Chapter 6

Migration and Mission Routes/Roots
in Oceania

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Migration was no big deal for our ancestors, as evident in Paula Taumoepeau’s recollection: “Manatu ki he talanoa ʻemau kui ki heʻene fanga kui. ʻObovale kuo nau puli ʻo lau uike, aʻu ʻo lau māhina. Nau foki ange ʻo talanoa eʻotu motu ne nau ʻo ki ai, ʻo aʻu ki Fisi mo Haʻamo. Naʻe ʻikai ko ha meʻa labi ia kiate kinautolu” (I recall my grandfather telling about the generation of his grandparents. Some would disappear for weeks, even months. They return to tell of the islands that they visited, as far as Fiji and Samoa. That was not a big deal to them). 1 It is appropriate to open this reflection with the recollection by a native of Oceania who is named Taumoepeau (Tau-mo e-peau) in part because his name suggests someone who has “been (tau) upon waves” or who has “fought (tau) with waves.” Tau-mo e-peau is what happens when the people of Oceania migrate. Back then, migration involved getting sprayed, salted, lost, then rereading the winds, currents, and stars to find one’s path in the sea. Migration used to involve getting wet in the sea. Nowadays, people fly over the routes of migration with ease and confidence.

Metaphors of voyage and navigation continue to live in the names of people—for example, Vaka, Moana, Taari, Folau, Peletai, Galu, and so on—and in the haka (movements of the body) in our cultural dances. In some dances, the body of the dancer glides as if it was a smooth day at sea with satisfying winds and accommodating waves. In others, the body wobbles and shuffles, falls and leaps, as if the waves toss and roll one around. The body of the dancer “presses the waves”2 in some dances, but leaps and bounces around in other dances as if it is fighting the waves, Tau-mo e-peau, gasping for survival. Shifting from the rolling and tossing waves in the sea to the coconut-oiled bodies of dancing natives, the memories of sea migration live on, even if islanders now prefer to travel in vessels that zoom with engines and horizontal sails (wings).

Back then, the natives of Oceania were a people of the sea. This point has recently been made sharply in a poem by Samoan poet Aurora Epa Elisaia,
first read at a memorial service in New York (October 8, 2009) to remember the victims of the tsunami waves that hit America and Western Samoa (September 29, 2009), as well as Tonga (on the other side of the international dateline):

We are people of the sea... sons and daughters of land, sun and waves... soon we will bury our people en masse. Families lie together side by side, Never before have we done so, never more do we want to... We are resilient and strong and while breath is still in us, we will still strive forward, to rebuild again. We have always been people of the sea, but we try now to turn our backs on her; she has hurt us beyond words... for now we will comfort and be comforted, but maybe someday not so distant, we will be once more—people of the sea.³

We are a sea of people also, with diverse drifts and meanderings. Micronesians have their peculiarities, and there is nothing micro about those. Melanesians have theirs also, even though the Polynesians have over the years, and still do now and then, entered their waters and messed with their people, goods, customs, and wisdoms. The diversity between us is clear, as Isaac Dakei, general secretary of the United Church of the Solomon Islands, explained to the June 2011 General Conference of the Methodist Church of Tonga (at Nuku'alofa):

Our boats tell something about our differences. You have small boats with sails. You need wind to voyage. We have longer boats without sails because we have more people, more powerful people, to row our boats.

We are a sea people, still, but we deal with the sea differently, relying on our different environments and the ways of our diverse people. There is no one Pacific way. We have a sea of ways.

This chapter moves through three sections that circle around matters we in Oceania face when we travel and migrate, from departure to arrival, with a middle section on how we find our paths.⁴ Observations, musings, and suggestions for theological and hermeneutical reflection will be woven and mangled, drawing upon recent experiences and memories of how our ancestors used to do things.⁵ The sections are written in sequence, as demanded by this linear medium of communication, writing, but they ought to be read in juxtaposition, as if they are three waves that meet, crossing each other, at the point known as the node (I learned this English name at South Tarawa, Kiribati, from David Upp). At the node, which we Tongans call lua, the water is silky smooth on the surface. But underneath, different waves and currents pass over and under each other, leveling each other’s rise, as they move from and toward different directions. The node does not roar or spray. It is a murmuring place, absorbing each other’s disturbance. It is a place of whispers,⁶ of telling, and the overlaying of talanoa (story, telling, conversation).⁷
A closing section winds this chapter up, reflecting on the bearings of migration on Christianity in Oceania. Studies on the history and development of Christianity in Oceania—focusing on the impact of Christianity on the region and the reactions of the islanders to the Christian mission—are available, allowing the closing section to address the challenges and opportunities that Oceania poses to Christianity. What bearing (effect, direction) does a region charted by the paths of migration and peopled by migrants have for Christianity? Christian missionaries saw Oceania as a place to be settled and civilized, but under the surface (as in the case of nodes) are currents of transition, movement, and fluidity. This chapter is thus an invitation to rethink the Christian mission in response to migration and to Oceania.

**Departure Taxes**

Migration requires departure and disconnection. Shuttling and shifting is the goal. The migrant does not intend to return home. Homecoming is not on the travel-log (which was not written for our ancestors), but longing for home will always be constant and painful.

Among Polynesians, there is tremendous pride in remembering that our ancestors were migrants. We speak of their “great migration” and we carve their *vaka* (*waka, waa*, boat) on our totems and meeting houses, and recall their stories and legends to our children. Some of us even tattoo onto our bodies the waves, sails, or the fishing hooks with which we imagine our ancestors survived their voyage. In some cases, the fishing hook is the one with which Maui fished up land to be their next home. Our memories are seasoned with the saltwater sprays of migration. Our talanoa have wavy flavors.

But ask any of us where our ancestors came from, and there will be silence. A node. Maoris among us might reply, “Hawaiki!” But they would not be able to tell where this place was. The Hawai‘ians might claim the honor, appealing to the similarity between the names Hawai‘ki and Hawai‘i. Samoans too claim Hawaiki, which they say is Savai‘i (one of the three larger islands of Samoa). The name *Samoa* (*Sā* means “sacred,” *moa* means “center”) in fact suggests that it is the sacred center of the universe. 8

The Tongans might join by shifting the conversation to “Pulotu” (to where the spirits of the ancestors return) and explain that this place is where the sun sets. One of our fisherman ancestors, Kae, had been to Pulotu, and he came back to tell about it, because he left fish to mark the way (in the sea!) for his return. Pulotu exists in the Tongan story, but no Tongan can take anyone there. At this point, some Samoan might say, “Pulotu is at Falealupo, in Savai‘i!” I imagine a roar of laughter would irrupt in response. We pass the node, even before the I-Kiribati joins with their four versions of their origin—*Kai-N-Tikuaba* (tree of resting place), *Te Uea-Ni-Kai* (at Tabiteuea island), *Onotoa* (six warriors), and the story of Nareau (North Tarawa)—or link the Polynesian Pulotu to Bouru, the land of the spirits that Nakaa the net-repairer guards. Fijians too have multiple stories, even if the story of
Degei is the more popular one. The missionary Thomas Williams “sought in vain for a single ray of tradition relating to the origin of the Fijians.”

The point for me here is that the natives of Oceania are proud of being daughters and sons of migrants, but we do not know from where our roots come. We have forgotten, and that is no loss. Our roots are mythical, and we are not troubled by that. We are people of myths also, and this has to do with being people of the sea. The mythical world links with the spirit world, and those are as real as the material world.

Oral people too forget. Recently at Onotoa Island (Kiribati), I met grandchildren (in their eighties) of a Tongan adopted by an I-Kiribati couple (brought together by blackbird traders) in the late 1800s. They remember their grandfather by the name Tion Tāmoa, and that he was around ten years old when he was brought to Onotoa, but they have no recollection of or connection with his Tongan roots. At this stage, Tion’s roots are mythical, even for the elders two generations after his arrival. This does not mean that his Tongan roots are not true, especially for the surviving grandchildren, Merian and Tion, and for their growing households.

Migration happens because people leave their roots and the stability of firm groundings. We do not all know why our ancestors migrated. According to one Solomon islander named Patrick Woria, whom I met in Suva, legends tell them that their ancestors migrated because of environmental pressures. They migrated in search of safer homes and greener pastures. They migrated because their first homes were no longer habitable. Woria’s people have an explanation, but many other islanders do not know why their ancestors migrated, or whether there were indigenous people in the land where they arrived. I imagine that there would have been stories of dispossession if that were the case. But we do not have stories similar to those in the books of Joshua and Judges.

I imagine that there can be several explanations for why our ancestors left their first homes: natural cause, supernatural inkling, spirit of exploration, fleeing personal or social matters, or because they were pushed away. I suspect that they did not set to sea in order to spread some godforsaken tradition or culture. I do not believe that they knew where they were going, just as we don’t know from where they came. I want to believe that they voyaged because there is something intoxicating about drifting away from safety to live floating lives—like what locals in Onotoa call Aha tabeheiti, floating lands—and set roots along one’s routes. In other words, they migrated because they preferred to live and think in transit. They were not disciples of Elijah, who wanted Israel to stop wavering between two opinions and instead decide whether to be on the side either of Ba’al or of Yhwh (1 Kings 18:16–29). As a sea people, our ancestors were transiting people, between places, positions, homes, roots. They would therefore be able to understand the implications of the people not answering Elijah “a word.”

More recently, natives of Oceania who live overseas speak and write of being in a Pacific Diaspora. Many of us have forgotten that our homes were the first Pacific Diaspora. Will two or three generations from now know
where their roots are? Will they long to know and reconnect? Will the technology of record keeping help them remember, or help them forget? Will they be suspicious of the accounts of their roots (as we are of the scriptures of our days)?

Migration happens when there is disconnection, and its upshot is the forgetting of roots. The cost to migration, or “departure tax” (a fee paid at some airports prior to departure, even for domestic flights as in Vanuatu and Kiribati), to use a more recent image, is the mythologizing of roots. This is not a problem for peoples of the sea, of myths, and of orality. This is the way things are; this is “normal.” It only becomes a problem when the myths are rejected as if they are not meaningful, as if they are not rooting, or venerated as if they happened, as if they represent reality. Both extremes are challenges for tellers of myths, for interpreters of customs, for keepers of traditions, for weavers of cultures, and for flag bearers of nations. Many Christian theologians and biblical critics perform those tasks also, and they too are not free of the challenges of taking their “texts” too lightly or too zealously.

To mythologize is to “story one’s roots,” and sometimes this involves intentionally hiding something about one’s roots. Stories store as well as put out of sight. Myths help people forget, and this too is normal in Oceania. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to hide and forget the precontact world. This is in part because Western and Christian lenses and preferences help us forget our roots, but also because of our transiting makeup.

No migration is free of “departure tax.” Mythologizing one’s roots is expected, and it enables one to cross into new lands, to meet new peoples and cultures, to become as local as possible. When, on the other hand, one’s roots are sanctified and one migrates, sets out, in order to spread those, the chance to engage and embrace new peoples and new cultures is difficult. In such cases, crossing of cultures can be disruptive, painful, and even destructive.

In Oceania, Christianity in its many shapes came in the arms of voyagers. It did not come as a myth but as “the truth,” and our people engaged it. Nonetheless, signs that Christianity is a foreign body to Oceania remain. A good indication of this is the names of our churches. At Piula Theological College (Apia, Western Samoa), for instance, three different Bachelor of Divinity theses refer to the same church by three different names: Methodist Church in Samoa, Methodist Church of Samoa, and Samoan Methodist Church. The Methodist Church is named differently in Samoa. Though there have been many attempts to contextualize the Methodist Church, and Christianity in general, traces of foreignness linger. Another example is the concept “bread of life,” a reference to Jesus that is meaningful in the context of Holy Communion, in Tuvalu, where the word for bread is *fūlōa* (flour). Bread is foreign to Tuvalu, and so is the concept of *fūlōa o te ola* (bread of life). These traces suggest that Christianity did not submit its necessary “departure tax.” In this regard, Christianity (which brought much excess baggage) fails to meet the requirements for migration.

One of the tensions in the current Pacific Diaspora is between those who hold strong to their island roots against those who advocate letting
go completely, in order that they live as locals in their new homes (in other island groups or in Western nations). Between those are ones who seek some kind of negotiation between the island home cultures and the adopted cultures. Cultural negotiation is easier for those who migrate freely than for ones who are uprooted (as in blackbirding) or because of deception (as the people of Banaba, Kiribati, who were moved to Rabi, Fiji), and different further for indentured workers (from the region and from abroad). Migration requires movement, which involves some form of uprooting and displacement. To survive those meaningfully requires negotiation and intervention, for departure is always taxing.

**Paths in the Vahanoa**

The paths of migration connect sea, sky, and land. That islanders chart their paths in the sea according to the alignment of the stars is a practice that we share with other indigenous people, and is known to writers from all over. The Aborigines in Australia have Songlines, also known as “Dreaming” tracks, which reveal the paths across the land and sky that creator-beings and ancestors took during the Dreaming time. The Songlines follow the way (footprints) of the ancestors. These paths are remembered in their songs, stories, dances, and artworks. Aboriginal Songlines identify landmarks, such as digging and ceremonial sites, mountains and waterholes, which the singer, storyteller, performer, or reader of art locate and follow in the process of singing, telling, performing, or appreciating artwork.

Songlines represent the intersection of memory, tradition, and land. In following the sequence of the Songlines, Aborigines navigate the wide land, with many dry and wet lakes, and deserts, languages, and ways of Australia. One cannot comprehend Songlines without crossing the landscape, for these are songs and stories of the land, and their melodies echo the contours of the land. To sing or retell Songlines requires walking, observing, and respecting the sacred land. To keep Songlines alive, and the land sacred, movement takes place. Migration happens in order for the Songlines to survive. In this regard, one may argue that Songlines function as scripture for Aborigines.

“Like all other peoples, Pacific islanders possess their own indigenous forms of history, accounts of ancestors passed down through chants, songs, and oral traditions. These too speak of voyages, many of epic proportions.”

We celebrate the navigation skills of our ancestors in our dances and songs. One of my favorite Tongan songs includes the phrase *taulanga he vavā* (harbor/destination in the air), which suggests that one’s journey is guided by, and toward, a harbor or destination (*taulanga*) that is in the air (*vavā*). It is interesting that the song avoids naming sky (*langi*) as the harbor or destination, but uses the word vavā, which carries the meanings of *vahanoa* (wilderness, ocean). The air is a wilderness, just as the sea and land are. Wilderness here does not mean empty or dead space. In Tuvalu, for example, the sea is *Fale-o-ika* (home for fish). The sea is not forsaken or deserted, for it is a home. The sea is not barren but, as one elder in Onotoa put it, it is a “deep
storehouse.” And in Kiribati, the sea is Tarri (brother, sister). The I-Kiribati (native of Kiribati) is a sibling to the sea. In these island nations, strong relational affections toward the sea as wilderness is expected. Consequently, as it was back then, migration involved crossing the rich and enriching sea to which one relates and depends, according to the harbor or destination (taulanga) in the air (vavā).

If islanders only traveled according to the stars, they would travel only at night, and we would therefore be people of the night as well. Island navigators did not fix their eyes to the vavā alone. They depended on the signs in the sea as well, like the range of reefs between island groups, and the kinds of fish caught on the way. The ika-ni-beka roams the warmer deep waters around Micronesia and the equator, and the fiau and vete will head for Tonga toward the warmer months (to lay their eggs). The sea is filled with pointers for island navigators, known as the muli-vaka (back of the boat) in Tuvalu. Those who assume that the sea is empty of markers and signs would probably think that there were no people in the paths of Israel during their wilderness journey (Exodus-Deuteronomy). Midianites, Edomites, Moabites, and many more were there and were trampled upon.

Island navigators also felt the sea, as in the Tongan legend preserved in one of the village titles from the Ha’apai group, Fāfā-ki-tahi (feel or touch the sea). The title originated from a blind man who usually traveled solo by canoe or raft from island to island. When asked how he found his way around, he replied that he could tell which part of the sea he was in by touching and feeling the sea (fāfā-ki-tahi). He was a true man of the night, who traveled not according to the stars but according to the feel of the water. He was a man of the vahanoa who probably got lost a few times, but he was persuasive enough to convince the ones on the island to where he arrived that he actually set out to come to their island. Great travelers too do get lost, and have stories to harbor their journey when and where they arrive. Those stories have many grains of sea salt!

Polynesians regularly speak of the great migration of our ancestors, and we tease one another that there were many boats and several got lost during the voyage. The lost ones ended up at the other islands, from where those whom we are teasing come. In jest, we speak of lost boats. In reality, we have lost kāinga (relations). The drifts of the vahanoa rip us from one another in the course of migration.

Paths in the vahanoa are not straightforward. It is easy to lose the way, and one learns to depend on one’s imagination. An adventurous spirit with a heavy dose of courage help one navigate the vahanoa. There is no certainty when it comes to the fluid paths in the vahanoa. Certainty is the illusion of modern minds. In Oceania, fluidity is the context of migration, which is continually “up for grabs.” From my limited experience of navigating narrow passages through reefs in the islands, I have learned two important lessons: one, “going with the flow” (of waves and currents) makes the difference between passing through the passage or bruising on the reef; and two, I learn to “trust the path.”
The narrower the passage the stronger the currents and the washouts, and it is a waste of energy fighting against those. It is much safer to maneuver according to the interval of the waves and the directions of the currents. This is where fāfā-ki-tahi would be helpful, but stopping or hovering over the rush of a flowing passage is not possible. If one is not familiar with the passage then one learns and maneuvers “on the run,” in the flow. If one’s timing is correct so that one catches the right break, one simply needs to stay on the brow of the wave and it will take one through. In this regard, the liquid context determines how a voyager passes through the passage. That is what “going with the flow” means in the vahanoa. It is not the silencing of oneself in submission to more powerful screams, as if one has no will, but learning to feel the strength of the liquid context.

Narrow passages are not straight. There is usually a turn but this will not be visible from far away, whether one approaches from the lagoon or from the open sea. The turn becomes visible as one comes to it, and so one must learn to “trust the path” instead of what one observes from far off. In the vahanoa, the voyager learns to listen to the context rather than force her or his observation from a distance upon it. And the direction that one gets from the fluid context is solid!

Obviously, the practices of contextualization would be different if people of the vahanoa designed those. At least the starting point would be the context in which one depends and trusts, with courage, to turn according to the contours of the context. The context is first, instead of the thoughts or teachings one seeks to appropriate for a new context. And the final step will be according to “local interests,” instead of some foreign agenda, whether Christian, civilized, or otherwise, that is supposed to be “good for us.” In this regard, we need to pull the “local interests” (especially of small island nations) back from the whirlpool of “the common good.”

One of the late entries into the theological scene in Oceania is the attention to climate change, with the low-lying coral atolls of Kiribati and Tuvalu used as poster faces to drive individuals, companies, and nations to account for their carbon footprints. Whose interests are served in the politics of climate change? As I write (mid-2011), the Australian government fights to set conditions and clear the way for its “carbon tax” and the names of Kiribati and Tuvalu are beckoned to make mass producers of carbon feel guilty, change their ways, atone for and recompense their misdeeds. I doubt that the damages that the carbon civilization has caused the environment can be reversed, or stopped, but I also trust that transformation of ways is possible.

Apart from a few leaders who speak on behalf of their nation and reap the benefits of climate change, the majority of locals I spoke with in Tuvalu and Kiribati are not worried by the threats of climate change. The sea is rising, they admit, and they build seawalls. But they say that the land is also rising, and that is comforting to them. Their worry is not the rising of the sea but the erosion of the land, and the two of course interconnect. They are more worried about storms and tsunami waves, like the ones that devastated
American Samoa, Western Samoa, and Tonga (2009), and the punishing series of droughts.

The vahanoa is a place of migration and displacement where one faces the temptation to “take roots upon drifts.” When one submits, one forgets that vahanoa is one’s routes (paths), instead of one’s roots (origin). The challenge here, therefore, is how the natives of Tuvalu and Kiribati might be who they are, as cultural and theological subjects, apart from the political and economic drifts of climate change. My aim here is to register that the peoples of Tuvalu and Kiribati have gifts, wisdom and cultures that deserve hermeneutical and theological engagement, rather than pressing them under foreign interests in climate change, which submit them under the guilt of the world’s economic powers.

The vahanoa is place of endurance and survival, of which the natives of Oceania are capable in the limited land spaces of island contexts. Endurance and survival sometimes require natives to move, as one Niutoputapu (Tonga) survivor of the 2009 tsunami explained. The local chief and government had offered families in his village land plots at a higher elevation, away from the sea. Many of his neighbors refused the offer, because they like Naboth (1 Kings 21) did not want to give up ancestral lands. He, on the other hand, shifted home for the sake of his children. After relocating, whenever there is an earthquake, his former neighbors run for higher grounds, even in the darkness of the night, while his children sleep with no fear. His family has transformed their new location into a home, and they stretch out (fakaloloa) with more comfort.

Coming to terms with the conditions of vahanoa reminds us of the transitory natures of migration. This does not mean that relocation is the only answer to threats, but that migration involves movement. Furthermore, migration and vahanoa resist stability and rigidity. Those on the other hand are opportunities for difference to multiply.

**Arrival Duties**

Modern-day travelers enjoy “duty free shopping” and sometimes forget that arrival comes with responsibilities, with “arrival duties.” The first responsibility is to pay respect to the ancestors of the land to which one arrives. I was reminded of this arrival duty when B’aranite Kirata took me (August 2011) to the village of his mother, Tabuarorae (Onotoa, Kiribati). I was ahead of this retired protestant minister, and began to cross the causeway to the first of the “floating islands.” He called me back, and took me to the side where he asked me to sit with him at the burial site of his ancestors. “Mauri-o” (Greetings!), he began, and then continued in I-Kiribati, his mother tongue. I found out later that he does not know who were buried at that site, but he greeted them on my behalf and sought peace for our journey to continue. He did for me what he did for his four-year-old granddaughter two weeks earlier, having arrived from Tarawa to Onotoa for the first time, and this was one of the practices he learned from his father when relatives and friends visit.
Instead of rushing across the causeway, B’aranite’s ritual reminded me that island time is flexible when it comes to crossing the land of the ancestors. This occasion reminds me of a conversation several years ago with Walter Fejo, an elder and minister from Arnhem Land, at the top end of Australia, of how Aborigines too are respectful of sites when they journey. They know where boundaries are, and they pause to pay their respects. Like their ancestors, B’aranite and Walter “knew of reality as interconnected between that which is visible [material world] and that which is invisible [spirit world].” Arrival cannot be rushed, because permission and acceptance are necessary in order for welcome to be received. Welcome to land is not given by those who occupy the land, but by the honor of those who were there in the past. Pausing on the journey is needed for acceptance to be received.

A second arrival duty is the bearing of gifts. I failed in this respect at Tabuoraroe, unlike someone who came through earlier and left a rolled tobacco under a clamshell at the burial site. That traveler was probably a local from another village, or another island, and s/he knew the custom. Though I remembered to take kava for the men and sweets for the children and women at Onotoa, I was not prepared for B’aranite’s ancestors. At the next ancestral site, I was prepared: not with tobacco but with a smooth coral rock to throw at stray dogs.

Gift giving is not unique to the people of Oceania. Like others, we take gifts and receive welcome and sustenance. As islanders for whom the content and size of a gift is determined by one’s place and role, the gifts are sometimes grand. When that happens, locals say that one has fulfilled one’s duty well. Others say that huge gifts are excessive and wasteful, especially when calculated according to dollar figures. Still others would say, noting that islanders tend to “think big” in a context where everyone knows everyone else’s business, that gifting is “showing off” of one’s status and wealth. Our economics of gifting has infused all sorts of valuing, and there is some truth to all of those views.

Many are the stories of exchange of goods in the early days of contact with Europeans. A nail, a scrap of metal, a fire-stone, for food, water, coconuts, and so forth. There was deceit and loss of lives. But reception was given to the Europeans due in large part to the effects of gifting. If there were no goods exchanged, would there have been any welcome? This is not only because goods have value, but also because goods were given in gifting cultures. Who received the better gift is not important here, even though natives have a version of the popular African anecdote: “The white man told us to close our eyes for prayer. After his prayer, we opened our eyes to find the bible and book of disciplines in our hands but he had our island in his hand.” What is more important here is that one respects the expectations and responsibilities that come with arrival into gifting cultures.

It is the more privileged travelers who often forget, intentionally sometimes, the responsibilities in entering gifting cultures. Gifting is linked to respect, and both are important for establishing and maintaining relations.
Back then, as elders prefer to put it, one claims land with a bush-knife. One arrives, clears an area, plants coconuts at the edges to mark the limits, and then waits for the villagers to come and build one's home. This is another arrival duty: patiently wait for the village to build one's home. In Oceania, especially in the outer islands, away from partially modernized capital islands, it takes a village to build a home. They know which pandanus or coconut trunk is appropriate for the posts, and where to get material for the structure, the thatches, the lashes, and so forth. Waiting for the village is, again, out of respect, and in “island time” as well. Once one’s home is ready, one becomes local and is expected to participate in the building of the next home. One continues to learn from the locals: what to plant when, where to fish at which tide, and so forth. These practical needs give islanders the chance to share knowledge and pass wisdom from one voyager to the next, from generation to generation. The daily and practical, ideological and informational intersect, and consensus was not always reached on what the “correct” island wisdom was. But they were all real.

Island cultures are highly structured. They are like Christian churches, which Father Tauke‘i‘aho Tuli explained to be full of rules: “Ko ‘e te manga kotoa ‘oku ai e lao ki ai” (For every step, there is a rule). The most structured are the kava ceremonies and the gatherings at community meeting places, where there is a place for everyone, including being seated outside of the gathering, and the rituals performed at funerals, where the principles of cultural tapu/tabu/taboo peak. These are the quintessential representations of island customs. Knowing what those are helps one know her/his place, and what the village expects of her/him.

One of the illusions that European voyagers and migrants share is the assumption that their acceptance, or rejection, had something to do with who they were. On the contrary, whether they are received or pushed away has more to do with the expectations of the local community. Take the case of the LMS missionary John Williams whose welcome to Savai‘i, Samoa, is not remembered in the lights of the expectations of local people. Prior to Williams’s arrival from Tonga with the assistance of a Samoan couple, Puaseisei and husband Faueā, the paramount chief Malietoa visited the prophetess Nāfanua at Falealupo, where Pulotu is located. He went to ask her to name a head for his government. Nāfanua told him to go back as there are only tails in the land; he was to wait as the head for his land would come from above. Would Malietoa have welcomed Williams and received the Christian message (August 24, 1830) if he did not believe Nāfanua first? In my island eyes, Williams’s success was due to the expectation of this local chief.

There is a similar story from Kiribati, concerning the tribe of Matang. The Matang men did something unpardonable and so the tribe was expelled from the islands. They loaded up their canoes and left to reform their ways somewhere in the sea. Many years later, Europeans started to arrive and the I-Kiribati took the fair-skin visitors to be their Matang cousins who returned as better people. Europeans are called I-Matang and they sit at the
place of the Matang in the Maneaba (community meeting house), which is the side toward the lagoon. Owing to the longing of I-Kiribati people for their expelled cousins, the Europeans became acceptable and received a place (as I-Matang) at the Maneaba. Welcome is due to the expectations and goodwill of locals, and it is one’s arrival duty to learn and appreciate their welcome.

One also needs to learn to know when islanders are fooling around, and may be making fun of her/him. Islanders tell as many lies and jokes as other people, with island twists of course. Humor plays a big part in island cultures, and it is not uncommon for islanders to laugh their heads off even on Sundays (when they are supposed to be devout and mellow). It is difficult to objectify and describe the various flavors of island humor, but one has not really arrived until one is able to laugh along with and at the locals, as well as at oneself. The more biting a joke is upon oneself, the louder one laughs in appreciation.

If there is a bottom line to the arrival duties that I am sketching, it is simple: I am asking for appreciation of and respect for locals and their cultures. Failure to respect the locals and their cultures is what sparks the clashing of cultures. Many missionaries were murdered in the early days of the Christian mission to Oceania because they broke cultural taboos. Some of those may be trivial in the eyes of outsiders, like permitting young men to eat yam before they are married and have their first child, or touching the hair of a chief, but they are taboo in the hearts of locals.

Attention to migration tends to be on the migrants and the skills necessary for surviving the voyage, but not on the locals at the receiving end. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this is the primary preoccupation since movement began from the garden, and from Babel, Ur, Canaan, Egypt, Judah, all the way to the return from Babylon with Ezra and Nehemiah. The migrants and their right to occupy wherever they were going is privileged, but the lot of the peoples of the land is not registered. If islanders with sensitivity to arrival duties were the authors of the biblical account, I imagine that they would be more understanding of and be in solidarity with the peoples of the land, the natives, the locals.

Failing to respect locals continues in theological circles, especially painful for local theologians. Father Mikaele Paunga explained to me in Nausori his recent experience at a theological conference in Queensland. One of the exposure events involved going to a nearby island to learn from the insights and wisdoms of aborigines. They were shown aboriginal paintings, which is a form of indigenous Songline. On one painting was a luscious, healthy, beautiful tree: Australia of the ancestors. On the next painting, a tree trunk, cut off from its green head and branches, blackened, dead: Australia after the colonialists arrived. Behind him, Paunga heard someone say, “This is not theology.” Some Balanda, white person, disrespected Aboriginal ways and wisdom, and insults the respect that natives give to I-Matang. Disrespect for locals and their ways continue to be a mark of theology and Christianity.
There is no denying that our ancestors did things considered savagery in their own eyes and in the eyes of the West, and were not always friendly. It was not out of place for Hamilton, a surgeon on the ship *Pandora* (1791), to comment: “The people of Nomuka are the most daring set of robbers in the South Seas and with the greatest respect and submission to Capt. Cook, I think the name of Friendly Islands is a perfect misnomer.” But out of respect for the locals, the gaps need to be filled, and misperceptions need to be mended. In the Cook Islands, the natives were not all cannibals. Cannibalism was a practice only of warriors, and only during wartime, as a show of power. And the people of Nomuka, renowned for their navigation skills, robbed because the white explorers and their crews failed to observe the expectations of sharing cultures. They were cannibals and robbers for a reason, and the rest of their people should not be stereotyped as being the same. It would be equally unfair for locals to think that all white people are Nazis or Missionaries.

Arrival is a step toward resettlement, and it is taxing for migrants as well as for locals. It is naïve to assume that arrival is free, or that resettlement ends the tossing and turnings. Resettlement is ongoing, never complete, as is life. This being the case, why do some people in Tuvalu and Kiribati resist resettlement to another and higher land as a solution for climate change? Why don’t they want to move? Have they given up on being peoples whose roots are in migration? B’aranite’s son, Otineta, helped me see things differently. “I prefer it here,” he said, “being surrounded by water.” He is a son of the sea, and he has many brothers and sisters in Kiribati and beyond. Even in the face of rising seas and the swells of climate change, people do not want to flee from the sea. Resettlement is not an attractive option because home needs to be surrounded by water.

Arrival marks the end of movement, but it is not the end of changing. As far as islanders are concerned, migration makes arrival watery, changeable, in transit.

**Christianity in Oceania**

Into Oceania, Christianity arrived as a migrating religion. Its impacts on and reception into our islands, cultures, and peoples, for good and for worse, have been documented (see n.9). My intention here is not to praise or criticize Christianity in Oceania, but to invite talanoa (conversation) on what it could look like now that it has come to Oceania. If Christianity was to come again, how might it come differently? I am more interested in looking forward than in looking backward, realizing of course that it is necessary to look both ways. I present my invitation for talanoa along the three stages of migration around which I offered the foregoing reflections.

*Caveat lector:* I am neither a church historian nor a missiologist, but a native Christian who is convinced that our region, peoples, and customs have something to contribute to the Christian church and mission. What concern me in this closing section therefore are the impacts that Oceania can
offer Christianity. In other words, I am looking again at Christianity with the interests of Oceania.

* * *

_Departure taxes:_ Before the arrival of Christianity, the peoples of Oceania were already roaming the region for purposes of “family reunion, migration and trade.” Upon arrival, the Western Christian missionaries took advantage of the navigational skills of the natives to help direct them around the southern seas, and their eagerness to influence (sometimes with force) one another. In Fiji, the success of Josua Mateinaniu in the westward islands is unmatched. In September 1836, ten months after he was sent to scout and mingle with the Tongans who had migrated to that part of Fiji, over three hundred Tongans followed Mateinaniu into the Methodist missionary Cargill’s chapel. A Fijian scout became a native missionary! The Methodist mission in Fiji was aided further by the then young Tongan church, which sent six Tongan teachers in June 1838 (12 years after the arrival of Methodist missionaries to Tonga in 1826). It is not clear what training and preparation these teachers received, but it is obvious that this “mission field” was beginning to bear fruits.

That however was not the first instance of native teachers being sent from one island to another. In 1821 and again in 1823, the London Missionary Society (LMS) missionary John Williams took Tahitian teachers to the Cook Islands. The LMS mission successfully landed in Tahiti before the Methodist mission came to Tonga, and these were the two big players (the Catholics were there also, but did not have as much an impact) in Oceania.

It was not long before Oceania qua mission field became a mission agency, at least for other islands in the region. The native teachers were sent out like “subalterns,” subjects who were outside of the hegemonic power structure but who were necessary for the task at hand. According to mission records, they were sent as “teachers” but in the eyes of the natives, they came as Christian “missionaries.” Whether they are teachers or missionaries, the impression given is that the natives were (in the) dark.

They went as Christian teachers/missionaries with no angst about denominational divide. The native Tahitians went as part of the LMS mission, while the Tongan natives were sponsored by the Methodists. When the native teachers/missionaries were received, they were identified not by their denominational roots but by their home islands. In Samoa, for instance, where Tahitian LMS and Tongan Methodist teachers/missionaries were both embraced, they established the _lotu Tahiti_ (Tahitian faith, religion) and _lotu Tonga_ (Tongan faith, religion). Lotu Tahiti stood for the Congregational Church and lotu Tonga for the Methodist Church, and this was how the two denominations were first received. When native Samoan teachers/missionaries went to other islands, like Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Kiribati, they went as teachers/missionaries of lotu Tonga and lotu Tahiti. It was only later, when the Western sending bodies began to manage and fund the two “conferences” in Samoa, that they were renamed as Methodist and Congregational churches.
The native teachers/missionaries figuratively “paid departure taxes” by disconnecting from (i.e., “forgetting”) their mission boards. Did it matter which mission board they were serving? What might have happened had the mission boards left things to the Tahitians and the Tongans? These hypothetical questions invite consideration and talanoa especially in light on the foregoing discussion of migration in Oceania.

What might Christianity look like in Oceania if it had paid its departure taxes? Insofar as migration drifts natives away from their roots, which they mythologize in order to remember but that process also allowed them to forget, one of the challenges for Christianity in Oceania is how/whether to drift away and mythologize its roots in order to remember and at once forget them. This seemed to be possible at first with the spreading of lotu Tonga and lotu Tahiti, but with the successes of the missions the two sending bodies pulled the reins back for the sake of economic support and leadership, both of which have to do with power and politics. Weren’t the natives Christian enough to run their own churches?

Wanting to break from the sending Mission body bubbled in my denomination since the beginning and came to a boil in 1885. Methodists succeeded in 1826 to land in Tonga, and after a civil war that followed soon after, King Taufa‘ahau was inspired to break from the Australian Methodist Conference to be lotu Tonga. In 1880 he declared, “Tonga should have an independent church . . . the missionaries and the whole world should see that I am determined to have the separation.” He was supported by Rev. Shirley W. Baker, who was his prime minister, but Rev. James Moulton (who established Tupou College in 1868) and the Tongan district opposed. The missionaries were divided, and the church and the nation were also divided, resulting in the exile of Tongans (who supported Moulton and the district) to Fiji in 1885 and the establishment of the Church of Tonga. My grandfather was one of the supporters of Moulton, so I grew up admiring his and other Tongan commoners’ courage to resist their king. Recently, I have come to appreciate Taufa‘ahau’s desire to drift lotu in Tonga away from its roots. This is because part of me imagines that Taufa‘ahau was also responding to the spirit of migration in Oceania.

Christianity roots followers in salvation and deliverance through remembrance; migration in Oceania uproots natives (putting them on routes) and weaves movement with remembering and forgetting. This (albeit simplistic) juxtaposition of Christianity with migration in Oceania indicates that they share certain characteristics, but with a slight difference, that Christianity drives to take root. What Christianity in Oceania still lacks is the courage to be a migrating church, to allow itself to drift, to find and belong to new homes. If it had continued to be lotu Tonga and lotu Tahiti, it would have belonged and been at home in Oceania.

* * *

Paths in the vahanoa: The winds have changed in Oceania, but the course of Christianity has not changed much since it arrived. Most worship events in the mainline denominations offer the prayers, sing the hymns, and repeat
the messages of the missionaries. In the early days, Sunday school, Christian education, and prayer meetings caused revivals that brought people into the Christian faith, and those activities are still conducted these days as if people have not converted. The orders of worship from the nineteenth century are still followed in the twenty-first century, according to the directions of the early missionaries. Put another way, Christianity in Oceania is stuck in the missionary era.

Furthermore, Christianity is kept alive in translation. The observation by Lamin Sanneh applies to Oceania as well, “Christianity could avoid translation only like water avoiding being wet.” Does the translated Christianity that is perpetuated in Oceania do justice to its source? To Oceania? Does it matter?

We received Christianity and its institutions and theologies, together with the Bible and hermeneutical approaches, from Western missionaries. We are grateful for those, I think, but we cannot free ourselves from the West if we continue to use and/or adopt its hermeneutical agendas. To continue using Western approaches is to keep the fires of the colonial era alive over the ashes of which hover the ghosts of the missionary era.

The paths that Christianity sailed in Oceania have not been straightforward both for the missionaries and for the peoples of Oceania. In the early days, Oceania was a “wilderness” and “hinterland” for European missionaries and explorers. Oceania was misperceived as an empty region to be claimed and divided, between foreign governments and mission boards. Three general attitudes toward Oceania consequently developed. First, there are those who romanticize our sea of islands as some kind of carefree paradise. They come as tourists who commodify our gifts, cultures, and peoples. They see the performance of cultural memories as entertainment, our reciprocating hospitality as generosity, and our children as darkened cheeks to pinch and squeeze as if they are fruits or vegetables. Second, there are those for whom Oceania is the part of Asia Pacific to fly over. There is nothing to gain, so it is better to avoid it except for the occasional business opportunities. Third, there are those who come to save Oceania from itself. They come with their own (foreign) understanding of what it means to be saved, and of how it should be done. These attitudes, which overseas Christian organizations share, do not see the peoples and churches of Oceania as subjects worthy of engagement or of consultation. The churches in Oceania consequently developed self-doubt and a deep sense of dependency on their overseas parents.

How might churches in Oceania find confidence in and among themselves? It will help if there is cooperation on both sides: the overseas partners to change their attitudes toward island churches, and the island churches to “talk back” and “give back” to the global church commune. The missionary era was when overseas mission boards were “parents” and “sponsors,” and now is the time to be “partners.” More importantly, there needs to be a shift of labels as well as of attitudes on both sides. Within Oceania, it would be helpful also if partnership between regional churches and bodies are encouraged.
Some movement has taken place in recent years, especially around the fields of theology and hermeneutics. Several church leaders have made significant contributions to contextual theologies and to biblical studies, to which the recently inaugurated (August 2013) Oceania Biblical Studies Association commits. These efforts seek to hear local interests and traditions in the theologies and interpretations that are produced in Oceania, in other words, to listen for and to be contexted in Oceania. Though there is movement on the theological and hermeneutical fronts, resources and opportunities are still limited.

At the home-island-church front, there is a widening gap between what takes place in the theological circles and the worshiping communities. The advances in contextual theologies and in island hermeneutics have not filtered through to the practices and rituals of local congregations. Contributing to this gap is the ongoing favoring of the “correct ways” that the missionaries brought, and the fear to navigate the “narrow and crooked passages” of Oceania. Churches have become settled, rigid, and they ignore the fluidity of their Oceanic setting.

One of the paths in the vahanoa for the churches to travel is to close the gap between theological insights and the rituals of worshipping communities. Whereas there is some courage in the former to be rooted/routed in the fluidity of Oceania, the latter is still stuck in the heaven-ward gaze of the missionary era.

* * *

Arrival duties: As long as churches in Oceania remain trapped in the missionary era and under the shadows of its heavenward theologies, Christianity will not have fully arrived into Oceania. In light of previous reflections on migration, arrival involves fulfilling of duties and responsibilities in the interests of islands and islanders, their roots and routes. There are key duties that remain for Christianity to meet, such as paying proper respects to our ancestors and participating in (rather than patronizing) the reciprocal cultures of islanders, and these could easily be met if the Christian churches break out of the missionary hold.

To break out is not to disrespect or disregard, but to step out in order to arrive, and then to build upon both the purposes of the escapees and the gifts of the new location. Take the motto on the Coat of Arms of my island home of Tonga as an example: ‘Otua mo Tonga ko hoku tofi’u (God and Tonga are my inheritance).

The Coat of Arms was designed in 1875, when Tonga’s constitution was created, under the influence of Christian teachers. It is under Christian guidance that Tongans grow up thinking that our inheritance is both God and Tonga. But it is ridiculous to speak of inheritance in Tonga, and in all patriarchal cultures, where women do not have the same right to inheritance as men. The motto of our nation is exclusivist, and this is the mindset that fuels our imagination when struck by the fever of nationalism. Shouldn’t we change our imagination?

* * *
I add another set of questions, drawing upon the Tongan word ‘Otua. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, ‘Otua was the generic name for the deities (the chief ones were the Tangaloa deities, each taking care of a specific domain—sky, land, sea, underworld) that our ancestors worshipped. A derivative of this is Atua, used in other Polynesian languages (Maori, Samoa, Tuvalu, etc.) for their deities. With Christianity, both ‘Otua and Atua started being used as names solely for the Christian God. The ‘Otua in the Tongan Coat of Arms is understood to refer to the Christian God. Why doesn’t the Coat of Arms refer to the Tangaloa deities as well? Why aren’t the Tangaloa deities, Gods of our ancestors, the inheritance of Tongans as well?

The use of “inheritance” in Tonga’s Coat of Arms is problematic, and also problematic is the exclusivist use of ‘Otua. Christianity has robbed the Tangaloa deities of the status of ‘Otua and Tonga will remain under the dis-respecting spell of Christianity until Tongan Christians affirm that there is more ‘Otua for Tongans than just the Christian one. Until Christian churches in Tonga break out from the monotheistic stronghold and pay proper respect to our ancestors, Christianity will not have fully arrived.

Spraying salt on the wounds of Tongans is the favoring of interfaith and ecumenical relations over against indigenous beliefs as if the Tangaloa deities did not serve a religious role. Faiths and denominations from foreign lands are respected more than local systems of belief (unfairly marked as paganism). The explanation most Tongans give for this preference is that the religious systems that the palangi (white, European) brought are more advanced, more enlightened, more correct than those of the local (darker) people. This fuels color biases, of which Christianity takes advantage: the palangi religions are better than the “paganism” of darkened locals. The locals are consequently conditioned to think that the palangi are better mainly because of their skin color. Other islands in Oceania share the same inferiority complex, and so too in other mission fields in the Global South.

Breaking out of the demeaning hold of color biases is one of the arrival duties that Christianity owes Oceania. When this takes place, Christianity opens itself to learn from the dark skin locals and reciprocity is more real. This will require accepting that Christianity is a foreign religion to Oceania, becoming aware of color privileges, and accounting for the conditionings of color blindness.45

Notes

I wrote this chapter during my study leave (July–December 2011), funded and supported by the Faculty of United Theological College and School of Theology, Charles Sturt University. I shared my thoughts with other natives on and between islands—recollecting memories and reflecting on engagements with fellow natives and some non-natives—in Oceania: Viti Levu (Fiji); Tarawa, Beru, and Onotoa (Kiribati); Funafuti, Fatato, and Funafala (Tuvalu); and Tongatapu (Tonga).

2. Another revealing Tongan name is *Lomi-peau* (pressing the wave down, as if to iron it out), which was given to the boat of one of our chiefs, for it traveled as if it could hold the waves down.

3. Cited in Lani Wendt Young, *The Pacific Tsunami “Galu Afi”: The Story of the Greatest Natural Disaster Samoa Has Ever Known.* © Hans Joachim Keil, 2010 (345–46; italicized in original). The tsunami claimed the lives of 144 people in Western Samoa, 33 in American Samoa, and 9 in Tonga (because of the international dateline, the tsunami is recorded as hitting Niua Toputapu in Tonga on September 30). Their names are remembered in Lani’s moving work, together with the stories of survivors, friends and relatives of victims, rescuers and aid workers, caregivers and supporters, locally and internationally.


5. This chapter is, insofar as its roots are in the routes of the natives of Oceania, a small homage to the spirit of orality that flooded the veins of our voyaging ancestors.


10. Blackbirding was more extensive than Faa’imata Havea suggested: natives of Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Solomon Islands to Australia around 1863 (in *Identity Crisis! Issues Facing Pacific Migrant Youth* [Nuku’alofa: Tonga National Council of Churches, 2006], 86). There were I-Kiribati, Rotuman, and Tongan blackbirds also.

11. Alisi Tira, the only woman on the faculty of Tangintebu Theological College, South Tarawa, preached on this text at the college chapel on August 7, 2011. She called for a decision, on behalf of God and Jesus Christ, but I held back.


16. The story of Fāfā-ki-tahi is different from a recent, more humorous one of a Tongan ship traveling to New Zealand. In the middle of the night, the crew saw the lights of another ship coming from the opposite direction. The Tongan captain flashed signals to greet the other ship, and asked where they were heading. “To New Zealand” was the reply!


19. They who say that Pacific Islanders do not attend meetings have not attended an I-Kiribati Mancaba gathering, or sat through a Samoan or Tongan fono. Our people too can hold long meetings and give winding speeches.

20. On the characterization of natives as wanting the colonizers to enter and dispossess them, see also Uriah Y. Kim, “Where Is the Home for the Man of Luz?” Interpretation 65 (2001): 250–262 (esp. 258).

21. To illustrate island humor, take this fish story, which I heard from B’aranite Kirata. There were three young men: Fijian, I-Kiribati, and Tongan. Each was bragging about the success of his father the previous night. First, the Fijian straightens out one hand, and with the other he points to his sternum, “My father caught a fish this big.” The I-Kiribati replies, “That’s nothing.” He stretches out both hands, “My father caught a fish this big!” It was twice the size of the Fijian’s fish. The Tongan silently takes a stick and slowly draws a circle on the ground around him. The other two were confused. “What kind of fish looks like a circle?” He replies, “No, that’s not the shape of the fish. That’s the size of the eye of the fish.”


23. See, for example, Maretu, Cannibals and Converts: Radical Change in the Cook Islands, trans, ann. and ed. Marjorie Tuainekeore Crocombe (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1983).


27. Ibid., 103.
28. Ibid., 105.
30. LMS missionaries came to Tonga in the late 1790s, but were not successful. Three of them were killed in Tonga before the mission successfully landed in Tahiti. “Cook’s Voyages had stated that the Tongans knew the names of 150 other islands, and it was therefore supposed that Tongatapu had some influence over other groups. Thus Tongatapu and Tahiti was regarded as a testing-ground for a general mission to the South Seas.” See Wood, Overseas Missions, 8.
31. In the British army, subalterns were soldiers who were subordinates placed in the front line because they were seen as expendable. For a discussion of subaltern subjects in theology, see Sathiananthan Clarke, Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
33. See Wood, Overseas Missions, 258.
34. Ibid., 166–167.
38. Ibid., 58–59: “The tradition of exegesis that has been practiced in the West seems to have run its course. There are too many instances of recycling and cultural discounting, and too willing a tendency to suppress difference, for us not to think that the envelope can’t be pushed much further. The standard exegesis spins faith into just more cultural filibuster.”

