

The Renaissance of Relationality Pacific Thought from Suva Conference on Indigenous Philosophy July 2018

Betsan Martin, August 2018

We are in a relational renaissance led by Indigenous ways of living and knowing which teach us that we are all kin, and that 'we' are humans and birds and fish and trees and mountains – all forms of life are part of a relational and interdependent uni-verse.

More than this, indigenous relationality speaks of the interplay between God and the spiritual realm with land and oceans and people. Love is an expansive energy of relationality with the inspirational quality of stars on their ever-changing course of infinite interwoven intelligence.

Navigational imagery draws on the stars and the ocean in indigenous philosophy of Pacific peoples, where the ocean is the means of joining peoples and the 'high rising and low gliding waves' evoke both fear and calm, purpose and destination.

Waves also refer to the breaking of waters before birth and giving birth to life. At the Pacific Indigenous Philosophy Conference in Suva, in July the Hawaiian indigenous philosopher Dr Manulani Meyer contrasted the equality aspirations of western feminism with the feminine quality of receptivity. She referred to the failure of western feminism to appreciate the mana of women; and spoke of indigenous ways simply as the ways which have endured through participating in the natural world.

The rebirth of relationality comes at a time when we have settled into acknowledging colonial histories. At the conference, many questions were raised about reconciling indigenous knowledge and Christianity. There was open consideration of the stark contrasts between Pacific peoples' sense of community and spirituality and western emphasis on the individual and secularism, on rationality and private property. Christianity arrived in the Pacific and in Aotearoa with the attributes of western ways as it had been shaped by those traditions over centuries. Yet Christianity has a paradoxical role: it has been a harbinger of colonization, and a counter-force to ways of the west, expressed for example in justice movements to resist the harms of society, and more recently, to lament environmental harm and call for safeguards for nature.

What came through the explorations of Pacific indigenous thought was that positioning Christianity as opposite to indigenous thought overlooks the relational world view of indigenous forebears who saw in Christianity new dimensions of spiritual and material power. As vividly portrayed in Dame Anne Salmond's recent book, *Tears of Rangi*, the missionaries brought their particular versions of Christian teaching along with horizons of the world on the other side of the earth – and along

with opportunities came two worlds completely incomprehensible to each other. The exposure of each to the other was both expansive and deeply costly.

A costly dimension can be seen in the attempt to erase traditional healing practices which come from the relationship between self and environment. These are being revived as a new generation of younger people seek to learn of the remedies of plants of the forests, kept by elders and evolving to meet the needs of modern ailments. The Chomorro people of Guam are expanding their practices of healing as people come to their clinics for remedies, yet they have to fight against their jungles being taken over by the &US military. Chomorro people ask 'how can the military understand medicine?'

The rising recognition of indigenous understandings of the integration between the human and natural universe comes with the winds of change as non-indigenous peoples appreciate that we are all part of an interdependent universe interwoven in ways that are beyond human comprehension. The psalm writers understood this well, as did Job in being faced by the overwhelming depths of creation in Chapter 38:

Who is this who conceals my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know....
Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?

The invitation to be immersed in the world around us, and heed its mysteries is as old as it is new and were at the heart of papers and reflections and the talanoa dialogues in the evenings in Suva. The discussions were against a back ground of holding and evolving indigenous knowledge in its exposure to development. Revd. Dr Ilaitia Tuwere spoke of land tenure from his deeply respected theology and knowledge of land in Fiji. Opportunities and tensions from collective land tenure and development sit alongside infrastructure needs such as water services and energy, technology and international investment interests.

Quality in relationships is drawn from our families, fanau, whanau, from friendship and from understanding the place we live in, the waters that sustain us, the air that surrounds us. We deepen relational ways of living by listening, observing, sharing, and experiencing the internal and external worlds as dimensions of consciousness that draw us to loving responsibility.