THE END-OR MEDIUM

Jione Havea

Stories, like darkness, ripple and irrupt, bounce and interrupt the material, the immanent the hidden, the repressed the illusive, the economic the political, the transgressive Ways of hearing, reading, and telling stories like Saul seeking the wise woman at Endor, move toward, approach, each other ebbing, nudging, flowing, as if to never settle The touching of stories with ears, eyes, and tongues as well as noses are openings for talanoa at once process, product, event, medium, end

Talanoa Roots

Talanoa, among the natives of Oceania, is story, telling, and conversation, together (Havea 2010a). It is not one or the other of those, or one in the place of the others, but one in relation to the other two. Talanoa is the three—story, telling, conversation—weaving, multiplying. The three come together as one; they are one. If one receives more attention, that one serves as a reminder for the other two. The one that is at the foreground calls attention to the ones that are not as present or that have been neglected or repressed.

Talanoa—story, telling, conversation—is medium and end, event and process, channel for remembering and for forgetting, opportunity for reconsidering and for remixing. It digs around for the neglected and the repressed, but it can also cover for the oppressor. It reveals and conceals. Like desire and memory, talanoa can be wild and lame; like production
and faith, it works best in company; like sex and control, it can be bad and good; like the repressed and the waves in the sea, it can rise, irrupt, and break. *Talanoa* rolls and breaches and ripples (Havea 2010b). I do not know if *talanoa* was at the beginning, but *talanoa* is around us all, and I expect it to stay to the end.¹

*Talanoa* is less about origins and more about belonging (Moala 2011, 3–6), returning memories to the tip of tongues, to the flow of orality, of mediation and mediums. This essay is accordingly the working of *talanoa*, which is like a river: “*It tickles from the source until it flows flows flows. Down the mountains of the mountains. Branching onto the land the land the land. Flowing. Spiralling. Flowing towards the sea. Spiralling towards the sky. Where it grows wings and flies towards the universe of the unknown*” (Figiel 1999, 3–4 [emphasis original]).

My attention in this *talanoa*, uneasily squeezed into writing, is on three subjects at the edges of the worlds of the living and of the dead in 1 Sam 28: (1) Saul scrambles in the world of the living, seeking attention and affirmation, while (2) Samuel lies from the world of the dead, the proverbial other side, and (3) the unnamed woman medium at Endor has the ability to open the two worlds, and the two subjects, toward one another. This woman is at the edge, a medium at the end. She is the End-or (hear: “and/or” also) medium.

Fear Drives

The Philistines, dreaded neighbors of Israel since the days of Samson (Judg 13–16), muster their forces to Shunem—also identified as the home of Abishag (1 Kgs 1:1–4) and of the older woman who hosted Elisha (2 Kgs 4:8–10)—for war against Israel, who were gathering at Gilboa under Saul’s command. The narrator sets readers up to easily see the Philistines as the aggressive party.

Separated by the Harod Valley, the opposing camps would have eyed each other in clear view. “When Saul saw the Philistine force, his heart trembled with fear” (1 Sam 28:5 NJPS).² The narrator does not explain why. Saul’s fear could be due to the appearance of the Philistine force, in

¹ I prefer the lowercase “i” because I use the lowercase with “you,” “she,” “they,” and “others” also. I do not see the point in capitalizing the first person when she or he is because of everyone else.

² All translations of the Bible are my own, unless indicated otherwise.
units of hundreds and thousands (1 Sam 29:2), because size matters when it comes to war. Size matters, and war is men’s business. But I suspect also that the narrator wants readers to discredit Saul as the leader with no guts, the man who is not manly enough. As king, he too is a man of war, and he should not be easily intimidated. When the narrator announces, “His heart trembled with fear,” one sees Saul as a loser. That is one effect of the narrator’s talanoa.

The narrator does not indicate whether Saul knows that David, whom Samuel has anointed to be king in the place of Saul, has become the “bodyguard for life” for King Achish of Philistia (1 Sam 28:2). Two of Saul’s rivals, David and Achish, gather as one. The rival king of Israel joins with the king of the rival neighbor. This rivalry would have added to Saul’s fear. But David, at this point, is only part of Saul’s problem. Saul is also under pressure from YHWH and Samuel, who made him king and then ignored him as if he were a floating island. Detached. Unwanted.

Saul was made Israel’s first king, but not by his choice or design. He was the tall, handsome son of Kish, a wealthy Benjaminite. Saul went to look for his father’s missing asses (1 Sam 9:1–3), and Samuel kissed and oiled him to be ruler over YHWH’s people (1 Sam 10:1). Saul’s mission to find the lost asses coincided with Israel asking for a king to rule over them like the other nations (1 Sam 8). Israel sought change because Samuel’s sons were devious, so the request meant the rejection of the house of Samuel. YHWH selected Saul to begin a different form of governing (1 Sam 9:17). Saul was the chosen one, who became king in response to the people’s fear of Samuel’s sons. Ironically, it was Samuel who pushed Saul into the political and public eye. In the eyes of the biblical narrator, Saul’s ascension was not an accident. It was his fate (Gunn 1980).

Samuel’s support for Saul did not last (1 Sam 15:26). He soon anointed David (1 Sam 15:35–16:13) to replace Saul as king. But no one removed Saul, so Israel ended up with rival kings, Saul and David, each leading a circle of men. With David oiled to be messiah, Samuel stopped seeing Saul, up to the day Samuel died. Israel lamented for Samuel and buried him at his hometown, Ramah, then Saul forbade “[recourse to] ghosts and familiar spirits in the land” (1 Sam 28:3 NJPS). The connection between the burial of Samuel with Saul’s decree is so strong that it seems to me that Saul did not want the spirit of Samuel to return (Havea 2011). Samuel was dead and buried, and Saul prohibited any access to him. Let the dead man rest in peace, undisturbed, like a sinking island, in the other world, far away from here.
YHWH becomes more distant and unresponsive (1 Sam 28:6) as if Samuel’s death cuts YHWH off from Saul. It becomes apparent that it is up to Saul, as we say in the islands, to swim or drown. In Oceania, however, as my I-Kiribati friends reminded me when they problematized the claim that their islands will drown because of climate change with the observation that more people die in Kiribati due to suicide than to drowning, drowning is a reality but not an option. In the face of the Philistine force, Saul has to swim in a sea of fear. Fear drives him against his own will and judgment, against his own decree, which was a tapu (prohibition, sanctification) he set for the whole of Israel.

Fear is at the depths of this talanoa. Fear drives Israel to break from the house of Samuel; fear of the Philistines drives Saul to demand, “Find me a woman who consults ghosts, so that I can go to her and inquire through her” (1 Sam 28:7 NJPS). Fear rules Saul and drives this talanoa.

In circles where having and exercising power is favored, fear is a weakness. Fear hinders creativity, clouds judgment, and deflates resistance, which is necessary in the war for control. Fear is the mark of sissies, and it is not acceptable, especially in the case of a king.

But in settings where freedom is limited, as in the case of prisons, fear keeps one alive. Resistance is not welcomed in prisons, where one survives not by confronting the authorities but by dealing with the situation. In prisons, dealing is not about submitting to another or compromising one’s integrity but negotiating so that “one stays on top” of how and “what goes on” to and around oneself. Dealing is what people who have no control over themselves and their surroundings do, and fear is a key ingredient in their dealings. In their circles, fear is not a weakness but a necessary condition for survival and sanity. Among persons in prison with whom I read this story, Saul’s fear is a step toward dealing, toward staying on top of things. Going against his own decree is part of his dealing. Reversing opinions and breaking taboos are common in the realms of dealing and of talanoa. Seen in these lights, I sympathize with Saul’s fear and his demand for a woman to give him counsel. Fear drives Saul and his talanoa, and there is nothing wrong with that.

I admire the fear that inspires dealing, especially when this has to do with people who have limited or no power. That is not to say that all forms of fear are healthy. Fear might be a symptom of powerlessness and psychological disillusion, but it is a means of survival in incarceration. Fear on the part of authorities, who do not like when something penetrates the coverings of their powers, often leads to acts of repression and injustice.
This is where the case of Saul is interesting because, as king, he is a person of power. He is top among the national bourgeoisies. Since Saul’s struggle is with YHWH and Samuel, who holds more authority in the story world, i—controlled by the *talanoa* of the narrator—opt to see Saul as one who is dealing, swimming in order to survive. He, of course, is not completely powerless, for he has men under his control, to whom he commands, “Find me a woman.”

There is a woman at Endor, the courtiers tell Saul, who consults “familiar spirits” (1 Sam 28:7). The courtiers do not say if she was an Israelite, but David Jobling (1998, 186) is certain: “To be a medium (or a wizard, etc.) is therefore to be a foreigner and to be rightly expelled. The mediums cannot be Israelites for they have made themselves not Israelites by what they do.”

The exact location of Endor is not known, but Endor is the name for one of the towns that the Manassites could not dispossess (Josh 17:1–12), so it is “beyond the border” even if it is geographically close to Gilboa (Pigott 1998, 437). Endor is a reminder of Israel’s incomplete occupation of the land of Canaan, and a reminder also of the ability of the people of the land to resist the onslaught of YHWH’s people.

This story sets readers up to expect the crossing of multiple borders: from Gilboa to Endor, to and from the spirit world and the world of the living, and from Ramah (where Samuel is buried) to Endor (where the woman medium lives). Endor is one point of transit.

**Night Encounter**

Night falls. Time of transition. Disguise comes on. Bodies cross over. Movement. Transit. Saul and his men come to Endor, one of the towns that reminds readers of colonial Israel’s failure, looking for a woman whose practice Saul prohibited among Israelites. Failure. Forbidden. They come looking for a woman to do a prohibited act, and they come at night. Since she is at Endor, outside the lines of Israel’s occupation, she lives and operates outside of Israel’s jurisdiction. But the narrator presents her as if she speaks the same language as Saul and his men and as if she shares the same rules and values as the Israelites.\(^3\)

---

\(^3\) This narrator is not on top of the consequences of border crossing. He or she overlooks that in crossing borders one crosses cultures and languages. Assuming sameness across borders is one of the marks of colonialists, which this narrator bears.
That night at Endor, faces meet but do not greet each other. It is not a meeting between friends. There is no “Welcome!” or “You got me at hello!” Fear. Rush. The disguised man has a desire, and he wastes no time. He asks the unnamed woman to bring up a familiar spirit whom he does not name. In her response, not knowing that she is addressing Saul himself, she speaks as if she is under Saul’s spell: “You know what Saul has done, how he has banned [the use of] ghosts and familiar spirits in the land. So why are you laying a trap for me, to get me killed?” (1 Sam 28:9 NJPS). She too knows that dealing is necessary. Her life is important.

If the night encounter between Saul and the woman medium took place in Tuvalu, it would be called mea te pouliga, “thing of the darkness.” In this Tuvaluan phrase is the assumption that certain actions are appropriate only for the night, in the darkness. There are two ways to understand this. First is the understanding that certain actions are bad and should be hidden (in the darkness) from the eyes of others. Those actions (e.g., having sex, telling stories about the ancestors, explaining customs and practices, etc.) are not appropriate for the daytime.

When Europeans came to Oceania, they saw the natives as people of the darkness, as compared to the fair-skinned white people of the light, and the ways of the native people were judged to be mea te pouliga. Dark-skinned people do things of the darkness, which showed how they are uncivilized and unchristian. According to this understanding, the mea te pouliga should not be done at all. The Samoan novelist Sia Figiel (1996, 236) challenges the racialized favoring of fair skins and discrimination against darkness and darkened peoples: “Lightness died that first day in 1830 when the breakers of the sky [fair-skinned Europeans who came as traders, colonizers, and missionaries] entered these shores, forcing us all to forget … to forget … to bury our gods … to kill our gods … to re-define everything, recording history in reverse.” Darkness, mea te pouliga, came to Oceania with the landing of light/fair people.

There is a second explanation: mea te pouliga are necessary to be done, but because they involve breaking some taboo (hence they will bring a curse), they are performed in the dark so that the curse does not spread to people who might accidentally see what is done. Mea te pouliga take place in the dark so that innocent people are saved from the curse that will follow. The mea te pouliga may be as simple as sharing a talanoa about an ancestor with someone from outside that particular ancestor’s circle of relations or as revolting as offering a gift or sacrifice to another (rival, enemy) deity. In both cases, one intentionally violates a taboo and expects
a curse. But in violating the taboo in the darkness, one aims to contain the curse. This is a different kind of civilization: where one knows the social limits and taboos, as well as the costs for violating those, and is willing to bear the burden without spreading it to others. It is because of this that mea te pouliga continue in Tuvalu and in other islands of Oceania.

It helps my talanoa to see Saul’s mission as mea te pouliga. He comes to break a taboo, and he is willing to keep the burden on himself, so he assures the woman medium, “As the Lord lives, you won’t get into trouble over this” (1 Sam 28:11). He comes to a medium and promises an end.

The promising, disguised Saul then demands, “Bring up Samuel for me.” A dead man is to be recalled, to be troubled, so that he no longer rests in peace. Anxiety. Saul’s request invites a question that many Pacific Islanders ask when someone dies: “Were they ready to go?” If they were not ready to die, they might return even if they are not wanted back.

The peace one receives at death does not matter as much as the peace one reaches before dying, and this has to do with whether the dead person met all expectations and responsibilities. The Islanders’ question reveals the belief that if one was not ready to die, her or his soul will linger in the world of the living. This is a problem for the dead soul, who becomes restless, and for her or his relations, who share the blame for mishaps that befall the community. The worlds of the living and of the dead always connect. One lives in both worlds, the material and the spiritual, at all times.

If there are unfulfilled expectations and responsibilities from the dead person, those who are still living would call for her or him, and this reason lurks behind Saul’s demand. He demands the return of Samuel, his reawakening, his arousal, because there is some unfinished business. Saul has dealing to do with Samuel. Restlessness. It is not time for rest.

Night remains.
Talanoa ripples.

Torment Me

A rejected king seeks a rejected medium to bring up a dead (i.e., ejected from life) prophet who had rejected the king earlier. Why does a rejected person seek for his tormentor, all the way to the other side? For revenge? Resolution? More torment?

Torment is intoxicating for the tormentor, who (I am told) enjoys some sort of release in the rush of exercising power and in the illusion of control. There is something addictive for the tormented as well, at least in the
way Scriptures present them as having the ability to convert the pressure of terror into the pleasure of submission. For instance, stories of torment present natives as if they want to be colonized (e.g., Rahab betrays her people to help Israel crush Jericho in Josh 2–6), and the oppressed appear to be afraid of being released (e.g., Israel resubmits to YHWH in Josh 24). They find pleasure in terror, they want to be ruled, and they hunger for more (Havea 2007). The oppressed come to depend on their masters. This is what Frantz Fanon (2008, 64–88) calls the dependency complex. In refusing release, the oppressed remains a “thing” rather than becoming a human, which comes with the process of liberation (Fanon 2004, 2).

Stories of torment are addictive also for the tellers and the listeners. It is more difficult to put down a story in which a hero spills guts and blood than one about the righteous and upright winning glory through nonviolence. Texts of terror, as Phyllis Trible (1984) calls them, are captivating. They feed people’s hunger for pain and thirst for cruelty. Torment and terror attract and win practitioners and converts, and there are many in the scriptural texts (Havea 2007).

In the Bible, prophets have a neck for tormenting kings. Moses tormented Pharaoh (Exod 4–14), Balaam did Balak (Num 22–24), and in 1 Samuel, Samuel has a go at Saul. Samuel oiled Saul for the throne, then turned around and despised him, similar to how some rapists hate their victims (see 2 Sam 13:1–22). Yet Saul seeks Samuel. Is the allure of torment too strong for Saul, enticing him to come because death will not part him from Samuel? Is Saul too naive to realize that he will only get more torment from Samuel?

I want to believe that Saul expects Samuel to rise and return as a different person, transformed by the peace of death. The biblical narrator appears to be open to my expectation, but the rising Samuel is not. Death seems to have had no effect on him. Samuel has reached his end: once a tormentor always a tormentor. Though he was a prophet, Samuel was no medium. Death has lost its sting. In the case of Samuel, death is terminal rather than transitional; it signifies the point of arrival rather than of departure. By seeking Samuel’s return, Saul challenges the termination that comes with death. With the help of the medium, Samuel’s secret in dying, as suggested in Alice Walker’s “Dying,” begins to unravel:

```
Dying is yours
alone,
precious
```
human being
whatever
you have done.

Dying is
your secret. (Walker 2010, 138)

This reading would have a more comforting feel if Saul were searching for the remedy that is in venom, as we find in the deadly sea urchin we call *alamea* in Tonga. It is a delicacy for Islanders, but, as the case is with most valued things, it will be fatal if one steps on its back. To reverse the toxin, one needs to simply turn the *alamea* over and stand on its underside. The healing is in *alamea* itself. If Saul is seeking Samuel for the same reason, in order to turn Samuel over so that he might give Saul some relief, Saul would come across as a wise character. Freud and Derrida, I imagine, would have sung Saul’s praises: “David won Samuel’s heart, and thousands more, but Saul turned him over.” The biblical narrator does not allow Saul that privilege, for he portrays Saul as a spoiled child who looks for and demands something he should know that he will not get. For the narrator, Saul just cannot learn his lesson. He comes to Endor to ask for more torment.

Face Recognition

Saul comes to Endor even though Samuel is buried at Ramah. How the medium is able to manifest Samuel in Endor is the stuff of legends. If she were a native of Oceania, she would have known of the passages in the underworld, even deeper than the caves where natives used to store and live, and 1 Sam 28 is her *talanoa* also.

The woman knows her job and goes about it initially (v. 11) without any of the ballyhoo we associate with spiritualism. She has the efficiency of a telephone operator: “What name?” And she gets the connection right the first time! (Jobling 1998, 187)\(^4\)

---

\(^4\) Jobling suggests an alternative reading that showcases the woman’s *dealing* spirit. She knows who Saul is from the start, and she manipulates the event so that Saul thinks that he is in charge (Jobling 1998, 188). She is wise.
She sees a divine being coming up from the earth. She recognizes him as Samuel. She screams. Excitement. She recognizes Saul as well. The appearance of the dead prophet, an old man wrapped in a robe, exposes the disguised king. Recognition. Seeing Samuel and recognizing Saul makes the medium a figure for Hannah: “He is šāʾûl” (1 Sam 2:28), Hannah said; “You are šāʾûl” (1 Sam 28:12), the medium says (Green 2003, 108). The appearance of one becomes the recognition of the other. They are not strangers to one another. Greeting. The tālanoa of two, Saul and the medium, becomes tālanoa of a threesome, with the rising of Samuel.

The woman is a medium. She breaks through limits and brings a body across to the other side. She crosses borders. She breaks taboos. She performs mea te pouliga, and I imagine she knows that that comes with a burden. Is this another reason why she screams when she recognizes Saul? Delight. He is the one who can pardon her for doing a forbidden task, for being a medium. He is the one who can remove the curse. If she were an I-Kiribati, a native of Kiribati, Saul would have had to announce tekeroi (ban is lifted) over her.⁵ Along this line, she comes across as a dealing woman also. She is, as they say in Tuvalu, a fefine manuia, a blessed woman, a woman of blessings, of fortunes. It is also in the nature of mediums to be, as Abram was expected to be (see Gen 12:1–4a), windows of blessings for others. She opens a window for Saul to gain a blessing through her, but Samuel does not cooperate.

Samuel does not even acknowledge her presence, as his attention is burning for Saul, and in my first reading, I could not excuse his lack of respect for her (Havea 2011). A typical patriarch he is. But ignoring her, on second thought, proves that she is not a problem in Samuel’s eyes. She is only a medium, so she is not to be condemned, even though she is the one who makes things happen. It is she, not Saul, who disturbs Samuel’s rest. In this regard, Samuel’s burning fury against Saul lets her off the hook. In contrast to Saul’s fear, which led him to the woman, Samuel’s anger blinds him from her. To an extent, then, it is good for her that Samuel is so angry with Saul.

Like a grumpy old man, Samuel is not happy about being disturbed (1 Sam 28:15). But he has to be disturbed because Saul is in great trouble on account of the Philistine forces and God’s absence. Saul is in distress, and he needs Samuel’s direction. Samuel’s response is expected: God has

⁵ Most I-Kiribati people pronounce tekeroi over food, even after offering a prayer, before eating a meal.
rejected Saul and replaced him with David. Nothing is new here. Then Samuel announces the death of Saul: “Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me” (1 Sam 28:19). Irony. To be with Samuel is to be dead, to expire. Death is not what Saul is seeking, but death will enable the removal and replacement that has been lacking in the story of Israel’s monarchy. Death is necessary if replacement (by David) is to take place. Of course, replacement is necessary because there can only be one monarch, and this is one of the problems that monotheistic religions and colonialist nations keep up. This is most devastating when control is over land, economy, literature, customs, minds, and/or means of expression (Nicole 2001). Radical decolonization is thus required (Smith 2008).

This *talanoa* aims to do something along that line on Samuel, who accelerates the story from recognition to condemnation and to the death sentence. He wastes no time. He draws Saul’s story to closure and takes over the story of the medium. Time’s up. Night has not lifted. Samuel knows not how freeing *tekeroi* is.

The medium brings Samuel up from the earth, and he takes over her place in the narrator’s account. When she returns to the narrator’s view, Samuel sinks into the night. She and Samuel switch places, and this is expected of a medium. A medium substitutes for someone else; she can embody the process of mediation.

Substitution in 1 Sam 28 is not limited to that between the woman and Samuel. Samuel also substitutes for God, insofar as he speaks on behalf of God, and Saul substitutes for Israel, who shares his fate. David is an interesting case, for he lurks behind 1 Sam 28 as the substitute for Saul. In due course, David will substitute for Israel and for God.

Nationalization of Death

Whether death exists and in what form, or does not exist at all, remains a riddle: “They say before you die, you do not die; while you are alive, death does not exist; and after you die, death does not exist either. Before death, there is no death; and after death there is no death” (Hanh and Berrigan 2009, 7). Death is a koan. But there is general agreement that death sets persons adrift, into the domains of the buried and the realms of the forgotten. Death fractures.

Death also draws people together. The ones who pass on join the ancestors at a mythical place Polynesians call *Pulotu*: Their bodies sink into and therefore become one with Earth; the survivors gather to
mourn and remember and to dedicate their dead relative to the collective memory. This connecting sentiment is present in the African poet Mazisi Kunene’s “Cycle.”

So many are asleep under the ground,  
When we dance at the festival  
Embracing the earth with our feet.  
Maybe the place on which we stand  
Is where they also stood with their dreams.  
They dreamed until they were tired  
And handed us the tail with which we shall dance.  
Even the weeds emerge in their praise.  
Yesterday they were vast villages  
We too shall follow their path,  
Our dust shall arise at the gathering place  
And the child will dance alone on our grounds. (Soyinka 1975, 48–49)

Death is about approaching, and it mends.  
Samuel returns from death to confirm that the impending death of Saul will fulfill YHWH’s rejection of Saul. Saul’s death will commit Saul to Samuel. Me voici! There is no mention in this story of whether YHWH too meets death, but as far as Saul is concerned, the silent YHWH is as good as dead. Samuel does not hold that position, for he sticks to YHWH, even beyond death.

“Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me,” announces Samuel. Returned from death, Samuel represents death, and it is toward him (qua death) that Saul is now moving. YHWH has broken up with Saul, but Saul is moving toward Samuel. He came to Endor seeking Samuel, and the next day he will be with Samuel. Saul will not come alone. His sons will die with him on the same day, and “YHWH will also deliver the Israelite forces into the hands of the Philistines” (1 Sam 28:19). It is not clear if this means that the Philistines will enslave or kill the Israelites, but Saul’s death will indeed affect the nation.

Saul will die because he failed to execute the wrath of YHWH against the Amalekites (2 Sam 28:18), and the Philistines will overpower the Israelites because they were backing Saul. The king’s death is entangled with the nation’s life. “The king whom the Israelites had demanded to lead them in battle (1 Sam. 8:20) would drag them instead to their defeat. Samuel did not tell Saul what to do because there was nothing he could do—the
The end—or medium 93

message from the grave was grave indeed!” (Pigott 1998, 439). The king’s wrongdoing will be costly to the Israelites.

In life and in death, Saul’s fate entwines with the life of the nation. The wrongdoing that resulted in his rejection by God and Samuel was prompted by his concern for the harmony of the people: “I did wrong to transgress the LORD’s command and your instructions; but I was afraid of the troops and I yielded to them” (1 Sam 15:24 NJPS). Afraid that the people might disperse, Saul favored the people over YHWH and Samuel.

Does Saul, in the end, put his personal agenda ahead of the interest of the people? Paul Borgman (2008, 62) thinks so: “Saul is surely doomed because of his handling of fear…. Saul’s quest for certainty through the medium stems from fear regarding his own status rather than care for Israel: am I not the king, am I not to be sustained as king and admired above all others?” (emphasis original). Even if Borgman is correct that Saul was self-centered and that he was seeking to break away from Israel, Samuel will not allow it. Samuel ties Saul’s death to the submission of the Israelites to the Philistines. They rise and fall together.

YHWH turned from Saul, but Saul will not let YHWH go. He does not leave Samuel alone either. Saul does not want to let YHWH or Samuel break away. Along similar lines, Samuel will not let Saul break away from Israel. The lives of these characters interweave so tightly that the death of one affects the others, and the people around them. The impending death of Saul is nationalized; his life and death intersect with the nation. Nationhood-ing. Transference.

Nationhood Assault

The strife in 1 Sam 28, at one level, is an international one: Philistia against Israel. The king of each represents his nation, but the two nations do not come to blows in 1 Sam 28. Rather, 1 Sam 28 tells of the struggles of Saul, from whom the throne of his nation has been torn. He is not the true king of Israel; according to Samuel, David is the real king. This is the internal site of the strife.

But there is no confrontation between Saul and David in 1 Sam 28 either. David, on the other hand—and this ties Israel’s internal affair to its international one—is backing the Philistine king. David is the king of Israel; David sleeps with the enemy; David is enemy also. The personal, the public, the national, and the transnational whirl together.
Samuel returns from death to seal the rejection of Saul and thereby adds another level to the strife. Saul is also rejected by the other side, the side of death. The rejection of Saul is complete. He is opposed by a neighboring nation, rejected by his God, and rejected by the dead also. Saul is nationalized and at once denationalized. Who then holds and feeds Israel’s interests? In other words, appealing to Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak (2010), who sings this nation’s song?

Nationhood is problematized in 1 Sam 28. The nation is under pressure from a foreign power and the leaders are in disarray, across several (positional and ideological) borders. The angry song that Samuel rises to sing is for death and disempowerment, toward ending Saul’s era. The quandary herein is whether the nation ends with the demise of Saul. The narrator does not entertain this possibility, for even though the king is nationalized, the nation is not personalized. A king may die and be forgotten, and even deserted as Moses was in the wilderness, but the nation does not die with him. In other words, the product (king) may represent the process that produces it (nation), but the process cannot be reduced to the product. What then makes Israel a nation? What is the tone and rhythm of its nationhood?

The fervor of nationalism that cradles 1 Sam 28 is problematized by the ambiguity of Israel’s nationhood. As such, I agree with Spivak (2010, 13, 21) “that there is no nation before nationalism” and “that imagination feeds nationalism.” The problem with 1 Sam 28, then, true also with the Hebrew Bible in general, is that it presents nationalism (imagination, ideology) as if that is nationhood (state, nation). There is nationalism in 1 Sam 28, but this does not presuppose that a nation was there also. Nationalism can be free of reality.

There are border crossings in 1 Sam 28, which are significant for my reading not because those open the story up to the possibility of transnationalism but because those put this talanoa in the polylingual paths of traders and traitors. Crossing borders requires one to swim in the tides of tongues and risk being lost in translation, which are the realms in which mediums operate. Mediation. Translation. Negotiation.

The fact that the biblical narrator ignores how border crossings push one into a different language world (Philistia, Endor) is evidence that this narrator is deafened by the fervor of nationalism. First Samuel 28 would definitely have been different if it were told by the medium of Endor. Her talanoa would be less nationalist and more transitional and migrational. Voyage. Home song. Longing.
Unleashing Acceptance

It is easy to read between the lines that Saul is imprisoned by the need for acceptance, so he goes to great lengths to gain approval. Belonging. He comes looking for Samuel’s approval, similar to how blacks seek the approval of whites. “As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man [sic]. And it is white” (Fanon 2008, xiv). The myth of whiteness is driven by the inferiority complex, which Fanon exposes and challenges at several levels. “There should be no attempt to fixate man [sic], since it is his [sic] destiny to be unleashed.… The misfortune of the man [sic] of color is having been enslaved” (205). Such is the burden of the black person, made worse by the persisting feeling that God does not care. The Zimbabwean poet Mashingaidze Gomo (2010, 46) hits the mark full on: “I think there are two gods in heaven: a god for white people who blesses them even when they are being evil to us and then there must also be a god for African people and he [sic] doesn’t care what happens to us.”

At one level, Saulcraves acceptance. Acceptance is at no time unnecessary or unwelcome, and it is most desired during times of loneliness and struggle. But there is more for Saul in 1 Sam 28 than acceptance. He comes to Endor to demand a response from Samuel because he is not satisfied with YHWH’s silence. He comes because he does not want his voice to be taken away (see Anyidoho 2011, 67). In not answering Saul, YHWH treats him as a nonsubject, as if he is among the wretched of the earth and the subalterns who cannot speak. In my reading of Saul’s coming to Endor, i am led to agree that “there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist” (Fanon 2004, 5). So i imagine that Saul comes for a hearing, to push for an answer. Saul does not come to lie down so that Samuel would walk over him but in order to do some dealing.

Saul is a reminder for Job, who debates his traditionalist friends and demands that YHWH appear and answer his charges. Saul explains that he calls Samuel so that Samuel can tell him what he is to do (1 Sam 28:15b). Explanations like that, showing that the speaker needs the one addressed, usually draw people into talanoa, if they are on the same standing and if they share respect for one another. This does not work in Saul’s favor because Samuel, who used to be among Israel’s national bourgeoisie, is not very accepting. Samuel blasts Saul with words that are so terrifying that they floor him (1 Sam 28:20). Saul drops also because there is no strength in him, for he has not eaten all day and all night.
Samuel seems to take Saul’s mission as an act of aggression, and Samuel’s response is aggressive. Aggression is at the seams of this *talanoa*, even if the aggression is expressed only with words. No one raises an arm to strike another in the opposite camp. What we have is the verbal war before the physical one, and in this round, Samuel drops Saul to the ground. Samuel withholds acceptance. He is like God, who, as the Samoan poet and writer Albert Wendt (2009, 63, 116) puts it, “can be frigid (or impotent)” and “can also suffer breakdowns.” Unlike Samuel, the Medium is more accepting, even if she is leading Saul on (Jobling 1998, 188).

The Medium Hosts

Darkness remains. Saul lies on the ground, and the woman comes toward him. In the beginning, she was the one whom Saul was seeking. At the end, she approaches her seeker. She moves to Saul because she sees that he is disturbed. She did not see him being disturbed when he first came. He became disturbed after Samuel had words with him.

The woman medium addresses Saul out of care. She suggests that he eat what she will prepare. She wants Saul to put his life in her hands, as she has put hers in his hands. She offers hospitality and the opportunity to gain strength. Become strong. Be upstanding. He refuses. His men join in, and he gives in to them. He rises. Sits on the couch. She butchers a fatted calf, kneads flour, bakes bread, and places those before Saul and his men. She is not wicked as people imagine a witch to be (so Pigott 1998, 435, 440). “At the level of plot this simple act of hospitality of a proscribed woman to her authoritative king is arguably the kindest gesture we have seen extended to Saul” (Green 2003, 112).

Having partaken of the woman’s generosity, Saul and his men again, silently, melt into the darkness.

Works Cited


