

## Emerging Indigenous Theologies in Oceania

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Indigenous people are people of a particular place who understand themselves as the first people of that place and who live in the face of newer and in some cases dominant cultures. Māori scholar Henare Tate describes indigenous theology in Anselmian terms as 'indigenous faith seeking indigenous understanding.'<sup>1</sup> In the Pacific Islands the term 'indigenous' is understood as 'traditional', and 'contextual' theology is the preferred term. This is possible because in the Islands the vast majority of people are indigenous. By contrast indigenous people comprise 15 percent of the total population of New Zealand, and 2 percent in Australia.<sup>2</sup> Whether termed indigenous or contextual, the theology referred to here as 'indigenous' emerges out of the culture, history, and experience of indigenous peoples in the twenty-five nations, states, and territories of the Oceania region.<sup>3</sup>

Oceania, sometimes referred to as the 'liquid continent' or a 'sea of islands' comprises almost one third of the earth's surface. Boundaries are somewhat porous in that geographically Oceania covers what is commonly known as the Pacific Ocean from the islands of Micronesia and Hawai'i in the north to Aotearoa New Zealand in the south; however, in referring to indigenous people of Oceania, it includes not only the island people of the Pacific, but also indigenous people in Australia. Often the indigenous people of West Papua are included also due to their ethnic ties with populations in Papua New Guinea.

Eveli Hau'ofa notes that though many of the islands may seem just little dots on the ocean, smallness is really just a state of mind, for if one looks at the myths, oral traditions, and cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania it becomes apparent that they did not conceive of their world in microscopic proportions. Their universe comprises not only land surfaces, but also the surrounding ocean as far as they can traverse and use it and the stars and constellations that help guide them across the seas.<sup>4</sup>

Traditional religions were faced with the introduction of Christianity during the colonial period beginning in fifteenth century CE. Spanish Catholicism was brought to the Western Pacific Islands and British and

American Protestantism predominated in the South and East. Churches gained independence, starting with Tonga, then other islands from the 1930s to the 1960s, as countries became politically independent.

Oceania is home to almost one thousand distinct languages or about a quarter of the world's languages, so one must be careful not to generalize across an area of great cultural, social, and historical diversity. Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and parts of Hawai'i stand apart as modernized, largely urbanized societies in contrast to the predominantly village-based lives of people in other parts of the region. Because of this range of situations, reference will be made to trends in theology emerging from various places within Oceania.

Throughout Oceania indigenous expression is often oral or appears in the form of dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, tattoo, or carving. While acknowledging the breadth of expression, the medium employed in this essay limits it to written texts, the majority having been presented in European languages.

### I. Life as a hermeneutical key

Theologies worldwide have developed different approaches to interpret their context. Classical Western theology most often employs rational discourse based on revealed truth. In recent times in various places, people engage theologically in interpreting their context from the perspective of liberation, inculturation, or the religiosity of the poor. While benefiting from these developments, indigenous theologies in Oceania have identified 'life' as their own distinctive key to meaning. This concept can have a range of meanings: from the cosmic concept of life as found in primal religions, to the struggle for life in the urban and semi-urban settlements of the region. The search for the maintenance and the celebration of life are present behind almost all efforts to do indigenous theology in Oceania. Indigenous theologies reflect the interrelatedness of natural life and human experience, along with earth, water, sky, and the underworld. In Australia, the 'Dreamtime' still co-penetrates the present as the life force released during the primordial creation. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori experience life when there are right relations between *Atua* (God), *whenua* (land) and *tangata* (people). The common Māori greeting *Kia ora* means 'may you have life.' Papua New Guineans view prosperity and harmonious relationships in community as *gutpela sindaun* – an expression sometimes glossed as 'salvation.' The concept of life is also significant when people confront situations of violence and death in the light of faith. Women in many parts of Oceania identify as

the bearers of new life but can no longer bear being victims in a system of authority that legitimizes domestic violence. Theirs is a prophetic option for life in the face of unjust structures.

With life as a hermeneutical key it is understandable that indigenous theology in Oceania considers life-experience as a significant locus for theology. The ethos of the Melanesian Brotherhood – a male Anglican religious community – is to live the religious life in a Melanesian, indigenous way both in their faith and their collective lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> The Brothers are highly respected throughout the region and during a period of ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands they camped between enemy lines, investigated the deaths of those missing, and dug up bodies so they could be identified and their remains returned. In 2003 seven Brothers were murdered while on a peace mission to the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. The Brothers continued to facilitate an end to the conflict and eventually the murderers surrendered, laying down their arms. The Brothers serve as men immersed in Melanesian culture yet with spiritual authority that gives them a role as indigenous peacemakers communicating the message through their lives and symbolic action. For example, those returning guns to the Melanesian Brotherhood washed their hands in blessed ‘holy water’ first, and then returned guns were exorcised and prayed over before being destroyed.

The following three sections will illustrate various ways in which Life provides a locus for emerging theologies in Oceania.

#### (a) *Social integration and conflict*

Christian Churches are closely integrated with social and political life in the island nations of Oceania.<sup>6</sup> Religious narrative is common in political discourse.<sup>7</sup> Informal links are made official in some cases, such as the explicit reference to Christian principles in the Papua New Guinea Constitution. Leaders took advantage of political independence as a chance for new beginnings for people’s ecclesial identity. Independent Churches in independent countries stimulated fresh thinking, including theological reflection.<sup>8</sup> Theology came to be seen as the local interpretation of the universal gospel, and there were calls for a ‘Melanesian Christ’ who would ensure a harmonious and prosperous life for the new nations.

Unfortunately, ethnic tension developed in a number of places, including New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea. Fiji has experienced several military coups, in which the Churches have played a significant part. The worst outcome was in Bougainville where over 10,000 people died in a civil war during the 1990s. Unsure of how the killing

would end, mothers in Bougainville found some comfort in reflecting back to Mary’s experience at the foot of the cross. There is no shortage of theological interpretations of the events. Some in Bougainville interpret the tragedy as punishment from God. Revolutionary leaders were influenced by indigenous religious movements, notably *Mekamui* (sacred land). People are now rebuilding their lives, but the violence and death are difficult to forget. Bougainville priest Louis Lobosi writes, ‘Who is Christ behind this message for Bougainville today? Christ is the crucified Christ who has suffered much in people’s lives, but is now risen in glory and is alive in people’s commitment to peace and unity’.<sup>9</sup>

#### (b) *Environmental concerns and eco-theology*

The Pacific Basin is the only area of the world that has experienced the deadly combination of nuclear attack, prolonged nuclear testing, plutonium shipments, radioactive waste disposal, and uranium mining. Nuclear testing in the Pacific provoked intense debate throughout Oceania, which contributed to a heightened sense of the value of life in the environment throughout the region, and reflection on the sacred quality of land and sea. The latter is well illustrated in Winston Halapua’s book *Waves of God’s Embrace*.<sup>10</sup> The oceans of the world are all interconnected, so the *moana* (ocean) acts as a metaphor for life in relationship and the world encompassing interconnecting nature of God.

In recent times people have experienced malaria spreading to cooler mountainous areas where previously it was unknown. Some island people on low-lying atolls have to migrate to islands with higher ground as rising seawaters inundate their homes. Such experiences contribute to a growing concern for climate change and developments in eco-theology. Environmental changes signal a threat to life, and there is a call for conversion so that Christianity will recognize the sacredness of land and sea respected in ancient traditions. The earth belongs to God, so people should exercise stewardship, nurturing the earth, not destroying it. Another image is that of nature as a mother to be respected rather than ‘raped’. In terms of global warming, it is also a cry for justice.

Throughout Oceania there is a general sense among indigenous people that they do not own the land; rather the land ‘owns’ them. Iaitia Sevati Tuwere has developed a theological understanding of land (*vanua*) in Fiji as a source of life.<sup>11</sup> In Fiji as in many Pacific languages, the word for land is identical with the word for womb, eg. *fanua* (Samoa), *fonua* (Tongan), *fenua* (Tahiti).

Indigenous Australian Anne Pattel-Gray says that the Aboriginal people's love for the land is the same love that white persons would have for their mother.<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal elders make their credal statement of divine presence and transcendence as follows: 'We believe that the land is alive with the spiritual presence of the Creator Spirit; the land is an extension of the Creator Spirit and filled with life-giving power. We belong to the land as we belong to the Creator Spirit.'<sup>13</sup>

### (c) Globalization and its effects

For developing nations and minorities in developed nations, the importing of cultural standards, practice, and institutions from elsewhere often amounts to a form of re-colonization. Local scholars question the neo-liberal agenda with tax exemption zones allowing unrestricted transfer of profits overseas while at the same time slum-like urban settlements expand. The mission Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, were global institutions. Their 'development' work and educational institutions, with the goal of assisting people to achieve a different standard of living, have played an essential part in paving the way for current developments. At the same time Churches have acted as a stabilizing force for ruling elites. Observers such as Peter Berger have noted how Christianity, particularly in its Pentecostal form, is the most popular movement serving as a vehicle of cultural globalization.<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of these developments local theologians are attempting to provide a social and theological response to suffering and death. Globalization comes from outside, whereas HIV and AIDS appear as a threat to life arising from within. Bishop Finau of Tonga notes that, 'Many patients die of loneliness before they die of AIDS. From a moral point of view, AIDS does not need to be all bad news; through its challenge, it has the potential to make us all better human beings.'<sup>15</sup> One might expect a healthy approach to sexuality linked to teaching on the incarnation. Yet, in dealing with a topic such as HIV and AIDS, indigenous theologians in the Pacific and Melanesia have to contend with the violence of silence and of critical hierarchical and patriarchal values that are part of many Pacific cultures.

## II. Theological Process

Initial attempts at adaptation of the gospel to cultural realities have given way to methods of correlation whereby cultural parallels are used to interpret scriptural and theological concepts. A lot of theological effort has gone into questions such as, 'What if Jesus had grown up as a Pacific Islander?'

One finds this type of question being addressed in theses written in many of the theological colleges in the Oceania region. Following this line of thought, we see the emergence of 'Coconut' theology (Tonga), Maneaba (community house) theology (Kiribati), and Digeridoo [indigenous musical instrument] theology (Northern Australia). In Papua New Guinea the symbol of the 'Pig of God' may be substituted for the lamb.<sup>16</sup> This method of using cultural symbols as metaphors to explain major theological concepts is perceived as a liberation of Oceanic theology from Western theology and Western culture.

When sustained with local exegesis the 'What if' process provides an opportunity for creativity based on life experience. When done poorly it amounts to substituting a symbol for revelation. The process is subject to criticism from some indigenous theologians who suspect that the cultural context is idealized and question whether it might be more fruitful to try to understand why Jesus was a Jew in the first place.<sup>17</sup> By locating the theological locus in the cultural context, one can devote a great deal of effort to developing the theological value of various cultural traits, but possibly at the expense of the historical dimension of revelation.

Some indigenous theologians, realizing the need for a solid foundational theology, are seeking to go beyond the work of non-indigenous anthropologists and theologians and to undertake their own analysis of culture, language, symbolic systems, and values that were part of their culture in the past and that continue to have significance in the present. Their intention is to enhance and restore significant cultural elements so as to enter the Christian mystery on their own terms.<sup>18</sup>

## III. Spirituality and theology

Much study has been done on indigenous spiritualities throughout the region. Indigenous scholars are continuing to deepen our understanding of key concepts such as aboriginal Dreaming, Māori *mana* (power) and Samoan *aitu* (spirit). Is such work pre-theological? When does the treatment of indigenous spirituality qualify as theology? Some indigenous scholars draw on the sacramental principal to focus, not on the symbol itself, but to see the Divine working within the world through symbols. For example salvation in Melanesia can be described as *gutpela sindaun*, which means fulfilment in every aspect of life, be it health, success, fertility, respect, honour, or influence over others. Ultimately it is the absence of such negative forces in life as sickness, death, defeat, infertility, or poverty. It is somewhat akin to the Old Testament idea of *shalom*. It is the evident possession of abundant life and effective living showing itself in harmonious relationships. Symbols of life

such as this can act as symbols of Divine goodness and the fitting response is thankfulness for the gift of *gutpela sindaun* or life. From an indigenous point of view it informs us about the indigenous experience of God.

A related approach to indigenous spirituality is to see it as foreshadowing that which, from a Christian point of view, has been fulfilled in Christ. In Oceania people adopt this approach when they seek continuity between their past and their current faith experience. From this perspective Aboriginal Christians are convinced that the God of the Bible was with their people in Aboriginal history and the Dreaming. Joan Hendricks refers to a 'partnership' of Christian faith and the spirituality of Aborigines.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV. Narrative Forms

Another form of indigenous theology involves telling stories about God or the Divine Mystery in their lives. The underlying logic is not faith and 'reason' but rather, faith and 'life', best expressed in narrative. The principal locus is the experience of a person or their community. Links are made with scripture or church teaching and at times people see their story as continuing the story of Jesus. This method is common in Papua New Guinea, where literacy rates are low but creative story-telling is common. Bernard Narokobi tells the story of him watching his father and mother taking their last walk in the garden before her death. He relates, 'I felt and heard the coconuts weep, cocoa trees mourn and banana trees cry. Mama was farewelling all these things. Here she was, the friend of missionaries and a supporter of the church and on her deathbed she whispers, "X (naming a person) broke my *daka* (mustard seed) and bewitched me".' Narokobi comments, 'So there she was, dying. Rightly or wrongly, in the depths of her consciousness she believed she was dying of sorcery. That came to me as a great shock, but I accepted it as part of the process of dying in Melanesia.'<sup>20</sup> Indigenous theologians continue to search for the divine presence and a spiritual meaning in life and death. Both the narrator and the listener/readers enter into the theological process as they try to understand the meaning of the story from a faith perspective.

#### V. Critical engagement with culture

Women are leading the way in a critical engagement with the Oceanic experience. WEAVERS was established in the Pacific in 1989 to promote theological education for women.<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, everyone plays a part in weaving, beginning with selecting a plant, and ending when the last woven thread

is tied away. So it is that theological weaving is beginning to show forth its shape and design.

The distinctively Pacific way WEAVERS engage in theology is shaped by the cultures that dictate women's roles in the Church and society. In that context, where women are all too often victims of violence, poverty, and other forms of injustice, women are reflecting on themes such as gender equality, empowerment of women, justice, human rights, and peace-building.

The South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS), under which the WEAVERS programme operates, has as its current theme 'Pacific Hermeneutics of Governance: Contribution to Peace-Building & Leadership.' Pacific Women's hermeneutics is characterized by lamentations and a call for justice through good governance, justice, love, peace, and unity. Women consider that such values must be more apparent in the life of the Church. Good governance in theological education and addressing gender issues in schools and churches are a priority if the Church is to act as a conscience for the wider society.

Women's contribution in prayer groups and the development of indigenous spiritualities is readily acknowledged. However, they have had to struggle for recognition in academic circles. Indigenous women are now making their unique contribution to theological reflection, among them Margaret Maladede (Papua New Guinea), Tui Cadigan (Aotearoa New Zealand), Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr and Joan Hendricks (Australia), Lisa Meo (Fiji), Keiti-Ann Kanongata'a (Tonga), and Celine Hoiore (Tahiti). Women use a 'birthing' metaphor to exemplify how Pacific women are emerging from a life of confinement in the womb to a new world of complex realities.

#### VI. Religious Movements

Religious movements and revival movements have had an influence on indigenous theologies in the past and today. Religious movements such as Pai Mārire, Hauhau, Ringatu and Rātana developed among the Maori in the late nineteenth century. Some religious movements are short lived. Others continue into the twenty-first century, often transformed into local churches and even political parties. Followers of the prophet Rātana continue to contribute an indigenous perspective on the religious and political life of New Zealand.

In recent times, religious movements have been associated with political crisis. In recent disturbances in the Solomon Islands Guadalcanal fighters wore emblems from the Moro movement, which they believed would protect them against the superior firepower of the Malaita Eagle Force. On

Bougainville, the Mekamui movement has close links with the Tomo cult, which is a mixture of Christianity and traditional forms. The term *tomo* refers to ashes, which have particular significance in a culture that practised cremation of the dead. Recently, newspapers in Papua New Guinea report the arrest of Steven Tari – a self-styled ‘Black Jesus’ – along with thirty ‘flower girls.’

In the lead-up to the year 2000, many revival movements that had been characterized by Pentecostal elements such as shaking and glossolalia took a more Apocalyptic turn, with frequent reference to the number 666 from the book of Revelation (those possessing the 666 will have access to wealth), the sinister meaning of bar-codes, and spiritual warfare. Besides addressing the question of what might happen at the end of the millennium, these apocalyptic-oriented movements provide an outlet for people struggling to deal with escalating violence and socio-economic insecurity.<sup>22</sup> From a rational, secular viewpoint the movements appear to be examples of delusion and aberrant behaviour. However, from the perspective of indigenous hermeneutics they may be perceived as the work of visionaries trying to make sense of a changing world in religious terms.

Millenarian beliefs continue to animate religious movements in the form of Christian revival movements. Whereas in religious movements traditional indigenous understandings provide the structure of belief, Christian revival movements attempt to purify their Christian lives, condemning established Churches along with traditional culture as being retrograde and idolatrous. They, in their turn, tend to reinforce traditional beliefs concerning the reality and power of the spiritual worlds they are attempting to break away from. Indigenous spirits are seen as representatives of the devil and there is a general demonization of traditional culture. Thus ritual engagement with traditional spiritual forces is preserved while giving them a different moral value.

### Conclusion: Oceania’s contribution

What does Oceania have to say to the wider world of theological reflection? First, Oceania has its own unique contribution to make to the worldwide discussion about climate change and environmental issues. Since indigenous people of Oceania are guardians of land, forests, and one third of the earth’s water, they can speak and share theological insights with a passion derived from their personal experience and close identity with the natural world.

Second, their integrated non-dualistic worldview is a welcome contribution to debates that separate the sacred and secular. Indigenous Australian

Mirian Rose Ungunmer-Bauman says that *dadirri*, or that inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness that some call contemplation, is the greatest gift that Aborigines can give to their fellow Australians.<sup>23</sup> That spirit of contemplation based in a long tradition of indigenous spirituality is a much-needed contribution in the world beyond Australia also.

Thirdly, indigenous theologies in Oceania contribute their hermeneutics of life. This shares characteristics of inductive methods emerging in other parts of the world but has distinctive features associated with its grounding in human experience different from those of other places. Christian faith has been welcomed, yet indigenous cosmic spiritualities oriented to searching for life in the face of death serve as a foundation for receiving Christian faith and tradition so as to interpret life experiences today.

### Notes

1. Henare Arekatera Tate, Towards Some Foundations of a Systematic Māori Theology. *He tirohanga anganui ki ētahi kaupapa hōhonu mō te whakapono Māori* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Melbourne College of Divinity, 2010), p. 8.
2. This paper will not make direct reference to the work of scholars such as Michael Shirres and Neil Darragh in Aotearoa New Zealand, or Geoffrey Lilliburn, Tony Kelly, and Gideon Goosein, amongst others, in Australia, since though they write about contextual and indigenous theology, they would not qualify as ‘indigenous’ according to Tate’s definition of the term.
3. See annotated bibliographies by Neil Darragh (Aotearoa New Zealand) and Clive Pearson (Australia) in John England *et al.* (eds), *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*, Vol 1, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002, pp. 541–598, 599–657.
4. Epele Hau’ofa, ‘Our Sea of Islands,’ in Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, Epele Hau’ofa (eds), *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, Suva: University of the South Pacific in association with Beake House, 1993, pp. 2–16.
5. After a period of service members are free to leave the Brotherhood and return to their villages, as the Brotherhood honours the important place of marriage and family life in the community rather than demanding lifelong celibacy.
6. Oceania is predominantly Christian. Fiji has a significant Hindu presence, and in recent times immigrants have added to the numbers professing other faiths in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. However, indigenous populations of the region are mostly Christian.
7. See Philip Gibbs, ‘The Religious Factor in Papua New Guinea Politics,’ *Catalyst* 28.1 (1998): 27–51; and ‘Political Discourse and Religious Narratives of Church and State in Papua New Guinea,’ 2005: [http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/working\\_papers/05\\_01wp\\_Gibbs.pdf](http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/working_papers/05_01wp_Gibbs.pdf).
8. Charles Forman, ‘Finding Our Own Voice: The Reinterpreting of Christianity

- by Oceanian Theologians,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 29.3 (2005), 115.
9. Louis Lobosi, 'Bougainville Crisis and the Message of Jesus,' in Philip Gibbs (ed.), *Alive in Christ. Point 30*, Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2006, p. 293.
  10. Winston Halapua, *Waves of God's Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean*, London: Canterbury Press, 2008.
  11. Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place*, Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2003.
  12. Anne Pattel-Gray, *Through Aboriginal Eyes: They Cry from the Wilderness*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991, p. 10.
  13. Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology – Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology*, Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 1997, p. 61.
  14. Peter Berger, 'The Cultural Dynamics of Globalization,' in *Many Globalizations – Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, Peter Berger and Samuel Huntington (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 8.
  15. Patelesio Finau, quoted by Steven Wete and Tevita Nawadra Baniranua, 'Editorial,' *Pacific Journal of Theology* 36 (2006), 9.
  16. Ama'amalele Tofaeono, 'Behold the Pig of God. Mystery of Christ's Sacrifice in the Context of Melanesia – Oceania,' *The Pacific Journal of Theology*, 33 (2005): 82–101.
  17. Ma'afu 'o Tu'itonga Palu, 'Pacific Theology,' *The Pacific Journal of Theology*, 28 (2002): 39.
  18. Tate, *Towards Some Foundations*, pp. 253ff.
  19. Joan Hendricks, in *A Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines and the Struggle for Justice*, Joan Hendricks and Gerry Heffernan (eds), Brisbane: JT Press, 1993, p. 80.
  20. Bernard Narokobi, 'A Truly Noble Death,' in John D'Arcy May (ed.), *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, Goroka, Melanesian Institute, 1985, p. 63.
  21. The name WEAVERS is not an acronym. It is used as a symbol recognizing weaving as an important role in Pacific women's lives.
  22. See Joel Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 113–43.
  23. Mirian Rose Ungunmer-Bauman, in *A Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines*, p. 34.