. And even if Germany had won World War II, the victory was never designed to benefit the masses as much as the elites.

American-style Christian nationalism displays some of the very same traits when it promises, with Donald Trump, that America will be made great again, a scheme which once again is designed to benefit the few rather than the many. Economic, political, and religious developments in the United States after Trump’s 2024 election to the presidency tell the story. In all of these examples, images of God are used to support false solidarities, supporting racism, Eurocentrism, nationalism, sexism, etc., assuring that the few stay in power over the many.

Unfortunately, liberal forms of solidarity are not in a position to provide viable alternatives. Too often, these solidarities are based on well-meaning moral appeals to support the victims, to “speak truth to power,” or to be a voice for those who are supposedly voiceless. Comments from those in the struggle explain the problems with liberal solidarity. Lilla Watson, an Australian aboriginal activist, artist, and academic, is

often quoted as saying: “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”³

In the South African struggle against Apartheid, the theologian Basil Moore had this to say: “Like most of us, I am prepared to trust and stand alongside a man who is fighting for himself and his own freedom if I know that his freedom is bound up with mine. I cannot wholeheartedly trust a man who is fighting for me, for I fear that sooner or later he will tire of the struggle” (Moore 1973, 5). While Watson politely notes the futility of liberal solidarity that ignores the common struggle, Moore points out the underlying problems: Without deeper solidarity, moralising appeals to support others tend to result in people burning out and walking away, sooner or later. Those of us who have been in the struggle for a long time are witnesses to this.

Global Deep Solidarity

If conservative false solidarity is part of the problem and liberal solidarity is not substantial enough to provide alternatives, what are other options? Consider the Abrahamic traditions of the Exodus one more time. Solidarity is at the heart of these stories, although this is often overlooked. Moses is not the lone hero of the story, and not even God is acting unilaterally. Growing up in Pharaoh’s palace, when Moses first wakes up to the exploitation of the Hebrew slaves, he acts alone and kills one of the slave masters. This solipsistic act does not lead to liberation, although it exposes Moses to the false solidarity of the palace, from which he has to flee in order to save his life (Ex 2:11–15). Moses learns the value of solidarity as a working person, realising that he cannot accomplish things by himself. As a result, he acknowledges his solidarity with the people, including his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam.

Even more important, the solidarity in which Moses eventually finds himself has been building all his life. Early on, the Jewish and Christian traditions tell us that his life was saved by the Hebrew midwives Shipra and Puah, his mother and his sister being involved. According to these traditions, Pharaoh’s daughter adopts the baby and raises him. In the Muslim traditions, Pharaoh’s wife, Asiya bint Muzahim, sides with the Hebrew slaves in the end. Asiya is one of only two women in Islam, alongside Maryam the mother of Isa (Jesus), who reached perfection, according to the Prophet Muhammad.

And, finally, in the Exodus stories God openly joins this growing solidarity, shifting the theological tables. This is a major part of these traditions, not only because the divine identified in concrete struggles but also because the dominant idea that the divine is on the side of the powers-that-be is challenged once and for all. Down the road, even the Canaanites seem to have become part of the resistance against the empires and their gods. While some of the ancient stories tell of a conquest, some scholars have argued, based on other ancient stories, that what happened was the formation of solidarity between the former Hebrew slaves and Canaanite peasant populations who were exploited by wealth and powerful city states (Gottwald 1979).

What is the basis of these solidarities? It is not moral exhortation. Neither are general principles like ethnicity, common humanity, or human dignity at the heart of the story. Even the value of religion for solidarity is limited, as religion evolves alongside the formation of solidarity: God eventually joins in solidarity, and the people experience the divine in a process that is never quite complete.

In contrast to all these forms of building solidarity, which have their value, the basis of solidarity in these ancient stories is something many labour unions, beginning with the Industrial Workers of the World

³ Dr. Watson prefers that the quote is attributed to “Aboriginal Activists Group Queensland, 1970s.” <https://uniting.church/lilla-watson-let-us-work-together/>.

(IWW, the so-called Wobblies), still recognise: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” The emerging solidarity is the solidarity of enslaved people. The apostle Paul says as much when he concludes his reversal of the Roman imperial vision of the organically related body by observing that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).

In the same passage, Paul also challenges how the dominant body of empire works, building itself up in relation to the labour of others and then trying to ignore it, noting that “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor. 12:21–22). Similar experiences of solidarity were made during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the English term *essential workers* was coined, signifying the reality of solidarity that is commonly ignored.

Solidarity is also at the heart of another biblical tradition that is typically presented in moralising terms. The second half of Jesus’ double commandment, “love your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30–31) can indeed be read as an ethical exhortation to care about others. But it can also be understood as saying that neighbors are part of the self (following the work of Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas). In these interpretations, self and neighbor are connected whether this is realised or not, and the best way to realise this is to embrace it. This is the foundation of deep solidarity (Kwok and Rieger 2012; Rieger and Henkel-Rieger 2016; Rieger 2022).⁴

Deep solidarity reminds us of the deep connections of self and other that are already in place. The important insight to add here is that these solidarities are often produced by outside pressures that weld people together. Combined with an understanding of the Capitalocene as relational flows of power, the relation of self and neighbor can now be observed at all levels, not merely as interpersonal relations (where most philosophers ended their reflections) but also as political and economic ones, which shape us all the way to the core.

Once it is clear that deep solidarity is not based in identity or sameness—marching in lockstep, talking, dressing, or looking alike is not necessary—diversity can be reclaimed. Unlike conservative efforts to limit diversity or liberal efforts at tolerating or celebrating diversity, deep solidarity puts diversity to use for the common good. It may seem paradoxical, but diversity strengthens deep solidarity rather than weakening it. Solidarity, grounded where the pressure is greatest, brings together the best of various backgrounds and identities, not to harmonise them but to put them to use. Cultured, ethnicised, racialised, gendered, sexualised, and other identities can now make their own contributions to common liberation. It would be interesting to explore further the wisdom and contributions of indigenous societies, but this is beyond the purview of what can be done here.

Diversity is not accidental to this solidarity, because in the Capitalocene the working majority is the most diverse body the world has ever seen. And this solidarity may eventually prove stronger than any dominionist efforts at controlling people and the planet, as it includes not only human but also other-than-human actors (Moore 2016), an insight that is also deeply rooted in many indigenous traditions. The driving forces of the Capitalocene definitely seem to be worried about this, which is why their pushback is so severe.

⁴ The term ‘deep solidarity’ was developed in various projects, starting with the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 (Kwok and Rieger 2012; Rieger and Henkel-Rieger 2016; Rieger 2022).

Confusing Privilege and Power

As deep solidarity is produced as an unintended consequence by the pressures exerted by the dominant powers, welding people and planet together, the dominant powers are making every effort to stop it in its tracks. We have already discussed their divide-and-conquer and unite-and-conquer strategies, which have proven to be very successful.

Moving deeper into solidarity, one additional factor must be addressed that constrains solidarity from within. This factor is at work when those seeking to build on the foundations of deep solidarity confuse privilege and power. While this confusion is at work in many well-meaning efforts to transform the world, it may have a special place in faith communities and takes us back to the perils and promises of religion.

Before examining this confusion, it must be stated clearly that privilege is real. It exists in many forms and is often unearned, such as white privilege, male privilege, straight privilege, national privilege, the privilege of physical ability, the privilege of dominant religion, and so on. Still, even a conglomerate of these privileges does not necessarily translate into real power, defined here as the ability to transform the status quo. This power is not merely the ability to make something happen but the ability to transform and substantially change the dominant flows of power which, in the Capitalocene, are in the hands of the very few at the top of the system.

Furthermore, the distinction of privilege and power is not meant to let people with privilege off the hook because of their lack of power. The opposite is the case: Realising that privilege does not necessarily translate into power can enable privileged people to use their privilege differently, which amounts to acts of repentance in which privilege is deconstructed and redirected. Theologically speaking, distinguishing privilege and power is an effort to understand particular forms of sin, without which calls to repentance and even conversion will always be misdirected (Rieger 2022, 170–173).

White supremacy, once again, may serve as an example of confusing privilege and power. In a racialised world, all white people have privilege, but not all white people have the power to change the world. Failure to distinguish privilege and power distributes the blame for systemic racism to all white people evenly, which amounts to letting those who hold real power to change things off the hook. This guarantees that nothing ever changes because without distinguishing privilege and power, the ruling class disappears from view and is able to wield its power without being called out. This, I would argue, is the biggest problem in the Capitalocene, and this is why transformation and change are so hard to accomplish.

Typical challenges to Christian nationalism provide another example for this problem, as the confusion of privilege and power leads to blaming the many foot soldiers of Christian nationalism while letting their enablers and financiers off the hook. This confusion, therefore, reinforces the reign of dominant power rather than challenging it. More importantly, this confusion of privilege and power offers little help in the conversion of these foot soldiers who—receiving all the blame—are now affirmed even more in their own confusion of privilege and power.

Missionaries may serve as another example from the world of theology and religion. When compared to their flocks, missionaries have clear privileges. Nevertheless, the power of most missionaries—except the most prominent ones—is often surprisingly limited. The history of missionaries to the Native Americans may serve as a case in point. Over a period of 400 years, these individuals supported various forms of colonialism, from which they rarely benefited themselves (Tinker 1993).

Failure to realise the confusion of privilege and power directs all blame to the missionaries and lets the colonial powers off easy. Common critiques of settler colonialisms without distinguishing privilege and

power display similar tendencies, sheltering the driving forces. In both cases, when assigning all blame to missionaries and settler colonialists, what is foreclosed is not only a sense of the deeper problems but—and this is most crucial—the path to conversion and the ability to envision the formation of alternative power and solidarity.

Without a more profound understanding of how power flows, the privileged are hobbled by illusions of power, assuming that all they need to do is to “speak truth to power,” or become a “voice for the voiceless.” While such efforts may lead to some improvements, they fail to challenge dominant power at its core. Moreover, the illusion of power by the privileged can prevent others who buy into this illusion from pursuing their own power. Worst of all, it prevents deeper solidarity from being built and it stops in its track what is most needed: the formation of alternative power based on the broad solidarity of the 99 percent. The result is frustration all around; as the many fall back, only the few at the very top advance.

Who, then, needs to build alternative power in the Capitalocene? This brings the conversation back to the awareness of the many and the few at the top, which is covered up by the notion of the Anthropocene but crucial for the formation of global solidarities. But even among the many, some distinctions still matter in the formation of solidarity. Marginalised minorities play an important role because they help the many see what the system is really like and what it is capable of. The many can learn from the marginalised not only what compounded exploitation and extraction looks like, but also what resilience looks like. This is perhaps clear in the Global South as well as in the Global North, seeing that, as in the Global North, similar structures of exploitation and extraction are at work that make life hard for increasing numbers of people. Child poverty rates of up to 30 percent in the United States tell their own story.

For those benefiting from privilege but with little power—in the Global North and the Global South—a particular kind of repentance is needed in order to engage in global solidarity. Rather than divesting themselves of their privilege, they can learn to put it to use in building power with the many rather than the few at the top. Only privilege that understands its limits can be redirected and thereby deconstructed, as privilege without understanding the limits of power tends to serve the dominant powers.

Using the example of male privilege, rather than divesting from it, men can use their privilege to dismantle patriarchy, once they recognise their solidarity with women in a patriarchal system built on the backs of women—to wit, the underpayment of women often leads to keep men’s wages down as well. For men, deepening their solidarity with women means that they will become traitors and will be treated as such, but this is precisely how privilege is redirected and alternative power is built, which will eventually benefit everyone.

Finally, building global solidarity in the Capitalocene requires an analysis of power informed by a deeper understanding of social class, which is key in the distinction of privilege and power. The goal of class analysis is not merely to understand the flow of dominant power better, refusing to let the ruling class off the hook, but also to gain the ability to do something about it (Rieger 2022, Chapter 3). Class analysis benefits solidarity by helping to clarify what side people are on at a time when the success of the Capitalocene depends on sowing confusion.

In sum, what ties the many together, extending beyond humanity to other-than-human nature, are structures of exploitation and extraction that make use of human and interspecies diversity for their own benefit. Class—as exploitative and extractive relationships rather than stratification—is still the most difficult topic to address, even after more than five decades of evolving liberation theologies. Solidarity is closely linked to the recognition that the working class is the majority everywhere, even in the Global North. The working

majority is the most diverse conglomerate the world has ever seen, and it extends in various directions: All those who have to work for a living are affiliated with it, even the casually employed and the under- and unemployed, including people with disabilities, all the way to fairly well-paid professionals who may enjoy some privilege but whose power to change things is embarrassingly small.

As global solidarity continues to form, resisting unite-and-conquer strategies and seeing through the confusion of privilege and power, it becomes clear that even the middle class, where many religious professionals both in the Global North and the Global South feel they belong, is not a safe space but is one of the prime places where the battle is being waged. This is true not only for the economy (think middle management), but also for politics (think elections) and religion (think religious nationalisms). Winning the battle will depend on developing global solidarity, starting from below.

Conclusions: Divine Solidarity

These reflections lead back to the place of the divine in the formation of global solidarities. As argued above, in the Abrahamic traditions God is constantly taking sides. This observation leads to an interesting paradox: Taking sides might seem to make God more universal rather than less. How is this possible?

The classical universalism of the Enlightenment, as many critics have argued, was never truly universal because it unwittingly universalised something particular. Classical liberal theology, talking about the human in universal terms, presupposed the particular image of privileged white men with some power. Classical religious theory assumed that universal religious experience was found in its highest forms in dominant cultures. Solidarity seemed unnecessary because the system was oriented towards the top, and it was assumed that what was considered lower sought to imitate what was considered higher (Rieger 2007, Chapter 5).

The emerging global solidarities presented in this essay, by contrast, are oriented towards the bottom. These solidarities might be described in terms of a different kind of love. Mary, the mother of Jesus, notes God's love for the lowly and downtrodden. This is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. Love for the bottom is linked to another phenomenon also prominent in the Bible that is less frequently acknowledged: love for the bottom tends to come with challenges for the top.

Mary herself puts it strongly: The God who lifts up the lowly pushes the powerful from their thrones, and the God who fills the hungry with good things sends the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53). What happens to the powerful and the rich here may be difficult to discuss in polite company, including faith communities, but it is important—being pushed from their thrones and being sent away empty may be part of divine love. It may be the only hope for the lowly and the hungry, whose lowliness and hunger are not self-caused, but it may also be the only hope for the powerful and the rich who are thus brought to self-awareness and called to repentance. Deep solidarity can take on shape where this love is at work.

Divine love is, therefore, not one-size-fits-all, but neither is global solidarity. The Abrahamic religious traditions push towards this recognition, and the stories of Moses, Asiya, and Jesus serve as timeless reminders that another solidarity—different from the false solidarities of the Capitalocene and the shallow solidarities of the do-gooders—is indeed possible.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Original Sin and Fossil Fuel Industry Spin

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to suggest the theological concepts of sin and evil as the most appropriate forms of language available to the church, and the most powerful, in addressing human-induced climate change. As we witness the planet being convulsed by the reckless use of fossil fuel, and its increasingly irreversible damage to the Earth System, the church is called to name the responsibility and sinful culpability of those who wilfully imperil life to satisfy their greed. I will deploy the Serpent in Genesis 3 to provide a biblical motif to connect the theological language of sin and evil with the “merchants of doubt” serving the fossil fuel industry. They are deeply implicated in the harm being wrought upon creation by human-induced climate change. Only in correctly naming the sinfulness of these powers theologically is the church fulfilling its prophetic calling.

Keywords

sin, evil, fossil fuel, serpent, climate change, creation, theology

*A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.
A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.*
— Luther (1518)

Australian Flames

In my own context, the Australian landscape has experienced heat and fire every summer for millennia. The indigenous peoples of the continent used fire to care for the land for tens of thousands of years. Their knowledge of the vegetation, and of the movements and habitats of its animals, is so vast they have always used fire selectively, intermittently, to rejuvenate its landscapes. Now, however, the Australian landscape is not rejuvenated by controlled burning; it is scorched and terrorised by heat and fire every summer.

¹ This article is an expanded version of a public lecture delivered by its author at Pacific Theological College in Suva on the 2nd of May, 2024.

The year 2020 was the beginning of a new era in the long history of fire on the continent. That summer, millions of hectares of land were devastated, hundreds of homes were burned to the ground, unknown numbers of animals were cremated, human lives were lost, and the skylines of smoke, cloud, and flames were apocalyptic. The military was deployed to manage mass evacuations to secure people from the blazing enormity of the fire emergency. In some settings, entire coastal townships had no way to escape the raging flames other than by retreating to the ocean shore, where they sheltered for days until collected by the Australian Navy. The climate is changing before our eyes.

The Anthropocene

These Australian infernos are just one aspect of a global drama impacting, especially, so many people in the Global South. That global drama looms as a play that may end in tragedy. Just like a human finger that bumps a spinning top from its perfect rhythm so that the spinning toy wobbles out-of-balance before either finding a new equilibrium or collapsing and stopping altogether, the Earth System is being bumped into a new Epoch, and the hand of humanity is doing it. The Australian ethicist Clive Hamilton has summarised this emerging shift from the Holocene to what is being forecast as the Anthropocene Epoch:

Paleo-climate records show an Earth history punctuated by periods of dramatic change ... This often-violent geological history stretching back to the planet's formation 4.5 billion years ago has been the product of the blind forces of nature, ranging from solar fluxes, volcanism and weathering to subduction and asteroid strikes. Yet in the few years after the Second World War, something almost inconceivable happened. A conscious, willing, decision making 'force of nature' began actively changing the functioning of the Earth System as a whole, so much so that a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is expected to be added to the Geological Time Scale to supersede the Holocene. (2018, 1)

We humans are that decision-making force of nature, the force that is changing the functioning of the Earth System as a whole. Earth System Science, a discipline born late in the twentieth century, asks us to complement our localised, contextual ideas of the environment and understand, as well, that the Earth is "a single, dynamic, integrated and ever-changing reality" (Hamilton 2018, 1). Planet Earth in its entirety is a calibrated, finely tuned system, which we may (and must) consider *en globo*, and upon this integrated planet there is one species that has irreversibly damaged the whole system. There is one species—and particularly the privileged among that species—that has now made the planet serve its needs to the extent that the cost to the whole Earth System has become intolerable. That species, *Homo sapiens*, is now impacting the Earth System in ways comparable to the way asteroids, volcanoes, and solar fluxes had previously impacted in the paleo-climate record. One species is now a force of nature rivalling the very forces of the Earth itself.

Disrupting Carbon

Human impact on the Earth System is caused primarily by our disruption of an enormous amount of carbon from its settled state within the Earth and our relocation of that carbon into the atmosphere above the planet. The process is profoundly unnatural and yet has become second nature in the Global North (in particular) for over two hundred years. Oil and coal (liquid and solid carbon) are pulled from the Earth and burned in engines and smelters to fuel the activity of industry.

Because of this process, the previously unharmed carbon in the soil below is turned into harmful carbon dioxide in the sky above. A layer of carbon dioxide has been placed around the planet that is creating a greenhouse-like effect. Heat is held within the Earth's atmosphere, unable to escape the carbon layer, and the

planet's temperatures have risen, and continue to rise. As temperatures rise, one consequence is the melting of the polar ice caps and sea level rise. Another is that land and trees become tinder-dry sources of fuel. A bushfire in Australia, for example, is now as close as one cigarette thrown into the bush from a car window.

The overwhelming majority of scientific research concluded long ago that these changes to the Earth System are predominantly the work of the industrial economies of the Global North. The evidence that the greed and wilful negligence of human beings are the significant factors behind rising temperatures has had the near-unanimous support of climate scientists for decades. Early in his book *Political Theology of Climate Change*, under the sub-heading "A Slow Catastrophe," Michael Northcott points out that the link between rising temperatures and rising human emissions of carbon dioxide was first accurately modelled as long ago as 1975.

There are now four Global Circulation Models run by supercomputers belonging to the U.S. and U.K. governments. According to their modelling, rising greenhouse gas emissions may see global temperatures rise by 4 to 7 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the end of the twenty-first century (Northcott 2014, 4). The U.K. Meteorological Office has published a projected map of a four-degree warmer planet. It shows that three quarters of the Earth's land area will be unsuitable for food growing or secure human settlement in a four-degree warmer world, including most of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific (Northcott 2014).

This is Not a Scientific Debate

The abuse of the Earth emanating from industry in the Global North has been sitting in plain sight for decades for all to see. In 2004, a literature review of the esteemed journal *Science* found that precisely none of the 928 peer-reviewed articles it had carried on the general topic of "global climate change" had disputed the reality of human-induced global warming (cited in McIntyre 2015, 72). A recent global poll of all known university faculty working in climate science or a closely related discipline found that 96% agreed that global warming is real and 97% agreed that the main contributing factor was human activity (McIntyre 2015, 72).

Among the most confounding things of all is the fact that the debate about climate change is not a scientific debate. The science was settled long ago. Climate change has been, however, a deeply polarising *political* debate. To give one example from my context, climate change has been a deeply contentious and partisan political issue in the world's largest per capita emitter of carbon dioxide, which is Australia. Why did the near unanimity of the scientific community about the causes of climate change become confused in the political and public arena in places like Australia and the United States (which is the second largest emitter)? How did the reality of human induced climate change become contested ground?

Merchants of Doubt

The story of the strategic attack on scientific knowledge in the public arena, of the attempt to confuse truth and create doubt in the public mind about climate change, is forensically explored by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway in *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2011). They reveal how ExxonMobil and other corporations funded selected think-tanks which then hired their own experts to challenge scientists in the public domain, especially in the popular press. In a transparent strategy of placing profit before truth, climate change was portrayed as just a *theory* by these "experts." Therefore, they argued, no changes to energy policy should be entertained while the science was still in doubt.

The apparently shameless Heartland Institute is one case study. While working with the cigarette manufacturing corporation Phillip Morris in the 1990s to raise doubt over whether passive smoking caused lung cancer, they followed a playbook called “manufacturing uncertainty” (McIntyre 2015, 75). A leaked company memo from that time reveals the strategy. “Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public” (McIntyre 2015, 75).

By 2012, the Heartland Institute’s self-professed primary agenda was to apply that playbook to raise doubt about whether global warming is true. The *New York Times* reported that Heartland’s strategy was focused on “... undermining the teaching of global warming in public schools [and promoting] a curriculum that would cast doubt on the scientific finding that fossil fuel emissions endanger the long-term welfare of the planet” (McIntyre 2015, 76). Tragically, this strategy of challenging knowledge, not by countering it with scientifically based arguments but simply by manufacturing doubt, has worked. The merchants of doubt are the reason why the clarity and near unanimity over climate change in the scientific domain became confusion and contested ground in the political domain.

Resurrecting Sin

It is time to draw theology into this conversation. The concept of sin is disappearing from public discourse. Discussion of sin has been moved to the private sphere where, even in the domain of Church and personal faith, it continues to fade (McFadyen 2000). In fact, broadly speaking, we seem to be setting aside the language of theology for other forms of discourse, such as therapy, in an attempt to present Christian beliefs within more widely accessible concepts and language (Farudi 2004). I agree with Ernst Conradie that the climate emergency is a time for Church leaders and theologians to resurrect the language of theology and, in particular, the concept of sin to arrest attention about what is going wrong in creation and to provoke conversion: a metanoia, a turning-in-our-tracks.

The famous twentieth century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that the “Christian view of human nature is involved in the paradox of claiming a higher stature for human beings and of taking a more serious view of their evil than any other anthropology” (Niebuhr 1941, 18). What did Niebuhr mean? Principally, he meant that Christian theology finds human beings a confounding contradiction. We are the likeness of the Creator, according to the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:27), and yet personally and corporately we are characterised by selfishness, disunity, and brutality.

Famous Christian thinkers like the apostle Paul, Augustine of Hippo, and Martin Luther all wrestled with this contradiction, with such utter seriousness that we can only conclude that they saw it as a great fault line in the Christian message. How is it that human beings are capable of inspiring goodness as well as appalling cruelty? The doctrine of sin is the way in which Christian theology seeks to address this unsettling mystery.

The essential goodness of human beings is theologically tied to the concept of the *imago Dei*: that we have been set within creation as a reflection, icon, or image of God. It is the burden of the doctrine of sin to explain why that image has been fractured—why human history and behaviour have consistently presented a dark contradiction to belief that we reflect God within creation. It is important to say that the depth of the Christian concept of sin is not reached if sin is understood only as a violation of moral codes. Rather, we are nearer to reaching an understanding of sin when sinfulness is viewed as a condition. Our acts of selfishness and violence are the outward sign of a greater problem.

That problem has been framed by theologians in various ways, yet most of those framings have their source in a common biblical story in early Genesis portraying our alienation and dislocation from God, from one another, and from the rest of the creation (Hall 1996). These are relational concepts. That relational state of alienation from God, one another, and creation is the condition of sin; damaging actions are its symptoms. To speak of the damage we do to others, to creation, and to ourselves as sin is for Christian theology a claim that “the essential character and defining characteristic of such pathology, however else it may be described and identified in non-theological languages, is theological: the disruption of our proper relation to God” (McFadyen 2000, 4–5).

“Original” Sin

Chapter three of the book of Genesis narrates this disruption between God and the first humans as a falling-out that is a consequence of the intervention of a wily Serpent. That story in Genesis 3 is the source of a well-known yet not well understood theory about the failure of human beings to live up to our stature as the image of God within creation: the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin, which has its origins in the work of Augustine and holds a significant position in the history of Western Christianity, does not stand up to scientific scrutiny, and becomes fragile under sustained theological scrutiny. It proposes that sin is an inherited condition of guilt for which we will be judged, a stain passed from generation to generation which had its source in one *original* sin in the biblical Garden.

While I am not inclined to support Augustine’s formula, it is intriguing that if human sin is understood as an inherited condition of alienation from God and from creation, and is understood as a condition of our species that is passed from one generation to another whether we like it or not, it may still have some meaning when speaking about what has gone wrong in this climate emergency, and why it has gone wrong. If theological language is found to speak of human beings as inheritors of this broken state, which we in turn perpetuate, it might become meaningful in a fresh way. If this “original sin” is described not as a guilt communicated to us from the first humans, as if it were part of our genetic coding, but as a set of fractured relations within creation that we inherit at birth, which radically and universally afflict our species and the planet, it can hold explanatory power for us today when discussing human-induced climate change. As anachronistic as the language of Christian theology may seem, this climate emergency may well be the time to resurrect the language of sin.

Original S(p)in

Turning to the Serpent in Genesis 3, this verse is of particular interest: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, You shall not eat from any tree in the Garden?’” (Genesis 3:1). The early chapters of Genesis focus on human beings as both “the glory and the central problem of creation” (Brueggemann 1982, 40). Daniel Castillo summarises them as follows: “If Genesis 2 describes an idyllic situation in which all things are ordered by and held together in accordance with the wisdom of God, then Genesis 3 narrates the manner in which all things fall apart” (2019, 76).

Interesting work has been done on connecting this myth of humanity’s origin to the present climate crisis. Intriguingly, some of that work highlights how Adam and Eve first appear in the Genesis narrative as forest-dwelling gatherers of fruit and nuts, whereas their exile from Eden, which is understood to be a consequence of their sin, requires that they raise their food thereafter by the back-breaking methods of

agriculture. In that reading, the Genesis story is a mythical portrayal of humanity's transition from hunters and gatherers to agricultural labourers. Humanity's transition to agricultural modes of production becomes the source of our alienation from nature, and of nature's subordination to our needs. As interesting as that may be, there is an even more telling aspect as we consider the climate emergency.

Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel all carry substantial symbolic meaning within the Genesis narrative. Adam and Eve represent the significance to God of humanity's place in creation, their son Cain murdering their other son Abel with an agricultural implement soon after God evicts the primal family from the pristine garden. Yet the character of greatest interest to me is the Serpent. The Serpent makes its mark in Genesis 3:1–7, a handful of verses interpreted by some as an explanation for how evil came into world, often described as “the Fall.” While that interpretation is simplistic, chapters two and three of Genesis certainly do present themselves as ancient Israel's canonical attempt to understand humanity's determination to live in the world as if it were its own rather than God's. They also address the consequences of our determination to do that. The role played by the Serpent is significant and can help us to reflect on sin and evil and the fossil fuel industry's “merchants of doubt.”

In Genesis 3:1, the Serpent echoes to the woman what she has heard from God shortly beforehand, namely, “You may freely eat of any tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2:16–17). Yet the Serpent repeats God's injunction with the inclusion of a gentle distortion. In doing so, the Serpent introduces confusion and lack of clarity regarding the point of God's speech. “*Did God say*, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” On the Serpent's tongue, what was intended as a given has now been made to appear like an option. In Brueggemann's view, “The serpent grossly misrepresents God in 3:1 and is corrected by the woman in verses 2–3. But by then the misquotation has opened up to consciousness the possibility of an alternative to the way of God. From that point on, things become distorted” (Brueggemann 1982, 48).

To be clear, the Serpent is portrayed in the Genesis narrative not as the embodiment of evil but as the one who manufactures doubt, the creator of uncertainty. The primordial couple, Adam and Eve, go along with the Serpent—knowingly, it would seem. The peaceful communion of the garden cedes to alienation and death (Casillo 2019). God's response is clear. The couple are judged and punished; they are cast out of the garden (Genesis 3:8–22). The Serpent has manufactured doubt. And it has worked. The original communion of God, humanity, and all creation is broken.

Ernst Conradie has written a fine book in which he seeks to answer the question, in light of human-induced climate change, “What has gone wrong with the world?” Answering that question is an interdisciplinary task Conradie describes as “social diagnostics.” He proposes that the Christian language of sin has an important contribution to make to this inter-disciplinary work:

The core intuition of this proposal is that Christian discourse on sin may contribute to the collaborative task of what I call ‘social diagnostics.’ My agenda is to address the colloquial yet dangerous question: What has gone wrong with the world? Indeed, what on earth is wrong with us humans that we are destroying our own home (oikos)? ... This is not only an ecological problem, but also a moral and a spiritual problem. (Conradie 2017, xii)

For Conradie, despite the strangeness of this language, the Church and its theologians should “redeem sin” (hence his title) as public discourse (2017, xxii). Conradie argues that “the Christian tradition

has developed a remarkably sophisticated and diverse pastoral and prophetic vocabulary to name sin,” and some of that vocabulary still cuts through (2017, 232). He also adds,

Further, through a prophetic impulse that has been yoked to the naming of sin and evil, the Jewish-Christian tradition has “helped set a standard of ‘speaking truth to power’ by putting (not pointing) the finger where it really hurts. The courage that this demands is only possible when evil is recognized, named, and exorcised. (2017, 232)

Conradie concludes that there is only one thing worse and more dishonest than making an unsolicited contribution to the collaborative task of social diagnostics, “and that is failing to make such a contribution when it is required” (2017, 231).

Conclusion: Name the Serpents

The first article of the Apostle’s Creed reads, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, the creator of heaven and earth.” That ancient affirmation is a confession of the Church’s faith that the Earth and all life within it belong to God. In light of that confession, and centuries of Christian proclamation about the nature of sin, any abuse of the Earth must surely be named as sinful—the abuse carried out by the decision-making force of nature, *homo sapiens*, which is taking such a massive toll on the planet.

Further, where merchants of doubt wilfully create confusion about what is happening to creation to serve the greed of the fossil fuel industry, then surely that must be named as evil. Those who are manufacturing doubt about our impact on the Earth have done so to ensure that an extractive, abusive, and sinful relationship with creation may continue unchecked. This planet abuse has seen the extinction of an unimaginable variety of animal and plant species and now threatens the survival of our own species. Creation, or rather one species within creation, is displacing the Lord named in the Apostle’s Creed and asserting itself as the Lord of all.

There was speculation in early 2020 about whether Pope Francis might name humanity’s abuse of the Earth as sinful in his much-anticipated statement on the plight of the Amazon and of the Church in that region. He did not. *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazon) was released in February 2020. It is a splendid document in almost every regard. Pope Francis denounced the unrestrained development taking place around the Amazon and the destruction of that most critical of the Earth’s forests. He wrote: “The businesses, national or international, which harm the Amazon and fail to respect the right of the original peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent, should be called for what they are: injustice and crime” (cited in Roere 2000).

The language of injustice and crime used by Pope Francis is powerful. However, it is not the most inherently powerful language available to the church. The most powerful language available to the church is the language of theology. And so, while I have admiration for the Pope’s statements in *Querida Amazonia*, it is surely past the time now to name the abuse of the Earth as a *sin*. Furthermore, the confusion of scientific evidence and the wilful manufacturing of uncertainty about what the industries of the Global North have done to God’s good creation, and continue to do, is *evil*. The serpents should be named.

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BOOK REVIEWS AND OTHERS

BOOK REVIEW

LYDIA F. JOHNSON, *LIVED THEOLOGY FOR THE WHOLE OF LIFE*.

Nike Franken

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Johnson's *Lived Theology for the Whole of Life* traverses a wide landscape of themes, each rich with insight and provocation. Her work seeks to answer the question of how theology can become relevant and practiced in the lived realities of our world. Johnson is deeply convinced that theology cannot remain within the narrow circle of academia, but must engage with the real, lived problems of people. To undertake such a task, she explains, she must step outside the conventions of doing theology the way Western academia has taught her. Her approach is personal, experiential, storied, multidisciplinary, and many-faceted. She acknowledges the risks of doing theology in this unorthodox, multi-methodological way, but insists that for theology to matter and to engage with the lived realities of people, it is necessary (xi–xiv). In this conviction, Johnson stands in deep continuity with the ‘whole of life’ vision developed at the Pasifika Communities University, where she spent many formative years as a lecturer at the then Pacific Theological College. Her work has grown on soil that PCU has long been preparing, and the influence and appreciation of that tradition is felt throughout the pages.

Johnson starts the first part of her book (3–36) with her theological framework. She grounds her theology in the claim that ‘God is the ongoing, ever-present creating that permeates the universe’ (3). Drawing on the Genesis creation narrative, and its recurring affirmation that what was created was good, she argues that God is inherently and consistently “*for-life*” (4f.). This becomes the ethical foundation upon which the entire book rests.

The theology Johnson embraces does not put humans at the pinnacle of creation, nor at its centre, but in relational equality with all living beings (17, 20). Humans have been given the “divine mandate to be good stewards of nature,” a mandate, she soberly observes, we have failed to honour (8).

Johnson situates herself as both, Christian and American, yet rejects American culture as well as Eurocentric theology (9). She critiques her culture for its over-emphasis of individualism at the expense of the common good (9–11), and the classical Eurocentric theology, for anthropomorphising God as an overpowering, monarchical ruler (11–16). She acknowledges how indigenous communities have long articulated a more holistic understanding of God, that is divinely infused in all things and beings, rather than set apart and above creation (11; 16).

In rejecting classical Eurocentric theology, Johnson offers an alternative she describes as inspired by the *relational theology* of Pasifika theologians. She argues, however, that the term “relational” could be misconstrued as referring primarily to the building of healthy relationships between individuals or between people and God, sidelining its intended deeper interrelatedness of everything in the cosmos. She therefore proposes the term *interrelational theology* (16), which she illustrates through the analogy of the Pasifika mats. A core claim of interrelational theology is that humans are not privileged over other living beings in creation.

Just as every strand of the mat is essential, every living being is equally important and needed to weave the mat of life. God, in this vision, is the whole mat (16f.). Having elaborated this framework, Johnson expresses her desire to give “full credit to (her) Pasifika brothers and sisters whose relational theologies have inspired [her] . . . own theological perspective” (17f). Johnson engages with a range of Pasifika thinkers throughout the broader work, but her acknowledgment at this point would have been strengthened by naming specific Pasifika scholars she builds her theology on.

The second part of the book (37–70) is concerned with the question of what it is that constitutes us as humans. A core chapter of this section (59–61) addresses what Johnson calls the “complacency of the familiar” (60). She argues that humans tend to retreat into small, manageable frames of understanding, contexts that feel safe and controllable, and that in doing so, lose sight of the larger world in which we are connected. The consequence, is that we become ill-equipped to face the pressing realities beyond our immediate horizon (59).

In her chapter, “Lifting the Mat of Forgiveness” (62–70), Johnson wrestles with the important question how we can practice a Christian ethic of forgiveness while remaining attentive to the demands of justice for the marginalised and oppressed. Entailed in this task is a commitment to “widening the circle of justice” (65f.), transforming personal hurt into a broader commitment to right relationships, where one’s own suffering becomes a doorway into compassion and advocacy for all who suffer injustice. Drawing on the Samoan ifoga and the Fijian tabua rituals (66f.), she grounds this vision in Pasifika practices of reconciliation, ultimately calling for a “restorative justice” (69).

In the third part of her book (71–135), Johnson applies her *for-life* ethic to a wide range of contemporary relational, social, and political issues, grounded in a commitment to the common good, set in deliberate contrast to the individualism she identifies as a defining and limiting feature of American culture. Each chapter takes up a specific issue and asks, with consistent ethical seriousness, what a *for-life* response might look like in practice. The topics covered in this part include abortion, (75–79) disabilities (79–82), racism (82–87), gender (88–91), suicide and euthanasia (91–97). This section also makes visible one of the inherent challenges of Johnson’s ambitious project. Each of the topics she addresses constitutes, in its own right, an extensive field of scholarly debate, and her commitment to engaging with the ‘whole of life’ means she casts her net wide. At points I found myself hoping for a more extended treatment of these particular themes.

Johnson then engages with three broader issues that she considers essential to any *for-life* ethic: poverty (98–109), border politics (110–121), and the human relationship with the natural world (122–135). On poverty, she draws on the words of Jesus, “blessed are you who are poor,” to argue that “the poor will only be blessed when *we* bless them” (109), grounding her discussion in a call to address the structural causes of marginalisation. On borders, she challenges the fear-driven narratives surrounding immigration, arguing that a *for-life* ethic demands both the welcoming of the stranger and a critical reckoning with the imperial policies that force people to flee their homes in the first place. On nature she draws on the Fijian concept of vanua and the practice of vanua sauvi, the temporary closure of land and sea areas to allow ecosystems to recover from abuse, as a model for the kind of restraint and reciprocity that the global ecological crisis urgently demands.

Having worked through how *for-life* ethics ought to be actualised in specific social realities, Johnson turns in the final part of the book (136–223) to what she describes as a necessary confrontation: The reality of empire, and more specifically the empire, that is her native country, the United States of America. She begins this section by reflecting on the difficulty of accessing reliable information within an imperial context of control (139–145), outlining how government and corporate interests shape mainstream media, feeding the public the “empire narrative” (141). From there, she turns to the structural logic of empire itself (145–

148), arguing that it rests fundamentally on *unequal relationships* between the imperial power and the countries it seeks to dominate. Central to her critique is the myth of “American exceptionalism” (148). Americans, she argues, have long been nurtured on a false narrative of their country as an exceptional beacon of freedom and democracy. Johnson reshapes this narrative, asserting that American exceptionalism has been constituted through “exceptional . . . violence, . . . exceptional exploitation of peoples and resources, . . . and exceptional willingness to militarily intervene” in other countries (149f.).

Turning to an ethical consideration of war, Johnson engages seriously with both pacifism (163–167) and just war theory (167–168), ultimately embracing pacifism, not as a passive withdrawal from the world but as an activist commitment to non-violent resistance, grounded in the teachings of Jesus. Her take on pacifism is what I consider one of the strongest and most theologically compelling sections of the book and one that invites the reader’s serious engagement.

Before her visionary closing chapter, Johnson engages with the “evil of empire” through two of the most complex geopolitical conflicts of our time, the war between Ukraine/NATO and Russia (168–188), and Israel and Palestine (196–213), offering in both cases a counter-narrative to the dominant Western perspective. She frames both as examples of the “for-death” ideologies of empire and exceptionalism. The war in Palestine and Israel is one of the most divisive conflicts of our time, with many feeling that taking a clear position is both necessary and morally urgent. In my reading, I found myself wishing that Johnson had more fully drawn on her own framework of restorative justice, one that holds the suffering and humanity of all parties in view. This is, of course, a matter of interpretation, and others may read her engagement very differently. But it seemed to me that a perspective which acknowledges the complexity and the inhumanity on all sides might have sat more comfortably alongside the ethical vision she develops throughout the rest of the book. A bold position and a compassionate holding of all parties need not be mutually exclusive, and I believe Johnson’s own theology has the resources to do both.

Her book ends with a visionary outlook that she calls “What if” (214–223), where she dares to imagine a world that actually lives according to interrelational *for-life* ethics, focusing on her native American context. She invites readers to be courageous enough to imagine how such a world might look in their own contexts.

While the book raises points of controversy, I want to acknowledge the committed and inspiring task Johnson has undertaken. Her vision of making theology relevant to every aspect of the ‘whole of life’ is admirable and needed. Her willingness and courage to bring theology into conversation with the most pressing, painful and controversial realities of our world often puts her on a less accommodating path, demonstrating intellectual courage. Her *interrelational theology*, rooted in Pasifika wisdom and animated by a consistent *for-life* ethic, enriches contemporary theological discourse and her final prophetic envisioning reminds us that theology is not only called to analyse the world as it is but to imagine and to help bring into being, the world as it could be.

BOOK REVIEW

UPOLU LUMĀ VAAI AND AISAKE CASIMIRA, (EDS.), *RE-STORYING THE PASIFIKA HOUSEHOLD*

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The book is very much a part of the larger experience of indigenous uprootedness by colonial powers—either political or religious—and the persisting neocolonial developmental and capitalistic agenda. The book opens with an apt poem, entitled “The language of trees and clams,” that laments the replacement of the language of nature with the noise of modern machines. Jenny Te Paa Daniel provides an inspiring “Introduction” to the book, rightly alluding to the breaking of silence through the many forms of voices spoken in the articles therein.

The details of how and why the publication came to be are apparent in the first chapter, “Pasifika Household—its Discontent and Agency.” Theresa Fox and Aisake Casimira did a great favour for the readers by explaining the terminologies specific to the book and common to the people of the Pacific, particularly the Pasifika household (Pacific region) and Pasifika households (nations across the Pacific Ocean). The relationship between the two is pointed out as organic, as it is historical.

The shared reality of past and present makes a strong case for solidifying familial relationships and mapping common issues such as climate change, cultural shifts, poverty, leadership patterns, healthcare, human rights, and ecclesial alienation. Juxtaposing the households’ concerns, the writers respond with indigenous principles of ecocentrism, wholesome development, dignified economy, partnership in governance, collective responsibility, community identity, and relationality respectively. The overall invitation is “... to strengthen the Pasifika household’s resilience, sustainability and agency, much more than agreements, ... understanding that wellness and wellbeing concepts have deep roots in Pasifika household traditions.”

In the first chapter, “Abraham and the ‘Curse’ of James Cook,” the author, Afereti Uili, projects the discovery and exploration narrative of Abraham in the mode of Captain Cook, the archetype of all “discoverers” to follow, as a colonial “curse.” The metaphorical “curse” is that of the imposition of European religion and culture in Oceania that remains extant, to their detriment. The question of whether the curse can or should be reversed is left open. The essay ends by commending the resilient indigenous values that have survived “the tides of empire,” with which to create new decolonised stories of the Pasifika communities and nations.

The essay by Jione Havea is titled “Covenant: Chosen, Cover, Contest.” It challenges the biblical notion of covenant that favours one against the rest. He then calls for an alternative reading that works under three C’s. First, readers need to engage with narratives in which God favours a “chosen” people and justifies displacing and dispossessing the people of the land (Gen 6–9; 12:5–6b). Second, readers need to remove the “cover” of the powerful who directly benefit from the covenant—even if by lies and treachery—and put the

burden of covenant on the marginalised (Gen 20–21). Third, readers need to hear the voices of protest in between the covenant events as indications of a bilateral relationship gone awry (Gen 6: 1–7; Ex 3: 7–9). Beyond the Bible, Havea shows that there are texts that stand against a patronising posture of the colonisers and protest events that cry for justice for the creation, as well.

Upolu Lumā Vaai authors the fourth article, “We are Earth’—reDIRTifying Creation Theology.” He begins by questioning the Christian creation story that engenders a human “ecological” control, and calls for birthing a new earth-based theology by returning to the Pasifika “dirt communities.” This involves “dirtification”—a triad investing in spaces of identity, consciousness, and frameworks for liberation and self-determination. These concepts are developed to formulate a creation theology of reDirtifying with the following argument: Firstly, the “wild thinking” of the peoples of Pasifika has led to them being branded as backward and pagan, yet it is to the wilderness that the Spirit led Jesus as an (alter)native space of value (Jn 4:1ff). John embodied the wilderness (Mk 1:4–6) and was even killed for it. This contrasts the “paradisaical thinking” from which many are moving out and “re-wildering.” Secondly, as descendants of the dirt, dirtification is the self-identification of the Pasifika people who are deeply rooted in dirt or earth and who have a placental connection from birth. Dirtified thinking enables connections between the marginalisation of the dirt people and ecological bodies such as land and oceans. Care and restoration for both is crucial. Thirdly, a “plural I” or an “ecological We” constitutes multiplicity, against the “singular I” which gave rise to centring the *imago dei* in rationalism and humanism extending to colonisation. Relationality to earth is being earth in the Triune Aiga.

In the “New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space,” Tevita Havea argues that a new generation of people and reality necessitates a new idea of ecumenism for the Pasifika household. He conceptualises “negotiated space” as separation, cosmological and relational, and thus develops a theology of ecumenism. Conservation of forest areas is separation for the natural world to rejuvenate, whereby human community is also renewed within itself. The author contends that the cosmic and interrelational worldviews of the Pasifika people ought to inform all dimensions of life.

Manulani Aluli Meyer’s essay, “Spirituality Centred Around Aloha/Pono: A Discipline of Love and Truth,” begins with this summary line: “The manifestation of Spirit is through loving, and if our society is bereft of one, we are without either.” This is embedded in the spirituality of Aloha/Pono—the loving and truth dynamic—seen as a discipline, she maintains. The practice of love of land and service to others, in the context of conflict, are projected as strivings of the Hawai‘ian people.

In “Custodianship: Re-righting Ecological Ethics Towards Sautu,” Sereima Naisilisili critiques an individualistic-capitalistic mentality while juxtaposing it with the relational Fijian identity with the whole ecosystem—the vanua, the end of which is sautu—the shalom. She further states that being good custodians of the ecosystem is to ensure that every life form is an invaluable part of the same ecological system, knowing that each affects the other. Theologically, this means that the earth is everyone’s home, including God’s.

“Collaboration or Collusion? The Need for the Pacific Churches/Household to *Tēu le Va*” by Lupematasila Melani Anae seeks an integration of the Bible and the Samoan holistic code of ethics (Solo o Le Va), within the larger question of it being disrupted by colonialism, Christianity, or capitalism. The silence from the pulpit on the comprehensive Samoan code is addressed by a calling to embrace this integration, while also questioning those contextual theological interpretations that project biblical ethics as in conflict with Samoan codes of daily living and conduct.

Kabini Sanga's "The Mala'ita LABU: Rescripting the Politics of Living Well Together" reimagines the LABU, a village of safety, in the light of issues confronting Pacific Islanders in general, with the goal of "living well together." Reducing the significance of the LABU has resulted in the suffering of the people and the environment. The recommendation is to restore the LABU on the principles of justice, membership, worship, and neighbourliness, which is necessary for securing a future where all live together, and well.

Arnie Saiki's essay, "Pasifika Economics: Towards our Navigational Star Line," turns to the Pacific's ecological assets to navigate global engagements on an equal footing. Economic wellbeing with Pasifika values is posited as crucial for enhancing the lives of native peoples and sustaining the inherent wealth of the region. While recognising the limitations of traditional economic systems, Saiki also suggests that without sensitivity to these indigenous frameworks, global trade systems will lack direction in structuring an integrative ecological economy.

In the final essay, "Rethinking Pacific Education for the Future: Cultural Wellbeing and Youth Resilience for Sustainable Pacific Societies," Frances C. Koya Vaka'uta presents a local indigenous approach to education, with a view to making Pacific Islander young people more resilient and sustainability conscious. The colonial method of education needs revamping to make it "contextually relevant" and "culture inclusive," keeping in mind global educational goals.

The volume closes with a conclusion that recognises the importance of integrating the multiplicity of voices across the Pasifika household, a vision that echoes shared aspirations for reclaiming indigenous concepts to address contemporary issues. Almost all of the essays in the book call for a new way of thinking and doing theology with Pasifika resources, which have been shown to be of immense wealth and value. This volume deserves global readership and engagement, not only to understand the history and creativity of the Pasifika communities but to learn from the wisdom ways that promote mutual care and relationality among humans, other-than-humans, and all of creation.

POEM

YOU ARE PEOPLE OF MOANA

Nikotemo Sopepa

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When we were cherished under the favourable eye of Taaroa,¹
we were people of Moana.
Then came the caravels and galleons,
on board was Jesus, tobacco, muskets, bottles, iron axes, and books.
The currents shifted and we became what we are not, micronesia, melanesia, and polynesia.

We were called savages and heathens,
our gods and spiritualities were considered lotu² of the darkness.
They told us we need the light, but the light did not obliterate the darkness,
it shone so bright and blinded us.
We no longer see our lands, ocean, cultures, and people,
all we see now are paper, copper, and silver currency.

We now see the house of God,
but are oblivious to the forests and reefs.
We teach our children to speak the languages of Bligh, Cook, and d'Urville,
and forsake the tongues of the Moana.
We measure our intelligence by confining our minds to four walls,
and as a result, forfeit the wisdom of the birds, insects, waves, taro, and stars.

Mother Moana now cries out to us,
Oh, you whom I have borne out of the fenua.
Sons and daughters of the eel and flounder,
you who fashion nioje³ and malena,⁴ orators of Taaroa e!

¹ Taaroa is the Maohi Nui word for God. In other Moana languages he is referred to as Tagaloa or Tagaroa.

² In Tuvaluan, lotu means intensity, passion, and depth. It connotes the engrossing interest in something from which one cannot differentiate oneself. This is the same word used for church and worship. Lotu is not a noun but a verb.

³ Nioje is the word for tapa, gatu, or masi to the Omie people from Oro Province, Papua New Guinea.

⁴ The malena in Vaitupu culture is a plated waist-string of the bleached skin (tā) of coconut leaflets, with a few locks of human hair hung from it. It is worn by young girls as a primary step of their initiation to womanhood on the day of their menarche.

Return now to the tafato,⁵ and bring ashore an ulufonu,⁶
For you are people of Moana.

⁵ Tafato signifies the deep, dark, ocean.

⁶ This literally means the 'Head of the Turtle.' This part of the turtle is reserved as royal cuisine presented only to the kings and chiefs. Today, it is given to the faifeau (pastors). In the celebrative accosting through communal caterwauling, ulufonu symbolises an honourable entreaty to enter sacred spaces.

Contributors

Article Contributors

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The journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies (CPT)

The Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies (CPT) is a peer-reviewed open-access journal based at Pasifika Communities University (PCU) that provides a unique platform for theological scholarship from and about the Pasifika household.

The name *The Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies* was chosen to indicate the journal's vision:

- **Contemporary**—The journal addresses issues that matter, real-life issues that affect Pasifika people today from a theological and ecumenical perspective. This does not exclude historical topics but situates them in a broader context drawn by the imperative of understanding the present and planning the future in light of the past to serve Pasifika communities.
- **Pasifika**—More than the mere geographical designation for the Pacific region, the journal understands “Pasifika” as a “new awareness,” a liberative mindset that reclaims faith and indigenous agency in articulating and transforming the development narrative and seeks justice and self-determination for Pasifika people.
- **Theologies**—Theological education should inform and transform public policies and development models. It rejects the “Onefication” of theology that has too often been imposed by colonisation, whether this be in the form of politics, economics, or religion. As a journal based at the only regional ecumenical university of the Pasifika churches, it seeks to promote diverse approaches and ways of theologising as well as diverse voices of communities, grounded in a commitment to the ‘whole of life’ vision and recognition of diverse forms of being and knowing that can coexist in mutual contradiction.

Rationale for the Journal

In Pasifika theologies, there is a need for:

1) High-quality peer-reviewed articles

Before CPT, there was no peer-reviewed and internationally visible academic journal dedicated specifically to the theologies of the Pacific region. CPT has been established to fill this gap in academic publishing and to provide the go-to place for theological discussions from and about Pasifika that meet international standards of academic quality assurance yet are driven by the wisdom of Pasifika communities.

2) Easily accessible open access publications

Academic publishing is a justice issue. Pasifika students and scholars are often excluded by the financial cost of academic literature, be it for online resources behind paywalls or for physical copies that come with added shipment and customs costs. While open access publications are free for the reader, they usually come with high open access publishing fees for the authors or their academic home institutions. With CPT, the PCU provides a platform that is both free to read and free to publish in, as a service to developing young theologians and strengthening theological education in the Pasifika household and beyond.

3) *Holistic theologising based on the Pasifika ‘whole of life’ principle*

As the home of ‘whole of life’ education, PCU stands for an approach to theologising that reaches into current discussions of societal and global relevance. CPT has been established as an internationally visible platform for Pasifika prophetic voices as well as international scholars writing about Pasifika. With a commitment to justice, self-determination, and a ‘whole of life’ vision, it seeks to publish research with a holistic and life-affirming outlook that serves the whole of the Pasifika household of God and beyond.

Key Objectives

- To publish critical theological engagements and articulation of contemporary issues that are of high relevance to the Pasifika household such as development, leadership, climate change, diplomacy, social cohesion, and the protection of land, sea, and people from exploitation.
- To showcase the diversity of Pasifika voices through sound academic work that draws on the richness of Pasifika thought, peoples, and cultures that can contribute to transforming theological education to read the signs of the time.
- To promote theological reflection and engagement that is visionary, prophetic, life-affirming, and dedicated to justice and a sustainable future for all, covering the whole breadth of theological fields, including history of Christianity, pastoral theology, ecumenical studies, missiology, interfaith studies, and ethics.
- To foster a ‘whole of life’ approach that resists dichotomies, onefication, and compartmentalisation and furthers an integral vision for humanity and the flourishing of the whole person.
- To disseminate the writing of established and younger-generation Pasifika theologians, inspiring innovative and creative theological thought for rethinking and restoring Pacific history, making sense of the present situation, and envisaging the region’s future.
- To encourage authors to explore how theological language rooted in Pasifika contexts and cultures can contribute to public policy discussions and development transformation.
- To publish exemplary research on ethical engagement with communities that can contribute to developing a strong Pasifika research culture and transforming the nature of research itself from a communities-based approach.
- To share key theological and ecumenical initiatives and developments from PCU to enhance exchange and collaboration between Pasifika and other regions.

History

CPT was initiated in 2023 by then Principal of Pacific Theological College (PTC), Rev. Dr Upolu Lumā Vaai, now the Manu Folau (Vice-Chancellor) of Pasifika Communities University. For the faculty and leadership of PTC, years of researching, publishing, and editing experience in the Pasifika context showed that a theological journal was needed. This journal would provide a peer-reviewed platform for academic articles to encourage the voice of theology in contemporary public issues, and to encourage research and conversation between older and younger theologians grounded in the Pasifika ‘whole of life’ vision. The idea and vision for the journal were presented to PTC faculty at the 2023 faculty retreat.

In early 2024, the first meeting of the editor and editorial team was held, and the name was set as *The Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies*. It was decided that as inaugural issues, the first two issues of the journal should be dedicated to research connected to PTC/PCU and its key ideas, showcasing especially the

work of academics with a connection to the institution. In March 2024, a call for journal contributions was sent to selected academics who had worked at PTC or have recently been connected to the institution as visiting scholars. In early 2025, the first CPT editorial board was confirmed. CPT was officially launched during the launch celebrations of Pasifika Communities University. The launch of the journal, in other words, marks a shift of theological education in the region grounded in the ‘whole of life’ vision. The launch was held in the context of a workshop on the ‘whole of life’ vision in the presence of many regional and international academics, church leaders, civil societies, policy makers, and the ecumenical community. The first issue was published in July 2025.

Structure

The editor oversees the content and organisation of the journal. The journal is supported by an editorial board comprised of regional and international experts. An editorial support team based at Pasifika Communities University closely collaborates with the editor in the daily editorial processes from peer review to author communication.

CPT publishes original research articles, book reviews, opinion pieces, poems, research frameworks, and other documents that contribute to Pasifika theological talanoa. CPT accepts submissions from anywhere in the world and issues both open and thematic calls for submissions. Occasionally, it also directly invites submissions from scholars whose research and previous publications align with the key objectives of the journal. All original research articles are sent out for double blind peer review.

CPT is published by the PCU Press, an academic publisher established and run by Pasifika Communities University. The journal is published twice a year and publishes both regular issues and special issues by a guest editor or team of guest editors. It is primarily published as an online open access journal but each issue also has a small print run, primarily to be held for reference in the PCU library.