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Re-imagining the dialogic spaces of talanoa through Samoan onto-epistemology

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Abstract

This article proposes a Samoan Indigenous philosophical position to reconceptualise the dialogic spaces of talanoa; particularly how talanoa is applied methodologically to research practice. Talanoa within New Zealand Pacific research scholarship is problematised, raising particular tensions of the universal and humanistic ideologies that are entrenched within institutional ethics and research protocols. The dialogic relational space, which is embedded throughout talanoa methodology, is called into question, evoking alternative ways of knowing and being within the talanoa research assemblage¹ (including the material-world). Samoan epistemology reveals that nature is constituted within personhood (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017) and that nature is co-agentic with human in an ecology of knowing. We call for a shift in thinking material-ethics that opens talanoa to a materialist process ontology, where knowledge generation emerges through human and non-human encounters.

Keywords

Talanoa; Indigenous philosophy; materiality; Pacific methodology; onto-epistemology

Introduction

Growing up as Samoans, *talanoa* has always been an integral part of our being. As young children we were accustomed to hearing our grandparents, aunties and uncles use this method as a way to discuss family matters (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020; Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). As we became older, we have been active participants in *talanoa* sessions, both within cultural contexts and the research process. This practice is entrenched in our way of being and is premised on intergenerational ethical understanding. Through the wisdom of generations before us, we have been able to understand the ethical nature of *talanoa*. However, it was not until we wrote this paper, that we have been able to dissect, interrogate and question



the nature of *talanoa* beyond humanistic dialogical practice. Through the perspectives of two Samoan academic/researchers, the Samoan onto-epistemological properties of *talanoa* will be explored.

Contextualising *talanoa*: What does the research tell us?

Tongan scholar Timote Vaoleti (2006, 2014) has methodologically grounded *talanoa* as a phenomenological Pacific research framework that affirms Pacific thinking, language and culture. Phenomenology traces back to the early twentieth century and has been taken up by philosophers, Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger and others (Heidegger, 1962). Essentially, phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience, particularly the structures of consciousness and the subjective nature of interpretation. In relation to *talanoa*, phenomenology is open to cultural experiences and interpretations of meanings and co-construction. Today, *talanoa* is a widely accepted framework frequently used globally when researching within Pacific contexts (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Halapua, 2007; Latu, 2009; Otsuka, 2005; Prescott, 2008; Vaoleti, 2003). The purpose of *talanoa* is not to discover or own stories, but co-construct meanings through conversation (Clandinin et al., 2006, cited in Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017). Usually, *talanoa* is spoken face-to-face as a co-constructed method of research which encourages authenticity, transparency and cultural appropriateness in the research process (Enari, 2021; Enari & Faleolo, 2020; Suaalii-Sauni et al., 2012). *Talanoa* accomplishes this by ensuring an encouraging environment for mutual understanding at a more personal and culturally appropriate manner that would not otherwise occur through structured formal interviewing (Carr, 1994), and recognises the needs and concerns of the participants, inclusive of cultural identity (Faleolo, 2013, cited in Dunlop-Bennett, 2019). The complexity of *talanoa* lies within its emergent yet culturally appropriate condition(s) for co-creation of knowledge. *Talanoa*, as explained by Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012), has the potential for emergent and different ways of thinking with Indigenous knowledge systems. *Talanoa* is a relational methodology and is considerate of the intricate Pacific intersubjectivities conceived and reconceived in the social space, which draws connections deeply embedded within Pacific oratory histories (Vaoleti, 2006). Trust within the practice of *talanoa* creates capacity for the sharing of feelings, inner stories, and experiences that speak to our hearts and mind (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012).

The burgeoning engagement in *talanoa* methodology across different research disciplines has evolved alongside other Pacific research methodologies, such as Fonofale, Tivaevae and Kakala (Tunufa'i, 2016). Like other Pacific methodologies, *talanoa* for Pacific peoples situates within the decolonising movement in academia: to confront Eurocentric research agendas that marginalise Indigenous epistemology and ontology (Smith, 1999). *Talanoa* deconstructed from a Tongan perspective means *tala* (talk) and *noa* (about nothing specific or anything) (Vaoleti, 2006). There are two presuppositions that feature in this interpretation of *talanoa*: one is a dialogic feature and the other suggests an openness to co-create knowledge as a relational praxis. The aim of this article is not to present a linguistic deconstructivist approach to conceptualising *talanoa*. Instead, we wish to focus on its emergent and dynamic conditions. Through a materialist ontology, *talanoa* can generate new understandings of Pacific personhood and subjectivity (Matapo, 2021a). In this article, we attempt to delineate the presence of the human subject over matter, or human above other-than-human affirming of a co-existence with world (as material), including an openness to the forces and flows of subjectivity.

Decentring a Eurocentric humanist position in Pacific research: What does this mean for *talanoa*?

For too long, Indigenous peoples, Indigenous ontology and epistemology have been othered through Eurocentric colonising regimes (Chao & Enari, forthcoming; Smith, 1999; 2012) which negate a negative ontology of difference in association with dialectic philosophy. The separation of interiority and exteriority as a metaphysical condition of internal relations (in thinking and reason) between human

experience and empirical reality date back to early Greek philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Existential claims of universal humanist ideology position a hierarchy that differentiates human as a superior species, thus human life in accordance to this order should be privileged above non-human other. Re-imagining the human subject as embodied and embedded rather than a universalised subject position challenges dominant views of humanist ideology. The notion of the ‘human subject’ is value-laden, historically situated in the ‘great chain of being’ and anchored in Eurocentric patriarchal structures (Braidotti, 2013). This particular human-subject is a western view that supports a particular hierarchical order: God and subsequently human, sentient beings, plants and then non-living entities (Matapo, 2021b). The transcendence of the human subject position influences the role of humans as interpreter and observer, that submits judgement of a perspective that sits outside complex mutations of difference in ongoing life. This dualism of relations positions the human-subject as transcendental given the separation between human and God as superior. The dichotomy of human and other privileges human capacities of power (especially capacity to reason) over non-human.

The human subject as a universal concept prescribes a specific subjectivity, one that is ontologically located with man’s capacity to think rationally, which leaves other-than-human estranged from the rational man. The dominant position of the human subject is problematised by Indigenous scholars Mika, (2017), and Thaman (1993), who have argued its exclusion of the racialised and gendered ‘others’. Precolonial Pacific Indigenous thinking has never been anthropocentric and from this frame, the human-subject has only ever co-existed in a shared cosmogony with the natural world, constituted in spirit-body-knowing-becoming. This worlded ontology, grounded in experience is shared in agentic and affirming forces that generate interconnection with world (human and non-human) towards a worlded-being-knowing. There is an interdependence between species: the $v\vec{a}^2$ that is shared in interactive ecologies that are expressive and process oriented. This interdependence produces intersubjectivity for both human and non-human (Bignall & Rigney, 2019). This ontology (co-existing) brings the privileging of humanistic ideals and philosophy into question.

There are various sense-languages for Pacific-Indigenous thought; these are embodied and material. Cultural and ceremonial events are common contexts for Pacific arts exchange, an interaction between bodies of history, story, and material in social spaces: from the woven pandanis leaves, the *siapo*³ printed on bark-cloth, the carved deity, the stitching of the *tivaevae*⁴, the *tatau* etched in skin to the dance of the *taualuga*⁵ (Enari & Taula, forthcoming; Lemusuifeauaali’i & Enari, 2021). Each Pacific arts practice carries Indigenous thought, not only in the act or event of arts practice itself, but also in the making process (which is usually a collective practice). Pacific arts, unlike textualised language, express Indigenous thought in an embodied way, where concepts are danced through the fingers and arms, from the movement of the head to gliding feet across the floor. These modes of expression are Pacific languages, communicating stories, genealogy, culture and knowledge. As Samoan scholars, we have engaged in our own *talanoa* to reconceptualise the concept of *talanoa* as it has been presented in scholarship as co-constructive, socio-cultural, dialogic, phenomenological and nuanced. We have asked and reflected on the following questions.

- What seems to be missing from the scholarship of *talanoa*?
- What voice is not presented as part of the *talanoa* assemblage?
- How is the social humanistic sphere within *talanoa* privileged?
- How can *talanoa* as performative (inclusive of materiality) shift to affirming difference in knowing, as opposed to the centrality of linguistic textualised representations in knowing?

Another voice of *talanoa*: Materiality and Pacific conceptualisations of personhood

Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2017) advocate for Indigenous Pacific conceptualisations of personhood in working with and against the impact of colonisation. These Pacific authors weave together notions of ‘human being’ or being human in a Pacific Indigenous context that requires *liuliu*, a deconstruction of personhood. The process of decolonising requires wisdom (*tōfā saili*), which is embodied in the Samoan concepts of *liuliu*-unthinking or deconstruction, *liuliu*-rethinking and reconstruction (*toe liuliu*) return (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). In this regard, all three phases of *liuliu* bring about change and as Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2017) suggest, leads to action driven by transformation. The three phases of *liuliu* are cyclic and occur simultaneously in the decolonising of deeply rooted colonial knowledge systems that have been both internalised and externalised by Pacific peoples.

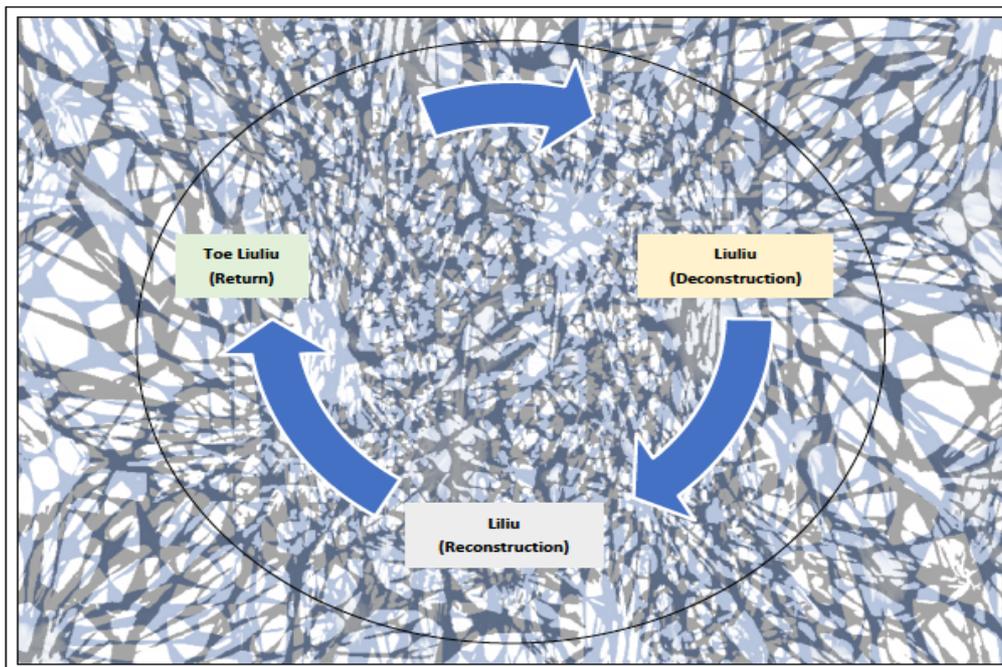


Figure 1. The *liuliu* as a continual process is fluid, reaching for *tōfā loloto* (Samoan deep wisdom). Adapted from Vaai and Nabobo-Baba (2017, p. 10) and Matapo (2021a, p. 99). *Talanoa* within *liuliu* as a constellation of networks, human and non-human relations (Matapo, 2021a).

Adding to this processual cycle, the materialist presence in thought generation could also be considered. Not only as a condition of critique of the ‘externalised’ colonial impact upon Pacific peoples, but also as virtual realm or *vā* (space) that breaks down the dichotomous boundaries of outside versus inside (Matapo, 2021a). The processual movement of thought is affected by materiality of world and the openness to thought outside of a-priori constructs. In this regard, *liuliu* becomes part of the bodied assemblage relevant to all three phases to provide new and emerging insights for ethically embedded and responsible action.

Liuliu, as part of this exploration of human subjectivity, is inclusive of all phases of life, including death and the spiritual forces and flows which bring connection to past and present. The spiritual phases of death and dying are acknowledged as celebration and mourning woven into the fabric of humanity. From a Samoan view, the spiritual gives rise to meanings, thoughts and compassion through acts of love—expression of *alofa*⁶ that nurture both life and the genesis of ideas. Spiritual knowing offers insight to what is both within us and beyond, outside the constraints of mortality (Enari & Rangiwai, forthcoming; Tui Atua, 2017). Pacific peoples’ epistemologies and lived realities are based on both

corporeal and incorporeal relationships with their ancestors, their god/s and their spiritual world (Vaiotele, 2011).

Talanoa and Samoan cosmogony: More than a social humanistic sphere

Connections to Pacific episteme are evident in Samoan accounts of creation. The co-evolution of human-becoming-matter tie the human in a biological and physiological relation with the natural world including the genesis of human life through bacteria (Tui Atua, 2014). Through *gagana*⁷ Samoa, specific parts of the body are named in relation to creation of human life and co-evolution as explained by Tui Atua (2014):

Man is God-descended and there are genealogical links between the sun, the moon, the seas, the rocks the earth ... earth and all living organisms, including human, originated from a 'big bang', the tumultuous separation of Lagi (heaven) and Papa (rock). ... Following the separation ... God Tagaloa sent his messenger Tuli (plover) to papa to help create plants and trees. Tuli is also attributed with discovering and germinating the lands of Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. Tuli on Tagaloa's instructions, then designated the human form from ilo (bacteria that became maggots). Samoans named the ankle *tuli vae* and the elbow *tuli lima* in recognition of the work of Tuli. (p. 16)

At a molecular level, Tuli generates new life-formations from the very DNA⁸ of bacteria-maggot-bodied-semblage, thus human corporeal life comes into being in a co-existing ecology of relations. The material world is evident in Samoan episteme and subjectivity which generates alternative ways of conceptualising knowledge not only as a humanist privilege or capacity. Samoan *fagogo*⁹ has a non-human-centred element and presents other ways of knowing and relating in the world. *Fagogo* is not only a dialogical practice among humans but also inclusive of communication between man and their environment (Matapo, 2021a). With this proposition, *talanoa* may engage human and non-human others in co-creative encounters, coming together in ways of being and knowing. Our ancient practices were not divided between human and non-human. There is nothing wrong with talking to the fish, the birds and the skies. Since European colonisation, our dialogic practices have become more human-centred.

Crocombe (1976, cited in Vaiotele, 2011) believes Pacific world views share many similarities to a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is premised on the belief that knowledge is constructed as opposed to discovered (Crotty, 1998) and can be influenced by both environmental and social factors. This epistemological standpoint has an emphasis on viewing the world as contextual, as opposed to a universal law of truth (Willis, 2007, cited in Wilson, 2017). The ability to acknowledge multiple truths and co-construct knowledge aligns with the Pacific way of knowledge construction (Wilson, 2017). *Talanoa* based upon this premise suggests that only humans have the capacity to reason, to construct and co-construct knowledge. The material world in this Samoan creation story is a very real actor in terms of generating life, knowledge and intersubjectivity. Ancient Indigenous practice engaged conversation between human and non-human worlds. Through early missionary education across the Pacific, this ontological position changed. Samoan intersubjectivity with the material world suggests there are other ways of knowing and co-existing in the world.

Materiality of the *talanoa* process

Cultural practices of *talanoa* engage with specific artefacts as part of the experience; for instance, in traditional Samoan *talanoa* the *fala* you sit on and the *ie lavalava* you wear. You create a space so the *talanoa* can emerge. Material aspects contribute to the *talanoa* as environmental actors are also present. *Talanoa* is inclusive of both human and non-human factors. In order to effectively draw upon both factors we must decentre Eurocentric humanist perspectives, particularly how Samoan Indigenous

knowledge opens up different modes of relation in and with world (material and human). The digital *vā*, for instance, engages technology in ways that support intersubjectivity of Pacific peoples, to express, create and innovate culturally relational spaces. At the heart of digital *vā* is materiality, technology as part of the *vā* assemblage. A materialist presence in thought generation could also be considered not only as a condition of critique of the ‘externalised’ colonial impact upon Pacific peoples, but also as a virtual realm or *vā* (space) that breaks down the dichotomous boundaries of outside versus inside (Matapo, 2021a). The processual movement of thought that is affected by the materiality of world and the openness to thought outside of a-priori constructs (Matapo, 2021a). In this regard, *liuliu* becomes part of the bodied assemblage relevant to all three phases to provide new and emerging insights for ethically embedded and responsible action.

By including a materialist ontology, we join other philosophers, such as Karen Barad (2003), who also confront the power of language in all its variations in philosophy and theorisation. Barad (2003) questions the place of matter in or the absence of matter in thinking that continues to privilege language signification over materiality. She puts it bluntly: “Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (Barad, 2003, p. 801). The argument raised by Barad (2003) could be more specific to the constraints of European language, which stems from its own traditions and etymology. The position of matter, as argued by Barad (2003), contests the power of language as representational: a separation between interiority and exteriority. We would also argue that for Pacific Indigenous thought, language as experience in and with world is deeply rooted in-material, whereby matter does matter, as *knowing and being*, in and with world and is inextricably linked to all modes of Pacific Indigenous language-expression.

Reimagining ethical encounters of *talanoa*

Pasifika scholars have argued that credible knowledge is that which is exercised in wisdom, which in turn brings collective affirmation and belonging (Mara, 2013; Matapo, 2018a; Samu, 2010). Through this, we challenge the dualism of mind and body separation which is a paradigm of the west. *Talanoa* is not a generic or a universalised Pacific concept, and therefore, we need to understand the ethnic specific ties to ontology and history of knowledge production at local levels, including the ways in which the material world is constituted in Pacific personhood.

When Samoans engage in *talanoa*, the environment is a co-creator of the *talanoa* process and provides the conditions (*noa*) for relational ontologies in knowledge sharing and knowledge generation. We share this poem, that speaks to the capacity of the conch shell call as a Samoan Indigenous non-human voice.

Ili le pū – Hear the call of the conch

Deep is the sound, felt in your body
 Hear the call, sensations under your skin
 Stirring movement in knowing self
 Calling upon ancestors, gods, spirit, time and space
 Knowing does not belong to you alone

Deep in the earth, the call vibrates
 Felt under the feet of those before.
 Fanua with its own life forces and flows
 Regenerates new life with old.
 Knowledge has constraints, unlike the wisdom of fanua

Deep is the breath you take to blow.
The winds around you, share in your breath
To fill your lungs, give life to your blood and brain
Breathe in your knowing, breathe out your wisdom
Generate understanding

Deep are the waters of Oceania
Ili le pū, another voice calls
Waves of unrest, spirit unsettled
Our Oceania is dying, listen to the call
Knowledge has constraints, Oceania speaks
Knowing does not belong to you alone
(Matapo, 2018b)

Storying Samoan engagement in a virtual *talanoa*

When we partake in virtual *talanoa*, we open our homes. Its physicality becomes part of the assemblage and is an aspect that helps constitute the *talanoa* (Enari & Matapo, 2020). Ethically, we need to be open to difference and how the environment shapes virtual *talanoa*, along with the autonomy of technology; for example, glitching and the nuances generated within the technological interaction. *Talanoa* is not about habitual conversation: it is a deep philosophical practice. The added layer of virtual *talanoa* extends its capacity to be transnational. Through technology, *talanoa*'s intergenerational and location reach is extended. As an added form of materiality, the virtual technology becomes a part of the constellation of networks.

During the process of writing this article, both authors engaged in the digital *vā* to negotiate and generate cultural and novel ways to think and reconstruct *talanoa* as a material co-agentic partner within *talanoa*. We share an excerpt of storying that emerged through our virtual engagement in *talanoa*.

Dion: When Samoans engage in *talanoa*, they dress respectfully not only for the person they are speaking with but also the *mamalu* (prestige) of the physical environment. For example, one shows dignity for the *maota fono* (meeting house) they are gathered upon by the removal of their shoes, hats and wearing a *lavalava*.

Jacoba: Physical power is also an active agent in *talanoa*. For example, the open nature of the *maota fono* and its ability to change the direction of the *talanoa*.

Dion: You may hear promptings from your environment which are important actors, such as a cold breeze which could act as a warning.

[Zoom glitches]

Jacoba: Oh my gosh, is the material virtual interference trying to tell us something?

[Laughter]

Dion: The non-human glitching our *talanoa*.

[Laughter as faces freeze a second time]

Conclusion

We need to not only acknowledge the Indigenous practice of *talanoa*, but also generate new ways upon which it is practised. The phenomenological nature of *talanoa* means it is constrained as a human centred practice. If we open ourselves within the relational sphere of *talanoa* to include the non-human material

environment, we may generate alternative ways of knowing that is not selfishly humanistic. For *talanoa* to engage Samoan episteme, reconfiguring dialogical practice must be inclusive of all material actors, the environment, natural world, all constituents that make up being in and with world. As researchers, we must not merely acknowledge environmental factors as passive or inert. Instead, we must incorporate them in *talanoa* as powerful actors. Such measures not only establish a connection of relationship but also of philosophy. Through such actions, the practice of *talanoa* will shift beyond human dialogic praxis, where the *mana*, life-force and knowledge of non-human entities can thrive.

Talanoa connects.

Talanoa is not merely open ended, diversity ticking, tokenistic interviewing.
 She is my connection to earth mother and sky father.
 She is my connection to their offspring
 She is my connection to the spiritual realm and all its glory
 She is mine, theirs, ours
 (Enari, 2021)

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Notes

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- ¹ The concept of assemblage developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refers to a process of temporary arrangements or constellations of objects, expressions, bodies, qualities and territories that create new ways of functioning. The assemblage is a multiplicity shaped by a wide range of flows and emerges from the arranging process of heterogenous elements (Livesey, 2010).
- ² *Vā* is the space that brings together and the space between relations of entities (Wendt, 1999). Within the social context, *vā* generates connection between peoples and is open to the spatial and temporal contexts of relations.
- ³ *Siapo* or *Tapa* cloth—A handmade cloth sourced from the paper mulberry tree, usually printed with cultural motifs and designs.
- ⁴ Cook Islands traditional quilt—Unique to each district and family (gifted during significant life milestones).
- ⁵ *Taualuga*—Traditional Samoan dance, usually lead by the chief’s daughter. The apex of dance performance.
- ⁶ Samoan word for love.
- ⁷ Samoan language.
- ⁸ Double helix molecule compound that encompasses genetic instruction for development.
- ⁹ *Fagogo* in Samoan Indigenous education are cultural allegories that carry Indigenous knowledge, and ways of knowing the natural world.