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EDITORIAL



The Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies

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

Volume 1 Issue 1 (2025)

Bula Vinaka! Malo soifua! Welcome to the first issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Pasifika Theologies* (CPT). Based at the Pasifika Communities University, this new open-access peer-reviewed journal aims to provide a unique platform for Pasifika-grown thoughts. It publishes research articles, book reviews, and other contributions to theological talanoa from and about Pasifika. The journal is ecumenical, relationality-focused and rooted in a communities-based ‘whole of life’ vision. It urges us to tell our story as we see fit and encourages communities-based research methodologies that centre ‘life for the whole’ rather than ‘life for the one’.

The journal responds to the urgent need to upgrade and restore Pasifika theologies in the light of the contemporary, to critically articulate our faith and assist the churches to seriously respond to the pressing societal and ecological issues and multiple crises. CPT publishes decolonial, innovative, and prophetic theological voices for rethinking Pasifika history, bible, theology, ecumenism, interfaith, mission, and even culture; transforming the present and shaping the future in the light of life-affirming values.

The establishment of CPT coincides with the 60th anniversary of the Pacific Theological College and its transition to the Pasifika Communities University. Founded in 1961 and established in 1965, the Pacific Theological College is the oldest degree-granting regional educational institution celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. It has, across decades, been a home for prophetic voices that addressed the challenges of the region with a dedication to decolonisation, contextualisation, and justice. CPT continues this mission of serving the Pasifika household of God by offering a unique platform where Pasifika theologians can read and publish on matters of theological concern that are relevant to the region.

This first issue celebrates the legacy of the Pacific Theological College, now Pasifika Communities University, by bringing together a range of contributions from scholars who are closely connected to our institution and its ‘whole of life’ philosophy.

Afereti Uili in ‘Engaging Hebrew Wisdom from a Pasifika Indigenous Perspective: A Reading of Proverbs 27:19’ brings Pasifika wisdom into conversation with biblical wisdom as part of a broader re-weaving of the biblical mat. He shows how the intentional ambiguity of Proverbs 27:19 can be understood in a life-affirming manner through the ‘whole of life’ approach of Samoan indigenous wisdom.

‘Ecumenical Unity and the Necessary Contribution of Pasifika Hermeneutics’ by **John G. Flett** challenges the way in which contemporary ecumenical discourse seeks to eliminate difference. Flett acknowledges the leadership of Pasifika thought as he seeks to develop a de-Empired account of mission that recognises the flexibility of the gospel and makes plurality fundamental to Christian unity.

P. Zubeno Kithan in ‘Healing Together: Indigenous Naga and Pasifika Pathways’ challenges the limited and Eurocentric concept of empathy that is found, for example, in the aid work of humanitarian agencies. She calls for more holistic healing frameworks that recognise relationality and mutual responsibility, such as those found in Naga and Pasifika communities.

At this time of global environmental crises, **Carlos Caldas** from Brazil initiates a dialogue between the Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir*—‘well living’—and Moana theology. In ‘Pachamama meets Moana: A South-South Dialogue on Eco-Theology and Well-Living from the Perspective of Public Theology’, he grounds this dialogue in a commitment to faith, hope, and love as virtues that can resist the capitalist reduction of the value of human life to consumerism.

Nikotemo Sopepa in ‘Au: A Pasifika Undertow Theology of Diplomacy’ draws on the image of the undertow current (*au*) to envisage a Pasifika theology of diplomacy. Diplomacy, like the current, can be a defiant movement that reshapes situations. Calling for a disruption of the mind, he appeals to the people of Pasifika to practice fluidity in thinking, which includes negotiating but also being prepared to walk away when the situation demands it.

In ‘The *Vosa Mana* of the *Vanua*: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Highlands’, **Brian Philip Dunn** takes the Pasifika approach to the *vanua* to Matthew’s Gospel. He shows how our understanding of the biblical text can be enriched if we listen to the voice of the land that connects the place and the people across generations.

Stephen Burns in ‘Christ, Calendar and Lectionary’ discusses the proposal that has recently been made by elite ecumenical bodies for a new ‘Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos’. Referencing the bias of the calendar and lectionary, he shows how this proposal continues a long history of ignoring Oceanic perspectives, and puts forward voices of wisdom from the region that should be listened to in the conversations about developing such a feast.

Faafetai Aiava in ‘Navigating Academic Privilege: Theological Insights for Pasifika Communities’ takes an honest look at the privileges enjoyed by academics. He calls indigenous intellectuals to redefine their privilege as relational and interspatial responsibility that should serve communities. Reflecting theologically, he shows how ‘not knowing everything’ is both human and an opportunity to engage the imagination.

In 'Reclaiming Inclusive Indigenous Voice Through Storytelling', **Bendanglemla Longkumer** argues that in the colonial system, indigenous stories have often either been dismissed or misappropriated. She calls for indigenous people to reconnect with their storytelling traditions, as stories can play an important role in achieving epistemic self-determination.

Melanie Barbato in 'Rethinking Metaphors for Interreligious Dialogue: From Boundary Crossing to Negotiated Space (*Vā*)' questions the spatial language that is typically used to describe the processes of interreligious encounter. Rather than a language of boundary-crossing, she suggests the Pasifika concept of relational or negotiated space (*vā*) as a metaphor for understanding interreligious dialogue processes.

The issue also features a book review by **Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni** of *The 'Whole of Life' Way: Unburying Vakatabu Philosophies and Theologies for Pasifika Development* (2024), edited by Upolu Lumā Vaai and Aisake Casimira.

I hope that these insightful contributions on diverse yet interconnected topics will inspire a new theological 'whole of life' consciousness. This journal, I believe, will stimulate talanoa and titillate the minds of many generations, today and tomorrow, to become revolutionary members of the Pacific ecological Aiga!

Upolu Lumā Vaai
Editor

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ENGAGING HEBREW WISDOM FROM A ‘WHOLE OF LIFE’, SAMOAN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE: A READING OF PROVERBS 27:19

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is primarily to show how the indigenous wisdom of Samoa, as part of the wider tradition of Pasifika indigenous wisdom, provides a valuable and transformative conceptual framework for understanding Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. For the purposes of this essay, my key text is Proverbs 27:19, a proverb whose text appears to be deliberately ambiguous in form and content, which thus presents an interpretative conundrum for its readers. I argue that this interpretative problem can be resolved in a positive and life affirming manner when the proverb is approached by means of the ‘whole of life’ framework of Samoan indigenous wisdom. In conclusion, I suggest that this ‘whole of life’ framework, offers a viable and critical approach not only to reading biblical Wisdom texts but also texts of the Hebrew Bible as a whole.

Keywords

Samoan wisdom, biblical wisdom, Proverbs, translation, ‘whole of life’

Introduction

In the last 200 years or so, wisdom in biblical studies has always been narrowly defined, i.e., only as wisdom strictly found in books categorised as wisdom literature in the Bible. But defining what wisdom literature is and determining the limits of its corpus has always been a matter of debate (see e.g. Kynes 2021a, Longman III 2022). More recently, however,

a movement in biblical scholarship is attempting to break the ties between wisdom as a concept and wisdom literature as a category. It's an effort to understand wisdom as a concept in its own right, and finding connections with extra-biblical wisdom traditions (Kynes 2021b, 1).

I see this movement as a decolonising move away from the control of an elite guild (largely confined to the West), and into the hands of the general population of biblical readers whose contexts are vastly varied and different. It is not a movement away from biblical wisdom as such. Rather it's a movement towards finding correlations, affiliations, connections, and resonances between biblical wisdom and other wisdom traditions around the world. A recent work that reflects this concern from the Asia and Pasifika contexts is called *Reading Ecclesiastes from Asia and Pasifika* (Havea and Lau 2020), where the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is critically engaged by the wisdom traditions of Asia and Pasifika.¹ For the purposes of this essay, a comment by Gerhard von Rad in his two-volume work *Old Testament Theology* (1962) is instructive. Writing about wisdom in ancient Israel, he contends that

[a]ny sound discussion of Israel's wisdom means taking the concept as broadly as it was in fact taken. For [Israel], thinking in terms of wisdom was something *common to humanity*. Wisdom had to do with *the 'whole of life'*, and had to be occupied with all of its departments. (1962, 428 emphases mine)

For me, von Rad had touched on something that is critically fundamental to an understanding of wisdom, not just in ancient Israel but throughout the world. Wisdom is 'common to [all] humanity', it is concerned with the 'whole of life', and as such, is occupied with all of life's many constituent parts: its multiple disciplines, cultures, and religions, and life's different manifestations in the physical, mental, and spiritual.

Proverbs in the Context of Biblical Wisdom

Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible (HB) is generally understood as a collective term that describes a variety of Hebrew words, namely, *hokmah* 'wisdom' and *binah* 'understanding' (Prov 1:2), *tevnah* 'good sense' (Prov 8:1), *da'at* 'knowledge' (Prov 1: 4), and *sakal* 'discretion' (Fox 2007, 669).² Wisdom is also personified in Proverbs, e.g. *hokmot* (1:20), *hokmah*,

1 See esp. the chapters by Waga (Oceania); Tong, Goh, Kim (China); Gnanaraj, Mascenghe (Tamil).

2 Other nuances of these words include, skill, learning, perceptiveness, cleverness, prudence, and sagacity (Fox 2000, 33, cited in Kynes 2021a, 2, n.5). Useful also in this regard is Maimonides's understanding of wisdom in the Bible as (a) the apprehension of true realities, (b) acquiring arts, (c) acquiring moral virtues, (d) the aptitude for stratagems and ruses (cited in Kynes 2021b, 2, n.5).

tevunah (8:1), *binah* (8:14). Samuel Balentine provides a useful summary of what wisdom is in the Hebrew Bible, and how it relates to knowledge and understanding:

In the broadest sense, ‘knowledge’ is information—anything a person acquires through thinking or experience. ‘Understanding’ is discernment, the result of a cognitive process of analyzing and interpreting information to clarify meaning lying beneath its surface. ‘Wisdom’ is a combination of knowledge elevated to expertise and understanding enacted in moral and ethical behavior. To acquire wisdom is to be able to weigh all options, decide which is morally compelling, and to act accordingly. The link between knowledge, understanding, wisdom, *and* moral/ethical conduct is critical (2021, 502).

An important trait of the Book of Proverbs is its focus on life experiences (supposedly of the wise), and how seekers of wisdom would do well in life if they were to learn from their life experiences, and from the life experiences of the sages.³ So, despite Proverbs being traditionally tied to king Solomon, the book itself doesn’t make any explicit references to the narrated history of Israel in the Bible (e.g. the exodus, etc.), nor to traditions concerning the covenant, the torah, the prophets, etc.⁴ In other words, the teachings of Proverbs are predominantly based on what John Goldingay calls, ‘the way life actually works’ (2014, 4). To seek wisdom is to seek the good life, i.e., living wise is living the good life.

Proverbs’ teachings also find connections with other traditions prevalent in the ancient world like Egypt and Babylon (Goldingay 2014, 4; Balentine 2021, 496–97). This association of ancient Israelite wisdom with other traditions of the ancient world suggests that wisdom is a global phenomenon practised amongst different communities around the world.

For the purposes of this essay, my key text is Proverbs 27:19, a proverb whose text appears to be deliberately ambiguous in form and content, and thus presents an interpretative conundrum for its interpreters. I have settled on a study of this proverb not only for the textual-linguistic challenge it presents, but more so for its astute integration of observation of, and participation in the ‘whole of life’.

A Preliminary Look at Proverbs 27:19

בָּמַיִם הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים כִּן לִבִּי־הָאָדָם לָאָדָם:

Kamaim haphānīm laphānīm ken lev-hā‘adam lā‘adam.

‘Like water face to face thus the heart of man to man’.

3 See however, the counter argument by Michael V. Fox (2007).

4 See however, the comprehensive counter-claims made by Katharine Dell (2006) on this issue.

This is Robert Alter's translation which for him, 'reproduces the strong compactness of the original [Hebrew]' (Alter 2010, 389–90; c.f., Goldingay 2012, 174). I prefer Alter's translation to most others I have come across because Alter's translation closely represents the form and literal sense of the Hebrew text. Furthermore, the 'compactness' of the proverb in both the Hebrew and Alter's English, presents a paradox. In other words, it is both very brief (which lends to its ambiguity), and also quite unassuming (which leads to uncritical interpretations). The Hebrew sage has packed into a very short space, or in a very few words, an analogy that looks straightforward at first sight, but is by no means easy to unpack. It reminds me of a Samoan metaphor, '*O le i'a iviivia*', a fish full of undetected bones, i.e., a body of complex knowledge requiring much analytical thought and contemplation.

With reference to Prov 27:19, imageries of water, face, heart, and man,⁵ and the idea of one reflecting another, all present a '*i'a iviivia*' that requires full attention to their meanings and their relationships within the proverb.

The Nature of the Problem

An initial question that comes to mind is: what is the point of the analogy? I will offer two possibilities to consider-

Possibility (a):

If the first part (*Like water face to face*) is about the **reflection** of a face, then by analogy, the second part (*thus the heart of man to man*) is about the **reflection** of a heart. Now, it seems clear in the first part that the face is reflected in water. But in the second part, it's not at all clear how the heart is reflected. Is the proverb saying that the heart is reflected in another heart, or not? This is where the proverb is ambiguous. And because of its brevity, it's not giving enough detail for a fuller understanding of the second part.

Possibility (b):

The position of *face to face* is **analogous** to the position of *heart of man to man*. We know that in the first position, the face is facing itself in water. In the second position, the heart of man is facing either the same man or facing another man. Again, the proverb is not at all clear on what the second position actually looks like.

5 The word 'man' (Hebrew, *adam*) here functions in two possible ways: firstly, denoting a single human being, and secondly, denoting humankind as a whole. This double function is probably why Alter has kept 'man' in his translation, i.e., as an abbreviated form in keeping with the compact nature of the proverb.

Approaching the Problem from Traditional Biblical Exegesis

Scholarly analysis of the book of Proverbs reveals that the proverb (27:19), belongs to a collection of proverbs which seems to have been randomly selected, given the fact that they don't readily display any formal or thematic continuities with each other (Fox 2007). This is an independent collection of proverbs found in chapters 25–29, which also has connections with the collection found in chapters 10–22 (Dell 2006, 76–82).

In the case of Prov 27:19, it doesn't appear to be *thematically or formally* connected to any of the proverbs within its immediate textual context. On the other hand, the analogous style and the synchronic parallelism of 27:19 is found also in several of the proverbs in this section. For instance, see 25:3, 26:1, 26:11, and 27:8. But what makes 27:19 different from all the others is that while the analogies of all these ones are easily identifiable and clearly understood, 27:19 seems to be *deliberately ambiguous*.

A historical analysis of this section of Proverbs including 27:19 shows that this is an old collection of proverbs belonging to King Solomon, which were collected and copied by King Hezekiah's scribes in the 8th cent BCE (25:1). But as with many of these proverbs, whether these all belonged to King Solomon cannot be historically verified. In other words, because the collection consists of proverbs that are loosely connected, if at all, it is quite likely that many of them have different origins (Dell 2006, 76–79).

At the end of this brief analysis, we're not any closer to resolving the problem of Prov 27:19. And so we're back to the two possibilities that I proposed above. Let us now see how these possibilities present themselves in the various ways that the proverb has been translated.

Translating and Interpreting Proverbs 27:19

The proverb states: *Like water face to face thus the heart of man to man.*

While Alter's translation might be the closest to the Hebrew, it doesn't make it any easier to understand. And I think this is the point of the proverb; it is deliberately worded to be ambiguous, which is not a bad thing. Ambiguity is an occasion for further reflection and contemplation, giving rise to new meanings. One sure sign of the proverb being ambiguous is the variety of ways it has been translated. Consider the following:

1. NRSV: *Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another.*
2. NIRV: *When you look into water, you see a likeness of your face. When you look into your heart, you see what you are really like.*
3. TaNaK: *As face answers to face in water, So does one man's heart to another.*

All three translations give different interpretations of the proverb. Note that each translation tries to give meaning to the text with the addition of a verb, like 'reflect', 'see', or 'answer'; verbs not provided in the Hebrew text (cf. Alter's translation), a

condition that gives rise to the proverb's ambiguity.

4. Even the Greek translation (LXX) of the HB gives yet another reading of the proverb:

As faces are not like other faces, so neither are the thoughts of men.

Here, the reference to water is missing or has been omitted.⁶

The NRSV and NIRV translations have chosen to take different paths, each deciding on a definite trajectory of one of the two possibilities discussed above. On the other hand, the Jewish translation (TNK) has opted to give meaning to the analogy by adding a dialogic element into it. For the Greek translation of the Hebrew, the agency of the water is removed so that the elements of diversity and distinctiveness are emphasised.

Pasifika Translations

The following are translations taken from bibles in Pasifika vernacular:

1. Translating my Samoan version goes like this: *Like eyes facing each other in water, such is the heart of one person to another.*⁷
2. From the Tongan Bible, it says: *Just like the appearance of ones' face when looking at the water, So like the appearance of ones' heart when looking at a different person.*⁸
3. From the Kiribati Bible: *Seeing the reflection of one's eyes in water, is the same as seeing one person's behaviour representing the behaviour of the whole community.*⁹
4. From the Kanaky Bible: *Same face with the face in water, it's the same for the feelings for each of them.*¹⁰

What I see in these Pasifika translations is an underlying holistic or communal worldview where 'the one' is understood and defined in terms of 'the other(s)'. This is despite the fact that Pasifika bibles in the vernacular were mostly translated from English versions (especially the KJV). Furthermore, these translations demonstrate the truth of Manulani Meyer's axiom: 'We are all the same, differently' (2024, 48).

Wisdom as a 'Whole of life' Concept

The 'whole of life' perspective frames our Pasifika indigenous understanding of wisdom, and the three key principles of this framework according to Upolu Vaai are, (a) 'integration', (b) 'interwoven multiplicities and complexities' and, (c) 'relationality' (2024,

6 See Clifford (1999, 239–40), where he claims the LXX reading is superior to the MT which he believes is based on a corrupt text.

7 My translation.

8 Translation by Fe'ofa'aki Veamatahau, Masters Student, PTC 2024.

9 Translation by Arobati Tetoa, BD Yr 2 Student, PTC 2024.

10 Translation by Sailugeje Sailugeje, BD Yr 1 Student, PTC 2024.

25–26). These three principles are not only interconnected; they also overlap and support each other. ‘Integration’ describes the wholeness of all life where all things are connected and interconnected in multiple dimensions of reality. This principle also designates the interdependence of all things in the cosmos. The principle of ‘interwoven multiplicities and complexities’ describes the multiple ways of knowing, of being, and of doing; and the complexities of relationships afforded by the ‘whole of life’ way. ‘Relationality’ simply put, speaks of the ‘continuities, flows, and fluidities’ of life (Vaai 2024, 26). It is not about fixed and absolute systems and structures. Rather it designates a complex web of relationships and interconnections characterised by fluidities and continuities, between all of life. In certain ways it can be likened to the holistic understanding of the hermeneutic circle¹¹ where the whole is understood in terms of the individual parts, and the parts understood only in relation to the whole.

Relationality¹² therefore describes the multidimensional and multilayered connections between all things, where the one is indelibly connected and understood in relationship with other(s) and vice versa. So, a self, an individual, or entity, is never fully known as a ‘thing in itself’, but rather always known and understood in relationship with other(s) and as part of the ‘whole of life’. This notion is succinctly expressed by one of our well-known custodians of the Samoan indigenous reference, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi who stated,

I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a *tofi* (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging. (2018b, 105).

Rooted in the ‘sense of belonging’ that Tui Atua speaks of is the Samoan understanding of wisdom. Our *faasinomaga* (‘designation’ or ‘identity’ as Samoans) and our *tofi* (‘inheritance’) are fundamental to a proper understanding of Samoan indigenous wisdom. They are fundamentally ‘whole of life’ concepts. Samoan indigenous wisdom, understood as the ability to make and implement moral and ethical decisions based on indigenous knowledge and experience, must always be guided by the principles of the ‘whole of life’ way.

11 The origin of the concept of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is generally attributed to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1864), the ‘father of modern hermeneutics’. See e.g. Schleiermacher (1998).

12 For a comprehensive articulation and elucidation of the concept of ‘relationality’ from a Pasifika perspective, see Vaai (2007); Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2022 [2017]).

Fa'aaloalo (Respect)

Fa'aaloalo in the Samoan language literally means 'the face-to-face way'. The face-to-face way of *fa'aaloalo* is the symbolic representation of respect. When people are oriented toward each other face-to-face, it is a mark of mutual respect, acknowledgement, recognition, and mutual inclusion. Turning one's back on the other is a mark of disrespect and rejection. In many facets of Samoan life as well as its architecture, the face-to-face way of *fa'aaloalo* is always present. An example is the Samoan *fale-tele* (meeting house) which is designed in a circular fashion. This ensures that people, when seated in the *fale*, are always facing each other. Similarly, in many cultural rituals and ceremonies, people make sure they face each other to respect the relational spaces between them.

In Samoan culture, the relational space between people (and other things) is called *va*. This is why *fa'aaloalo* is the key guiding principle in the life of Samoans. It is inherent in the way they behave and act, the way they think, and the way they spiritualise. *Fa'aaloalo* is a relational way of life. It guides the way we relate to each other, to the land, the ocean, and the sky. But *fa'aaloalo* is also sacred, because in the indigenous Samoan cosmology we are all descendants of the progenitor God *Tagaloaalagi* (Tagaloa of the Heavens).¹³ This means that relationships between human beings, between human and non-human, and between the human and spirit world, are relationships of *fa'aaloalo*.¹⁴

In all *fa'aaloalo* relationships, recognition is always given to the space that exists between those in relationship. This space is, called *va fealoaloa'i* 'social space' (Iuogafa 2022), and *va tapuia* 'sacred space' (Tui Atua 2018c [2009]), which must always be attended to for a proper and harmonious functioning of *fa'aaloalo*. In other words, those in relationship must *teu le va* which means, 'to nurture, to beautify, to cherish (*teu*), the space in between (*vā*)'.¹⁵

Teu le Va (Nurture, Beautify, Cherish the Space)

Vā, also referred to as *va fealoaloa'i* and *va tapuia*, is the relational space between people, and between people and everything else in the cosmic community. While this space is both physical and temporal, Samoans always understand it not as empty space, but space filled with relationality and spirituality. The two spaces are distinct but closely interrelated. *Va fealoaloa'i* recognises the dignity and value of all human and non-human beings, by virtue of their 'mutual inclusiveness' (Vaai 2007, 184). *Va tapuia* is sacred space and signifies the sacred origins of both human and non-human beings, living and non-living. Nurturing the

13 Alternatively in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we are both the created image(s) and children of God, through Christ.

14 Upolu Vaai characterises the Samoan '*fa'aaloalo* relational way' in terms of three main features: (i) 'Mutual inclusiveness' (2007, 184), (ii) 'Responsibility towards the other' (2007, 175; 184), (iii) 'Holism' (2007, 185).

15 My personal translation.

two spaces (*teu le va*), through appropriate language use and acts of reciprocity, performed through ritual, ceremony, oratory, etc., all contribute to the maintenance of balance and harmony in life. *Teu le va* is a way of connecting and communicating with those in the present as well as with our ancestors who have gone before us. *Le va*, (the space) between faces in the ‘face-to-face way’ of *fā’aaloalo* is multidimensional and relational. Living in relationships of *fā’aaloalo* (respect) therefore, ensures that the sacredness and sanctity of ‘the space between faces’ is maintained. *Teu le va* is therefore both ethical and spiritual. It is living in the mode of *fā’aaloalo* and ‘the ‘whole of life’ way.

***Alofa* (Love, Compassion, Care)**

Inherent in the ethic of *fā’aaloalo* (respect) is the ethic of *alofa* (love), and the two could be understood as the same because both are relational and spiritual. Rooted in relationality in the same way as *fā’aaloalo* and the ‘whole of life’ way, *alofa* is holistic, mutually inclusive, and driven by a sense of responsibility towards the other. In terms of these principles, therefore, *alofa* ‘love, compassion, care’ is not limited or restricted to the one or the other. Differences are not irreconcilable opposites of an ‘either-or’ binary, but rather complementary opposites that evolve towards a ‘mutual emergence’ (Meyer 2024, 47–58). *Alofa* is the recognition and acknowledgement of the inclusivity of the whole. Whether it is relationships between people or between people and the land, sea and sky, *alofa* is extended to all. It is a responsibility for the other and for the whole community, borne out of the inseparable connection of the one to the other and to the whole. *Alofa* is not a matter of choice,¹⁶ but a matter of relationship. *Alofa* enacted is reciprocal, sacred (*tapu*), and powerful (*mana*). Allow me to give a short portrayal of a slice of my life as a child in Samoa, which puts context into my reading of Prov 27:19.

16 While we are free to choose whom we ‘love’ in special relationships (e.g. marriage), *alofa* never relinquishes its inclusivity and responsibility to others.

A Personal Story



Image 1, Samoan ecosystem, reproduced with permission by the owner, Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson.

The above picture shows part of an ecosystem that is central to my village in Samoa. I was born in this village called Moata'a, one of the many villages I belong to,¹⁷ in this case, on the maternal side of my family. When I was born, my placenta was buried in our family land at this village. Everyone who is of this village is called "*tama a le 'ele'ele*" meaning, "an offspring, or a child of the land" (specifically belonging to this village). Every Samoan is in fact a *tama a le 'ele'ele*. The burying of my placenta (*fanua*) in the family land (*fanua*), validates the wisdom of my belongingness, i.e., my fundamental connection to the land, to my family, my village, etc. It is the most basic link between us and the world, between us and the cosmos as a whole. As it were, I spent most of my early formative years in this place before I left Samoa as a young adult for further education.

The near side of the pond leads toward the main road, the school, the church, the village shop, and the *malae*.¹⁸ The photograph shows the widest part of a natural water system that covers a large part of the village. The system itself is fed by a number of freshwater springs located further inland. All the water from the springs come together around the point where the photograph is taken, and from here, the water gently weaves its way between the mangroves towards the sea. Such ecosystems are common in Samoa.

17 In Samoa, people belong to more than one village, depending on where your parents and ancestors come from.

18 The *malae* is the traditional social, cultural, and sacred centre of the village where most of the important cultural activities of the village are done.

One important feature of this ecosystem is that it was the place where the mullet fish come to spawn every year. And every year, our village community would harvest big catches of mullet, close to the estuary. The water system was and still is an integral part of our community life. Unfortunately, there's a sad side to the story. Under the banner of economic development, a huge part of our ecosystem by the estuary was buried over, for the purpose of building a beach resort. Needless to say, our village community no longer harvests the mullet fish like they used to in the old days.

Before we had running water at home, this pond and its springs were an important part of our community life. It was the place for drinking water, for bathing, washing, and for swimming. It was our waterway to and from the sea. It also provided us with fish, mud-crabs, eels, etc. The whole ecosystem was an integral component of our life; it was in our blood. Every time we walked the track across the pond, my friends and I would look at our reflections in the water because the water is so close.

A Samoan Indigenous Reading of Proverbs 27:19

1. *Relational face*¹⁹

Whenever I see my face in water, I am not just seeing my face. In my cultural understanding, my face is not just mine alone. It is the face of all my *aiga* (family), my community, and all my ancestors (e.g. Tui Atua 2018a, 93).²⁰ These faces will continue to be transmitted from generation to generation, and will be reflected in the faces of our descendants. The mere reflection of a face in water tells a story. It is a story of knowledge and wisdom, of genealogies, of relationality, and of coloniality and decoloniality. It's a story that goes all the way back to the beginning of all things. The face is *tapu* (sacred) because it is rooted in divinity, whether we are 'images' and 'likenesses' of the Creator God *Elohim*, or 'descendants' of the Progenitor God *Tagaloaalagi*. It symbolises all different dimensions of who we are: culturally, socially, spiritually, emotionally, etc. Not only as individuals, but also in terms of our collective identities, our connections, continuities, and relationships, in and with our families, communities, and ancestors.

2. *Faces on the water, in the water, and through water.*

The use of water imagery by the Hebrew sages is very apt when reflecting on it from a 'whole of life' perspective. While the proverb appears to focus only on personal relationships with

19 For a useful discussion of the significance of the 'relational face' (*alo*) in theology and hermeneutics, see Aiava 2017.

20 See for instance, Tui Atua 2018a, 93..

oneself, or relationships between oneself and another, the imagery of water brings new dimensions and perspectives to understanding this piece of Hebrew wisdom.

Water is a variable medium, so reflections on its surface can vary from one extreme to another, like from near perfect to very distorted or simply unrecognisable. Such variables will also impact how we understand the second line of the proverb. The Hebrew writers could easily have referred to an object like polished bronze as a mirror instead of water. However, they deliberately used water, and not necessarily by some textually transmitted error as some biblical scholars have claimed (e.g. Clifford 1999, 239–40),²¹ but as a conscious effort perhaps to show the complex relationships between human and human, and between human and non-human beings.

For my present purposes, I will focus on the smooth surface of water like that of my village pond in the picture. Long ago when I used to peer into the water from the stone track, I not only saw a reflection of my face, but I saw also the reflections of the clouds and the sun in the sky, as well as the trees and the birds above and around the pond. When fishing for mud-crabs at night during full moon, we used to see the reflections of the moon and the stars in the water. The knowledge and skill for fishing and trapping comes from observing the integrated relationship between the biodiversity of the ecosystem and the moon. Abundant harvests are always shared instead of sold for money.

So, whether we look at the water during daytime or night time, we see reflections not of our faces only, but reflections of the world and the sky all around us. Here we see, alongside our faces, other faces not specifically human, but which are nonetheless faces of our ecological *aiga* (family). Those faces tell their own stories and many of those stories intersect with our own. For instance, a well-known myth in Samoa tells of the origins of the coconut tree. The tale is about the love affair between a young woman Sina and a young man who became an eel (*tuna*). Woven into the story are some of the springs at our village that became the locations of affectionate meetings between the two lovers. These springs still have the names given to them by our ancestors in reference to events in the story. For example, some of the springs at our village are named: ‘*Puna o le se’e*’ (slippery spring), ‘*Puna lilo*’ (mysterious spring), and ‘*Tanoa-a-le-i’a*’ (pool of the eel). These names commemorate the story of Sina and her *Tuna*.²² Eventually Sina got tired of the relationship and wished to terminate it. At which point, *Tuna* realised he couldn’t endure the sense of losing Sina, so he determined to end his life. But before *Tuna* died, his parting words to Sina were: ‘When I die, cut my head off and bury it in the ground. When a tree grows out of it, the fruit will be good for your refreshment and sustenance. The fruit will

21 See e.g. Clifford 1999, 239–40.

22 This rendering of the story does not include other parts that extend to the island of Savaii.

also serve as a token and memory of my love for you, because every time you drink from it, you will see my face and drink out of my mouth'. That tree was the coconut tree.



Image 2, 'face' of a coconut, photo by the author

In the picture above, the 'face' of the coconut is referred to by Samoans as the face of the *tuna* with its two eyes and mouth clearly visible. The 'mouth' is the only point on the 'face' of *tuna* (i.e., the coconut) that can be easily pierced for drinking the juice from the coconut. Significant in this story is the appearance of the face which represents not only the tuna and his genealogy and kin; it also represents the *alofa* (love) extended to someone who did not wish to reciprocate that love. Ironical, however, is the fact that the wisdom of love is always enacted and commemorated every time the ritual of drinking the coconut takes place.

The story of Sina and her *tuna* together with many such stories and folklore in the Samoan indigenous traditions serve as constant reminders of the sacred intersections between human and non-human relationships and their genealogies. They all speak of the power of *alofa* (love) and *fa'aaloalo* (respect) that are embedded in the relational connections between people and the natural environment.

Water is also transparent. Every time we peer into the water, we don't just see reflections on it. We can also see through the water. In my story, we used to see what's in the water like fish, as well as what's beneath the water, like rocks, sand, mud, etc. And this ability to see in and through the water affords us a unique experience of relating to the water itself, the world underwater, and the world above-water. In this regard, the water

is many things to us. It is our storehouse of knowledge, our hermeneutical lens, our life-giver, and our means of knowing ourselves in relation to everything else in the world. The water is in our blood, and in our souls. We are the water, and the water is us. We are related to the water in a multidimensional way, just as we are related to all the faces of nature and of ourselves, that we see in and through the water.

Analogy of Face-to-Face, with Heart of Man to Man

Whichever way you look at the proverb, it seems that the second verset of the analogy (i.e., ‘the heart of man to man’) refers to one’s ability to see one’s own heart, just like being able to see one’s own face in water. The question then is, how does one see one’s own heart? The first answer is through the heart-to-heart method, just like the face-to-face method in the first verset of the analogy. In other words, when two hearts face each other, one is able to see itself in the other. One is dependent on, and incorporates the other for knowledge of itself.²³

The second answer is that one’s heart has no need of another, because it can see for itself. In other words, truth is found in the individual self and not elsewhere. A caution against this approach is that it can lead to a polarising attitude to knowledge, one that prioritises an ‘either-or’ formula for truth. However, while it is important to see into your heart and gain an understanding of yourself that way, that knowledge can only be limited, because it reveals only part of the bigger story of who you are.

Epistemologically speaking, the first method of face-to-face (heart-to-heart) is communal and relational, the second is self-sufficient and self-dependent. The English versions we looked at before, all reflect in one way or another, these two ways of knowing. I have yet to see a translation where the two different ways of self-understanding are laid out side by side, thus affirming that the two are not incommensurable opposites, but are mutually complementary to each other.

A word that has inclusive denotations in Prov 27:19 is *adam* (‘man’). *Adam*, means both an individual ‘human being’ or ‘humankind’ (see Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907, 9). So, if we use humankind in the place of man, we have the second verset reading: ‘thus the heart of humankind to humankind’. Obviously, this translation subverts the individualist reading into a holistic and relational understanding of the phrase in question. Furthermore, this holistic understanding is consolidated by the fact that *adam* (‘humankind’), is derived from *adamah* which means ‘earth’, ‘soil’, or ‘land’. In other words, the heart of humankind is also the heart of earth. Humankind and earth are *aiga*, ‘family’.

23 Cf. Manulani Meyer, ‘We know our self through others’ (2024, 52).

Proverbs 27:19 in the World of *Fa'aaloalo*

Reading Prov 27:19 through the lens of *fa'aaloalo* reveals a relational understanding of the expressions 'Like water face to face' and 'the heart of man to man'. Seeing one's face in water gives the imagery of a person in relationship with herself/himself. But understanding it in the *fa'aaloalo* 'face-to-face way' means that one's relationship to oneself is a multistranded and multidimensional set of relationships. A one-to-one relationship of the self to itself is not, therefore, confined to a unipolar relationship of the self to itself *per se*. This is because in the *fa'aaloalo* way of understanding and knowing, we define and know ourselves only in terms of our relationships. These are relationships with people in family, community, ancestors, etc., and relationships with the land, the sea/waters, and the sky. By the same token, when any notion of a self-examination of one's heart as suggested by some readings of the proverb is analysed in the *fa'aaloalo* 'whole of life' framework, it means that the self examines itself always in relationship to, and with, others in the cosmic *aiga* (family). It's not that the individual is unimportant. Rather, the individual is important always insofar as he/she/it is understood as a constitutive part of the 'whole of life'. This individual is related to human and non-human beings in many different ways, e.g. historically, socially, spiritually, emotionally, etc. Self-understanding therefore, or the quest for knowledge of oneself, is never about knowing the self 'in-itself', as it were. It is about knowing the self in relationality.

This relational approach to knowledge and wisdom, as well as to all of life's disciplines, is the Pasifika indigenous response and resistance to coloniality. Particularly against the individualistic element that is prominent in colonial and Western culture, a culture that sets itself up at the centre of the world. In the culture of the centred-individual, everything around it must conform to its singular and homogenous version of the truth.²⁴ Resistance to this colonial culture would either have to be overpowered by means of physical force, or be mentally controlled through education, indoctrination, and other cultural means. Under the control of this individualistic colonial culture, people and things, as well as disciplines and faiths, are segmented into factions depending on their conformity or non-conformity to the one-truth promulgated by the centre. So, we're caught up in a world of dualistic thinking, where everything is judged under the criteria of the 'either-or'. You are either civilised (enlightened) or uncivilised (primeval); developed (progressive and advanced) or under-developed (primitive); saved (Christian) or doomed (heathen or pagan); modern (Western culture) or barbaric (indigenous); central (the West) or peripheral (all others); and so on. The one-truth system means things stay fixed in one way, and relationships become stale and die. The 'whole of life' approach demonstrated in and by the Samoan concepts of *fa'aaloalo*, *teu le va*, and *alofa* is part of the Pasifika

24 Further on this point, see Upolu Vaai's notion of 'oneification' (Vaai 2021; 2024).

alternative to the 'one truth' of the centre. In the 'whole of life' way, there is no centre or margin, only the whole.

One important feature of this 'whole of life' way is the sense of responsibility towards everyone in the human and the cosmic community, and vice versa. The cultural ethic rooted in *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *teu le va* (nurture the relational space), and *alofa* (love), maintains resilience, balance, and harmony in the 'whole of life'. Reflections of our faces in water tell a story of who we are, of what we have become, and what will emerge out of the conditions of possibility we provide for our descendants.

Conclusion

In this essay I have presented a 'whole of life' hermeneutic framework in terms of the Samoan concepts of *fa'aaloalo*, *teu le va*, and *alofa* in which Samoan indigenous wisdom is rooted, understood, and practised. I have also attempted to interpret Proverbs 27:19 (from this hermeneutic perspective), a proverb unique in its own way in comparison to other proverbs of similar form and content in the book, and which also presents a problem of how best to understand its meaning(s). In my reading of the proverb, I have highlighted the use of a heuristic device which I believe is pertinent to my understanding of Proverbs 27:19. This device is a sketch of my own personal history, my family, and the community I belong to, which gives context my reading. It is not external to or separate from the Samoan hermeneutic framework, but is integral to it.

Here, I want to conclude as follows:

1. Reading Proverbs 27:19 from the perspective of Samoan indigenous wisdom is a reading that is methodologically viable and rewarding. Viable for its ability to respect different interpretations of the proverb, while also providing a framework in which these differences can be viewed as mutually complementary. It is rewarding because it provides an alternative way of reading wisdom in the Bible; a way that is holistic, inclusive, life affirming, 'whole of life'.
2. Samoan indigenous wisdom is a way of life, just as much as ancient Hebrew wisdom is a way of life. Both are 'whole of life' in their observations of reality, their reflections on that reality, and their participation in that reality.
3. Samoan indigenous wisdom does not hold a monopoly on Pasifika indigenous wisdom. Similar frameworks are also present in the wider Pasifika community, with properties that are unique to each.

4. My reading of Proverbs 27:19 can be seen as part of the *re-weaving of the biblical mat*, Pasifika style. This is because any interpretation of biblical texts or any text for that matter is not only **contextual** but is also part of the process of **re-writing that text**. I have called it *re-weaving*, in solidarity with a Pasifika cultural icon. Needless to say, the hermeneutic lens of the Samoan indigenous wisdom has important implications for reading other biblical texts.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECUMENICAL UNITY AND THE NECESSARY CONTRIBUTION OF PASIFIKA HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

The revolution of ecumenical discourse currently underway throughout Pasifika offers both a critical de-privileging of histories that retained the West as the focus, and a constructive revisioning concerned with local social systems, structures and ethics. As a project, it relies on the hermeneutical method. However, the continued liberation of local theological work requires a de-Empiring of mission along with ecumenism and hermeneutics due to how the ecumenical movement approaches unity: unity is achieved through the elimination of difference. This essay examines the absence of difference within contemporary ecumenical discourse, the origins of that approach in the earliest ecumenical councils, and the attempt to overcome the distinction of the theological and the non-theological through the application of hermeneutical methods. Here the questions and approaches underway in Pasifika offer significant leadership. But more remains. Against the temptation to close history, to focus on the local context alone, a de-Empired account of mission sets the gospel within an eschatological framework, one which makes proclamatory pluriformity basic to Christian unity.

Keywords

non-theological, Empire, ecumenical movement, hermeneutics, mission

Introduction

At a 2017 Pacific Church Leaders Meeting, to cite Upolu Vaai, the Pacific churches ‘committed to renewal by moving away from the “unity in Christ” narrative, that has dominated Western Christianity and mainstream ecumenism, to the “household of God”’ (2019, 3). On the one hand, this constitutes a critical resistance against ‘the European and North American churches’ territorial definition, grounded in their ‘Eurocentric worldview’ (Vaai and Jathanna 2020, 11), including a rewriting of ‘ecumenical histories’ within the Pacific which privileged the West (Casimira 2020). On the other hand, as a ‘radical response that is inclusive and holistic’, treating everything as a ‘living relational household’ (Vaai 2019, 3), it is a constructive move to incorporate shared Pasifika values and themes of significance through the region and develop greater solidarity at the religious and governance levels.

This re-constituted ecumenical process shifts away from a monolithic application of the one oikumene and towards a concern with negotiation among multiple traditions. This includes a necessary critical dialogue ‘between Western and Pacific epistemologies in research and praxis’, and the support of ‘traditional social systems, structures and ethics that act as the key sources for developing Pacific hermeneutical approaches to ecumenism’ (Anisi and Casimira 2017, 28). This link forged between the ecumenical project and hermeneutics is the concern of what follows.

This article examines the relationship between mission, hermeneutics, and ecumenism. Specifically, while ecumenism and hermeneutics have been identified as historic tools of Empire, today they are being treated as constructive locations for overcoming Empire. However, and while good local constructive work has been done to reframe what constitutes mission (“The Mission Call” 2010), mission remains the sacrificial scapegoat in relation to the Christian gospel’s alignment with colonisation. And when mission is related to the imaginary of Empire, any local constructive development remains grounded within and continues the ecumenical vision associated with Empire: mission is treated first as a matter of geographical movement, with a priority attached to histories which ‘had’ the gospel before ‘us’. This implicit point of agreement needs to be dismantled. To distance the ecumenical project from Empire, it is necessary to de-Empire mission, to understand mission as an eschatological disruption of history’s premature closure. This sets constructive ecumenical concerns and hermeneutical approaches on a different foundation: the proclamatory, the witnessing embodiment of the gospel in context, is basic to the Christian plurality out of which unity is formed.

The argument begins by observing that the contemporary ecumenical movement has not developed a theological account of difference, relying instead on a dichotomy of

the ‘theological’ and the ‘non-theological’. This governing binary echoes the processes for unity evident at the earliest ecumenical councils: unity is found in the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference. This is the approach of Empire. To move beyond the categorisation of ‘tradition’ and ‘context’, Konrad Raiser (1991) proposed applying hermeneutical method as a way of establishing difference as the basis of unity. Though this approach found some traction, the default approach soon reasserted itself, with tradition and context remaining the operative framework. Given this ecumenical impasse, the approach to ecumenism and hermeneutics through the Pacific provides significant leadership for the world Christian ecumenical project—but it must include the de-Empiring of mission as part of that project.

The Absence of Difference

Multiple definitions of and approaches to Christian unity exist within the contemporary ecumenical movement (Chapman 2015). The same cannot be said of theological definitions of ‘difference’—because none exist. The problem should be obvious: to unite, it is necessary to understand what divides. And, without giving a theological account of difference, all difference becomes divisive.

In terms of ecumenical discourse, division between ecclesial bodies tends to be associated with identifiable historical moments of disagreement concerning doctrine. Attention focuses on the ‘great schism’ of 1054 CE between the Greek East and Latin West, and on the Reformation. These are key moments of breach and upon which ecumenical concern focuses. Such categorisation assumes that the primary division lies in institutional distinction, and that the mechanisms for repair lie in doctrinal agreement concerning the theological positions that fostered schism. This establishes the conditions of ecumenical unity: it seeks a form of institutional unity and identifies the processes by which that unity might be achieved.

In this approach, ‘theology’ takes centre stage. But what is theology? According to a 1937 statement, theology is the ‘direct reflection upon immediate spiritual experience, and the formulation of these reflections as a system of thought, which interprets the prior experience and which elicits from the particular forms of that experience its universal truths’ (Commission 1937, 9). Note here the language of ‘immediate’ (or, unmediated) ‘spiritual experience’, a ‘system of thought’, and ‘universal truths’. The same statement develops an opposite: the ‘non-theological’. The non-theological is the mediate, the lived, and the local, a conglomerate of ‘factors which have their origin in the enviroing culture rather than within the direct Christian tradition’ (Commission 1937, 11). These factors have something to do with the ‘interpretation’ of church’s proper ‘spiritual life’, via the

‘use of analogies, mental apparatus’ for the purposes of missionary communication of ‘the Gospel to non-Christians’ (Commission 1937, 10). The non-theological indicates ‘ideas and modes of thought originating in the first instance outside the direct Christian tradition, but eventually employed in the formal elaboration of Christian thought’ (Commission 1937, 10). In specific terms, the non-theological encompasses race, language, class, ethics, gender, economics, and is deemed to ‘operate in the milieu of disunity far more powerfully than theology proper’ (Clark 1951, 349). These elements, it is so argued, constitute the barriers to unity even when theological agreement exists.

Given all the insights developed through the twentieth century concerning human rationality, the importance of culture and language, hermeneutics, etc., a definition of theology from 1937 cannot not be taken as normative today. Yet, whatever complexification might be attributed to theology ‘proper’, it has not been likewise attributed to the idea of the non-theological. This has remained consistent—and operative—through ecumenical discourse.

Enter Chung Kyung-Hyung. Her dance on the final day of the Seventh Assembly of the WCC held in Canberra (1991) prompted a frenzied discussion regarding ‘paganism’, ‘syncretism’ and a sudden need to address proper ‘diversity’. This appeared in the official report of the Assembly, and remains today the singular definition of ‘diversity’ within the ecumenical movement: ‘Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic, or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8)’ (Kinnamon 1991, 173). (As a small digression, it is not without some irony that Heb 13:8 speaks to the experience of Gentile Christians and against the imposition of ‘strange teachings’ linked to food regulations. In other words, the passage speaks to the fidelity of Jesus Christ in the embodiment of cultural and religious difference—the exact opposite to how it appears in this pseudo-definition.) Note that this ‘definition’ does not actually define ‘diversity’, or even explore the relative merits of the term diversity: divergent from a norm. It, rather, locates diversity: first, by maintaining the distinction between the theological and the non-theological, and second, by identifying the non-theological with ‘context’. Though it affirms diversity as ‘integral’ to communion, it does not describe how it is basic to communion. Rather, this ‘definition’ is wholly concerned with imposing necessary ‘limits’ on, and the ‘illegitimacy’ of, diversity. This is because when diversity ‘goes beyond acceptable limits it can be destructive of the gift of unity’ (“The Church” 2013, 17). Diversity and unity appear as a zero-sum game: the more diversity, the less unity. The only theological supports given to this position relate to the idea of the ‘common’, and is set within a diachronic framework: the same yesterday, today

and forever. In the context of World Christianity, to claim the common and the shared yesterday is to claim that the forms developed through the western tradition remain the singular normative ‘theological’ forms.

Nowhere in ecumenical discourse is ‘difference’ subject to theological definition. Instead, it develops in relation to accounts of ‘context’, as a non-theological element derived from culture but deemed necessary to the embodiment of the faith (without specifying how or what this might look like). The idea appears also in lamentations concerning the loss of difference via colonisation and as demanded by missionaries. ‘At times, the cultural and religious heritage of those to whom the Gospel was proclaimed was not given the respect it deserved, as when those engaging in evangelization were complicit in imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations’ (“The Church” 2013, 7). Apart from observing how this statement from 2013 (!) continues the neo-colonial line of denying the possibility of resistance from local peoples against the ‘power of the West’, note the absence of the institution of the church in this account. Indeed, through ecumenical documentation, while missions and missionaries stand at fault for cultural denigration, the church as institution and ecumenical unity are presented as the proper locations of healing and reconciliation. However, due to the absence of any theological definition of difference, let us intrude at exactly at this point, the point at which the logic appears its strongest: What if ‘blaming the missionaries’ is the basic first step in denying difference any theological merit?

Unity as Cultural and Linguistic Sameness

To question the category of the ‘non-theological’, to examine the function of ‘context’, and to question the scapegoating of ‘missionaries’ within contemporary ecumenical discourse, intends not to dismiss the ongoing harm of the colonial period. It is to suggest that the confident identification of these three elements continues colonial approaches to difference.

Listening to judgments issued by World Christian voices regarding the ecumenical movement, one hears complaints concerning: knowledge production ‘rooted in Eurocentric nativism’; a claim to ‘universal normativity achievable independent of place, time, context, or people group’ (De La Torre 2022, 59); a premature closing of history in which the identity of the ‘body of Christ’ and its continuity through time resides with institutions of western civilisation (Míguez Bonino 1982, 122–24); and a failure to entertain within its conception of unity, the concerns and values of the global South (Barreto 2022, 84). Or, in sum, the contemporary ecumenical movement is a legacy of the imperial era, seeking a form of unity and associated processes corresponding to

the Christendom project: unity which is ‘culturally and epistemologically exclusionary’ (Barreto 2020, 224; Vaai and Jathanna 2020, 8–9).

The ecumenical movement owes its ‘exclusionary’ nature to what Lamin Sanneh has termed the ‘mental habits of Christendom’, the predisposition ‘to look for one essence of the faith, with a corresponding global political structure as safeguard’ (2003, 35). This is an extended historical project, one which defines the faith in essentialist terms (without reference to the non-theological) and promotes its truth through imperial political structures. Far from ideological, this observation is based in the primordial and defining schism in the history of the Christian church: the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).

Of course, the formal schism which occurred at Chalcedon was itself a logical endpoint of the exclusionary practices already at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) with its exclusion of the Jews and the absence of Persian bishops (Grayzel 1970). But this possibility of othering and exclusion at ecumenical councils soon became the norm. Without developing a detailed account of the contest between those who affirmed the christology of Chalcedon against those pejoratively labelled ‘monophysites’, Chalcedon embodied a political, economic, and socio-cultural conflict. Specifically, it represented the attempt by the Roman Emperor Marcian (396–457) to assert Graeco-Roman culture through the empire (Mar Gregorios 1988). This colonialist agenda succeeded in severing Western Christianity from Asian and African Christianity and resulted in the centuries long murderous persecution of those now deemed ‘heretical’ (Davis 2004).

For the positioning of the non-theological and difference in relation to unity, this history and its continuation through the Christendom era, is of decisive significance. For the western theological tradition, the early ecumenical councils constitute moments where the church codified, through the instruments of creed, canon, and hierarchy, its proper order and so its structures for governing difference. These councils are the constitutive movements of the church itself, and so definitive of Christian unity. This is true—they did indeed define the nature of unity and the processes by which it is to be achieved: unity through the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference and the identification with imperial structures. To cite Andrew Walls (2022, 166–67), this ‘permanent’ division included two clear consequences: Christians in Europe became cut off from (murdered) Christians in Asia and Africa; and, dividing the church along linguistic and cultural lines became the default mode.

In terms of our wider argument, three further observations might be made. First, to treat this moment as primarily a ‘theological’ discourse, one dealing with complex christological concerns, is to pretend that it was not also a conflict (and theological solution) informed by non-theological factors. It secures the possibility that the theological is properly abstracted from the non-theological. Second, even as a key moment of schism

in the Christian church, Chalcedon is often not viewed as such because the event itself created the conditions for unity—unity through the elimination of difference. Third, though a colonial move with all the attendant violence, it establishes a historical narrative which eliminates the ‘other’ and establishes the ‘tradition’ according to a certain set of terms and continuous through time only in reference to these terms (Spickard 1999). This constitutes the ‘Christendom pattern of exclusion’ informing contemporary ecumenical accounts of unity and the concordant absence of difference.

As evidenced by the colonial era, mission is one of Christianity’s most powerful and consequent theological constructs. In the earliest church, mission had something to do with the encounter between communities of difference and curated theological processes which supported the emergence of a multicultural body. The possibility of eliminating difference, therefore, relies on the co-opting of mission, on eliminating the eschatological opening of histories and identifying the movement of the gospel through time in a single history. Mission came to align with the imperial assertion of an established (universal) centre and its othering of the margins so that they relate to the centre only as commodities, and an account of history conceived in terms of the geographical movement from the ‘centre’ (Rome) and to the ‘periphery’ (Asia/ Africa). A one-way process of transference results. The movement of the gospel to the margin is based on ‘reception’ and this, to cite Enrique Dussel, is ‘simultaneous with the act of enforced domination based on political, economic, technological, military, or ideological superiority’ (1985, 112). According to this schema, the imagined border between church and mission maps precisely onto the border between centre and colony. The result is the translocating of established ecclesial artefacts as the necessary form for the “universalization” of Christendom in the entire world... a spurious and fetichized universality’ (Dussel 2019, 34). Mission defined as (coerced) reception is the mission of Empire, and the form of unity based in the elimination of difference.

The (Im)Possibility of Intercultural Hermeneutics

To return to the contemporary ecumenical discourse, within the movement it became clear that even factors adjudged to be non-theological could not simply be dismissed; they needed to be set in a relative position. The Faith and Order conference held in Montreal (1963) accomplished this by distinguishing between Tradition with a capital ‘T’ (referring to the revelation of God in Scripture and passed on in other ways), and traditions (cultural and conditioned forms of Christian embodiment). The resulting operative binary of ‘Tradition’ against ‘context’, however, continued to view difference as an inherent threat to Tradition. Even with the language of ‘translation’, as it appeared in the 1977 WCC paper *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (World Council

of Churches 1979), the dominant concern was one of ‘danger’: translation ‘may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life’ (§27). The stance towards difference remained concerned with imposing limits.

In response, Konrad Raiser (1991) published an article titled *Beyond Tradition and Context: In Search of an Ecumenical Framework of Hermeneutics*. This begins by retelling the ambiguous history of ‘contextualisation’ and of missionary translation within ecumenical discourse. As part of this history, Raiser too returns to the earliest ecumenical councils, noting how the ‘flexible rule of faith of a missionary community’ mutated due to ‘the political concern for the unity of the empire’ into ‘doctrinal definitions, which were the fruit of a successful inculturation of the Christian faith in the cultural, religious and philosophical world of Hellenism’ (1991, 351–52). The now instituted ‘doctrinal definition of the limits to diversity’ promoted murderous violence against the churches of Asia and Africa in service to the Empire, or, to use more sanitised ecumenical language, prompted ‘the first schism in the ancient church’ (Raiser 1991, 352).

Raiser does not stop here. He notes that the following two major schisms in the church in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries embody a ‘similar dynamic’, meaning that the flexibility of mutual missionary encounter hardens to the point of fracture when the ‘hitherto dominant or sending community’ insists ‘on the privilege of defining the criteria for mutual recognition’ (Raiser 1991, 352). A simple related conclusion follows: in the contemporary era of World Christianity, the rule of missionary flexibility is being rejected in favour of a privileged account of the norms of Tradition over-against the non-theological merits of context. In other words, contemporary ecumenical discourse embodies an identical dynamic evident through the three great schisms in the life of the Christian Church. And not just this: this dynamic has been exacerbated by the rise of different forms of Christian embodiment in the global South and the decline or consolidation of traditional bodies. This, for the ‘historic churches’, resulted in an existential concern of ‘disintegration’ (Raiser 1994, 170) and a corresponding ‘retreat back into their tradition’ as a way of preserving ‘continuity with their roots’ (Raiser 1994, 171). With pressure for institutional survival manifesting as tribal conservatism, ecumenical discourse had failed to include ‘the Evangelical or Pentecostal communities with strong indigenous ties, which predominates in the churches of the South’ (Raiser 1994, 171).

Raiser’s own response consists of reasserting the nature of Christian mission as it appeared prior to the establishment of set criteria and the prosecution of their limits. That is, ‘the history of doctrine up to the modern era can be analysed in missionary perspective as a succession of processes of inculturation responding to different and culturally-conditioned soteriological predicaments. The message of salvation in Christ does not represent a timeless truth; it needs to become incarnate in the life situation of particular

people and communities' (Raiser 1991, 353). To so position the missionary dimension of the Christian faith in relation to an ecumenical hermeneutic, communication between communions would take form as 'an open-ended process that will be consummated only in God's own future' (Raiser 1991, 354).

As General Secretary of the WCC, Raiser was able to sponsor a wider formal discussion of hermeneutics, leading, in 1995, to a WCC held consultation "On Intercultural Hermeneutics". Its focus concerned the reality of the Christian message crossing cultural boundaries in a way which 'elicits new cultural forms of appropriation', that is, ways in which the gospel becomes new, and the diversity of the faith's embodiment itself witnesses to 'God's reconciling work through the cosmos' ("On Intercultural" 1996, 245). The beginning point is properly that of missionary exchange, and the ambiguities attendant to that exchange. For example, when 'the Christian story was told to [those in the South] by dominant cultures, the effect has often been a *suppression* rather than a *transformation* and *renewal* of their own stories' ("On Intercultural" 1996, 245). This is to be countered as pernicious error which runs against the revelatory diversity of the faith. In terms of 'integration', or the authenticity of Christian embodiment in difference, the text notes how '[i]n the West the church integrated into itself Jewish, Hellenistic, Roman and Germanic elements. Elsewhere, older Christian traditions integrated Indian, Ethiopian, Syrian and Chaldean elements' ("On Intercultural" 1996, 251). The report then laments that this same latitude was not given to Christians in the South. Although these communities are undergoing identical processes to those experienced in the West, this has become a 'controversial issue' for those communions who view their forms of integration as normative.

This 1995 consultation is to be commended as a fundamental summary of theological encounter with difference as proper to discovering the fullness of Christ, and so the fullness of Christian communion. However—it was not the last statement. In 1999, the finalised WCC 'instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics' was published as "A Treasure in Earthen Vessels". This document repealed much of the significant work accomplished during the early 1990s, reasserting a similar pattern to that affirmed at Montreal: the 'one Tradition' constituted the singular measure for discerning 'the authenticity of faith in a situation of conflicting cultural perspectives, frameworks or hermeneutical principles' ("A Treasure" 1999, 15). By contrast, the 'alien and alienating' nature of Christianity in various places is due to the 'potential ambiguity about the way in which the gospel is proclaimed' especially given that 'many missionaries were bound up with imperialist impulses and consequently became colonialist' ("A Treasure" 1999, 27). In other words, Christianity already has a received measure for judging the authenticity of the faith, and the experience of alienation lies not in this measure, but in the manner of

its communication. As to the deployment of a ‘hermeneutic’, this is used to reinforce the prevailing forms of theological authority and the denigration of whatever it deemed to be ‘non-theological’ (Körtner 2012; Neelankavil 1999).

Proclamation as the Necessary Ground of Difference

The introduction of hermeneutics in ecumenical discourse is a case of one step forward and two steps back. Indeed, since the 1999 publication of “A Treasure in Earthen Vessels”, the hermeneutical method envisioned by Raiser has not played any great role within formal developments (Andersen 2006; Houtepen 2001). Recognising this is exactly where the major ecumenical potential of the contemporary theological work undertaken within the Pacific lies.

Upolu Vaai’s idea of *oneification* begins with a unique, but appropriate, etymology for the term colonisation: ‘The real meaning of colonisation... comes from the word *colon* meaning *to digest*. Theology in the Pacific has been a slave to this *colon narrative* where only one culture, one way, one dance, or one destination digests all others in the name of an ultimate truth’ (Vaai 2020, 43). *Oneification* is ‘the control of truth’ (Vaai 2020, 43), the ‘reduction of everything into *one*’ and the production of theologies which ‘support the idea of *oneness* engineered by the fixed notion of truth’ (Vaai 2016, 51). Nor is this concern simply one which comes from ‘outside’: the Pacific has not been immune to empire building using similar means. Empire and the closing of history (the advancing of our own history as the norm) is a temptation always on our shoulders.

Theological discussions of Empire often express two concerns. The first focuses on forms of projection, on the way Empire perceives, names, and constructs a reality and the resulting behaviours (Vaka’uta 2020). The second concerns the barriers to participation in the Empire and the negation of local voice (Vaka’uta 2015). These concerns describe the real and ongoing effects—in historiography, ecology, economics, epistemology, culture, social relations—of Empire on the local.

Vaai’s (2016, 2020) definition, however, includes a third component: the local continues to feed Empire. Colonial theft, the mining of local resources and their export to centres of power, is the obvious basis and goal of colonisation itself. But to transpose this position into the ecumenical project, *oneification*—as an ongoing process—grants both the export of local voice and its return as the expression of one truth. This prompts a question: what is the local product being fed upon, digested, and returned as the monolithic defecation of Empire?

Before addressing that question, one might indicate a general theological response within Pasifika theologies to this problem of a totalising truth—diversity belongs to Oceania, first, in the resplendent cultural difference characterising the region, and second,

in the shared forms of reciprocity at the heart of these cultures, a ‘reciprocity’ (Tongan, *tauhi vā*; Samoan, *teu le vā*) [which] elevates distribution above consumption, sharing above accumulation, peaceful coexistence above domination, communal well-being above individualistic interests’ (Vaka’uta 2015, 60). This is in evident contrast to the basic posture of western modernity, within which, according to Walter Mignolo, ‘[i]nclusion is a one-way street and not a reciprocal right’ (Mignolo 2011, xv).

Reciprocity finds expression in *talanoa* as itself a model of theological hermeneutics. To give an example, Vaai refers to the process of *faafaletui* (sharing, retelling, reconstructing stories), as ‘a hermeneutical approach’ which recognises that ‘[m]eanings are not rigid’, that a single story always has multiple and new meanings, and the retelling ‘contributes to the *ongoing reception* of the same story from generation to generation’ (2016, 53–54). Such reciprocity indicates that ‘truth is always relational. It is relative to the context and perspective of the receiver of the story. It is not something abstractive or universal’ (Vaai 2016, 5). Necessary to this process is the sense of community, extended family and solidarity that is at the heart of the Pasifika Household of God, and includes what Vaai has termed the ‘de-heavening of God’: ‘In this household, God is no longer that remote monarchical figure who controls the world from afar to maintain divine power, but rather a companion who is part of multiple relationships through the Spirit, and through the Spirit suffers alongside the grieved members of the household’ (2019, 4). In short, if one might summarise the stated theological commitment within Pasifika theologies over the past generation, it is to a shared diversity of voice and the invitation to develop theologies through an array of local lenses and the processes (institutions/structures/methodologies) which support this invitation. The direction and production are constructive and fabulous.

However, as to what local theology feeds Empire, let us begin with the idea of theologising out of context. This should not be confused with ‘contextualisation’ because this speaks more to a theology of identification and evaluation by an agent external to the context using local language, symbol, and ritual to communicate a static message. As Jione Havea argues, such an approach trades upon ‘the illusion of essentialism’ (2011, 44). Essentialism is the tendency to ‘privilege and valorise unity, harmony, and totality and thereby to denigrate, suppress and marginalize multiplicity, contingency, and particularity’ (Duraisingh 2000, 680–81). Out of this comes the drive to absorb that which is different and to convert it in such a way that it confirms the original and the universal. Or, contextualisation performed in this way perpetuates the processes of imperialism with its end in dehumanisation (Halapua 1998, 22).

In opposition, Havea advocates taking ‘contexts seriously, not just as points of arrival and departure, but as that which is at the center of our attention’, to focus on ‘the local location rather than the global context’, and to appreciate the complexity and multilayered nature of location, along with the fluidity of borders (2011, 44, 49, 50). This interest in the local leads Havea to the following conclusion:

When we theologize *in the interest of the Christian mission*, many things become secular and pagan, including the memory of the ancestors. I am denied the joy of recalling the stories of my pre-contact aunties, for I have to live as if I am a descendant of Sarai (even though I prefer Hagar). If on the other hand we theologize *in the interest of the context*, it makes no sense to speak of something that is secular or profane. Everything is tapu (sacred, prohibited) ... Connecting with ancestors enables the barrier between the sacred and the secular to fall. (Havea 2011, 50)

Of course, Havea’s interest is not with contemporary ecumenism, and the definition of mission he is using here understands ‘conversion’ in terms of leaving one history for another, a mission which demands a binary ‘disruption’ with the non-Christian past. And, without question, his position is developed with the deliberate intention to serve the local and difference. The problem is: making this binary fundamental to local theological construction establishes the beginning point (the key problem), the form of solution (methodology), and an envisioned goal (what does our theologising seek to achieve). This purposely feeds and affirms empire because it maintains the basic assumption of empire—context is non-theological, and the experience of alienation lies in the missionary transmission of the gospel.

Let me explain. As previously stated, the elimination of difference is the approach to unity upon which contemporary ecumenical discourse trades: the consolidation of the Christian message into a ‘One Tradition’ which is itself deemed to be trans-historical and trans-cultural. This process of consolidation included: (1) reconfiguring mission from the processes of communication and theological construction due to the appropriation of the gospel within communities of difference; (2) aligning mission with the imperial assertion of an established non-theological (universal) centre, and the political, military, and economic movement from that ‘centre’ (Rome) and to the ‘periphery’ (Asia); and (3) linking the ‘body of Christ’ to a form of continuity identified with the trajectory of western civilisation. While this approach has undergone significant criticism in the postcolonial era, it remains intact precisely due to mission’s scapegoating. In other words, the ‘flexible rule of faith’ (mission) is blamed both (1) for introducing difference (the non-theological) into the limits of a fixed rule because of its translation of a culturally transcendent message

using local imaginaries, language, symbols, etc., and (2) for communicating the Christian gospel in such a way that it replicated western forms of the faith and so denigrated local cultures (colonisation).

Both points of blame hold significant truth, but to ground the production of local theologies within this framework affirms: (1) that the means by which Christianity grounds itself in and negotiates difference (the flexible rule of faith) is itself to be rejected in favour of fixed rules (a particular history of embodiment); (2) that developing theologies, overt in employing a local hermeneutical lens, depend upon the ‘non-theological’ and so develop as something to be celebrated within the ‘One Tradition’ but which fail to intrude upon it. Together these affirmations force difference into a binary which sets christology over against the local, portrays Jesus as someone who prevents engagement with pre-contact aunties, and distinguishes ‘unity in Christ’ from the ‘household of God’.

This is the problem of history, of identifying the body of Jesus Christ with the transmission/continuity of the gospel with the passage through time (and so the necessary preservation of embodied forms) and not in intercultural negotiation. To retain mission as singular scapegoat of Empire is to accept the identification of Jesus Christ with the contingent movement of the faith through western history and, with this, to accept the perpetual denigration of our own histories in relation to the faith. Or, positively stated, the reality of multiple cultures speaking the faith must include the reality of multiple histories embodying that faith.

Under Empire, mission became a condition of acceptance, conversion to a set form, rather than a process, a being converted in mutual exchange. De-Empiring mission serves the ecumenical discourse by rejecting the ‘premature closure of history’—the claim that the continuity of God’s acting in history is identified in the history of a singular culture. This is a repeated theological concern through world Christian discourse (Song 1976; Charleston 1998). With mission as the opening of history, to cite Raiser, ‘the emergence of plurality in the church can be understood as a process of differentiation taking place in the course of the transmission of the gospel and the missionary expansion of the church.... [T]he interruption of continuity, is constantly necessary to preserve the freedom of God’s action, God who creates the new and also seeks and makes possible new responses on the part of human beings’ (Raiser 1998, 123–24). To de-Empire mission is to affirm plurality as the necessary condition of continuity, the newness of the gospel in history through each generation and language, making claims (proclamation) in relation to local appropriations, encouraging integration by which the faith is embodied in authentic local form (Yettica-Paulson 2014).

As to the significance of mission's de-Empiring for hermeneutical method, as Damar Heller (1994, 32) observes, a hermeneutic serves a twofold function. First, it is a matter of hearing, understanding, and reception. This includes both listening to the complex fluid-border locale within which a community of interpretation is situated along with receiving voices beyond that locale. Second, it is a matter of expression, language, and proclamation. It is the telling of theological truths, not as abstract universals, but according to Halapua's definition of *fakakakato*, the inseparable relationship between the symbol and the experience (1998, 25). Such intercultural hermeneutics of plural traditions renders impossible the dichotomous formulation of the local and the universal basic to Empire and to the processes of *oneification*. Nor is it to reject the very idea of the 'universal'. Instead, the 'whole is not conceived prior to the parts, rather the one whole comes to be, is constituted by, in and out of the relations of its many constituents' (Komonchak 1981, 30). To define mission as the eschatological opening of history, interrupting continuity through retelling the gospel and its consequent newness, is to identify a 'universal' as necessarily contingent upon the plurifomity of local voices. This is the nature of ecumenical unity.

Conclusion

The very fact of world Christianity demands recognising that 'the interpretation of reality is plural, and that such plurality is true' (Vélez Caro 2007, 250). Vélez Caro asserts this position against norms which assume a universal 'empirical' mode of culture—a way of perceiving reality according to a vision of a 'universal human being', and a program of educating people toward this vision (civilising). To recognise plurality, to recognise difference as proper and basic to Christian unity, is not to assert a relativism which denies truth; it is to understand truth not as 'a condition or a situation, but as a process' (Caro 2007, 250). In terms of ecumenical methodology, intercultural hermeneutics offers a clear path forward—but not without significant contest due to the ongoing suspicion towards mission as a theological concern. Yes, it is necessary to deconstruct the received and experienced configuration of mission as bound to Empire. A de-Empired account of mission resides in the flexibility of the gospel. This both creates communities due to 'constant pressure of the "eschaton" upon history to keep "re-launching" it towards the kingdom', and ensures a critical edge as 'the prophetic-missionary impulse interacts with the historical forms of injustice, institutionalized in our churches, it produces conflict within the church' (Bonino 1982, 123). The church is not itself immune from mission because the 'questions of race, sex, class are thus no extraneous elements "ideologically" introduced in the discussion of unity, but the necessary disruption of our "premature" unities which have incorporated "the form of the world"' (Bonino 1982, 123). Mission is

the eschatological disruption of the closure of history. The gospel is only ever 'real' as it is embodied in communities, and to 'exclude or guard against doubtful or dangerous forms of church plurality, the church cuts itself off from the network of dynamic relationships which alone keep its identity alive... The more a church seeks to limit or even suppress plurality, the poorer it becomes' (Raiser 1988, 124). The missionary dynamic, by contrast, is this eschatological orientation to the embodied pluriformity of the faith and the corresponding hermeneutical concern draws the 'non-theological' into that future.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HEALING TOGETHER: INDIGENOUS NAGA AND PASIFIKA PATHWAYS

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Abstract

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

Keywords

healing, colonial, empathy, indigenous, holistic

Introduction

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

Dominant Narrative of Healing and Empathy as Individualistic and Ahistorical

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

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

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

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

Empathy as Hierarchical and Apolitical

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

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

Humanitarianism Shapes Empathy

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

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

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

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

Healing Practices in the Pasifika and Naga Traditions

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

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

Interconnected Worldview in Indigenous Cosmology

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

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

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

Collective Responsibility and Relationality

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

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

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

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

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

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

Historical and Cultural Context of Healing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reciprocity and Mutual Care

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

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

Action-Oriented Compassion

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PACHAMAMA MEETS MOANA: SOUTH-SOUTH DIALOGUE ON ECO-THEOLOGY AND WELL-LIVING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY¹

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Abstract

One of the hardest problems humankind has ever faced—perhaps the most difficult problem ever—is the care of the environment. Humans have been modifying the environment since the very beginning of their existence on this planet, but never in the fast and dramatic ways the world has witnessed at least since the last century. For the sake of ‘progress’ that begets immense profit, entire biomes have been destroyed. What can be done in the face of such a complicated situation as this? This article aims to reflect on that, from the vantage point of a dialogue between the South American Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir*—‘well living’—and the South Pacific Moana theology. The overall perspective of the article is that dialogue is an exercise of Public Theology, something highly necessary in the world today. The article presents a critique to capitalism that defines the value of one’s life by its power of consumerism. The article proposes the effort of an epistemology that takes seriously the perspectives of peoples and societies from the Global South, proposing that this South–South dialogue can suggest practical measures that will be good for the whole world.

Keywords

public theology, *Buen Vivir*, ecotheology, South-South, epistemology

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Introduction

This article intends to propose a dialogue between two worldviews of the so-called Global South, specifically, between South America and the South Pacific: the Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir* (BV)—‘well living’—and a Pasifika theology of creation. The article intends to present convergencies and divergencies between these two worldviews. The basic presupposition of the article is that such a dialogue is an exercise of public theology.

This is illustrated through the article’s structure: first, the geographical and cultural contextualisation of the BV philosophy, followed by some considerations about Public Theology (PT). The third part of the article deals with the idea of an epistemology of the South with some practical considerations concerning the BV philosophy. The fourth part of the article will present some elements of a Pasifika theology of creation. This article remains open-ended, as concluding remarks leave room for a continuation—particularly, an expanded exploration of the Pasifika perspective on eco-theology.

To begin with, it is important to present a conceptual difference between South America and Latin America—are these two concepts synonymous with each other? The answer is: no. South America is a geographical concept, and Latin America is a cultural concept. Let us begin with the easiest concept, which is the geographical one: South America comprises the countries south of Panama: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guiana (the former British Guiana), Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, Uruguay, and Venezuela. From Panama northwards to the Mexican border there is Central America, composed of continental countries and island nations as well: Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Costa Rica, Curaçao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Granada, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. And finally, the three countries of North America: Canada, Mexico, and the United States of America.²

Latin America, in turn, is a cultural concept: it has to do with countries that suffered Iberian (Portuguese and Spanish) colonisation. In the Americas, some countries experienced colonisation processes from European powers other than Spain and Portugal: it is true, especially concerning most of the Caribbean countries that suffered British, French, or Dutch colonisation.

Being so, Latin America is a concept that has to do with an Iberian cultural, symbolic, and religious matrix. As far as the religious element is concerned, this matrix is, by and large, of strong Roman Catholic influence, which contrasts with the Anglo-Saxon cultural, symbolic and religious matrix of the North American countries of Canada and the United States, which have Protestant influence.

2 The three lists were presented in alphabetical order.

The focus of this article is on the Andean South and Latin American countries known as Andean America or Andean States, that is, the countries of Western South America crossed by the Andes mountain range: from north to south: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile. But in a more specific way, the philosophy of BV comes from Bolivia and Ecuador. As it will be seen in the continuation of the article, BV is a tradition of sageness rooted in the ancestral wisdom of the Quechua and Aymara peoples of these regions.

Public Theology: What is it All About?

According to Marty (1974), Public Theology (PT) is a Christian reflection on issues that interest society as a whole, and not only the Christian community. After Marty and his pioneer intuition, American Catholic theologian, David Tracy (b. 1939) gives another important theoretical contribution to the understanding of what PT is supposed to be. In *The Analogical Imagination*, he proposed what he called ‘the three publics of theology’, or, the publics with which theology dialogues: the church (in this situation we have a confessional denominational theology), the *academia* (now we have a ‘scientific’ theology that is not necessarily confessional or denominational) and society, which is the most difficult of all three. If theology intends to speak to a public broader than its first audience (the church), it needs to hear what experts in other fields of knowledge have to say. Especially today, more than in any other time in history, a theology worth the adjective *public* must engage in a dialogue with people of other faiths—or none. And in all of this, public theology must not quit the *proprium* of Christian theology, that is, what is essential to the Christian faith. If one intends to be a public theologian but does not include in his/her discourse the essentials of the faith, this discourse will be anything except a public theology. In every case, PT is a two-way street. By its own definition, PT is a dialogical exercise, which establishes a contrast with the aforementioned confessional theology (following Tracy’s classification) and academic theology as well, because in these two situations, there is no dialogue, but one who speaks—the priest or pastor in confessional theology and the professor in academic theology—and the others who limit themselves to hearing what the religious or academic authority has to say.³

Theology—Public, Practical, whatever—is always contextual. Theology is not a reflection that happens in a vacuum, in an ethereal space. Rather, it always reflects the particularities of the live context the disciples of Jesus are in. It is important to remember that we must be alert to the similarities and dissimilarities between our two life contexts, if we want to establish this South–South dialogue.

3 This situation of just one person who speaks and others who hear what has been said was described and criticised by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2018).

Public Theology and Epistemology: Perspectives from the South

There are similarities and dissimilarities between the Latin American context and the Pasifika context. These two contexts are in the so-called Global South, and if there is the intention to establish a dialogue between them one needs a theoretical basis for such dialogue. To establish this theoretical basis, one needs aid that comes from *epistemology*. In the philosophical tradition, epistemology is the theory of knowledge. The question epistemology wants to respond to is: how do we know what we know? Epistemology deals with questions such as: How does someone know what is true or real? How do we acquire knowledge? What are different types of knowledge? How can we be sure that it is true, not error or illusion? Therefore, epistemology tries to explain the origin, nature, types, and methods of knowledge. At this moment of our reflection, it is important to reckon the contribution of Portuguese sociologist, Boaventura de Souza Santos (2014) in his seminal work *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. However, before we proceed, it could be useful to be reminded of a Brazilian proverb that says that in some situations, it is necessary ‘to go forward and come backward’. What does this folk saying have to do with this issue? It means that on the one hand, Santos (2014) has the merit to be the very first to criticise what he calls ‘abyssal epistemology’, that is, the classical and traditional epistemology done in the North Atlantic (North America, the UK, and continental Europe). He proposes valuing knowledge traditions from the ‘South’—Latin America, Subsaharian Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pasifika—this is ‘going forward’ (Santos 2014). However, on the other hand, he could be blamed for what he criticises because he belongs entirely to this Northern hemisphere existential framework, be it geographical (as a Portuguese, he is European) or educational, as he was academically trained in Portugal, Germany, and the USA (he received his doctorate from Yale). Besides, he worked as a professor in the United Kingdom and in the USA. Therefore, he is totally in the North Atlantic life context—this is ‘come backward’. Notwithstanding, some trueborn Global South thinkers have been proposing this epistemological approach from the South. One of them is the young Argentinian theologian and sociologist, Nicolás Panotto. In *Descolonizar o saber teológico na América Latina* [Decolonizing Theological Knowledge in Latin America], Panotto (2019) responds to the question of what theological education is like in a post-colonial time and how theological education is if it is seen through the lens of decolonial critique (17). In the ‘prehistory’ of this concern of formulating a critical thought from the perspective of the South, is the late Catholic Argentinian philosopher and theologian, Enrique Dussel (1934–2023). He was one of the first to think about a ‘philosophy of liberation’, that is, a philosophy thought according to the premises and

particularities of Latin America.⁴ In his theoretical elaboration, Dussel stressed particularly philosophical ethics, a central theme in the life setting of Latin America, characterised by poverty and oppression. In this same line it could be mentioned the work of the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (b. 1958) with his *El giro decolonial: Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica mas allá del capitalismo global* [The Decolonial Turn: Reflections on an Epistemic Diversity Beyond Global Capitalism]. These examples are enough to demonstrate that not only Santos but thinkers native to Latin America are reflecting on this theme of an epistemology below the Equator line.

This issue of an epistemology ‘of the South’ is sensitive, because one could reason by saying truth is truth, no matter the geographical or cultural context one is in. Truth is truth indeed. However, at the same time, the *Sitz im Leben*—geographical, historical, economical, political, social, symbolical, cultural, religious, etc.—one is in can influence one’s worldview. Truth is and always will be truth, but how we look at it and understand it is influenced by our contexts. As the Brazilian Catholic theologian Leonardo Boff once said, in an aphorism that became very famous, ‘Every point of view is seen from a point’.⁵ This is exactly Santos’s emphasis: the way one in the Global South looks and, consequently, interprets and understands the complexity of reality and its multiple challenges, is oriented (not necessarily determined) by the very context of the Global South.

Santos’s proposal of an epistemology of the South has to do with two contemporary concepts that, even though they are related somehow to each other, are not necessarily synonymous: postcolonialism and decolonialism. According to South African postcolonial scholar Benita Parry,

there has been a fluid, polysemic, and ambiguous usage of the term ‘postcolonial’ within and beyond specialist circles. The plenitude of signification is such that ‘postcolonial’ can indicate a historical transition, an achieved epoch, a cultural location, a theoretical stance – indeed, in the spirit of mastery favored by Humpty Dumpty in his dealings with language, whatever an author chooses it to mean. (2004, 66)

It is not easy to define postcolonialism, as it is used in many fields of knowledge, such as literary criticism, political theory, and religious studies. Considering this, some

4 A prolific author, Dussel’s magnum opus is *Para una ética de la Liberación latinoamericana* [For an Ethics of Latin American Liberation], in five volumes published between 1973 and 1980.

5 The assonance and wordplay of Boff’s aphorism in Portuguese cannot be captured when the phrase is translated into other languages: *tudo ponto de vista é visto de um ponto*.

scholars prefer to refer to it as postcolonial theory instead of postcolonialism.⁶ But for this chapter, putting it in simple terms, postcolonialism is, or intends to be, a subversive worldview. The word *subversive* sounds problematic or troublesome, as it is generally understood as something radical that intends to undermine a given institution or even the state itself. But this is not how we use it: in this chapter, we are using *subversive* in its literal meaning. The English word *subversive* comes from Latin: it is formed by the conjunction *sub*—‘under’—plus the noun *versio*—‘version’. Therefore, subversion is a ‘version under’, or, in other words, an alternative version. Of what? Of a worldview, a view of the world, of life, death, the here and beyond. So, if postcolonialism is a kind of worldview, it is a sort of epistemology or theory of knowledge. The idea of postcolonialism is to suggest an epistemology that is an alternative to a traditional North Atlantic Eurocentric worldview.

Decolonialism, in turn, is different from postcolonialism, even though it can echo it somehow. It has to do with decolonisation, the struggle of many Pasifika, African, and Asian countries to regain their political autonomy from European colonialist powers that took place after the Second World War. The ideas of decolonialism and decoloniality are close to each other, but they have their distinctions. Argentinian philosopher, Walter D. Mignolo (b. 1941) enlightens the difference between these two concepts and also explains the pioneer role in the formulation of these ideas of the collective Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (a collective entirely formed by Latin American scholars) and also the influence of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (Mignolo 2024). In the words of sociologist Gurinder K. Bhambra,

The traditions of thought associated with postcolonialism and decoloniality are long-standing and diverse. Postcolonialism emerged as an intellectual movement consolidating and developing around the ideas of Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak. While much work in the area of postcolonial studies has directly addressed issues of the material, of the socio-economic, there has also been a tendency for it to remain firmly in the realm of the cultural. In contrast, the modernity/coloniality school emerged from the work of, among others, the sociologists Aníbal Quijano and María Lugones, and the philosopher and semiotician, Walter D. Mignolo. It was strongly linked to world-systems theory from the outset as well as to scholarly work in development and underdevelopment theory and the Frankfurt School critical social theory tradition Postcolonialism and decoloniality

⁶ There is a plethora of publications about this issue, since the pioneering work of Edward Said, first published in 1978 (Said, 1995). But even before Said, one can locate in Martinican author Frantz Fanon’s work *The Wretched of the Earth*, first published in 1961, the seeds, or the remote root, of what would later be called postcolonialism (Fannon 2021). The same can be said regarding the work of Anglo-Indian author Homi Bhabha (b. 1949), especially his book *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 2004). See also, inter alia, Young (2001, 2020).

are only made necessary as a consequence of the depredations of colonialism, but in their intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance, they offer more than simple opposition. They offer, in the words of María Lugones, the possibility of a new geopolitics of knowledge. (2014, 115–21)

‘A new geopolitics of knowledge’, Maria Lugones said—has to do with the proposal of an epistemology of the South, and, consequently, with the aim of this article, *viz.*, a dialogue between these two South worldviews, that are the Latin America idea of *Buen Vivir* and Moana theology. This is certainly not an easy task. After all, Global South is not a homogeneous entity. There are, of course, many differences between Latin America and Pasifika life settings, but there are similarities as well. On one side, the immense geographical variety of South America, with its high mountain ranges, the Amazon rainforest and the pampas in Southern Cone, to name only a few examples, each one of them rich in biomes, fauna, and flora. On the other side, the sunny islands of the South Pacific. What do the folk traditions of wisdoms of these two different regions have in common? What can they teach to other parts of the Global South and the world as a whole? What are the main concerns and alerts that come out of this dialogue?

***Buen Vivir*: What is it All About?**

Buen Vivir (BV) is a social philosophy or an ethics that comes from the tradition of the wisdom of the Quechua people from Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia in South America.⁷ It is called *Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua, *Suma Quamaña* in Aymara and *nhandereko* in Guarani.⁸ BV is a critique, and it is an alternative way of resistance, to a hegemonic capitalist model of economic and social development. It is a worldview distinct from the one that is predominant worldwide, a worldview that equalises happiness to consumerism. One could call BV an ‘ecosophy’, wisdom of the οἶκος—*oikos* (Greek for ‘house’), *viz.*, the planet we live in. In other words: BV is a wisdom that teaches us how we should live in our great common house, Earth.

Now it is necessary to refer to the Ecuadorian author Alberto Acosta. He was a state minister in his country, but because of some quarrels with the president, he is no longer occupying such a position. However, we need to emphasise that Acosta succeeded in including in the Constitution of Ecuador some paragraphs about ‘the rights of nature’. Ecuador was the first country to expand the concept of (human) rights to include the

7 All the information concerning the wisdom tradition of BV comes from Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta’s book *O bem viver. Uma oportunidade para imaginar outros mundos* (Acosta 2016).

8 The quéchuas (or quichuas) are an Indigenous group of people from the Andean region, especially, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. The Aymara are an Indigenous people from Bolivia, Peru, and parts of Argentina and Chile, and the Guarani are Indigenous people from Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay.

rights of nature. This was a great step towards a better understanding of what human rights is meant to be. By and large, the notion of human rights is understood in a merely individualistic way. However, it would be better understood in a communal, societal way. In other words: human rights not only refers to the individual ‘I’, but to a community of persons.⁹ And not only a community of persons, but a community formed also by the non-human beings of creation. According to Acosta, ‘Good Living is essentially a process arising from the community matrix of people who live in harmony with Nature’ (2016, 32). He also said that ‘The center of attention should not just be the human being, but the human being living in community and in harmony with Nature’ (Acosta 2016, 35) and ‘It is necessary to overcome the divorce between Nature and human beings. This historical and civilizational change is humanity’s greatest challenge, if we do not want to put our own existence at risk. This is what the Rights of Nature, included in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, are about. The relationship with Nature is essential in the construction of *Good Living*’ (36, emphasis added). Acosta adds: ‘The discussion about BV should not be limited to Andean and Amazonian realities There are many options to start practicing it in other places on the planet, including industrialized countries’ (Acosta 2016, 47).

This idea of BV is useful and necessary in the contexts of both Pasifika and Latin America, lands of countries considered underdeveloped according to a capitalist Western standard. To quote Acosta once more, ‘Development (social and economic), as a global and unifying proposal, ignores the dreams and struggles of “underdeveloped” peoples’ (2016, 58). This is because the Western standard for measuring and evaluating progress is based on a capitalist ideology, which leads people to endlessly consume, more and more. Capitalism, using what French philosopher René Girard (1979) calls *mimetic desire*, leads people to think that to live well, we need to acquire goods, to buy things. The logic of capitalism makes one desire what the other has: if he/she has this or that, I want to have it.

At this point, it would be good to remember that, as early as in the first half of the last century, the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin called *Kapitalismus als Religion* (in good English, *Capitalism as Religion*).¹⁰ Long story short, for Benjamin, capitalism took the place that in traditional societies belonged to religion.¹¹ One of the commandments of this ‘new religion’ is: buy things, if you want to be happy. But the goods we buy come from nature, and to get them made, it is necessary to deforest, to

9 Perhaps the African idea of *Ubuntu* can help us to get a more balanced understanding of human rights. According to *Ubuntu*, ‘I am because we are’.

10 The idea of capitalism as religion appears briefly in a short manuscript published posthumously in 1985 by Ralph Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser in Volume 6 of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected Writings].

11 There comes a wordplay that makes sense in Portuguese: the name of this economic model is *Capitalism*, which makes Brazilian Portuguese-speaking people remember the word *capeta*—one of the many popular words that stands for ‘devil’ in English. Therefore, one could speak about Capitalism as ‘Capetatism’.

pollute water and air. Therefore, we humans are committing an *ecocide*, an assassination of the *oikos*, our planet, Earth itself. But by doing so, what we are really doing is ‘killing the goose that lays the golden eggs’. The ‘goose’ in this case is nature. It seems that we have forgotten the obvious; if the environment is destroyed, we will be destroyed altogether. Considering all these things Acosta stated: ‘For the majority of the planet’s inhabitants, capitalism does not represent a promise or dream: it is a nightmare come true’ (2016, 62). BV is an alternative to such a delicate, difficult, and complex context, ‘Its starting point is the different ways of seeing life and its relationship with Pachamama’¹² (Acosta 2016, 82). It is curious to observe that Pachamama—Mother Earth—makes one remember the Hebrew word אָדָמָה—*adamah*, whence comes the word *adam*—the human. *Adam*¹³—the human—comes from *adamah*—the cultivable land, from which we derive our sustenance, the very ground in which we plant seeds and cultivate our crops that are of vital need for our survival. Therefore, the human being is *adamah*’s child. These ideas of BV, Pachamama and *adamah* challenge us to think about alternatives to a way of living that is destructive to the land we came from. Rev 11:18 presents a serious warning to which we are supposed to pay attention:

The nations raged, but thy wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear thy name, both small and great,
and for *destroying the destroyers of the earth*. (RSV, emphasis added)

BV Put into Practice: Some Suggestions

After this brief presentation of the idea of BV—what is it all about?—it would be good to present some suggestions relating to its practicality. After all, the reflection of this article, as it was already mentioned, has to do with public theology, and public theology cannot be just a theoretical elaboration. Public theology must be incarnated, it must become ‘flesh and blood’. Otherwise, it would only be a sequence of interesting thoughts with no implication for real life.

12 According to Bolivian historian Manuel Rigoberto Paredes Iturri in his book *Mitos, supersticiones y supervivencias populares de Bolivia* (first published in 1920) in the mythology of current-day Quechua people *Pachamama* is Mother Earth, a sort of feminine spiritual entity representing time, that distributes the seasons, fertilises the earth, its companion, gives and absorbs the life of beings. Such belief comes from the ancient cosmology of the Inca people.

13 Hebrew language establishes a distinction between אָדָם—*adam*—human being, broadly speaking, men and women alike, אִישׁ—*ish*—meaning ‘man’, the masculine human, and אִשָּׁה—*ishah*—meaning ‘woman’, the feminine human.

A good start could be the recovery of the tradition of a simple lifestyle. This tradition comes from the Anabaptist branch of the Reformation, the one that historian Roland H. Bainton, as early as in 1941, called ‘The Left Wing of the Reformation’.¹⁴ The Anabaptists shared very important points with the other three branches of the Reformation, viz., the Lutheran Reformation, the Reformed (or Calvinist) Reformation and the English (or Anglican) Reformation. All these four branches take hold of the *Solae* of the Reformation: *Sola Fide*, *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus* (or Solo Christo) and *Soli Deo gloria* (respectively, ‘by faith alone’, ‘by Scripture alone’, ‘by grace alone’, ‘by Christ alone’, and ‘glory to God alone’).

However, the Anabaptist tradition has some characteristics that are exclusively their own, and one of these specific traits that belongs only to their fold is the tradition of a simple lifestyle. Anabaptism pioneered teaching their members a philosophy of life that emphasises that ‘less is more’, encouraging them to dress modestly, avoid unnecessary expenses and have no ostentation at all. It is clearly a rejection of consumerism that dominates entirely capitalist societies, consciously or not, which idolises *Mamon*—money. In the Anabaptist mindset, a simple lifestyle is a spiritual practice, a visible and tangible way to live holiness in the world.

This proposal for a simple life remained for centuries as something exclusive to the Anabaptists (Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and some others). However, at the beginning of the 80s, there was a shy cry to other Evangelicals to take this issue seriously. Such a call came from the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, or, more simply, the Lausanne Movement.¹⁵ The Theology and Education Working Group of the Lausanne Movement (LM) summoned small meetings assembling theologians and church leaders from all over the world to work as a sort of ‘think tank’, reflecting critically on those issues and proposing practical evangelistic actions. One of these meetings was held at Hoddesdon, England, from 17 to 21 March 1980: *An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle*.¹⁶ The conference had John Stott as its chairman and Ronald Sider (author of the bestseller *Rich Christians in a Time of Hunger*) as its convenor. This convocation

14 An extensive-length approach to the history of the Anabaptist tradition and to Anabaptist theology would go beyond the aims of this article. For details about their history and theology, see, *inter alia* Estep (1995); Friedmann (1999); Snyder (2004, 2022).

15 In 1974, American evangelist Billy Graham, via his organisation, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, summoned Evangelical leaders from many countries to gather in Lausanne, Switzerland, to join forces for a global effort of world evangelisation. As an outcome of that meeting came the Lausanne Movement, intended to be a conservative Evangelical alternative to the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, which Evangelicals considered as theologically liberal.

16 For the full text of the document that presents the conclusions of the consultation and a list of participants see Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (1980).

for a simple lifestyle aimed to reach a broader Evangelical audience, and one cannot help observing that there is a resonance between it and the Andean philosophy of BV and the Anabaptist tradition of a simple lifestyle. Taking a simple lifestyle is a simple, but important step on the path of caring for creation.

This is so because capitalism has such an unquenchable thirst for profit, sometimes (always?), profit at any cost, no matter what. As already stated,

the wheel of economy cannot stop; industries and factories must work incessantly. After all, commerce needs to sell its products. In order to achieve this, having enough raw materials becomes a necessity. These raw materials come from nature; they are extracted from the soil, from the seas, and from the forests. In many cases, the process is destructive, which is illogical, insane even, because in doing so, we are destroying what we need to live. It is like killing the golden goose to get more eggs made of pure gold. (Caldas 2024, 89)

Another suggestion for a practical way to do a public theology oriented by this philosophy of BV is to include some content related to the care of creation and reject the culture of consumerism in the curriculum of theological seminaries. As these institutions are houses of pastoral formation, and pastors are church leaders, it will be a great job if matters such as those already mentioned are included in their pedagogical matrix. Future pastors and laypeople as well must learn not only systematic theology or church history, but they also need to learn about how to be responsible stewards of creation.

One cannot forget also that some Christian NGOs and movements have been working on such matters as social justice and environmental care. In the following some specific examples will be given: one of these is the Brazilian Evangelical agency *Nós na Criação* [We in Creation]. It started its activities in 2016 as a movement organised at the Baptist Church in Coqueiral, in the periphery of Recife, Northeast Brazil, for dealing with the cleaning of a river in the city. In 2020 it was organised as an institute, and since then they are working in nine cities in both Northeast and Southeast Brazil. With similar goals is the *Renew Our World* movement. According to their official website,

We are a global movement of Christians campaigning to make the world more fair and sustainable. We have national expressions in Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Ghana, India, Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Peru, Slovakia, Tanzania, Uganda, UK, USA, and Zambia. (Renew Our World Campaign n.d.)

On the Catholic side, there is the *Laudato Si'* Movement, a movement with the same goals as *Nós na Criação*, with the difference they are global in their reach.¹⁷ All these movements, and, certainly others similar in their aims, are practical, down-to-earth possibilities to take seriously the inputs coming from BV and Pasifika theology. In sum, these are only a few suggestions. This brief list does not intend to be exhaustive. Rather, it aims only to be a starter, hoping that the readers of this article will think about other possibilities that are suited to their existential life contexts.

Contributions from Pasifika Theology

After presenting, even only in brief, the South American Andean idea of BV, it is necessary to bring to this table of conversation some contributions from the theological reflection on the creation and the care of it that comes from the Pasifika itself.¹⁸ Needless to say, what is to be presented here will be no more than a brief introduction to this issue of Pasifika theology.

As was already mentioned, this article intends to establish a *talanoa* (dialogue) between these two South Global perspectives, Andean South America and Pasifika. At this point, it would be good to remember also that theology, be it systematic, public, or whatever, is always contextual. The *Sitz im Leben*, viz., the place in life, of the community where any theological reflection is made, is influential in the making of any theological reflection.

This basic presupposition is especially true in the life context of the Pasifika, the 'liquid continent'. In one vast area of thousands of square kilometres there are two great and affluent nations—Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand—and many insular countries, some of them very tiny. This area is the most vulnerable in the world to the dramatic climate changes that have been taking place in the world today. Due to global warming, which provokes the melting of the polar cap and, consequently, the rising of the level of ocean waters, some of those islands can be submerged. It sounds like a dystopian science fiction novel, but sometimes, life is stranger and more unexpected than the art. What does it mean to do theology in such a context? Considering these threatening circumstances, theology made in the Pasifika is, and should be, public because it has to deal with issues of general interest to the whole population of their islands.

This dialogue between two Southern theologies does not mean a denial of traditional theologies made in the North Atlantic (the USA, Canada, United Kingdom

17 For details, see *Laudato Si'* Movement (n.d.)

18 In the words of Jione Havea (2021, v.), 'Moana nui a kiwa and 'Otu motu referred to the waters, reefs and islands that spread in the moana (sea, ocean) between Hawai'i (northeast), Palau and Papua (northwest), Aotearoa (southwest) and Rapa Nui (southeast)'.

and Western Europe). It is an attempt to establish convergences between two vast regions. Perhaps this conversation between Pasifika theology and the Andean South American traditional wisdom of BV can reveal some similarities. In what follows, the article will try to articulate a little of these possibilities. This article works with the presupposition that theology, by its very definition, should be done dialogically, North and South, South and South, West and East. Such dialogue will enrich everybody involved in it.

Pasifika theology is influenced by some concepts of Pasifika cultures. The article will not delve in-depth into any anthropological analysis of this vast array of cultures, as it would be a detour from this main theme. However, some examples of these cultural concepts and how they influence Pasifika theology will be given. One could say that Pasifika theology is a reading of the Scriptures through the lens of Pasifika culture(s). Therefore, it is a bold and innovative way of thinking about theology. One example of that boldness is what Samoan theologian Marie Ropeti-Apisaloma (2022) calls ‘Nafanua Theology’. Nafanua is a goddess of Samoan mythology. For Western Christians, it could be reason for scandal to label any theology after the name of that goddess. But in such a courageous way, Ropeti-Apisaloma, a theologian as bold as Nafanua herself (according to the Samoan *fagogo*,¹⁹ Nafanua is as brave as any man), had no fear to name her case for women in ordained ministry as Nafanua Theology.

Professor Upolu Lumā Vaai, a Samoan himself, has been an advocate of thinking about theology influenced by Pasifika cultures and context. He defends what he calls a ‘redirtfying creation theology’ (2023). According to Vaai, ‘creation theology must reclaim its Earth-based affinity from the control of the “egological” rivet’ (2023, 63). Vaai criticises ‘theology’s captivity to a human-centric market led to the splitting of the redemption narrative (salvation of the human) from the creation narrative (salvation of the whole)’ (2023, 69). This is a sound contribution to a theology of creation, because it takes seriously the understanding of sacredness of nature. Vaai’s (2023) thinking echoes Rom 8:18–23:

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; ²¹because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (RSV)

19 In Samoan culture a *fagogo* is a sort of storytelling, therefore, it has to do with oral traditions of Samoan peoples.

Paul is crystal clear in his exposition: the redemption carried out by and through Christ is for humans and non-humans alike. Therefore, ethics, which must follow faith—*credenda et agenda*—must be for human relations, but it has to do with nature too. This is a possible contact point between Pasifika theology and BV life philosophy.

Vaai (2023) works with the Samoan concept of *aiga*, a word that means approximately family, but has a much broader reach than ‘family’ has in European languages, like English or Portuguese (in these two languages, and in others as well, ‘family’ has to do with a micro-familiar unity composed of father, mother, and children, but in Samoan language and culture *aiga* is much more than that. In the Samoan way of thinking, *aiga* is understood in a much more extended way, including the ancestors and the land itself. In the words of Vaai,

creation is not so much about ‘being created’ as about ‘being related’. The latter has always been sidelined by conventional theology because of the focus on the former in order to be in line with rational and scientific research. The former is only part of the latter. There is always a relationship first, before there is a creation. Creation was birthed into being from within the womb of relationships. This changes everything, because we are invited into an inclusive ‘holistic gaze’ to treat everything as part of us. The iTaukei Fijians already taught us this through their totemic culture, where each person has a bird (representing the skies), a fish (representing the ocean), and a tree (representing the land) – a dirtified ‘whole of life’ approach often sidelined by creation theology. Earth, therefore, is first and foremost a relationship. (2023, 73)

Pasifika theology, according to Vaai (2023), takes seriously the concept of *aiga*—family, in a broader sense. It makes one remember the words of 1 Timothy 5:8, ‘If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever’ (RSV). Applying this biblical Pauline word to Vaai’s understanding, one could say that our *aiga*—our great *oikos*, this planet—is to be cared for by Christians, as they care for their families.

A last example of Pasifika theology will be given: Tafua Molu Lusama in his book *Vaa Fesokotaki* uses the tradition of wisdom of Tuvaluan people known as Vaa Fesokotaki, which means ‘relational sacred space’ as a theoretical key for developing a theology of *te Atua*, God. In his words,

I employ the Tuvaluan concept of *vaa fesokotaki* as an interpretive lens to demonstrate the importance of relational space in the Tuvaluan worldview and how it can be used for a reconstruction of the theology of *te Atua*. *Vaa* refers to the sacred relational space

that determines how we relate to each other and to creation *Fesokotaki* comes from three words that collectively can deep mutuality. Thus *vaa fesokotaki* is a space that connects what has been presented to us by foreign worldviews as binary opposites, such as God and world, being and relation, closeness and distance. It is a space that embraces diversity and is about mutual encounter and engagement. (2022, xxvii).

These examples are sufficient to demonstrate the richness, creativity, and depth of the theologies thought in the Pasifika context of life. They can be resourceful partners in conversation to the BV philosophy, seeking together ways to resist a destructive and disruptive way of life that puts profit as the supreme goal of life.

Conclusion

This article ends expressing *amanaki* (hope) that another world is possible. Christian faith is many times contrainuitive, totally contrary to the *Zeitgeist* that establishes financial matters as above everything else. So, the reflection vehicled in the article is only a step in such a long and difficult journey. Christians are ‘Pilgrims of Hope’ in this world.²⁰ As such, the followers of Jesus, no matter whether they are in South America or the South Pacific, must go on with perseverance in their path, full of faith, hope and love, like those who see the invisible (cf. Heb 11:27). These cardinal virtues are necessary, because when one looks to the contemporary scenario it is very easy to give up, because it seems that the god Mamón will win, and their worshipers will succeed in destroying nature for their profit’s sake.

In order to incarnate the theological and ethical proposal presented in this article it will be necessary to have faith to believe in the very first message of the Bible, that is, this world and everything in it is a creation of God. And as the poetry of Genesis 1 teaches us, ‘and God saw that it was good’ (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, RSV).²¹ This is also the first statement of the Apostle’s Creed, the oldest and most ecumenical declaration of faith in Christian history: ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth’. Faith to believe that the world is God’s creation leads us to responsibility to the environment.

It will also be necessary to have hope that God will not turn his back on us nor leave this world alone. Christian hope is that the future of the world is ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev 21.1, RSV); it is not such a thing as a naive optimism that things will be put

20 *Pilgrims of Hope* is the theme of 2025 Jubilee Year of the Roman Catholic Church. This poetically beautiful idea was drawn from Rom 5:5: ‘hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us’ (RSV).

21 בָּרָא is the Hebrew word translated into English as ‘good’. It could be translated also as ‘beautiful’: ‘And God saw (viz., the creation) that it was beautiful’.

together on their own. Rather, it hopes that ‘the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this’ (Isa 9:7, RSV). A hope such as this will fuel Christian action in this world, for the sake of this very world created by God. This is because Christian hope is not a passive, static quality. Rather, it is strongly active, as it pushes those who have it to action.

Last, but not least, it will be necessary to have love. Only those who love the work that came out from the very hands of God will be able to take care of it. So, the cardinal virtues of Christian tradition are necessary to incarnate the sage tradition of BV and the theological input that comes from the Pasifika. This dialogue must continue. After all, many of the challenges that the peoples of the Pasifika and the peoples of Latin American (the Andean peoples included) are the same. Poverty and inequality, economical injustice, poor quality of education, psychological and emotional problems that lead many to mental disorders and to acts of violence, including violence against themselves—suicide, the threats coming from global warming, and many others. Any theological reflection that wants to be labeled as ‘public’ in these life contexts must take these challenges seriously. And in such a complex situation, the dialogue between Pachamama and Moana can be helpful to everybody, and to the peoples from the North too.

Pachamama will meet Moana, and when that happens, there is no doubt this encounter will be healthy for everybody on our planet. This article marks just the beginning of this dialogue.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

AU: A PASIFIKA UNDERTOW THEOLOGY OF DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

More than half of Pasifika is still colonised. The entire Northern Pasifika is under the Compact of Free Association, making its inhabitants political subjects of the United States of America. Although countries like the Cook Islands, Niue, Tuvalu, and Tokelau celebrated their independence from Great Britain, they remain dependent territories of Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Maohi Nui, Rapa Nui, Hawaii, Guam, Kanaky, West Papua, Wallis and Futuna, and American Samoa were directly colonised by France, Indonesia, and the USA. This situation creates a structured and controlled diplomacy where Pasifika administrative institutions are puppets.

In Tuvaluan navigational knowledge, undertow currents are referred to as *au*. *Au*, as a verb, refers to two critical realities: firstly, the moving of undertow currents that move opposite to the waves and water on the surface, and secondly, it refers to the impenitent and conscientious shaping of something, like the pruning of tree branches. Combining the two meanings in a navigational space, *au* is a defiant movement to reshape situations. Based on a communal theology of undertow, this chapter aims to reorient Pasifika diplomacy within the community.

Keywords

au/undertow currents, think invertedly, think disruptively, think spirally, diffidence effect

Introduction

The quest for a theology of diplomacy is a much-needed enterprise given the geopolitical struggle of power between the United States of America and its allies, and China, over the Pasifika region. The Blue Pacific 2050 Strategy also provides a compelling environment where all Pasifika stakeholders must contribute to the composition of policies that will guide Pasifika political leaders and policymakers. The Pasifika Church¹ has given little interest in political matters in the region, although the footprints of its political influence can be found in almost every island nation. Robert Audi contended that the separation between the State and Church in the USA is a measure taken to ‘protect religious liberty and government autonomy’ (2011, 39). A taint of Audi’s proposition may be true in Pasifika, but one of the main reasons for the lack of interest in politics within the Pasifika Church is Christian fundamentalism. Pasifika Christians hold to the belief that the reputation of the church will be tarnished if it is to take interest in political matters despite the fact that most Pasifika Christians are politically involved in many democratic processes.

Another reason for the imperative of this undertaking is the fact that most Pasifika Islands are still colonised. Hawaii, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Tokelau, Guåhan, American Samoa, Pitcairn Island, Norfolk Island, Cook Islands, Niue, ‘Uvea and Futuna, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, the Mariana Islands, Rapa Nui, and West Papua, are still colonised. They are either directly colonised or are trust territories of the United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand. Oddly, I will add Tuvalu to the list. Tuvalu is a constitutional monarchy with the British Crown as its ruler. This effort is also a theological and political nudge for diplomacy to prioritise the political self-determination of the Pasifika nations. But this should begin with the emancipation of the Pasifika populace, for many have gained their political independence but continue to be under the influence of colonial stratagems.

Another important element of this quest is to deal with political ideologies such as the notion of the British Commonwealth. It is an issue worth our attention because being in the British Commonwealth is a testimony of our continuous colonisation, and more so, it is somewhat a confirmation of our ineptitude to self-determine our future in our ways, at our pace, and on our terms. The Commonwealth and other organised institutions are meant to tame and control former colonies, disallowing people in regions like Pasifika to freely traverse the aesthetic of our own wisdom and philosophical wildness.

This paper is an attempt to stir the wildness of Pasifika’s theological prowess using the Kioan undertow understanding of *au* (currents), the unseen force beneath the movement of surface waters. Furthermore, it is a pursuit of a diplomatic narrative from two

1 The generalisation ‘Pasifika Church’ refers to the Christian faith in the region. It does not point to a specific denomination.

separate conceptual starting points: a Kioan au theological reading of politics, diplomacy, and the ebb of socio-economic currents in grassroots communities, and a Kioan socio-economic understanding of intra and inter-communal interaction.

An Essential Theological Shift

The perennial question that led to my interest in the role of theology in diplomacy and politics is, ‘What is the church’s role in the political decolonising of Pasifika?’ In addition to this is the quest for freedom by the people of West Papua (Webb-Gannon 2021, 19), Kanaky (Fisher 2013, 54), Guåhan (Cogan 2008, 34–35) and Hawaii (Trask 1999, 39). They managed to find a voice in the past and they believe in freedom and their customary ownership of resources. Smaller islands like Futuna, ‘Uvea, Tokelau, and Rapa Nui, to name a few, do not have the political capacity to push back against their colonisers. Most certainly, the political decolonisation of these Pasifika lands and bodies is far from the diplomatic priorities of Pasifika political leaders. The economic race to become industrialised has caused the Pasifika leaders to forget their own. Pasifika values like relationality (Vaai 2017, 226) and make right or *ho’oponopono* (Aluli-Meyer 2004, 42–51) have become closed circles confined to new colonial constructs like social and economic equals and acquaintances. It is a pity to see a highly spiritual² people become clones of capitalistic greed at the cost of a brother and sister’s freedom.

Theology on the other hand, most specifically Pasifika theology, needs to take a keen interest in the political affairs of the region. If there is an essential role Pasifika theology can play in regional diplomacy, it is to become the consciousness of the political leaders. Damon Salesa (2023), in speaking of the Samoan case, highlighted the somewhat ambiguous role of Christian spirituality in Samoan society due to the undefined complexity of transitional Samoan spirituality when the *lotu* was brought to Samoa. Salesa (2023, 280–81) wishes that the Samoans could be reoriented by delving deeper into the rich Samoan world of spiritual, ideological, cultural, and social change experienced in the nineteenth century. His concern is valid, given his desire for the swift retrieval of old Samoan ‘ways’. He sees in it the answer to current Samoan and Pasifika predicaments. Salesa’s concern is worth mentioning here because he is not a theologian, and what he wishes for started in the 1960s and 1970s, when the pioneers of Pasifika theology began graduating from the Pacific Theological College and challenging mainstream Western theologies, actioning those theologies by standing with its people in their struggle. The movement of Pasifika theologians and the early contextual Pasifika theologies came to be known as the ‘lifting of the coconut curtain’ in world Christianity (Sachs 2018, 57). The

2 ‘Spiritual’ here defines how Pasifika people treat every aspect of life and occurrences as spirituality. It also refers to Pasifika philosophies, epistemologies, Pasifika cultural identities, and Pasifika cultural patrimonies.

‘lifting of the coconut curtain’ refers to how the Pasifika church came together to fight against France in the Mururoa nuclear protest. The stand for a free nuclear Pasifika by church leaders like John Doom, Setareki Tuiovoni, and Father Walter Lini continues to inspire later generations of church leaders to fight against nuclear testing in the region. Mururoa was one of the incidents that brought the churches together, and an incident where classroom and library theologies came to life and breathed among the people. Such is the necessity of theology in Pasifika regional diplomacy.

Today there has been a theological shift where we begin to take Pasifika philosophy, epistemologies, and hermeneutics seriously and use them as undergirding pillars for theological and biblical interpretations. This is not an adhering to non-theological Pasifika scholars like Salesa, but a complementary undertaking of two important realities: the continuity of pioneering Pasifika theology, for we build on their shoulders and work, and the incapability of transmitted theology to answer current Pasifika socio-economic, political, and theological questions. Pasifika theology has to be interdisciplinary (Vaai 2019, 3). The latter takes into account Salesa’s wise wishes which many Pasifika theologians continue to elude.

The theological shift has also moved into how Pasifika theology can inform Pasifika policies at the highest level. The Pacific Theological College’s recent publication, *The ‘Whole of Life’ Way: Unburying Vakatabu Philosophies and Theologies for Pasifika Development*, is aimed at a readership beyond theological institutions. The book is a Pasifika concoction of disciplinaries with a single commonality, Pasifika philosophies. Our philosophies, our way of living and thinking, are the very spiritualities Salesa and current Pasifika theologians long to retrieve, for they are indispensable to Pasifika theology and life.

Au: An Undertow Theology

Au is the undertow currents that dictate the flow of surface water in the ocean. A learned island child is taught not to swim where there is a *ma’taau* or rip current. *Ma’taau* simply means the ‘eye of the undertow current’. Although children and even adults are discouraged from swimming where there is a *ma’taau*, I will use its negative implications to construct a theology of diplomacy. There are three main components in au theology of diplomacy: first is to think invertedly; second, think disruptively; and third, is to think spirally. To know the au, one must be one with it, think it, and be it. An undertow theology must never be separated from the movement of surface water. The conceptualisation of the au theology through the three components will be unpacked with the hope of finding a narrative as we search for meanings in diplomatic praxis.

Think Invertedly

The au does not normally flow in the same direction as the surface water. The au may flow in the same direction as the surface water, but in most cases, it has a countercurrent flow. Whichever way the au flows, the surface water will not move mistakenly, but according to how the au dictates it. If I am to flank my earlier premise that Pasifika theology should be the consciousness of political leaders in the region, then a Pasifika theology of diplomacy has to be inverting. This is not negation theologising, but by inverting we need to think backwards, or as Vaai (2018) suggests, think ‘upside-down’. According to Vaai (2018), an upside-down view is ‘a position to respond and attack’. Vaai was speaking of a bat-eye view of the cross in interpreting Mark 8:34–38. Fundamentally, a bird-eye-view speaks of a destabilising or overturning conventional systems. Inverting, here, also refers to the refusal to be confined and conformed by dominant and normative diplomacy that is manufactured in high perches and pumped systematically and strategically around the world as a universal standard. It is about the willingness to push back before you discuss matters of regional interest.

There has to be a foundation from which the willingness to refuse derives. Lupematasila Melani Anae gives some admirable suggestions in her critique of Matt Tomlinson’s *God is Samoan*. According to Anae (2023), after much research to understand how Pasifika theologians use the ‘anthropological concepts of culture’ to instigate theological dialogue, Tomlinson fails to capture the destabilising component of theology that would have to disorient anthropology ‘to open up fresh theoretical transformation’ (Anae 2023, 132–33). I will go beyond Anae, not critiquing Tomlinson, but proposing, through inverting thinking, that Pasifika theology is a theology birthed out of two fundamental realities: the issues facing Pasifika, and Pasifika spiritualities that both Anae and Salesa have remarked upon. These two propositions have been the energy of Pasifika theology. The problem then is how, through inverted thinking, can Pasifika theology constantly inform regional diplomacy.

The wisdom of an inverting undertow, au, lies in the fact that the au will return to the same space again, at its own pace. When the au pulls back and the waters recede, we can be assured that the au will either return the same waters or bring new water. And with each recession and advance, the sand beneath shifts, reshaping its form; even the debris carried by each wave is ever-changing. There must be a constant shift in Pasifika-undertowed theology of diplomacy in order for a frequent shaping of regional diplomacy to take place. It is a sign of both Pasifika resiliency, and, more so, of being in active participation with God.

Although there is some resentment about how Pasifika theologians use cultural symbols and thoughts in their work (Palu 2012, 77–79), the Pasifika experience of God

can never be legitimate if it were to be solely based on traditional Puritan theologies such as the *solas* of Martin Luther. Palu's argument against Pasifika theologies is the undermining of the central role of scripture in the whole enterprise. I do not blame Palu, for his critique of Pasifika theology came at a time when Pasifika theologies were still in the contextualising stage.

Furthermore, Pasifika theology has not delved into regional issues to use those issues as the basis for theologising. A recent example is the geopolitical militarisation of the Indo-Pacific driven AUKUS Agreement, a political move that has only strengthened the ongoing colonisation of Pasifika. To theologically refuse confinement or conformity to these Western geopolitical narratives that are discussed behind closed doors of diplomacy, we must begin by turning theology upside-down.

In addition, the approach to reading and interpreting scripture must be overturned if we are to make progress in freeing our people. For example, scripture itself is no longer exactly what the missionaries brought to us since the inception of Christianity in 1668 with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in Guāhan (Kopka 2011, 94). Bernard Narakobi, (1980, 7) in lamenting what seems to be a lost past, stated that it is a fool's task, a lost cause, if we try to reconstruct the exact past. Similarly, for Pasifika theology to continue treating scripture the way it was given to us without critiquing the theologies that came with it, or even the very content of scripture itself, is foolish. The scripture we claim to have enlightened and saved us is the same scripture that was the forerunner to the colonising of our lands and bodies,³ and it has to be viewed in the same way we look at oppressive colonial tools, be it in theory or practice. To neglect this responsibility is to perpetuate the colonial project, only this time we are imposing it upon our people.

Think Disruptively

In my son's classroom was a Social Studies placard with the names and flags of Pasifika States, including Indonesia. The new Year 7 Social Studies textbook was written during the sixteen-year rule of the Voreqe Bainimarama government in Fiji, a time when Fiji was politically courteous to Indonesia at the cost of the ongoing colonisation and genocide of West Papuans (Budiardjo and Liong 1988, 84; Webb-Gannon 2021, 8, 20, 57). When we returned home that day, I quickly explained to my children that Indonesia is not part of Pasifika. I told him about the plight of the West Papuans. I told him how the Government of Netherlands and the Utrechtische Zendingsvereeniging of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands failed the Papuan people they Christianised and colonised. I told them how the United Nations, in 1962, sold the West Papuans to Indonesia in a pact known as the

3 I, like many Pasifika Christians, am always indebted to the work of the missionaries, but that does not mean that my sense of appreciation should prevent me from critiquing Christianity, its mission, and its text.

New York Agreement. There were a lot of things I wanted to tell my children, like how the president of the United States of America, John F. Kennedy, was more worried about the Communist intrusion into Asia than allowing the people of West Papua to be free in their own land. I wanted to tell my children that John F. Kennedy had forgotten how the people of Pasifika saved his life in the waters of Western Solomon Islands in 1943 (Kwai 2017, 27). I told my children that one day they would have to start questioning everything they have learned.

Our Pasifika educational system does not foster an environment for critical thinking. Like their good ancestors when the missionaries and colonisers arrived, our children implicitly trust what they are being taught. The content of their learning is geared to serve the interests of the colonisers—the neo-liberal capitalistic West. Worse, our children are being taught to be intellectually maimed in that they cannot question the authority (not the authenticity, but the authority) of what they learned. Like pebbles, they are shaped and shifted around by the various au of colonial thinking. Marlon Simmons argued that the identities of colonised people are ‘embedded with global overtones, as argued through a sociogenesis that configures the social and material relation of the becoming black life in which they are intertwined’ (2020, 209). If we are to discover ourselves through inverted thinking, where the normative and usual are turned upside-down, we should be ready to be disruptive at any time, and at all times.

An example of disruptive thinking in Pasifika theology is Afereti Uili’s (2023) reference to the biblical figure Abraham as a coloniser and not the eminent father of faith we were taught. Uili called this the curse of Abraham. Uili’s hermeneutical lenses were those of the silent and oppressed Canaanites, Hittites, and Amorites. Radically, he equates Abraham to Captain Cook (Uili 2023, 35–62). Such disruptive reading of biblical text might not sit well with many Pasifika Christians. This is evident in the theological density of Christian Zionism in the region that has recently celebrated Israel’s bombing of Palestine. Fraser Macdonald (2024), a senior lecturer in Anthropology at Waikato University, alleged that ‘some of the staunchest support of Israel comes from the Pacific’. Macdonald identified the Pasifika close cultural knit of kinship as one of the main reasons behind the [odd] Christianity practised in the region. He assumed that, ‘In a variety of ways, people [Pasifika people] have woven Jewish people, their sacred geography, and the State of Israel, into their own kinship network’ (Macdonald 2024). For Macdonald, this is one of the best ways of understanding geopolitics in the region.

Macdonald has identified, in a sketch, the surface movement of Pasifika Christianity, and to an extent, I would agree with him. But then there is the messiness of details beneath the complex issue of kinship in the various Pasifika contexts. Geopolitically, many Pasifika Christians care less about the plight of the Kanaky, the Maohi Nui people,

West Papuans, and other colonised Pasifika States. The closest they get to supporting the self-determination cause of these island nations is through prayer.

What then is needed to break the curse of uninterrupted complacency, if we are to ask in a disruptive way? Concepts like rethinking, reimagining, resetting, and redirecting have been around the Pasifika academic hallways for quite some time, but it seems that it has not trickled down to where it should be—the grassroots communities of Pasifika. A lot of the rethinking and reassessing of Pasifika diplomatic relations is done at the government and bureaucratic level. To be disruptive is to educate the voters and the citizens of the islands to understand their plight within the geopolitical and diplomatic schemes of things. Or maybe the rethinking needs to be in ascending order, where our Pasifika governments and bureaucrats need to relearn Pasifika values through unlearning their Western-learned minds. What Western diplomacy has done to the islands is improve their neoliberal capitalistic economies, but Pasifika economies are grounded in island and village economies and values depreciated by the colonial disintegrating of the Pasifika essence of life.

Disruptive thinking from a down-upward undertow current *itulagi* (Vaai 2017, 6) is a constant countercurrent flow of assessing and reassessing current and prevailing issues that affect the people of Pasifika and their lands and oceans. Pasifika diplomacy should always think countercurrently to Western and Eastern diplomacy. To think diplomacy in parallel to Western diplomacy is nothing more than succumbing to or acceding diplomacy, which is a sign of leadership ineptitude and incompetency. It is also a sign of intellectual frailty stemming from fear. Fear diplomacy is seen in the prominence of security in Pasifika diplomatic strategies. Corey Lee Bell (2023) alleges that the security agreements between the governments of Australia, Tuvalu, and Papua New Guinea are somewhat viewed as a diplomatic victory for Australia as the fear of China's economic and political influence in the region grows.

Pasifika's fear diplomacy can be situated in two political domains: the fear of not belonging in the realm of contemporary power-led diplomacy; and the fear of China by the Western traditional diplomatic partners. This can be classified under the established political and diplomatic debate on the polarised stance between security and liberty. Notable is the philosophy of John Locke on governance and security. Locke alleged that there is 'mankind [sic] who are given up to labour and enslaved to the necessity of their mean condition; whose lives are worn out, only in the provision for living' (1959, 228). Locke's claims reverberate with Niccolo Machiavelli's reference to 'unintelligent people' in his political treaty, *The Prince*, a century earlier. This claim by Locke and Machiavelli is central to the donor-aid political and economic diplomacy of Pasifika multilateral partners. The current global economic order makes many, including Pasifika people, economically

insecure thus plunging them into the dependency ditch, and in doing so, they become slaves to donor countries and organisation.

In September 2024, Henrietta McNeill and Maualaivao Maima Koro (2024) asserted that Kiribati and Samoa's refusal to allow a foreign diplomatic presence during their general elections is 'symptomatic of a saturation of absorptive capacity'. To a certain extent, McNeill and Koro are correct if we are to look at diplomacy from a Western *itulagi* and how honestly, we can deal with the colonial donor-aid strategies. The Machiavellian theory contends that the powerless are 'unintelligent people' (Machiavelli 2008, 96) who can be easily manipulated to achieve what you want in any way you want ('the end justifies the means' theory). James B. Atkinson, who translated Machiavelli's treaty, interpreted this to mean that the unintelligent people are 'powerless people, those without the imposing dignity of government' (Machiavelli 2008, 284). McNeill and Koro's (2024) suggestion for partners and foreign governments, which is to focus on absorptive capacity in Pasifika diplomacy if they are to make a difference, depicts a negative representation of Pasifika knowledge systems, cognition, and values as having no specified qualities to frame diplomatic policies that suit the cultures and spiritualities of the islands. McNeill and Koro's (2024) political suspicion that 'visits have only multiplied with geopolitical competition in the region, including the Chinese Foreign Minister's tour of the region in 2022 in pursuit of a (failed) regional security pact' affirms the employment of fear diplomacy that is backed by economic transactions and diplomatic militarisation in the recently signed AUKUS.

In order to disrupt current diplomatic trends, there must be a disruption of our minds first and foremost. A trained and learned mind that is unwilling to be disrupted is a mind that will recolonise our people. The danger here is that, due to our deep spirituality in Pasifika, we will tweak cultural representations and meanings to suit our interests and call it culture. But once we accept the fact that our minds need to be disrupted from their Western training, we take that first step toward self-determination. Political self-determination is one thing, diplomatic self-determination is another. We should never choose security over our liberty. The greatest sign of freedom in diplomacy is refusal. Refusal is disruptive because it tells of our ability to determine our own life and political, economic, and civil plight. It also signifies that we do not need aid and security in militarisation to feel safe. It speaks volumes of the values that undergird our practices and the resilient spirit of Pasifika.

Think Spirally

When heat is lost from the light water near the surface of the subtropic gyre, it balances the density of the various water layers. Wells explains that this causes the

water to slope downward towards the centre of the gyre. The cooling of the waters ... leads to the sinking of the surface water to produce a water mass known as 18°C water. This water, which is removed from the surface layer, will slowly move along the isopycnal layers into the thermocline. As it moves clockwise around the gyre it will be subducted into the deeper layers of the thermocline in a spiral-like motion. (2009, 511)

Spirals in ocean currents occur because of the balance caused by the mutuality in disparate elements, as defined by Wells. In Pasifika philosophy, this is known as mutual contradiction and is all part of what Vaai called ‘restraint’ (2024a, 32–33). Restraint is not just about holding back; it is also about giving when it is the time to provide. The dynamics of restraint happen in what Tevita Havea calls negotiated spaces (2023, 108–9). In diplomatic spaces, Pasifika leaders should first negotiate within their immediate context. Certain cultural and communal elements need to be considered before a decision is made at the government level. This is not only a gesture of transparency, but it displays the holistic approach to governance and diplomacy.

The fishermen of Kioa know about the spiral-like motion of currents by reading the shift in wind directions, the movement of birds, and the direction of wave movements. They have no idea of scientific hypotheses like those described by Wells (2009). But they know exactly how undertow currents move by reading what goes on the surface of the water—the movement of the *fenua* (land), *moana* (ocean), and *lagi* (sky). In theology, this is the ‘reading of the signs of time’. An important component of reading the signs of time is resolving matters of common interest. Well’s 18°C water hardly happens in Pasifika because the ocean is warmer than the northern ocean. What is experienced in the Southern Hemisphere Ocean is the Ekman spiral which is ‘driven by an imposed wind stress’ (Vallis 2006, 113). The Ekman spiral twists on the surface as the depth of the ocean changes.

Ocean spirals differ depending on where they occur due to oceanic and atmospheric dynamics. Similarly, reading the signs of time as a theological exercise in Pasifika diplomacy should consider the various depths in Pasifika communities and choose whether the spiral moves clockwise or anticlockwise in a wisdom that can only derive from the *fenua*, the *vanua* of Pasifika. We cannot think spirally, as if we live in the Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, or Antarctic Oceans. For too long our thinking in diplomacy has been dominated by Western European and American diplomatic methods learned in the Western schools of international affairs and diplomacy that were meant to gag, stifle and tame us in the first place.

To think spirally is to shift the proceedings that happen on the surface through and by the affairs of the deep, the community. There should be a connection between the

various depths of communal life and how diplomacy is negotiated and administered. The affairs and status of Pasifika communities should dictate the flow of diplomacy. When this is neglected and overlooked, Pasifika governments and diplomats will use a reef current to negotiate in global deep or vice versa, triggering an imbalance that will always put diplomatic navigators at a disadvantage, which continues the colonial neoliberal project while we scramble as beggars. We have to believe in our wisdom and ability to negotiate, whether in adjudication or in hesitation to whatever is offered to us. Vaai (2024b) argues that ‘It is better to eat crumbs while we believe in ourselves than to eat a full meal from the master’s kitchen’.

Conclusion: The Diffluence Effect

The aim of thinking invertedly, disruptively, and spirally is to hearten Pasifika diplomacy through diffluence. Diffluence in meteorological terms refers to air that moves outward from the centre. The au undertow theology of diplomacy encourages the capacity to rise and walk away from the negotiating table when our demands are not met. One of the heartbroken and miserable representations of Pasifika diplomacy can be seen in the recent COP (Conference of the Parties) held in Baku, Azerbaijan. Negotiators from AOSIS (Alliance of Small Island States) and LDCs (Least Developed Countries) threatened to walk out of the negotiation because they felt like they were not heard (Schuster 2024). *The Guardian* further stated that the effort to battle climate change should be a collective one as agreed to in the 2015 Paris Agreement (Schuster 2024). Nine years later and after nine COPs, nothing is materialising and Pasifika continues to pound on the Loss and Damage Fund that is controlled by the same nations that perpetuate ecological violence in the name of development.

The question is, ‘When can Pasifika negotiators walk away from the table and say enough is enough?’ In matters vital to life, wisdom often lies in the ability to walk away. Diffluence is not a weakness. It is our strength to affirmatively state that we have wisdom that has existed for thousands of years, which we can rely on to fight issues concerning Pasifika. The artifacts found in archaeological sites from Papua New Guinea to Tonga date back three thousand years (Allen 1996, 11). Ward Goodenough (1996, 4) alleged that the central islands were settled around 1500 BC. Pasifika needs to dig deep within themselves to plot and pave a way forward in diplomacy. If I am to speak in a language that many, if not all, Pasifikans understand, we need to be the navigators we once were. We have lost the diplomacy plot—to sail across the ocean and exchange gifts, seek help in warfare, and negotiate marriage courtships (Lal and Fortune 2000, 549) which is thousands of years of diplomacy. These tales can be found in our songs and metaphors. We must use them as

diplomatic instruments to negotiate and, if things do not work out, walk away. There is always another tide, another wave, and the undertow currents will change the features of surface movement again.

The diffidence effect is taking control and determining our fate. Diplomacy is not just about negotiating our positions in an ocean of differences and diverse human behaviours and intentions; it is also about agreeing that our differences cannot be solved by giving up our uniqueness. It has nothing to do with pride and identity, it is about life. Moving away is moving forward. To linger at the coloniser's table is to be in debt and that is exactly where we are at the moment. Spoon-fed by aids, we have become numb in our ability to construct and create, to dream and visualise what is it like to reach the fenua after sailing the stormy seas. Epli Hau'ofa's (2008) *We Are the Ocean* is similar to Ilaitia Tuwere's *Vanua*. (2023). They speak of who we are as people of the vanua, moana, and lagi. Most probably, who we are is best described by Teresia Teaiwa who claims that 'we sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood' (2021). Like the ocean and its currents, we are people of fluidity and should never be stagnant in our dealings and thinking, whether it be theologically or diplomatically. Like the ocean, we should not remain calm and pretend that all is well. At times, the call to diplomacy emerges like a surging wave amid a dark and turbulent ocean, with the undertow currents moving ferociously beneath the surface, preparing for a fine day at dawn.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

Introduction

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

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

The *Vanua* and the *Eretz*

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

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

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

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

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

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

An ‘Indigenous’ Gospel

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

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

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

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

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

Tuva Kawa

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tawa and Tabu ni Vanua

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

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

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

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

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

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

Neitou Yavu

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

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

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

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

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

Say to *This* Mountain

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHRIST, CALENDAR AND LECTIONARY

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Abstract

Ecumenical proposals are currently apace about a new feast for the churches' calendars—a 'Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos'. This article notes with appreciation one important aspect of the feast—its detachment of christological liturgical celebration from northern hemisphere solstices (as Christmas) and equinoxes (as Easter). But it also raises concerns about failures of elite ecumenism to listen to the whole church about the whole mystery of Christ, and especially the feast proposal missing the opportunity to learn about grace from the earth in Oceanic perspective.

Keywords

calendar, creation, ecumenism, land, lectionary

Introduction

This article seeks to open up discussion of topics about which persons other than the author are most qualified to speak, and on issues that link to many other concerns both wider and deeper than those in focus here. Such as it is, the article is offered in hope that it will encourage people of Pasifika to speak up. My invitation is to reflect on contemporary ecumenical proposals about a new christological feast for many churches' calendars, a so-called 'Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos'. I consider this proposal from Oceanic perspectives, identifying some merit in the proposal as well as locating various problems with it.

The Feast

Conferences and Canticles

In 2024, a cohort of elite ecumenical bodies came together to propose a new feast for churches of western tradition: a Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos, which, these bodies proposed, would ‘ideally’ be celebrated each year from September 2025. (I use the word ‘elite’ quite intentionally here, employing Robert Gribben’s less-than-affirmative term for ecumenical conversation that goes on at the top tier of hierarchies. ‘Elite’ might be contrasted with ‘grassroots’, local, approaches. See Gribben 2004.) The timing of the feast’s proposed inauguration is deliberate, as 2025 is the 1700th anniversary of the ecumenical council of Nicaea, whose creed remains normative for doctrine in many churches and is commonly recited in eucharistic celebration. The second stanza of the Nicene Creed declares of Jesus Christ that ‘through him all things were made’—and so the new feast intends to give particular emphasis to that creedal declaration.

The elite group proposing this new feast was coordinated by a Roman Catholic circle of scholars much indebted to Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical on the environment, and threats to it, *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis 2015; see also Grayland 2024). That Christians of different communions might also be grateful for Francis’s words on the environment can be seen in that the World Council of Churches, as well as groups from churches encircled by WCC membership such as the Anglican Communion and World Communion of Reformed Churches—those elite bodies—have joined with the Vatican in calling for exploration of the new feast. To that end, in March 2024, representatives of these and other like-kind bodies gathered (with other invitees online) for a conference at Assisi, Italy (13–14 March 2024), famous as a major site in the ministry of Saint Francis.

The site of the conference, like the proposed starting date for the feast (2025), was also deliberate, as 2025 is also the 800th anniversary of Francis’s ‘Canticle of the Creatures’, Francis’s beloved song in which sun and moon, stars and fire and Mother Earth are the subject of his praise. In Francis’s canticle, ‘Brother Sun’, ‘lovely, shining with great splendour’, heralds the Most High, while ‘Sister Moon and Stars’, ‘lightsome and precious and fair’, give their praise along with ‘Brother Wind’, ‘Sister Water’, ‘Brother Fire’ and ‘Mother Earth, ‘who sustains us and directs us’ (Dupré and Wiseman 2001, 119–20). At the 2024 Assisi conference, persons such as Janet Martin Soskice (Canadian, Roman Catholic, based between Britain and the US) and Rowan Williams (British, Anglican) spoke, as did members of Orthodox churches of the east whose own practice of observing something like ‘Creation day’ in September is credited (in the documents of the conference) as one of the sources for the suggestion that the new feast for the western churches might also take place in September.

Ecumenical and Other Concerns

In an era of so-called ‘ecumenical winter’ (see Burns 2023), a development such as a new shared feast is no small achievement. It should be remembered that it comes a little more than a decade after significant withdrawals from ecumenical convergence, given that numerous western churches, which had, for a time, shared texts in common have done so less since the 2010 translation of the order of mass in the Roman Catholic tradition. Through the past decade or so, the main symbolic weight of remaining commitment to ecumenical practice has been placed on shared lectionary use. For the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used (sometimes in a close variant) across many Protestant churches is itself an amendment of the Roman Catholic Lectionary for Mass which emerged in the early 1970s from the call of the liturgy document of Vatican II for ‘richer fare to be provided at the table of God’s word’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], ¶51 [Vatican II Council 1963]; on three-year lectionaries, see Ramshaw 2019). In this context, therefore, the new feast proposal adds another strand of ongoing ecumenical commitment, after the demise of common texts—at least those shared between Protestants and Catholics. It bolsters liturgical expressions of the search for or celebration of a certain unity by adding to shared lectionary a common feast.

Indeed, when the feast proposal itself identifies several boons of the new feast, it puts ecumenical concerns above all. Hence it suggests that the new feast could ‘1) strengthen even further the path of Christian unity’, not least ‘as a fraternal gesture from the Western Churches recognizing the historical leadership of the Eastern Churches in regards to creation’. To that advantage, the proposal adds that the feast could also ‘2) enrich the liturgical calendars of Western Churches... which currently have no dedicated feast to celebrate the theological mystery of Creation’ as “‘all things were created through Him”, is absent’ from official celebration of the Christian year. The feast, the proposal adds, could further ‘3) nourish the spiritual life of the faithful, possibly correcting how Western churches have given so little attention to creation in recent centuries. (Also, it adds: ‘as a side effect, this would be particularly attractive to young people, supporting a key evangelization priority of all churches’.) Finally, it could ‘4) respond prophetically to the “signs of the times”, ‘deepen[ing] our collective commitment to the fate of God’s beloved Creation, while also uplifting Christianity’s relevance in addressing the challenges of this “Anthropocene Era”’ (Laudato Si’ Research Institute 2024). The point that such challenges are profoundly felt in Oceania hardly needs to be argued, given that islands are going under water.

Global South, Old North and West

The ecumenical feast proposal might indeed assist with each of these four aims. However, while different churches of both East and West are now converging in the exploration of a new Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos, what I find so striking about both the proposals under exploration, and the voices which have so far been raised in the exploration, is the prevailing leaning to the north. While persons from the southern hemisphere were present as attendees at the Assisi conference, they rarely led the reflection, if at all.¹ To put the point gently, it would seem the ‘global south’ is still being led by the old north and west. But to this dynamic, other concerning observations can be added. For the new feast seems to be a missed opportunity to occasion deeper awareness in the north that all southern experience of liturgical seasons is out-of-synch with northern climatic patterns, with which liturgical seasons coalesce. As yet, there does not seem to have been much interest in this. More troubling again is that Oceanic perspectives about land that could enrich or even correct aspects of the feast proposal do not seem to have been sought. Moreover, real-time crises of climate change are overwhelmed in the feast proposal by concerns of western theologies. In my view, these matters deserve closer attention.

Ways of Seeing

It is hardly surprising that the Vatican would be a major player in a proposal emerging in connection to a papal encyclical or in seeking convergence between elite ecumenical bodies. Quite arguably, the Vatican is the appropriate body to represent Roman Catholics in such elite discussions. But once it is noted that Vatican City is the smallest country on earth in terms of land-mass, it perhaps seems somewhat curious that the very smallness of Vatican City does not seem to have favoured attention to other small countries. And notably, *had* attention to other small countries—and voices from them—been in focus, then of course people of Pasifika would have been included in discussion of the proposed new feast. Nauru, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Tonga and Kiribati appear after Vatican City near the top of lists of small countries measured by land-mass. By population, Niue, Palau, Tokelau would also be in sight with the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu again. Of course, emphasising land-mass is a way of thinking about ‘our sea of islands’ which is flipped in much Pasifika thinking, which more likely foregrounds attention to *moana*; seeing small atomised atolls above water is, arguably, a very northern way of looking at the immense ocean which interconnects all it envelops (Hau‘ofa 1994; Havea 2021). But the point here is that not even an apparently northern way of seeing and thinking about things led to the inclusion of Pasifika perspectives in initial explorations of the feast proposal.

1 James Bhagwan of the Pacific Council of Churches was an invited speaker in March 2024 and was again invited to a second event in Assisi ‘convened by various Catholic institutes and universities’ on 6–7 December 2024.

Southern Experience of Liturgical Seasons

‘The Whole Mystery’?

At the head of the document proposing a new Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos, a quote from the Roman Catholic Church’s liturgy document from the Second Vatican Council sits alongside lines from the prologue of John’s gospel. The gospel text is John 1:1, 3: ‘In the beginning was the Word... [through whom] all things came to be’. The portion from Vatican II captures the idea that in each yearly cycle the church’s calendar ‘unfolds the whole mystery of Christ’ (SC ¶102).

The gospel text speaks for itself as inspiration of the Nicene Creed’s affirmation of all things having being made through Christ—in John, ‘the Word’. Notably, these Johannine verses also have had a liturgical use in Roman Catholic liturgy, not only as the gospel reading for the first service of Christmas (as they are in each of the three years of the RCL), but also, until Vatican II, as what was known as ‘the last gospel’ recited at the end of mass, perhaps by the priest in recessional, as a way of pointing back to the beginning. The liturgical function of the last gospel is to suggest that in some small way, all common worship points back to the creation of the cosmos.

Notably, the feast proposal uses SC’s claim that the liturgical calendar ‘unfolds the whole mystery of Christ’ in each yearly cycle as a point of critique. The document goes on to point out that in fact the whole mystery is *not* represented, which is what the new feast is seeking to make good.²

Lectionary Linked to Calendar

To set these observations in wider context, it should be appreciated that the RCL, as the Lectionary for Mass, is entirely developed around seasons (see Bradshaw and Johnson 2011). Two cycles operate: first, the ‘Christmas cycle’: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany; and secondly the ‘Easter cycle’: Lent and Easter through to Pentecost. Outside these two cycles, many churches refer to the remaining part of the year as ‘Ordinary Time’. However, this ‘ordinary’ period is punctuated by other significant days, with Trinity and All Saints Day being among the most important. These patterns mean that even where the liturgical calendar is not fully observed—as it may not be to its full extent in some Protestant contexts—Bible readings being heard if the RCL is being followed nevertheless *presume this calendar* with its cycle of liturgical seasons and feast days.

2 It is salutary also to remember that the biblical material itself, at least in its current editorial forms in received canons, may not always be fully helpful—a point underscored by Margeret Barker’s studies reconstructing the vision of creation manifest in the liturgies of Jerusalem’s first temple: ‘Many Christians have been searching for a comprehensive and characteristically Christian theology for the environment crisis because the knowledge of angels and the vision of wisdom have been lost’ (Barker 2010, 288). Barker’s speculative proposals about the first temple are a powerful provocation to question how the Bible has been and is being received and adapted, for better or worse.

Furthermore, what is not always appreciated—either in the north or the south it seems—is that the liturgical calendar’s cycle of seasons is fused with northern climatic patterns. While the origins both Easter and Christmas yield different theories about some of their details—about which much exists to be read, as these are major foci in liturgical studies—much less attention has been generated as to how the climatic patterns with which they link are out-of-kilter in much of the world (see e.g. Johnson 2009; Pilcher 2009).

Calendar Linked to Northern Seasons: Easter and Equinox, Christmas, and Solstice

To highlight the point: in many places in the North, Lent corresponds to lengthening days—Lent of course means ‘to lengthen’. Then Easter comes with the bursting to new life of nature that comes in springtime. The date of Easter each year is always determined in relation to a northern spring equinox; it falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, regulated by a superficial set date for the latter, 21 March. So, to state the obvious, Easter is not in the *Southern* spring.

The origins of Christmas are a little more complex but are to do with early Christian engagement with either (or both) pagan traditions of Saturnalia in the days following 17 December or Talmudic ideas about how greatness manifests in human life.

Saturnalia was a Roman festival involving anticipation of the northern winter solstice, and the date set for Christmas Day quite likely intended to symbolise that light comes with the birth of Jesus. But as Saturnalia was a festival of excess and debauchery, Christian traditions came to emphasise judgement in this period, as reflected in the ancient ‘Advent O’ antiphons, popularised in the eighth century and still used in many churches. In the antiphons, Christ is presented in images drawn from Hebrew scripture, such as Wisdom, root of Jesse, key of David, radiant dawn, and so on, with these allied to exhortations which enjoin obedience to law and turning from evil. In various ways, then, the solstice was key to both determining the date of Christmas and to sifting the scriptural images which come into play on these days in the Christmas cycle.

In an alternative—or complementary—theory of the origins of Christmas, Jewish rather than pagan traditions are more prevalent. 25 December may have been determined as the date of Christmas because it was imaginatively linked to the celebration of the Annunciation marked on 25 March, which in turn was understood to have taken place on the day in the Jewish month of Nisan when Jesus died (thought to be 14 Nisan). Whereas Talmudic teachings suggested that ‘great’ people died on the same day in the annual calendar as their birth years before, early Christian witness to Jesus deliberately twisted this Jewish idea to make the affirmation that Jesus could be seen as even greater

than great people because his death, distinctively, was not on the same calendar day as his *birth* but on the same calendar day as his (miraculous) *conception*.

Calendar Clash

Whatever weight might be given to either of these theories about the origins of Christmas, in the north at last, after the day set for celebration of the birth of Christ, Christmas Day, light spreads—the creation itself thus seems to give praise. But in many parts of the south, the links between northern equinoxes, solstices and seasons are reversed, dislodged, weak, if not entirely topsy-turvy. *Easter is not in spring, Lent is not a time of lengthening days, Christmas does not yield new light, and Advent is not marked by darkness*. Indeed, northern seasons do not map onto much southern experience at all.

‘Ikani Lātu Fakasi’i’eiki suggests that in the Tongan context the word for ‘year’, *ta’u*, also refers to the yam crop, and that ‘before Europeans arrived in Tonga [...] the system for counting the times of year was different’, to do with growing and harvesting the yam crop (2011, 132). Out of his Fijian experience, Sevati Tuwere (2023) gives great detail about how different periods constitute *caka yabaki* (‘year making’), and are much to do with gardening. Tuwere explains how three seasons exist: *vula ko sakalo*, six months long beginning in September, lately called spring, in which fruits flower and fish spawn; then *vula i matua*, the season of maturity mapping onto March and April; and the third season then runs to September and is preoccupied with garden preparation (Tuwere 2023). Tuwere provides many details of what occurs in the natural environment within each of these three seasons, their smaller turns as it were, but most strikingly he depicts ‘time’ as ‘a place’, a place ‘in which one waits’, together part of ‘a relationship that traces its origin to a divine source’ (2023, 39). From islands now known as Australia, Garry Deverell identifies no less than seven ‘Indigenous seasons’ largely determined by attention to local flora and fauna and the animals that feed from and among them in the Narm (Melbourne) region: luk eel, warring wombat, guling orchid, poorneet tadpole, buath gurra grass, kangaroo apple, and biderap dry seasons (2023, 29–30). Each of these examples suggest how local experiences in the south may have very little to do with either the presumed ‘four seasons’ that prevail in northern imagination or the church’s liturgical seasons drawing at least aspects of their supposed meanings from the northern patterns.

Problems of Polarising Darkness and Light

Yet the ongoing strength of Northern traditions can be seen by noting how light and darkness imagery is so pervasive in every single one of the Church of England (CofE)’s *Common Worship*’s prayer services for the Christmas cycle (CofE 2005). Among many examples, the services assure worshippers that ‘the dawn from high is breaking upon us /

to dispel the lingering shadows of night' (CofE 2005, 198), and they exhort worshippers to 'cast off the works of darkness / and put on the armour of light' (CofE 2005, 201).³ As in these examples, many of the texts they put into play are themselves direct quotations from scripture, and that in turn confirms how lectionary and calendar merge, with scriptures being chosen according to season. But the *Common Worship* services also show that however scriptures for reading in a service may be selected for their connection to the season, so too selections according to season deeply shape the rest of the service. Yet the idea that darkness forms southern experience of Advent is little more than ridiculous. The Church of England's Christmas cycle services do not travel well. But then the nonsense of such prayer in the blazing height of summer pales compared to the dangerous racist correlation of light with goodness or divinity, then of darkness with sin, which use of such scriptures perpetuates and normalises but should be rejected (see Jagessar and Burns 2011; Burns 2022). At the very least, how 'the whole mystery of Christ' may be being 'unfolded' through different experience of seasons invites some serious suspicion.

Appreciation of the New Feast

Against this background, it can be noted with appreciation that the proposed ecumenical Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos has one strong merit. That is, it advocates *a christological feast that, unlike Christmas and Easter, is detached from northern seasons*.⁴ The Feast of the Creation of the Cosmos is *not* determined in relation to northern equinox, solstice, or seasons. As such it represents *a new dimension in many liturgical calendars*, and this might well be welcomed in the south. However, an Oceanic voice could have more to say...

Oceanic Experience of 'Creation'

Whose Anxieties?

A very notable feature of the new feast proposal is its concern to distinguish between what

3 *Common Worship* Christmas-cycle services have a lot of this language: 'the dawn from high [] breaking upon us / to dispel the lingering shadows of night' (CofE 2005, 198), 'cast[ing] off the works of darkness / and put[ting] on the armour of light' (201), 'cast[ing] away the works of darkness' (204), 'reveal[ing] among us the light of your presence' (205), 'the light of your presence' (again) (205), 'a lantern to our feet / and a light upon our path' (205), 'deliverance [that] shines out like the dawn' (215), 'people who walked in darkness hav[ing] seen a great light' (216), 'dwell[ling] in a land of deep darkness' (216), 'darkness [] passing away and the true light [] already shining' (217), 'call[ing] us out of darkness / into his marvellous light' (219, 225), 'dispel[ling] the darkness' (220), 'the light of the world' (220), 'deliver[ing] us from the dominion of darkness' (222), 'light [that] has come' (228), 'night [that] still covers the earth, and darkness the peoples' (228), 'Christ as light to the nations' (232), 'call[ing] us into your marvellous light' (232), 'arise, shine, for your light has come' (235).

4 Most likely this is unwitting, given that I had an email from a member of the feast proposal team to me on 9 February 2024 making the comment about my observation of the feast being de-linked from northern patterns: "hadn't thought of that."

it calls the *action* of creation and the *result* of creation. To highlight the difference, the proposal notes that ‘in Italian a helpful distinction is made by coining specific words for two distinct meanings of “Creation”’: ‘*la Creazione*’ which ‘primarily stands for God’s *act* of creation of the cosmos, i.e., Creation as theological mystery (*creatio* in Latin)’ and ‘*il Creato*’ which stands for the *result* of the act of creation, the fruit of *la Creazione*, i.e., Creation as the created universe, or everything created (*cuncta creata* in Latin)’. The proposal adds that ‘Naturally, both meanings are intimately connected (with *il Creato* also serving as our main door to meditate on the mystery of *la Creazione*)’. But it also warns that ‘the Feast of Creation is sometimes misinterpreted as a mere celebration of *il Creato* that misses the significance of *la Creazione*’ (Laudato Si’ Research Institute 2023).

The proposal reads as anxious to avoid collapsing distinctions between creator and creation, or about giving room to perspectives such as panentheism. So, the proposed feast is very emphatically a christological feast—its focus is Jesus, not ‘everything created’. While this may well be regarded as laudable from the point of view of much Christian theology, it might also be considered that in its stress on its distinction the feast proposal may have sidelined or otherwise determined not to draw much upon some previous attempts to amend liturgical calendars to incorporate a focus on creation. It would seem that (albeit without direct criticism, but rather via neglect to mention) these have been deemed to be too vulnerable to focus on creation itself, rather than the divine act of creating. And although evidently some participants at the Assisi conference were aware of some distinctive Australian initiatives about a ‘Season of Creation’ that predates the feast proposal, the Australian initiative is one which the new feast proposal does not engage.

The Australian-led Season of Creation

The ‘Season of Creation’ is a longstanding project, begun in 2001 by a synod (Victoria and Tasmania) of the Uniting Church in Australia. While Uniting in its institutional affiliation, the project was, however, spearheaded by Australian Lutheran biblical scholar, Norman Habel. Moreover, over time it has attracted quite strong ecumenical engagement, including by Catholic dioceses. With a website⁵ (albeit not updated since 2021) as a key means of dissemination, the project has also yielded numerous books, most notably *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* (Habel et al. 2011) while also having more informal connection—in part through Habel’s own involvement—with a series of biblical commentaries, the Earth Bible Commentary (and its forebear, The Earth Bible Volume).

Materials in the Season of Creation project do forgo some of the precision (persnicketies?) of the more recent ecumenical feast proposal. For example, rather than claiming that, or questioning, whether the liturgical calendar unfolds the whole mystery

5 <https://seasonofcreation.com>

of Christ, they note in a more pedestrian way, ‘for the most part, the seasons of the church year follow the life of Jesus’ while lacking focus on ‘God the Creator’. However, the materials go on to make their own strong argument that while liturgy has tended to focus on human relationship to God and human relationships with one another, ‘it is now time to turn our attention to God’s relationship with all creation and with our relationship with creation (and with God through creation)’ (Habel et al. 2011, 3). Hence, the project intends to ‘bring [] the celebration of Earth fully into the orbit of Christian worship as a natural and integral part of the church year’ (Habel et al. 2011, 5). The idea of a ‘season’ of creation emerges as key to the project in its provision for four Sundays of the liturgical calendar to serve as a kind of ‘Creation Time’ (akin to ‘Ordinary Time’). The project does not set four specific Sundays but does note that while the season might fall at any point, for various reasons practice has developed of holding it between ‘Creation Day on September 1st’ (since ‘in 1999, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios 1 of Constantinople declared September 1 to be Creation Day’) and St Francis of Assisi’s sanctorale day on the 4 October.

Introductory material on the Season of Creation also includes some specific but minimal reflection on ‘connecting with Christ’. Of the Johannine prologue, for example, it suggests that ‘in one of the most radical assertions of the Gospels, John declares that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). In other words, God “became flesh.” And flesh is composed of water, air, and soil—the basic stuff of Earth. So, the Word became a part of Earth’ (Habel et al. 2011, 65). It also suggests that questions such as the following be asked whatever scriptures are read:

Does the text point to Christ and the origins of creation or continuing creation? Does the text point to Christ suffering with and for creation? Does the text connect with Christ forgiving sins, including environmental sins? Does the text reveal the presence of the risen and cosmic Christ reconciling all creation? (Habel et al. 2011, 64–65)

Oceanic Perspectives—Land

Whatever some people’s apparent reserve about insufficient clarity about Christ in the Season of Creation project, I contend that the new feast proposal’s distinction between act(or) and result of creation needs to respect Oceanic perspectives that are outside western dualistic categories, and moreover, may not have neglected creation in ways that both Season of Creation and the new ecumenical feast proposal agree that Christian traditions have. Hence, in this section of my reflections—the heart of my contribution—I assemble some perspectives that I think need more engagement by the northern and western churches proposing the new feast. I take encouragement from the like of Arthur

Walker-Jones's call for 'honour[ing] the wisdom of cultures of Oceania by allowing it to critique and supplement' western views (Walker-Jones 2001, 84) and from Upolu Lumā Vaai's (2020, 209) challenge to abandon 'the dominant old colonial pathological *narrative of onefication*' that prevails in much ecumenical discussion (after John 17: 21). Instead of oneness, Vaai (2020) lifts up the image of a varied 'household'—notable for also being biblically based (e.g. Galatians 6:10).

Here, then, are some Oceanic voices that I think are relevant to consideration of the ecumenical feast proposal. To begin with, Sevati Tuwere (2023) links time and place, and this is just one insight into the centrality of land in Pasifika cultures with profound implications for calendar. As Tuwere underscores, the Fijian *vanua*, Māori *whenua*, Samoan *fanua*, Tahitian *fenua* and Tongan *fonua* all have parallel meanings related to womb/placenta, and these meanings are bolstered by a common practice of planting coconut trees at the place where a newborn person's umbilical cord is buried (2023, 36; for further profound examples, see Pilcher and Kivi 2023, 512–14). So, not only time but people are powerfully related to land. Among many of Tuwere's examples, in Fijian culture, strong connection to land is also indicated by the practice of *i cavuti*, identifying oneself by speaking of 'belonging within certain frontiers', and meaning 'belong to', 'being owned'. This is such that 'One does not own the land; the land owns [you]. [People] and land are one. [People] derive [their] names and therefore [their] basic constitution as a human being from the *vanua*, which means both turf and people' (Tuwere 2023, 49). Moreover, 'without the people, the *vanua* is like a body without a soul. The expression *sa wawa tiko na vanua* (the land is waiting) means the people are waiting' (Tuwere 2023, 35)—an expression which relates to what Tuwere says about calendar.

Western imaginations may well be stretched by such worldviews. But my point here is that the ecumenical feast proposal reflects *nothing* of such Pasifika perspectives. While the feast proposal is concerned about avoiding dualism—distinctions between creator and creation—what Tuwere and others suggest is that appreciation of what the proposal calls 'creation' may be more complex than the proposal yet conceives. Not only may human persons be more deeply implicated in land than western imagination has grasped, but the land may also be more related to its 'divine source' than the spheres deemed separate in western thought. There is a very important opportunity here for western churches to listen and learn from Christians in Oceania.

On this point, one might also ponder Larrika theologian Wali Fejo (the first First Nations person to lead Nungalinya College in the Northern Territory of Australia) and his writing about land as 'mother, provider, keeper' (Fejo 2000). It is to be looked after as a mother, just as in its turn the land looks after the people of the land. Yet, Fejo asserts, land is also 'within' the First Peoples, such is the strength of connection. Fejo's insights

also embrace the idea that ‘every rock is an extension of Ulura’ (2000, 141), and that God ‘is in the Earth’ such that ‘God is as close as the ground on which we walk’ (2000, 146). In considering the flood narrative of Genesis, he stresses that when Earth flooded, God was ‘not at a distance on some cloud watching’ but rather under the waters, so that when the ark landed on the rock it landed on God. Moreover, in the covenant signalled by the rainbow of the story, ‘God makes the same personal promises to kangaroos and crocodiles, to turtles and beetles, as to human beings’, as the rainbow itself is a ‘revelation of the Rainbow Spirit’ (Fejo 2000, 143), *Kurraj*, emerging from Earth.

Fejo’s focus on water in the flood story is also a portal into Oceanic perspectives that ‘land’ itself refers to more than the atolls that peek above waterlines but includes both sky and sea as well. In his own Pasifika turning of the creation story, Jione Havea can therefore assert that ‘out of the waters of mighty ocean, baby Earth was born’ (2011, 180).

Tuwere, Fejo, Havea—and plenty of others—articulate ways of thinking that *defy* western categories in place in the feast proposal. But might the new feast proposal not provide some opportunity to reconsider what documents towards the new feast present as having space between what Oceanic wisdom suggests may be more fluid? *Might the new feast proposal’s recognition that the whole mystery of Christ is not in fact manifest in the current calendar lead to and yield to further insight that wisdom has been missed?* How might people of the land be heard in ways the new feast proposal does not yet seem to have heard them? Western Christians fretful about ‘doctrine’ might also choose to follow the clue in Winston Halapua’s reading of land as he hints at the ‘triune interconnectedness of the vast ocean, the sky and the dotted scattered islands’ (2008, 5; see also Tomlinson 2020, 88),⁶ which is to say that perhaps Christian doctrine may be revitalised rather than threatened by engaging with what may initially seem strange to western minds in Pasifika worldviews.⁷

The Fault

The basic fault in the ecumenical feast proposal seems to me to be that it continues to *operate—albeit as it does not explicitly espouse—a doctrine of terra nullius*, ‘empty land’. It overlooks Oceania. In early waves of conquest, local practice of land-care—which did not look like western practice of agriculture—led Europeans to assume that Oceanic places

6 Note also Deverell 2023, 16–18: albeit eschewing inherited idioms, not the Father, but ‘universal dreaming’, not the Son but ‘Country’, not the Spirit, but ‘primordial pattern’.

7 We know that Pasifika perspectives are rarely present in theologies even in the larger islands of Oceania. For a disturbing account of the sheer lack of Pasifika insight in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand theological journals, see Flett 2022. Given what Flett shows, it is hardly surprising that the same perspectives make no impact on the feast proposals of western elite groups.

were empty. In more recent geopolitics, Pasifika people were again disregarded in the so-called Pacific War leading to devastating testing of nuclear weapons and storage of nuclear waste in the region (Vaka'uta 2019, 213; Havea 2019). And while the new ecumenical feast proposal might look more peace-making than these colonial legacies, in it again Pasifika appear to be disregarded. Yet as Nāsili Vaka'utu insists, 'Oceania is not empty!' (2019, 113).

In the feast proposal, the Pacific and its people have been flown over (Vaka'utu 2019, 113), over-sighted (Havea 2009), and are unheard. They have been assumed to be able to be spoken for by others—in the North and West.⁸ Most egregiously, despite aspirations to read the signs of the times, Pasifika experience of going under water has not been invoked but should have been (Carroll 2020; 2021; Havea 2020, especially 68–70 with disturbing photographs of both maternity ward and burial ground submerged). We will only know more about 'the whole mystery' as more Oceanic voices speak up.

8 One particularly lamentable moment in the feast proposal conference was when a contributor from the United States suggested that the first Sunday of September would be an unsuitable day for the new feast, given that it clashes with a US holiday. This comment seemed to speak to the question of who the feast is intended for, at least in its present articulation.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**NAVIGATING ACADEMIC PRIVILEGE:
THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FOR PASIFIKA COMMUNITIES****Faafetai Aiava**Associate Professor and Head of Theology and Ethics at Pasifika Communities University. faafetai.aiava@pcu.ac.fj**Abstract**

This article scrutinises various aspects of academic privilege, integrating some of the challenges I faced and the insights gained while furthering my theological education. Inspired by the complex roles of a tautai (Samoan traditional navigator), the article is structured in three parts. The first section seeks to undefine privilege by interrogating the infamous prestige afforded to those in leadership positions, highlighting why such privilege is both a blessing and an unenviable task. Part two redefines privilege as a relational responsibility, namely, to serve in and between intersecting spaces. The third and last part engages the field of theology, where the author's own privileges are addressed, and a challenge is issued to those in academic spaces regarding the repurposing of one's position and privilege in service of his or her communities.

Keywords

academic privilege, responsibility, community, interspatial, colonial

*Educate yourself enough
So you may understand
The ways of other people
But not too much
That you may lose*

*Your understanding
Of your own*

Tate Simi (2016, 14)

Introduction

The decision to write about academic privilege leaves me somewhat exposed. I am a theological educator who was trained in both Western and Pasifika institutions. I also made it a personal mission to join the growing number of Pasifika scholars who tell their stories in academic spaces. Unbeknownst to me, the field I was entering was highly contentious. By the time I completed my doctorate and began identifying as an academic or researcher, the whole notion of research had come under fire for its extractive and exploitive nature. For years, I would downplay and even deny the labels, as though the guilt of the knowledge systems that manipulated community-owned information for personal, institutional, or political gain was now my mine to bear. I found myself apologising for my position and its privileges—something I would later realise, in hindsight, was a great disservice to my parents, siblings, wife, and family, who had made many sacrifices to help me reach where I am today. It also made me question, particularly during the course of this writing, whether it is possible nowadays for one to be an academic without shame.

Inspired by the complex roles of a tautai (Samoan traditional navigator), I have structured the discussion in three parts. The first focuses on undefining privilege, where I question, from the perspective of tautai wisdom, the alleged prestige and authority of those in leadership positions. This section explains why privilege is not just a blessing but one imbued with unenviable challenges, responsibilities, and limitations. Part two then turns to redefine privilege as a relational task, namely, to serve in and between intersecting spaces. These interspaces include the intergenerational relationships within my family, the place of Pasifika scholars within the academy, and the unique contributions of an indigenous researcher. In the third part, I turn to the field of theology. I particularly look at my own privileges, before addressing the need for imagination and diversity. This is followed by theological insights regarding ways in which those of us in academic spaces can potentially repurpose our privileges to benefit our Pasifika communities.

Undefining Privilege: E lē sili le ta'i nai lo o le tapuai

I begin this section with two housekeeping matters. Firstly, although 'undefined' exists as an adjective in the English language, describing something that is unclear, I intentionally use 'undefine' here as a verb conveying the actions of undoing or unlearning. The point of undefining here is not so much to obscure the meaning of privilege, but rather to disassociate privilege from its academic baggage, thus establishing the need for an alternative. Secondly,

although a theological researcher is what I have in mind when referring to a tautai in this work, the notion itself can be applied generally to a leader of any undertaking (academic or otherwise). My focus on the field of theology is merely to highlight the specific challenges that I faced, although the hope is that my experiences resonate with scholars throughout the region from different fields.

According to local Samoan wisdom, a tautai has the power of command during a voyage or fishing expedition. That power, however, is not without its limits. While often interpreted as a position of privilege and authority, the actual role of a tautai comes with grave responsibilities. The expression ‘e lē sili le ta’i nai lo o le tapuai’ which translates as ‘a leader is no more important than the prayers of the community’, serves as a reminder of leaders’ accountability to their communities and reflects the common understanding that absolute power never rests solely with those at the helm.

And while I admit that I have indulged in the perks of being an academic tautai, I have had my fair share of criticism levelled against me. This is by no means a new phenomenon. Much has been written on the infamous privileges that have been abused by researchers. For instance, when researchers think it is okay to breach cultural protocols so long as the end justifies the means (Smith 2012, 26), or when research methods prioritise only the interests of the academy and those among its ranks (Aiava 2024), or when the traditional knowledge extracted from communities is misappropriated or worse, becomes the intellectual property of a selected few (Koya Vakauta 2023, 137–38). Irrespective of these flaws, there remains a serious need to undefine what privilege means beyond the usual confines of academia.

The Outsider Privilege

In my appeal to the metaphor of a tautai, it is worth noting that the main premise of being selected as a tautai is owed largely to one’s familiarity with the seas and navigational skills. This means that a tautai is not normally considered an outsider to the seas. However, Samoan proverbial wisdom also maintains that knowledge of the deep should not be taken for granted and thus requires a more collaborative consciousness. For our purposes, I draw on three common sayings that attest to this. First, ‘a worthy tautai is decided by the ocean’. Second, ‘even the most knowledgeable of tautai cannot predict a rogue bonito (fish)’. And third, ‘successful expeditions are backed by prayer’.¹ These expressions suggest that even at the peak of one’s skills and knowledge, a tautai never possesses full command of the seas and ocean life—a humble reminder to those in leadership that their strength comes from the communities they serve and not individual brilliance.

1 Translated from: (i) E fili e le tai le tautai e agavaa, (ii) E poto a le tautai ae sē lava le atu i le ama (iii) o faiva e tapuaia, o faiva e manuia.

In the context of academia, including cases where the researcher and the community being researched are quite familiar with each other, there remain limits to what we know or think we know. Based on his experience in the field of anthropology, Epeli Hau'ofa had this to say:

Although I entered the discipline by accident, I was eventually attracted to it perhaps because it was a case of courtship between birds of the same feather. I studied other people, I wrote about them, I liked most of them, but I could never become one of them. This is true of all anthropologists. However much we understand and like the people of the cultures we study, we always remain outside their charmed circles. As one remains outside, one is exposed to the elements that can chill the soul and heighten the sense of isolation as one looks into a house where the hearth glows, the beds are soft, and the laughter peals are infectious. I often long to enter, to belong to the community in which I live at any particular time; but only in Tonga, for reasons of ancestry, and forced and voluntary identification, could I come close to belonging, as I have described here. (2008, 104)

It is intriguing that even in his ancestral homeland, Hau'ofa acknowledges coming close to becoming an insider yet admits never feeling like one. Was this a consequence of his overseas education? Was it a passage rite that those doing 'objective' studies usually go through? Or was it a demonstration of intellectual modesty? I suspect it is a combination of all three. And though the author seems to lament feeling like an outsider, I am curious as to whether maintaining this outsider position could be perceived more optimistically.

Fa'aeaea: An Extrinsic Privilege

I am also convinced that the chilling experience mentioned above is not entirely self-induced. In another familiar occurrence, for academics within communities that is, Hau'ofa (2008) mentions times where his community leaders would often seek his 'expert' opinion on matters beyond his field of specialisation. He observed, with reference to the Pasifika landscape in the 1960s and the 1970s, how promoters of native peoples showered greatness on persons with postgraduate degrees in the name of localisation and regionalisation. This had 'weird effects on these peoples' attitudes and consequently on the lives of those around them' (Hau'ofa 2008, 103). I have also experienced this as a theologian in my community. Regardless of how often I gave advice (theological or otherwise), prefaced with disclaimers disqualifying its widespread application, it did not deter my community leaders or my peers from seeking my input.

In Samoa, this act of recognising the achievements of select individuals is known as fa'aea, an honour which is not necessarily self-designated but rendered by others. This is not to say that island intellectuals are immune to the allure of the academic limelight, but rather to state that in many Pasifika communities, the honourable status placed on 'schooled persons' is extrinsic to those receiving it (Sanga 2021). In these instances, where the received honour is enough to make an intellectual feel like an imposter, the privilege is an unenviable one. Since the fa'aea of communities is beyond the control of its recipients, the onus is on the recipient to exercise humility or, more frankly, not let the privilege get to one's head. The most obvious way around this, I believe, would be to charter an alternate course where one's privilege could be manoeuvred for the common good of those on the giving and receiving ends.

The Myth of Omniscience (All-knowing)

In another tautai wisdom, there is the expression 'do not be deceived by the calm tide on a given morning'.² This wisdom is often uttered as a warning for leaders to not only prepare for the unknown but also be content with not knowing everything. It is with regard to the latter that I think the need to undefine privilege is most needed in academia. That is, in its claims of omniscience. As alluded to earlier, the outsider status of a researcher is usually a given, and thus neither new nor inherently problematic. I also do not see the extrinsic privileges rendered by communities (faaea) as problematic since this honour is beyond the control of the learned and, more often than not, comes with responsibilities. The crux of my dilemma comes after an academic tautai is granted access to community-owned knowledge. This privilege, often entrusted on the premise that the researcher genuinely wanted to learn more about the other, ends up being exploited.

Instead of engaging in mutually enriching dialogue, Western-trained researchers deploy highly individualised tools that not only encourage the extraction of information, but also serve the interests of the degree-granting establishment. This results in the latter controlling what is said or written about the community in question, blatantly ignoring the collective consciousness and the trust that enabled the access in the first place.

It is from this all-knowing position that self-proclaimed or externally verified experts are created. Though many of these individuals may mean well, particularly as they echo some of the ongoing struggles observed in the field, many end up speaking from an all-knowing position inaccessible to the communities they intend to represent. The result, particularly when experts become unaware of their privileges, is the perpetuation of a saviour complex.

2 Translated from 'aue nei e seetia i le malu o le tai taeao'.

This one-way agenda not only creates a rift between academic institutions and indigenous communities, but it also fuels a climate of mistrust between the two. What is most concerning, with reference to the academy, is the effect this will have on the growing number of young Pasifika students progressing to higher education across the region. It is for that reason that I think redefining privilege is warranted.

Redefining Privilege: Tautua i le vā (Interspatial Responsibilities)

Although I was trained in theology, I was compelled through the faaeaea of my family to reach some level of proficiency in other fields. Most of the time, I am some sort of linguist, translating written or spoken English into Samoan and vice versa. This role came with tasks like analysing literature, clarifying legal policies, proofreading essays, writing speeches, or acting like an on-demand thesaurus for big complicated words. And though deflecting these tasks has been futile, it eventually developed in me a sense of appreciation for the trust already invested in me. This unique placement and its embedded responsibilities culminate into what I call an interspatial privilege. That is, the privilege to navigate the spaces in and between the two languages including the values, worldviews, and epistemologies of its creators (Prior 2019).

Inspired by his responsibilities to both his family and church, Vaitusi Nofoaiga (2017) deemed this life of in-between service as *tautua i le vā* (meaning to serve in the spaces). Though, for symbolic reasons, he purposely omits the spaces between the words and uses ‘*tautuaileva*’ instead. In Nofoaiga’s view, the latter is more accurate of his research location which not only places him between the Samoan and Christian cultures but also demonstrates what he perceives to be a gapless integration of both cultures (2017, 39–40). Though I would not go as far as claiming the two cultures are without gaps, I concur that this interspatial *vā* comes with a responsibility to bring the distinct realities into a mutual dialogue.

This privilege, which places me within the academic halls of theology and within my family and community, is never without responsibility. At a deeper level, I felt more like a double-agent whose objective was to maintain diplomacy between the competing worldviews innate to the various spaces. Within my own household—consisting of three generations—the internal diversities and value systems can be so apparent that it makes decision making a painstaking process. On a good day we reach a consensus or happy medium. But on a bad day, a decision is imposed from the top and everyone goes away dissatisfied. My placement in the middle of these generations thus comes with the delicate responsibility to facilitate that the needs on both ends are somehow met.

Navigating Colonial Spaces in the Academy

This in-between role is what initially attracted me to cultural critic, Homi K. Bhabha, and in particular his theory of mimicry.³ Regarding formal education, Bhabha (2004) believed that one of the biggest flaws in colonial discourse had to do with its attempt to produce compliant subjects. Although the goal was that the educated subjects would soon mimic the values and assumptions of the dominant culture, the result was that it produced ambivalent subjects whose behaviours exhibited more mockery than obedience (Bhabha 2004, 172). Most interesting to me about this contentious space (between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised) is not its capacity to entertain mockery or what Bhabha refers to earlier as 'sly civility' (2004, 133–44), but rather in its openness for negotiation and renegotiation.

These interspaces, which Bhabha (2004) prefers to label 'third space', have not only provided an effective means through which minority cultures could negotiate their identities, but they have also enabled indigenous scholars to speak confidently within the academy. It is for that reason that Bhabha's 'third space of hybridity' has become a staple in the general literature on coloniality and in postcolonial theology.

While seemingly inviting, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) warns that this space was one invented by Western intellectuals to conveniently dismiss nativist thinking while simultaneously maintaining the power to define the world. She argued that this is why many indigenous intellectuals choose not to participate in postcolonial discourse. 'For each indigenous intellectual who actually succeeds in the academy—and we are talking relatively small numbers—there is a whole array of issues about the ways we relate inside and outside of our own communities, inside and outside the academy, and between all those different worlds' (Smith 2012, 14). It was to that end that I purposely refrained from identifying as a postcolonial scholar out of fear that this celebrated space does not itself become a closed fixture within the academy thereby losing its fluidity or, worse, autonomy. The choice to use interspaces, therefore, intends to maintain the plurality of the intersecting realities so that the complexities between the worlds and the internal diversities in each are not conflated.

3 Bhabha was born and raised in India and did his postgraduate studies in Oxford. He held prominent positions in various tertiary institutions including the University of Sussex and later Harvard. His work has not only been instrumental in postcolonial studies, particularly his analysis of hybrid cultures in postcolonial contexts, but also in the way that he challenged the so-called binary between the colonised and coloniser.

For Pasifika scholars, this reassigned place within an already limited space is patronising, as though being instructed to ‘aim small miss small’.⁴ It not only goes against the understanding that it is one’s service (tautua) of the interspaces (vā) that defines the tautai, but it is also a missed opportunity with respect to what an individual—including his or her communities—stands to gain from the encounter.

One of these opportunities, says Shawn Wilson (2008), is in our capacity to bring new perspectives to the table. In his words,

one of the great strengths that Indigenous scholars bring with them is the ability to see and work within both the Indigenous and dominant worldviews. This becomes of great importance when working with dominant system academics, who are usually not bicultural. As part of their white privilege, there is no requirement for them to be able to see other ways of being and doing, or even to recognise that they exist. Oftentimes then, ideas coming from a different worldview are outside of their entire mindset and way of thinking. The ability to bridge this gap becomes important in order to ease the tension that it creates. (Wilson 2008, 44)

Navigating Research Spaces

To what degree then, if at all, could an academic tautai bridge the needs of his or her communities and the institutions they serve? One of my major struggles in higher education, particularly as I began doing research, had to do with presenting my ideas in the third person. My first issue is that it imposes a language of distance that isolates the researcher from his or her own work encouraging students to prioritise universal concepts at the expense of any meaningful particularities arising from personal experience. My second issue is that it promotes an institutionalised ownership of knowledge, where any discovery worth having becomes the property of the all-knowing institution that verified it. This puts researchers at a double disadvantage. It is bad enough that island scholars have to be invisible in their own work, but the expectation for them to address the self as other or through the eyes of the other makes it far worse.

It was not until I commenced studies at the Pacific Theological College that I discovered a deep passion to write as me and with the ‘us’ of community. This to me was more than being granted permission to speak in the first person. It was a formal recognition that I am also a community whose interests were not strictly individual and whose

5 In a similar manner, Hau‘ofa described indigenous scholars as being a small nebulous group of elites. Despite being like-minded and sharing many similarities, this group of individual writers, poets, and scholars often worked independently of one another due mainly to their being isolated in their own islands. On the rare occasions that they did cross paths at conferences, it was a coin toss whether it would be as friends or as enemies (2008, 102).

objectives were not limited to those of the institution. This relational mindset was most evident whenever I read a book, heard something new in a course, or uncovered something rare. In such cases my objective was always twofold. The first was to store information relevant to my studies and professional development. The second was to set aside pearls of wisdom that I could share later with friends and families beyond the academy. Like the dishonest worker that keeps taking office supplies home, this was something that I did subconsciously most probably because I was the only one in my immediate family to receive a scholarship. It was then, as I became a lot more intentional with asserting the interests of my community, that my research went from being a mere means to a degree to a catalyst for change.

Today, I now have the privilege of teaching and supervising other research students. Though much has changed, my attitude to research remains the same as I continue to push the conventional boundaries of academia. I do this by encouraging our aspiring scholars to be proud of their indigeneity and to showcase in their writing both the good and the bad of their cultures. The point is so the cognitive dissonance of wanting to attain an academic degree without losing one's identity in the process becomes an opportunity for empowerment. For Aisake Casimira (2004), this dissonant space is where research can play a transformative role. It can be done as a protest—not just holy thoughts on paper (think: theological reflections) but as a holy deed (think: praxis) carried out intently to liberate. It can be our unique contribution to knowledge—legitimising not just the stories of who we are, but also our own ways of storytelling. Lastly, it can be a gift to our people—documenting our values and identities ensuring their continuity (Casimira 2024).

Privileging Theology: Mataupu Silisili

I turn now to what may be perceived by some to be an elephant in the room, namely, my choice to study Christian theology. For Samoans, this career path is an esteemed one that comes with social, political and, occasionally but not always, economic privileges. For many parents, particularly those from the baby boomer generation and earlier, it is a dream come true when at least one of their offspring enters church ministry. The word 'theology' itself is translated most widely as mataupu silisili or the highest discipline, where 'highest' (silisili) often points to the spiritual character of theology. Whether this translation can be attributed to the attitudes of Samoa's older generations or to Europe of the Middle Ages when theology was labelled 'queen of the sciences' (Jasper 2004, 46), is uncertain. What I do know is that my participation in theology puts me in position of dual privileges regarding my standing within the academy and in the church. In this work's efforts to redefine privilege as responsibility rather than prestige, I have equally contended that a

more constructive use of privilege is warranted. It is to that end that I offer in this final section, theological insights on some potential uses of one's privileged position.

On Symbol and Imagination

What fascinated me most about theology is its emphasis on symbols. Maybe this is because theology itself is a symbolic language written, spoken, and transmitted through images and allegories rich with meaning. Or perhaps it had something to do with the way that symbols inevitably engage the imagination. Take for instance one of the most prominent symbols of Christianity embodied through the person of Jesus (Haight 1999). Through Jesus, we mortals not only witnessed the in-breaking of the divine realm, but we also encountered God in human form—the flesh not taking away from Jesus' divinity, nor his divinity making him any less human. For the rational mind, the two natures are diametrically opposed, as fire is to water. But for the faithful imagination, it is the mystery who is God.

This mystery has for centuries captured the imagination of not just theologians, but Christians in general, given that symbols, much like the communities where the symbols first found expression, are fluid and constantly changing. The reason, says Paul Tillich (1969), is that religious symbols are born from a creative encounter with reality. Religious symbols are true when they fulfil the need for which they were created; and they also die or disappear if the situation in which they were created has passed (Tillich 1969, 109, 113).

This dialectic between symbol and the collective imagination was evident in the heyday of Pasifika contextual theology, where many seized the opportunity to reimagine God through the use of cultural symbols. It was not only characteristic of dissertations produced by PTC students since its inception in 1965, but it was also central to the then vision and mission statement of the college. Of course, as is the changing nature of symbols and the cultural diversities and changes within the communities that give them meaning, it was inevitable that some symbols would resonate more than others.

Take for instance a recent debate on social media regarding an artistic depiction of the crucified Christ as a sogaimiti (a male bearing the Samoan traditional tattoo). The image attracted heavy criticism as if it was the first contextualised image of its kind. The majority of the critics said it was disrespectful to Jesus' Jewish culture, some going as far as calling it blasphemy. Others accused the artist of limiting salvation exclusively to Samoa and its chiefs. Theologian or not, I welcomed the artist's creativity and daringness to reimagine the symbol of Christ from a different perspective. More specifically, it made me curious about the theological significance of the body or tino (Samoan) and the intention behind it. Was the portrayal of the Samoan body meant as a celebration of our traditional culture? Or was it a protest from bodies often relegated to the margins?

I was reminded of Eve Parker's (2022) argument that all knowledge begins in the body, though not all bodies or bodies of knowledge are treated equally.

Some bodies are deemed problems, inconveniences, irrelevant, indecent and therefore incapable of being producers of knowledge—their experiences are often reduced to anecdotes, while the bodies of the privileged elites are the knowledge holders and truth bearers who shape and determine what should be deemed 'real theology'. (Parker 2022, 31)

In Pasifika, the tino or body is not limited to the individual and his or her relatives, but rather goes beyond the human—encompassing the whole of life. For Upolu Vaai (2017), the tino not only embodies the relations of land, sea and sky, but it is also through which God relates to the world.⁵ Whether or not it was intended by the artist, these connections and stories are symbolised in the Samoan traditional tattoo. Like many other forms of indigenous knowledge, there are images often dismissed as body art or replaced in formal education by dominant epistemologies. Could the artwork represent Christ in solidarity with such communities, namely, indigenous peoples coerced into disowning their own bodies as sources of knowledge?

It was apparent in the online debates that many were either unwilling to acknowledge the body as a source of theology or they were driven by the misconceived notion that indigenous cultures do not change. According to Smith, 'what counts as authentic is used by the West as one of the criteria to determine who really is indigenous, who is worth saving, who is still innocent and free from Western contamination' (2012, 77). When this is internalised by Pasifika peoples, a wedge is driven between those that perceive themselves to be authentic to the culture from those perceived as non-authentic. In Smith's words, 'at the heart of such a view of authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege' (2012, 77).

Perhaps there lies the invitation for both Western and Pasifika contexts. That is, to invent and reinvent our cultures and cultural symbols. For Garrett Green (2000, 15–16), it is exemplary of 'imaginative faithfulness'—where we acknowledge that we are earthen vessels of God's truths, that we hold those truths not as masters but stewards, and that these truths were given in forms that can only be grasped by imagination. Without this imagination, the language and symbols of theology run the risk of losing its vibrancy or worse, relevance.

5 In Vaai's 'Tino Theology', he explains how God, through the Son, enters into relationship with the whole tino—land, sea, skies, people, communities and ancestors. Also, through the Spirit, God is woven into the dynamics and rhythms of the tino (2017, 234).

Reconstituting Diversity through Jesus

In relation to the way Jesus himself responded to the different identifications projected onto him, Elizabeth Malbon (2003) conducted an interesting study of Jesus' identity according to the Gospel of Mark. In her view, neither Jesus nor the author was responsible for labelling Jesus the 'Son of Man' or, 'Lord of the Sabbath', as in the story where Jesus and his disciples break Sabbath protocols (Mark 2:27–28). Instead, it was the various characters in the narrative, and the implied audience, that make the connection. For instance, after forgiving the sins of the paralytic man resulting in his healing (2:5), Jesus reminded the scribes in attendance that such authority on Earth belonged to the Son of Man (2:10). Since Jesus refers to the Son of Man in the third person and never explicitly says, 'I am the Son of Man,' it meant that it was his listeners, and Mark's implied readers, that were responsible for the Christological rendering.

What transpires is something Malbon calls refracted or deflected Christology (2003, 373–74). This occurs when Jesus 'refracts' the differing perspectives that the disciples and others have about his identity, resulting not in a uniform understanding of Jesus, but an array of views regarding who he was for each. Malbon (2003, 374) goes further to describe this process using the analogy of a prism—as Jesus bends the views projected toward him from others, the phenomenon is like that of a prism when held up to the light, refracting or bending white light to reveal its spectral colours.

This symbolic representation of Jesus as a prism correlates with my own understanding of theology, namely, to relate to the mystery of God in ways accessible to us, acknowledging that God cannot be strictly defined as this or that, but is free to manifest Godself as a colourful spectrum of divinity. Taking nothing away from John Macquarrie's classic definition of theology, where its central task is to express the content of the Christian faith 'in the clearest and most coherent language available' (1966, 1), I am curious whether theologians actually account for the politics, limitations, and the evolving nature of language. Going back further to Anselm's definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding' reiterated by Migliore (2014), one gets the sense that theology's initial task was to integrate the realms of faith and reason. However, somewhere in the process, particularly as theology morphed into the highly intellectualised discipline it is today, reason assumed a more omniscient position leaving artistic expression at the margins!

Invitation to Interpret Anew

Even in biblical interpretation, the meanings of texts are seldom taken on face value nor are they interpreted from a place of omniscience. Since the words themselves point to meanings both seen and unseen, readers of the Bible—like the tautai—are encouraged to navigate with humility. One way of doing this is through metaphor. For Sallie McFague

(1987), metaphors are our most readily available resource in our attempts to understand the mystery of God. She argues that there is no other aspect of the universe that we know in the same way with the privilege of the insider. So rather than speaking about God from an all-knowing position, McFague uses the personal metaphors of Mother, Lover, and Friend. Although the sacred space (vā) between her and the divine mystery remains, the metaphors do provide her with a more intimate way of relating to God as ‘radically relational, immanent, interdependent and noninterventionist’ (1987, 82–83).

Church historian, Vicente Diaz (2010), raised a similar point regarding the need to interrogate the established meanings of texts. Dissatisfied with the official hagiography of Diego Luis de San Vitores—the first missionary turned martyr in Guam, Diaz (2010) turns his focus instead on unofficial and unwritten accounts from the Chamorro community. He calls this the ‘oral cavity’ in many of the Catholic Church’s official documents, claiming that ‘the modern concern with factuality and with credible source documents, was secondary to the belief that if God was working through the individual in question, *that* truth (and its practical value for nurturing faith) was what really mattered’ (Diaz 2010, 56). Like McFague (1987), Diaz (2010) chooses not to limit himself to one interpretation or even the most conventional. Rather, he draws from alternative sources that were not only available to him, but also proved to be more meaningful.

I accept, coming from a Reformed Protestant tradition and from the years of engaging other Pasifika Christians, that the infallible authority of scripture or *sola scriptura* carries enormous weight. But *sola scriptura* was not intended to mean at the expense of oral histories, traditions, or the ever-changing experiences of the church. Given that the church has been the primary interpretive context of the Bible since its inception, there remains an ongoing need to renew not just our interpretive practices but also the church itself. The reason, says George Zachariah, is that the church even at its best, remains a frail and fallible human institution— ‘The church, because of who we are, remains open to always being reformed’ (2020, 89).

Part of this reform is the need to read the Bible with fresh perspectives, to seek alternative meanings and symbols, and to ask what else the Bible could be saying for our times. This brings with it an opportunity to read with and for the vulnerable among us. In Judith Rossall’s (2020) reinterpretation of the Bible from the perspectives of those struggling with shame, she makes the case that the overemphasis on guilt and sin in mainstream literature has neglected the actual victims who have been sinned against. In her words,

[w]e are complicated creatures and God is ultimately beyond our understanding; theology must therefore perform a balancing act that holds equally important truths

in tension. If we fail to take the broader message into account we can leave people struggling with toxic shame. What is more, we are likely to become more and more irrelevant to a world that is very concerned with issues such as self-esteem and self-worth. (Rossall 2020, vii–viii)

With her balancing act culminating in the world's ultimate shaming moment, God nailed to the cross, Rossall (2020) not only offers a great example of why reading the Bible anew is necessary for all, but also of how we, theologians, can use our privilege to serve the vulnerable in our communities.

Conclusion

This article set out initially to develop an outline for a Communities-based approach to theological research, intended as a resource for Pasifika students. However, the more I looked into the tautai wisdom of Samoa and some of the insights from theology, the more I saw my own image saturated in privilege. Through the benefit of hindsight, I recognised a more pressing need for me to first deal with the numerous privileges I used and likely misused as an intellectual. Was this new trajectory a blessing in disguise? I think so—given that I have been practicing theology in my family and communities for some time, without articulating responsibly how I was doing it or from what position.

In my efforts to undefine the meaning of academic privilege, I came to the conclusion that human knowledge is finite and that is perfectly fine. The claim to omniscience by the academy is not only foreign to Pasifika contexts, but it is also divisive in communities built on trust and mutual learning. By redefining privilege as an interspatial responsibility, I highlight the various spaces where an academic tautai can potentially serve as a family or community mediator, as an open-minded academic, or as a proud island-researcher in colonial spaces. While these are contentious spaces, I argue that indigenous intellectuals stand to learn more about themselves and the world from navigating the deep, instead of settling for the liminal spaces afforded to them.

In my turn to theology, I gave examples of why not knowing everything is both a human thing and an opportunity to engage the imagination. As demonstrated in my discussions of Jesus being both the symbol and the mystery who is God, there are elements in the Christian faith that cannot be fully rationalised or verified by written facts or cut off from artistic expression. It was on this basis that I posited three invitations. The first is an invitation to reconstitute the diversities that exist within our cultures as embodied in Jesus' multiple identities and natures. The second is an invitation to interpret God anew where both the church and its interpretive practices are called to remain in a continuous state of reform. The third is an invitation to read the Bible with the vulnerable in our

communities. Rather than resent our positions as academic ‘insiders’, the examples above are intended to offer some ways where we can repurpose our privileges in the service of others. Although it is by no means a comprehensive guide for doing theology or research in communities, I can only hope that I am on the right track or, at the very least, offer an important first step.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RECLAIMING INCLUSIVE INDIGENOUS VOICE THROUGH STORYTELLING

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

Introduction

One of the cherished activities among the indigenous people is storytelling. The elders never tired of narrating stories to the youngsters who would eagerly listen. We miss those days when we sat near our grandparents, aunts, and uncles around the fireplace (coming from a much colder place, where the fireplace was the common sitting area during the evenings). During one of her presentations at the Pasifika Philosophy course, Frances¹ said, 'When I remember the story told by my grandmother, I still smell her/it.' Likewise, the indigenous people recollect those days, and those memories remain fresh always. Storytelling is an important technique to communicate with people. It is an important means of connecting people to a sense of belongingness. For the indigenous people, storytelling is the fabric of life, the heartbeat of the culture, the web that connects people's stories and lives. Stories are used as a pedagogical tool to teach about life, ethical lessons, social and cultural values. Through storytelling, we become cultural producers, in the sense that we engage in practices which not only reproduce the cultural repertoires we are provided with and need as we move through social life but are to some extent able to modify and shape them as they are passed down the unbroken chain of generations which constitutes human life (Featherstone 1997, 3).

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

Experience of Colonisation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Epistemic Self-Determination

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

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

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

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

Centring Inclusivity

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

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

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

people that surround them. Talanoa is a general philosophy that promotes open discussion and respect among people (Robinson and Robinson 2005, 16). Halamalu Ma'asi² shares a life-soothing practice in Tonga about Faka Lekesi (mother's arm), where the children rest their heads on their mother's arms while she tells them stories that convey cultural values and norms of behaviour. This is also a way of putting the children to sleep as she chants lullabies. The same arm is used to feed and discipline the children. The mother's arm is compared to a kaliloa (a wooden headrest) used by several people.

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

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

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

Gender Justice

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETHINKING METAPHORS FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: FROM BOUNDARY CROSSING TO NEGOTIATED SPACE (*vā*)

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Abstract

Interreligious dialogue is often conceived of in terms of intentional boundary crossing. While this metaphor captures part of the experience of interreligious dialogue, namely the movement from a well-known place into the space of another, the overreliance on this metaphor inscribes particular aspects of dialogue into discussions and sidelines others. This article seeks to rethink the spatial metaphors through which interreligious dialogue is conceptualised in the light of the Pasifika concept of *vā*—a relational space for encounter. Tevita Havea has, in his book chapter ‘New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space’ (2023), used the concept of *vā* for thinking about ecumenism in terms that are free from the colonial language of empire. Similarly, this article seeks to think dialogue in terms other than discovery and exploration. While interreligious dialogue may or may not be seen as an extended ecumenism, similar relational issues are at work, and similar challenges of conceptualising encounter, similarity and difference.

Keywords

metaphor, space, boundary, interreligious dialogue, interfaith

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue can be defined as the conscious and respectful engagement with members of other religious communities *as* members of these communities.¹ ‘Boundary crossing’ is by far the most frequent metaphor that is used for the large variety of activities and communication forms that together make up the field of interreligious dialogue. When people in interreligious dialogue speak about boundary crossing, this is usually done in a positive light, as part of a respectful learning experience that can be gained by the movement from a well-known place into the space of another. Nevertheless, the overreliance on this one metaphor bears the risk of inscribing and overemphasising certain elements in how we think, describe and do interreligious dialogue, while remaining unaware of the limitations and risks of this particular imagery.

The aim of this article is to rethink the spatial and topographical metaphors for interreligious dialogue. In the first section I will discuss the dominance of spatial metaphors in interreligious dialogue, particularly boundary crossing. In the second section I will introduce the concept of relational space (*vā*), as it is adopted by Tevita Havea in his ‘New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space’ (2023), and reflect on how this concept could also help us find a way of speaking about interreligious dialogue beyond the language of empire.

Bridges and Boundaries

A metaphor is not just a stylistic device that can make texts more interesting to read. Rather, the use of metaphors shapes the way in which we think about a subject (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors can help to make abstract concepts more concrete and accessible but they do so at the expense of creating connections with specific mental imagery. If a topic is typically discussed in the language of a certain metaphorical field, these metaphors come to determine what is considered normal, even if other ways of thinking about the topic or concept would be equally possible. Every metaphor foregrounds certain aspects and renders others invisible, which can make the overreliance on one particular metaphor problematic. Monika Kopytowska and Paul Anthony Chilton emphasised that ‘[r]eligious metaphor networks are not timeless unchanging structures’, and pointed instead to ‘the crucial role metaphorical reconceptualisation can play in the historical transformation of systems of belief and organisation’ (Chilton and Kopytowska 2018, 168). This means that

1 ‘Interreligious Dialogue’ is here taken to constitute different formats of deliberate and formal or semi-formal interreligious communication and engagement, interreligious diplomacy and interreligious art initiatives, and is not restricted to the bi- or multilateral verbal exchange. The term is often also taken to include the everyday non-deliberate ‘dialogue of life’, i.e., people of different communities interacting without thinking of doing dialogue. While I do not typically see this as part of interreligious dialogue, my criticism of the overuse of the boundary crossing metaphor would apply here, too, and the exact delineations are not the focus of this article.

if we want to improve the practice and study of interreligious dialogue, it is worthwhile to reflect on the use of language, and specifically metaphor, in dialogue contexts.

Bonnie Howe, has in a book chapter on metaphors of interreligious dialogue and interdisciplinary research, highlighted the strong presence of the spatial metaphor. She asks: ‘Are we Boundary Crossers and Bridge Builders?’ (Howe 2018, 120). If one goes by the titles of works on interreligious dialogue, this is certainly how many academics and practitioners approach the topic. An interview book with Cardinal Arinze has the title, *Building Bridges: Interreligious Dialogue on the Path to World Peace* (Cardinal Arinze 2004). Another example is Francis X. Clooney’s pioneering work, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Clooney 2010). Christoffer H. Grundmann edited a volume, *Interreligious Dialogue: An Anthology of Voices Bridging Cultural and Religious Divides* (Grundmann 2015). In the same year, Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof published an edited volume, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations* (Moyaert and Geldhof 2015). The language about boundaries and transgressions may be particularly suitable for the negotiations for ritual participation, where entering a holy space usually reserved for certain groups might be perceived by some members of these communities indeed as a boundary violation. But, as the examples indicate, verbal dialogue, too, is perceived as a process of boundary negotiation, maybe as an extension of such sensitive interreligious encounters: boundaries that have to be acknowledged, respected, bridged, or transgressed.

The interaction with the boundary of both one’s own and the other’s tradition is so foundational to the way that people speak about interreligious dialogue that it could be called a ‘dead’ metaphor, so commonplace that it is hardly registered as a figurative way of speaking (Seligman and Weller 2019, 79). It might therefore be helpful to consider for a moment what kind of topography this metaphor implies. It is a landscape of religious belonging, marked by religious and cultural divides, which is otherwise unspecified. These divides may be imaged as borders, similar to the lines on a map that mark the territory of a nation state. As such, they clearly and unambiguously demarcate the dominion of one religion or cultural group from the other. Or, alternatively, the divides can be imagined not as dark lines but as three-dimensional faults or abysses that cut deeply into the landscape. This is where the language of building bridges comes into play, because a bridge makes sense only in a terrain with faults or rivers that otherwise cannot be crossed. Within that mental imagery, those engaged in interreligious dialogue travel through the country and intentionally cross the borders, much like travellers or explorers, or like pioneer-engineers build bridges across faults so that they and others can cross over safely into new lands. The boundary and the bridge metaphor are thus two sides of the same coin, as the act of

connecting presupposes division: a border that is crossed is still a border; a fault over which a bridge is built is still a fault.

The border crossing metaphor captures some important elements of interreligious dialogue. Engaging in interreligious dialogue means in some way leaving one's religious comfort zone. It is a journey of learning and a venturing into the unknown, of leaving behind, if only temporarily, the familiarity of one's own community to understand the thoughts and practices of another community, maybe even to walk a mile in their shoes. Dialogue has the goal of establishing communicative routes that are acceptable and comfortable to both sides, and that invite respectful future encounters, hence the image of the bridge, that helps to cross what otherwise might be an abyss of prejudice. As these considerations show, not only does talking about spatiality and movement within a landscape make sense in interreligious dialogue, it is indeed difficult to speak about interreligious dialogue without using metaphors of topography and space. And yet, the ubiquity of the boundary metaphor in interreligious dialogue makes us forget that spatiality does not have to be about boundary crossing. In his influential work, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Land*, Ilaitia Tuwere has succinctly remarked: 'A Fijian does not think of himself as belonging within certain frontiers but as originating from the place where the founder-ancestor landed and after which the land was named' (Tuwere 2002, 49). This means land does not have to be viewed naturally as segmented space with boundaries that are to be crossed but can equally be conceptualised as relational space, with the human being tied to the land through kinship lineage and oral traditions of naming, speaking, and remembering.

Paths and Pilgrimages

In 2007, Cardinal Tauran, at the time president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, chose the title, 'Determined to Walk the Path of Dialogue' for his yearly message to the Hindus on the occasion of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. In this text, the path of dialogue can be envisaged as a journey of at least two people from two different traditions. It is about journeying together, in a landscape that is otherwise unspecified. The 'path of dialogue' does not suggest a landscape of religious boundaries with a Christian and a Hindu territory. As indeed in most of these religious greeting messages, the 'other' that is viewed with some suspicion is not the other religious community, but people who oppose dialogue efforts, regardless of their religious affiliation (Barbato 2020, 363). The metaphor of the 'path of dialogue' brings up a mental imagery of travelling together, Hindu and Christian, on the journey of life, or human collaboration, or maybe even on the journey towards God. Walking together is a much-loved metaphor of Pope Francis (for example

Francis 2023) and, in this particular Diwali message, it is used as part of a call to keep collaborating and to keep building friendships, even in the face of challenges from both outside and within the respective traditions.

The path of dialogue may not always be a stroll in a lovely garden. It may at times indeed be quite a strenuous or at least longwinded interfaith pilgrimage, as, for example, Lynne Price's book title, *Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue: A Methodist Pilgrimage* suggests (Price 1991). However, both walking together in a garden and the parish pilgrimage are communal and relational events involving both oneself and the other as agents. The boundary crossing metaphor, on the other hand, is very much based in a wider field of exploration and pioneering: a person or expedition setting out to travel, crossing boundaries, making first contact, and establishing the necessary infrastructure for sustained engagement. In this imagery, there is no presupposed mutuality. The learning process may lie predominantly in the courage required for setting out, crossing the boundaries, the risk and adventure of the movements in unfamiliar territory, and challenges of establishing contact and communicating with the 'natives' in their land, before returning with stories to tell back home. None of these activities need to be done with hostile or disrespectful intentions, but they sound, for an activity that is about intercultural engagement, uncomfortably close to visions of discovery and empire.

Mapmaking and the 'Centre'

The metaphor of interreligious dialogue as boundary crossing entails a form of mental map-making. We are invited to make sense of the activities of interreligious dialogue by imagining a topographical landscape of territories, faults, borders, and bridges, which has to be traversed. The connection between geography and power, particularly empire, has been analysed in different academic disciplines, most specifically critical geopolitics (Toal 1996; Cox, Low, and Robinson 2008). Land surveying was an essential part of the colonial enterprise, and maps and borders were often made by the powerful for the powerful, and without the people who may be most affected. As Giselle Byrnes showed for the case of New Zealand, colonisation by land surveying went beyond the merely physical, and included also the visual, textual, and conceptual (Byrnes 2015). Already in 1995, Ilana Friedrich Silber discussed the rise of spatial metaphors in sociological theory (Friedrich Silber 1995). Vebjørn L. Horsfjord more recently studied spatial metaphors in the Common World Muslim-Christian dialogue process (Horsfjord 2016). Katherine Pratt Ewing pointed out specifically for the border-crossing metaphor that it is 'a manifestation of the discourse of nation-states' (Ewing 1998, 266), which often fails to adequately capture identity negotiation and shifting processes, in her case for the study of Muslim identities.

The spatial metaphor of boundary crossing implies the notion of a starting point, from which one sets out to explore and cross borders. While everyone has a homeland, too often in colonial history the homeland and starting point of the explorer became absolutised. The starting point, or one's own country and culture, is then understood as the centre, the normal, from where one travels into the periphery, possibly even the barbaric, uncivilised ends of the world. For example, while from the view point of the Portuguese, it made sense to say that they 'discovered' America, this makes no sense from the perspective of the indigenous population, yet for a long time the language of 'discovery' was used uncritically as if it was a universal descriptor. More recently, the language of discovery has met a significant push back, as the Eurocentric normative assumptions are rejected in favour of more balanced or multi-focal ways of telling history (Miller, Ruru and Behrendt 2010). The language of boundary crossing can unintentionally replicate pattern of centre and periphery or normal and inferior. This deserves attention, in particular, as interreligious dialogue is still predominantly Christian-initiated, and sometimes shows a lack of reciprocity or even willingness to participate unless Christians are given the central place or 'lead role', as Peniel Rajkumar observed with reference to Heup Young Kim's concept of 'the will to host' (2021, 694)

In my own experience, participants in interreligious dialogue respond well when I tell them that for me, interreligious dialogue is not only about crossing boundaries but also about respecting boundaries. Behind that may often lie a relief that I will not oversimplify religious difference to support a narrative that all religions are or want the same. Nevertheless, the boundary, here protective rather than nation state, should only be one metaphor for dialogue among others, and other metaphors should be sought specifically to balance the boundary metaphor's imperial connotations and lack of relationality. The Pasifika concept of *vā* can be helpful in this regard.

Relational Space (*Vā*) in Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is not the same as ecumenism, but it may be seen as a wider ecumenism that extends from the plurality of the Christian churches to the plurality of all faith communities (Moyaert 2013, 196). Even those who do not share such an understanding of the relationship between ecumenism and interreligious dialogue can agree that, in both ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, similar relational issues are at work, and similar challenges of conceptualising encounter, similarity and difference have to be negotiated.

Gladson Jathanna questioned the typical language of Christian unity that is used to speak about ecumenism because of its proximity to the colonial language of empire, pointing out that in Roman times, the term '*oikoumene*' was used to refer to the Roman

empire, that is, the extension of Roman political reach to the ends of the known world (Jathanna 2020, 4f). This colonial meaning of *oikoumene*, Jathanna argues, is ‘mirrored in the Western colonial conversion projects and also in the modern ecumenical movements’ (Jathanna 2020, 6). Before this background, it becomes imperative to look for metaphors for ecumenism that do not reinforce connotations of conquest and colonisation.

One such alternative is offered by Tevita Havea in his article, ‘New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space’, with the Pasifika concept of *vā*. *Vā* describes a relational space between two or more people. Havea introduces *vā* by quoting from an unpublished paper ‘The negotiated space’ (2008) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Maui Hudson, Murray Hemi, Sarah-Jane Tiakiwai, Marcia Dunn and others, who describe negotiated space as ‘the in-between terrain where distinctive worldviews and knowledge bases enter into some form or engagement or relationship to potentially be expanded and innovated’ (Tuhiwai Smith et al. 2008, 6; Havea 2023, 86). Negotiated space, according to them, is a “space that relates” between people, a “sociospatial” way of conceiving of relationships’ and ‘a terrain of intersection where both communalities and differences can be explored and understood’.²

Vā, a space for relating, can thus be seen as an alternative or complementary topographical metaphor to the mental terrain of the boundary crossing metaphor. Interreligious dialogue, read through the concept of *vā*, would not be a landscape of faults and bridges, nor a territory for conquest, but rather a space filled by encounter, exchange, looking at each other, speaking, sending cues and signals, maybe also stepping forwards and back. Unlike the path of dialogue, the people in the negotiated space may be imagined not as walking side by side but facing each other. *Vā*, in comparison to the path of dialogue, is less directional, and more relational. As Martyn Reynolds has emphasised, within the Tongan and Samoan context, *vā* can be seen as an expansive concept that stretches beyond individuals to the cosmos, where relatedness is the basic structure of life and the kind and degree of relatedness is potentially open (Reynolds 2016). This implies also the need for appropriate relationships, which may place different requirements on intradenominational, ecumenical and interreligious engagement. I’uogafa Tuagalu pointed out that, for the Samoan context, *vā* is about social structure but it also has psychological and spiritual underpinnings, and these cannot be isolated from each other as Samoans ‘tend to define themselves in terms of their sacred obligations to family and community’ (2008, 115).

Two aspects are often forgotten in discussions of *vā*: aesthetics, that is, the connection to beauty or harmony, and time, that is, that *vā* is not only about space but about relational space/time (Ka’ili 2017, 34). Havea emphasises the temporal element of *vā*, as relationality includes not only the right spatial relationship but also the right

2 Havea 2023, 86 quoting from Tuhiwai Smith et al. 2008, 6.

temporal connection: when to engage with whom and how. One important element is the conscious disengagement of human activity from the land, to let the land rest and recover for future agricultural use. As Havea points out, *vā* can be both a space of interface and a space of separation. This is not an internal contradiction but shows that *vā* is, as Havea agrees with Tuhiwai Smith and others, about negotiation processes in ‘balance, reciprocity and respect’.³

A negotiated space sometimes needs engagement, sometimes disengagement, in both temporal and spatial terms. While dialogue partners tend to appreciate my statement that dialogue is both about crossing and respecting boundaries, the concept of *vā* more accurately expresses what should be going on in respectful dialogue: the temporal and spatial frame for encounter is maintained at all times but the actual relational action may at times be one of engagement and at other times one of disengagement, as required by the situation. Interreligious dialogue will not always be about talking; it can also be about holding the space of friendship while letting the other be, allowing them to recover their identity after potentially unsettling processes. In contrast to the connotations of pioneering and empire that come with the rather forceful boundary crossing metaphor, the notion of *vā* is more gentle and responsive but also more intense in terms of the relational focus on each other, in that it either means intentional engagement or intentional disengagement to allow later re-engagement, but with a constant relationship-focus and not merely project- or process-focus. As Upolu Lumā Vaai has pointed out, ‘[b]alance is not about equating and twinning things but about differences and contradictions falling into place in their aligned relations in order to offer life and wellbeing’ (Vaai 2024, 39).

The space of *vā* is more fluid than the space implied in the boundary crossing metaphor, where the territory is already marked by dark lines or deep faults. *Vā* implies a negotiation process of relational give and take, which can be slow and cyclical, and extend beyond mere human-to-human interaction. Havea draws on examples of indigenous conservation practices as a negotiated space between people and plant-life. The *vā* is not there independent of the people; rather it is set by the people, but not the people as independent agents but always people in relation. This relationality extends beyond the people that are involved, to include the surroundings, animal and plant lives, into a cosmological dimension (Havea 2023, 86). In this view, ultimately everything is interrelated with everything. *Vā* is not an anthropocentric concept, but one that places the individual in relations to other individuals, other communities, other life forms and ultimately the whole cosmos. Havea writes: ‘[N]egotiated spaces are about the rebalancing of the ecological web of the household, so that the natural world can regenerate enough to sustain the household’s needs’ (Havea 2023, 90). Even when apparently nothing happens,

3 Havea 2023, 86 quoting from Tuhiwai Smith et al., 6.

these spaces are not without processes but work in different time frames. They do not serve the purpose of quick extraction and capitalist expectations but the building of equitable long-term relationships on all levels. This is why the concept of *vā* is chosen by Havea for an ecumenism that serves the Pasifika household of God—a vision of Christianity that extends to other communities and all of creation. A similar point about human and non-human interconnectedness is made by Luke Bretherton in the context of political theology and the call for an intentional formation of a common life:

As creatures, situated in various covenantal relations ... we are always already in relationship with others. Our personhood is the fruit of a social and wider ecological womb as much as a single physical one; that is, we come to be in and through others not like us, including non-human others. This means we cannot exist without some kind of common life with a plurality of human and non-human ways of being alive. (Bretherton 2019, 22)

In interreligious dialogue, the focus on long-term relationships cannot be over-emphasised. Religious actors are of interest to diplomacy as multipliers in times of conflict, but interreligious relations are no immediate response solution. They require years of trust and relationship building and work best when they have become part of a society's fabric, not introduced as part of a crisis resolution programme. Despite increasing attempts to determine and study factors for the evaluation of dialogue programmes (Abu-Nimer and Nelson 2021; Driessen 2020; United States Institute of Peace 2004), the success of interreligious initiatives remains difficult to measure because the healing and networking processes are often slow and almost impossible to single out. Introducing factors for making dialogue success measurable and quantifiable can do more harm than good, because once a quantitative approach has been adopted, the fostering of a relational space is likely to be substituted for a focus on procedures and reporting mechanisms. In the light of such functionalist approaches, Pasquale Ferrara has called for a change in perspective: for diplomats not to ask how interreligious dialogue can serve diplomacy, but how diplomacy can serve interreligious dialogue (Ferrara 2022). The idea behind this is that dialogue processes are valuable in themselves and need to be fostered long-term, continuously and without performative pressure, so that they can bear fruit when interreligious cooperation and intervention become necessary.

***Vā* and Common Ground**

Vā may be distinguished from another spatial metaphor, that of the common ground. The metaphor of the common ground as a shared space for dialogue is a key idea of the

Common Word document, which Muslim leaders addressed to a Christian audience. As Vejbjørn Horsfjord pointed out, in the Common Word process, the common ground is presented as ‘*given* rather than constructed’, as the second paragraph speaks of a basis for peace that already exists (Horsfjord 2018, 232). The metaphor of the common ground presents sameness or at least close proximity as the ideal (Horsfjord 2018, 234), proposing an ontology of two religions overlapping in their expressions of truth. Horsfjord agrees with Marianne Moyaert that the common ground can become ‘the blindspot of interreligious dialogue’ (Horsfjord 2018, 233).

While both common ground and *vā* imply a relational space, common ground implies the (possibly premature) assumption of similarity or identity, while *vā* is a negotiated space of difference and exchange, where harmony is not assumed as a given but sought through relational processes. Common ground can be seen as a safe starting point, but in interreligious dialogue sometimes the common ground may turn out to be rather shaky, as religious traditions are complex and few positions tend to be uncontested. For example, Muslims often call the Christian religion a fellow religion of the book but some Christians reject this description; for Christians, God has revealed himself primarily in Jesus, that is a person, not a book. Positing the existence of a common ground can be a way of initiating a positive interreligious conversation, especially where levels of trust are low. However, where there is an opportunity for open discussion, the exploration of difference can be more fruitful than the observation of things one has in common. The danger of the common ground metaphor is that it can be static, by framing similarity as positive and beyond questioning, as it is taken literally as the ground on which dialogue is built. Common ground shares with the boundary metaphor the mental image of religious territories, however, with the assumption of a significant extent of overlap when it comes to values in particular. The concept of *vā* is more dynamic as the space is envisaged not as a given basis, but as a living space that develops through relationality.

While common ground might appear as something that should not be questioned, negotiated space implies ongoing care and recalibration. Michael Lialiga has used *vā* in his discussion of a Samoan model of conflict resolution and prevention. He explains that in Samoa, the self is only thought of in relation to the community, especially other family members, and the space or gap that exists between them (Lialiga 2022, 222). The self as an isolated and bounded entity or ‘individual’ is not part of the cultural vocabulary (Lialiga 2022, 222). *Vā* is therefore not a mere sphere of overlap, as the common ground suggests, but a sphere of relationality. Samoan culture recognises that every action affects more than just the agent, meaning other people but also the whole world around them, animate and inanimate. What is important, according to this outlook, is not the maintenance of the individual’s boundary or autonomy, but the maintenance of the

appropriate space between those in relations, be they chief and the village, brother and sister, or human being and God. According to the Samoan philosophy, honouring the *vā* is a way of conflict prevention, because conflicts occur when sacred space and relationality between people or between humans and all other elements of the cosmos, have been violated (Ligaliga 2022, 225). In line with these considerations, good interreligious dialogue can be envisaged as honouring and maintaining a sacred space between people of different religions that reduces conflict, establishes long-term relationships and aids a deeper and organically integrated understanding of our differences and similarities.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the concept of relational space (*vā*), which Tevita Havea has used for rethinking ecumenism, can also offer a way of thinking about interreligious dialogue that is free from the language of empire. The predominant metaphor of boundary crossing shows an uncomfortable proximity to imperialist or at least individualistic language of venturing into foreign territory for making (first) contact. The metaphor of the relational space, on the other hand, is about mutual engagement in a shared space, and about relationships, not isolated agency. *Vā* can be a helpful concept for ecumenism in the Pasifika household of God, which is no longer just about Christian or even human flourishing but about the necessarily interconnected flourishing of all of God's creation. Similarly, *vā* can help to rethink the mental territory of interreligious dialogue.

Language about interreligious dialogue strongly relies on spatial language: boundaries and bridges, paths and pilgrimages, common ground, and, at least as connotations, territory, nation state, empire, centre, and periphery. While the boundary crossing metaphor is about decisive action and fearlessly pressing forward, the alternative or complementary metaphor of the relational space is more about intentional engaging and intentional disengaging. In the imagery of *vā*, the religious person does not possess a religious territory into which the initiator of the dialogue can cross. Rather, both or all parties form the negotiated space together in a cosmological network of interconnection. While boundary crossing has almost become a dead metaphor, the concept of *vā* can bring new life to the reflection on how religious people interact with each other and the world that surrounds them.

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BOOK REVIEW

UPOLU LUMĀ VAAI AND AISAKE CASIMIRA (EDS). 2024. *THE 'WHOLE OF LIFE' WAY: UNBURYING YAKATABU PHILOSOPHIES AND THEOLOGIES FOR PASIFIKA DEVELOPMENT.*

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I have been following the recent work of Pacific Theological College (PTC), now Pasifika Communities University (PCU), in this space of developing Indigenous Pacific—or Pasifika as the editors say—philosophies and theologies, and I have marvelled at the sheer determination, collective vision, and sense of mission shown. What they have undertaken is not easy work, and not work they can do alone. But they have done a superb job with this publication. This book is testament to PCU's dogged commitment to a shared, Indigenous-inspired vision, collective ethic and purpose for the region and the world.

The timeliness of this book cannot be understated. It reclaims and centres in development discourses, what Maori legal scholars Sir Eddie Durie and the late Moana Jackson have called right-relations and whakapapa—the right to live and be in good or tika and pono relations with each other and the 'whole of life', and a spiritually-based relationality. This is core to the indigeneity thesis promoted by this book.

The book recognises that the indigenous and Indigeneity are, as any socially constructed phenomena, both generative and contested. As Mohawk and Cherokee nation scholars, Alfred and Corntassel have stated, the Indigenous and Indigeneity are things that are 'constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism' (2005, 597) and that notwithstanding, there is value in using these terms nonetheless as key organising concepts that can help transcend the constraints and bleak trajectories of modernity.

This sentiment aligns nicely with the wonderful chapter by Kumar and Sharma on ‘Sustainability, Climate Change and Coconuts: A Hindu Mythological Perspective’. They propose use of Dussel and colleagues’ ‘transmodernity’ theory to help situate and progress Indigeneity and Indigenous-led and defined development, which they say avoids being ahistorical or becoming trapped in what Upolu Vaai describes as ‘oneification’ (I encourage you to buy and read the book to gain an understanding of what the Reverend means by that). This chapter gifts us, in the wider Pacific, access to the richness of Hindu myths about the coconut and I am struck by how similar their whole of life themes are to those of Pasifika cultures.

Kumar and Sharma’s illuminating chapter, when read alongside all of the other chapters within this text, show us, in nuanced and analytically sophisticated ways, just how similar and different our stories and whole of life values are as Indigenous communities. Their chapter underlines the point that notwithstanding our differences there is a significant space— ‘a third space’ they suggest— for revealing what renowned Hawaiian philosopher Manulani Aluli Meyer describes in her chapter as ‘mutual emergence’. The inclusion of Kumar and Sharma’s chapter in this book, and their voice in Pacific regional and global dialogues on development and sustainability, reflects both a maturing of our regional identity politics and of our collective Pacific thinking about Pacific Indigeneity.

Before I continue, however, I should make a few disclaimers. I am not a theologian, nor am I a formally trained philosopher. Rather, I come to this review as an avid and perennial student of the Indigenous. I am fascinated by the intersections of knowledge and power in the interstices of Indigenous and social science knowledge, especially in the Pacific and in criminal justice. I therefore come to this review as a critical Indigenous social scientist who seeks to bring her Indigeneity into deliberate conversation with her social science training.

I am a child of Indigenous Samoa whose pute (umbilical cord) is buried in the ‘ele’ele (dirt, as Vaai says), of the village of Sa-o-Luafata, on this island, here in Samoa. My life journey and direction thus far seem somewhat destined to involve constant and active conversations with my ancestors. If I might add the ‘ele’ele of Sa-o-Luafata is not only where our new Miss Samoa comes from; it is also where the best Samoan cricketers are from, and it is the place of the Fatumanava legend that Tui Atua describes in his riveting tour de force through the Manu’a Solo o le Va, detailed in his chapter in this book!

For scholars and students of the Indigenous and of development, this book is indeed a treasure trove. It offers profound examples of how to conduct, research, and teach a ‘whole of life’ way where content and processes are not ‘buryable’ or unable to be unburied without good cause.

If Indigeneity, as a subject position, is both historically situated and self-determined, then this book and its take on Indigeneity is, by definition, an open-ended conversation. What excites me about this text is the intergenerational scholarly and everyday conversations and learning it can and will afford. It will be an apt resource not only for university or higher learning courses, but also for development policy and law reform boardrooms and senior management teams.

I want to touch a little on the key concepts of 'unburying' and 'vakatabu' used in the title of the book and woven throughout. I do this by way of telling a little story, one that speaks directly to their importance and to their lived pluralities, complexities, tensions, and contradictions.

Aisake Casimira helps us to understand how the book applies the concept of 'unburying' and its significance. He notes that it is something that involves the 'finding of our voices in the darkness of the night'. Vakatabu, on the other hand, is a Fijian term meaning to slow down and reflect, to take time to rejuvenate and renew. This resonates with wider Indigenous wisdoms of restraint such as the *tofa taofiofi* of the Samoans, as discussed by Vaai and alluded to by Faafetai Aiava.

The idea of Indigeneity as an open-ended conversation recognises that there are multiple interpretations, theories and lived experiences of Indigeneity. It also recognises that some Indigenous experiences and traditions have been buried, unburied, and then reburied. The question arises: which Indigenous knowledges or traditions have been unburied? Then reburied? How has this occurred, where, when and why? As I pondered these questions, I was reminded of an experience my mother shared. It involved an altercation she had with her village council of chiefs. Before I share her story though, first let me say tulou.

I say tulou to anyone from my mother's village who may feel offended by this story or my rendering of it. In saying tulou I acknowledge the sensitivities at play and wish to pay respect to those sensitivities. But I seek your indulgence to tell this story notwithstanding because to me it aptly conveys the point about unburying and vakatabu in this contemporary moment. I tell my mother's story with her consent.

As I said, the story is about my mother's altercation with her village council of chiefs. This occurred after she disclosed certain information, she believed was right, during a land and titles court hearing about the origins of one of the paramount chiefs in her village. The issue arose because when she was asked by the Land and Titles Court judge whether the paramount chief in question *was of* the village, she said he *was not*. She explained that according to her family mau or oral history of their village constitution, the title had come to our village from outside. It was a gift from another village, the village of an in-law, whose family had bestowed the title on the recipient, and he had brought it

with him to our village, the village of his father. This originating ancestor was bestowed this foreign title in recognition of his long and self-less service to his wife's family. This disclosure unsurprisingly provoked some unhappy reactions, to say the least, amongst some of the villagers present in the courtroom. When the hearing was over, my mother was summoned before the village council. The words of their exchange as told to me by my mother have stuck with me.

In reprimanding her, the village council said: 'O oe o le teine o le nuu, ua e toe laga upu ua uma ona tanu' (You are a daughter of the village, why have you unburied that which has been buried?). To which she responded: 'O a mea ua tanu, ae aisea ua tanu ai?' (What has been buried? And why has it been buried?). My mother is now older than most, if not all, of the chiefs who currently sit in this village council.

If you know my mother, you will know that she does not shy away from provocations. She remains adamant that justice here required engaging in the act of 'unburying'. The council did not answer her questions about burying or unburying. Rather they left them hanging and imposed on her a hefty fine instead.

Her case of unburying family knowledge impacts village knowledge and nuances claims about the plurality, definitional parameters, and contestability of family knowledge, of village knowledge, traditional knowledge, Indigenous knowledge. And it raises so many other questions about right story and wrong story, stories of the peopling and settling of lands or villages, about Indigeneity and development, law and order, discipline and punish, knowledge and power, justice and restoration, and so on and so forth.

While unburying can reveal continuing colonialities and injustices, it can also, however, retraumatise and cause disharmony. Within this call to unbury, there is always present, a call for pause and reflection and for a search for the wisdoms of peace and harmony—of vakatabu.

For younger generations, our stories—those captured in this book and many more—are vehicles to help us/them make sense of ourselves/themselves and of our/their responsibilities to the whole of life. Understanding and engaging in vakatabu philosophies, and bringing them into conversation with other philosophical, theological and theoretical paradigms, offer rich opportunities for a much-needed 'authentic intercultural and intergenerational dialogue'.

I thank the editors and authors of this amazing treasure trove for this gift of service and love. The scholastic rigour of the deconstruction narratives contained within and the mana, alofa, and respect each author imbued into their storytelling is special and will live across generations.

There is legacy and hope in this work. The kind of legacy and hope that lies in the words of one of my favourite Albert Wendt poems:

I carry willingly the heritage of my Dead
my children have yet to recognise theirs.
Someday before they leave our house
Forever, I'll tell them: "Our Dead
are the splendid robes our souls wear" (2014, 354)

My final words in this review are words of dedication and hope: hope for the kind of authentic regenerative mutual intergenerational conversations this book will inspire. I dedicate this review to my maternal Aunt who passed away recently in Masterton, Aotearoa New Zealand. This book encapsulates all that she stood for. She was a second mother to me and instilled in me a love for all things Indigenous. She would have loved this book.

She was a fierce teine o le 'ele'ele, tama'ita'i o le nuu, daughter of Sa-o-Luafata, that is, the village and families of Luafata. To me she epitomised the mana of Sa-o-Luafata's traditional nuu o tamaita'i, its traditional council of the daughters of the village.

Unburying and restoring the traditional power of our nuu o tamaitai are things she would have loved to have seen done in her lifetime. However, it was not meant to be, nor will it be in my lifetime, but maybe in the lifetimes of my daughter or her daughter.

My Aunt's name is Na-o-upu (meaning 'only words'). The long version is Na-o-upu-ae-le-alolofa (only words but there is no love). There is a story and message in her name, one that is present in all of the stories of this wonderful book.

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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 the 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 mind-set 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 meets international standards of academic quality assurance yet is 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 was 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 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.

