



## Dispatch

# Pacific Academic Migrants: Re-shaping Spaces in Dynamic Times

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### Introduction

The ocean connects Pacific peoples in complex ways. Māori arrived on the shores of Aotearoa (New Zealand) in waka (canoes) from across Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean. Their migration was part of a more general movement of skilled voyagers who stopped at various times in diverse places. Moana (or Pacific) people remain related through bloodlines, language and intersecting stories. Many connections can be seen. Some Tongans, Samoans and Fijians share genealogies (Hau'ofa, 1994). People of ancestry now called Polynesian inhabit areas of the Solomon Islands in modern Melanesia (Kinaston et al., 2013). In addition, trade historically crisscrossed the east and west of the ocean (Hau'ofa, 1994) as it does today. Cosmologically, links also abound: Maui who fished up Te Ika a Maui, the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, left his mark behind in places such as 'Eua in Tonga; Tangaroa, the Māori deity of the ocean, corresponds in many ways to Tagaloa of the Samoans (Nunn, 2003). Any simplifying focus on the separation of people in this regional space reinforces cartographic lines constructed by European settlers when describing the movement of individuals at the expense of the expanding relational connections that matter more.

That space is not a simple idea in this region can be illustrated by two examples. The first is from Malaita in the Solomon Islands, from where David Gegeo (2001) describes the Kwara'ae perspective of place as a matter of indigeneity which involves inhabiting a Kwara'ae ontology and epistemology, and space as "the location a Kwara'ae person occupies while in motion or circulation" (pp. 494-495). By shifting in space, migrating

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Malaitans understand movement as an act that expands place through its portability. Gegeo continues, “because of the possibility of space, a person can be anywhere and still be inextricably tied to place” (2001, p. 495). Grounded in Samoan thought, Sa’iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009) discusses the intersections between the concepts of *malaga* (movement back and forth; migration) and *va* (relational space between) to point to “the importance of thinking about migration more socially than territorially” (p. 22). Seen through this lens, migration is creative and circular. Movement creates an expanded relational space to be maintained through actions that express an ethic of care. By undertaking relational obligations, Samoans remain firmly linked to the social network and physical place of origin.

Academic migrants are those scholars who move to another “world of ideas” (Mason & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2014, p. 3). The way space is understood by various groups in the Pacific region is salient when considering academic migration, the movement around the region (and beyond) of emerging (and established) scholars. Through complex, contextual understandings of place, space and movement, academic migration in the Pacific region deserves to be thought of in more than physical ways. Individual Samoans, Tongans, Papua New Guineans, Solomon Islanders and so on, do relocate temporarily or permanently to universities such as ours in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, to further their education and sometimes their careers. Many are selected for further education because they are leaders or because of their potential in this area. For them and others, education brings expectations of, and opportunities for leadership. However, particularly in the context of leadership, what are the relational implications of academic migration?

In some cases, Pacific academic migration to educational spaces overwhelmingly populated with Western ideas can result in less than optimal social outcomes. For example, some academic migrants may return to their place with colonial worldviews, leverage their qualifications and experiences to accede to leadership positions, and localize rather than dehegemonize leadership in their Pacific nations (Gegeo, 2001): the portability of place is not one-way. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a bicultural mandate places even more importance on relationality, the state and experience of being related, as an aspect of academic migration. Many educational institutions here seem to still be struggling to equitably articulate the implications of bi-culturalism in education, adding nuance to any discussion of tension in academic space.

Even in Pacific located and focused academic institutions, academic leaders may fail to resolve tensions between cultural democracy, which values students’ home-based understandings and experiences, and cultural blindness, which fails to value diversity (Helu-Thaman, 2014). In such cases, academics may be faced with a migration to an unfamiliar world of ideas in their own land. Unresolved tensions between world views can be costly. The personal pain involved is depicted by Konai Helu-Thaman in her poem “Our Way” (Helu-Thaman, 2003, pp. 3-4): a belittling personal discomfort likely replicated in the lives of those who travel similar paths.

### **Questions and opportunity**

In a situation where academic migration is a given but is not always clearly articulated, appreciated or critiqued, it is pertinent to ask a number of questions: What qualities of pedagogical environments can be imagined to better reflect nuanced regional understandings of space and movement? How might such understandings be enacted? What kinds of pedagogies and interactions best reflect the various implications of relational thought in the region? How can an academic space of value to academic migrants be capable of honoring an indigenous group or groups and act in anti-hegemonic ways? While answers may be hard to find, it is clear that newly configured spaces and new understandings are required within the academy to foster deeper respect for academic migrants by re-valuing their contributions. In this way, the “rightful place of alternative cultures of knowledge and learning” (Mason & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2014, p. 1) as both challenging and complementary to hegemonic knowledge is fortified.

Movement toward this ideal situation is contingent on appropriate configurations of relationships. The potential of open dialogic relational spaces not pre-structured by judgements of superiority or inferiority has been articulated in a number of contexts in the region. For example, biotechnology has been equitably and revealingly articulated with Māori theorizations of the world through the deliberate employment of a “negotiating space” (Hudson et al., 2010; Hudson et al., 2012). This model has been extended to the relationships between Western clinical models and Pacific health in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009a, 2009b). This kind of thinking has also been applied to Pasifika education, the education of students of Pacific origin in Aotearoa New Zealand, where success involves negotiating in a space between ideas of European and Pacific origin (Reynolds, 2016). In the case of academic migration, spatial, relational thinking can support Pacific peoples through practices that are ontologically grounded. Here, the negotiation involves neither ignoring nor being dominated by the academic context that brings academic migrants together, but rather foregrounding relationality in ways that are creative, anti-hegemonic and communally beneficial.

### **Leadership Pacific (LP)**

What follows is an account of one such deliberately constructed negotiating space: Leadership Pacific (LP). LP involves a Pacific understanding of movement and space applied in the leadership field. A deliberate construction of this kind provides a challenge to hegemonic responses to Pacific academic migration by focusing on the distinctive qualities of space inhabited by Pacific-origin people as they move in time and space. LP is a movement of leadership development, which configures space by embracing storying as a

pedagogy consistent with Pacific relational, dialogic and connected understandings of the world.

Storying is a pedagogy with deep roots in the Pacific region. Tok stori, for example, is a Melanesian form of communication, whereby a shared reality is created through storying (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019; Sanga et al., 2018). Those who contribute to a storying session are understood to be experts in their own experiences. The sharing of stories allows emotional as well as other forms of knowledge to remain as integrated as they are in life. Another example, talanoa, is a form of communication at home in places such as Tonga and Samoa (Fa'avae et al., 2016; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Vaoleti, 2006). Like tok stori, talanoa involves storied expression; perspectives and knowledge are presented in a space where enhanced understanding of others is facilitated by increased relational closeness. As in tok stori, in talanoa contextual elements dictate the exact form of encounter. Both tok stori and talanoa are ontological, relational ways of being in the world, which are useful in, but exist beyond, research and learning.

LP was begun in response to academic migration. Academic migrants from across the region needed friendship, and a leadership cluster offered this possibility. In 2005, in the face of a “university campus... cold in more ways than one,” five student members met with two academic staff to “negotiate an unfamiliar learning environment” (Sanga, 2017, p. 102), using the relational resources and understandings they brought with them. Seeking a space with village-like qualities, these original members started a tradition of relatively short gatherings for storying over coffee or lunch, generally on a monthly basis. As a Pan-Pacific group, augmented by those from other regions who wish to experience, understand and positively contribute to the lifeways of Moana people, LP clusters continue to operate to provide a space for storying, deliberate listening and learning on leadership and other matters. Members come when they can, bring their friends and colleagues, and spread the word that those who travel to other worlds of ideas can continue to value, learn and live in their own.

Within LP, storying “presents leadership in relational terms rather than as a strategy to learn or a style to master” (Sanga, 2017, p. 105). Through this medium, LP proposes an understanding of leadership based on a dual philosophical platform: finding one’s purpose as greater-than-life and acknowledging the privilege one has in life (Sanga, 2008). These philosophical tenets are unashamedly relational, affirming and enabling, embodying Pacific-sourced relationality understood through a strengths-based lens. This understanding is supported by three underlying principles: the ownership and assumption of responsibility for oneself on individual and societal levels; appreciating what one has (and not looking primarily for what one has not); and starting with the here and now in leadership – heritages, cultures and resources, in our contexts (Sanga, 2008).

Through these philosophical tenets and operating principles, LP is a practical response to the kinds of leadership theorization that permeate the

academic world. These often separate ideas about leadership from experiential knowledge, valuing the former at the expense of the latter. In addition, LP defies the kinds of cartographic separations that dominate western thinking about the Pacific region, by providing a space for recognition of the kinds of connections that have long existed and been valued. A focus on connection fits with thinking that sees leadership as influence, and influence as relational: when leadership is named in such terms, relationships are nurtured at the expense of the development of individual power, and self-protection gives way to a genuine commitment to those to whom one is related (Sanga, 2008). If members see an LP cluster as a kind of village, this implies relational responsibilities and obligations. These stretch beyond the professional to mutual acceptance as a ground for deep interaction, trust and care, so that hegemonic segmentation is resisted.

LP can be appreciated as a movement in a particular space and time. Aligned with the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific for Pacific (RPEIPP) (e.g., Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Pene et al., 2002; Thaman, 2009), LP thought comes from a perspective which recognizes that one effect of the academic worlds to which Pacific scholars migrate is the erosion of relational embeddedness, subsumed and potentially neglected in other traditions. This, however, is not a backward-looking stance. As Sanga (2008) says, “the times of your grandmothers and grandfathers are over” (p. 2). As a consequence, LP understands its role in supporting academic migrants as being to appreciate and celebrate time-tested leadership institutions and frameworks, while encouraging migrants to accept themselves for who they are – neither defined by the academic worlds of the present, nor captivated by an image of the past, however rendered. Instead, LP invites academic migrants to “look inside” as leaders and dig deeper into personal resources informed by context, experience and relationships, to deal with the here and now.

### **The Leadership Pacific (LP) Application**

The portability, flexibility and creativity of the LP space can be demonstrated by the inaugural LP conference, which took place at The University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, in 2018. Despite issues of cost and the vagaries of transport in the region, over 60 delegates from a number of Pacific regional nation states – including Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and Fiji – met to support and develop understandings of ethical leadership through mutual contact and storying. Storying as pedagogy was evident in sessions that were run as tok stori, through panel discussions where a tok stori was staged by speakers and then opened to observers, and in informal settings in which participants responded through story to the stories of presenters.

There were several distinctive features of the conference. One feature was the deliberate foregrounding of storied intersections achieved through inviting presentations on a number of different stories on a related theme. For instance, leadership was storied in the context of Moana families from the positions of a daughter, of parents relating to children, and through the experiences of a widowed father reflecting on families in times of social change. The intersections of these stories revealed theory embedded in experience. Deliberate listeners were able to appreciate variations and commonalities in the intertwined nature of emotion, responsibility, faith and strategy in family life in various Pacific-context circumstances.

A second important aspect of the LP conference space was deliberate valuing of the dignity of participants. This involved downplaying position or rank. Thus, undergraduate students, villagers, village leaders and spokespeople, school teachers, administrators, policy makers and senior university academics were encouraged to reflect on, and learn from, each other's stories. For example, the hereditary nature of wisdom indicated by one's name in certain parts of the Solomon Islands was recounted in adjacent time and space, both to a story of school-based educational leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to personal experiences of leadership, land, law and tradition in modern day Fiji. In this way, conference participants were invited to use their skills in connection and empathy to make sense of the lives of others by appreciating the strengths revealed in the stories.

Third, emotional and intimate connections can be a consequence of a storying pedagogy, as can tangential learning, especially when deliberate juxtaposition of stories is a feature of the learning space. Two examples from the LP conference space are the remarks of a participating mentorship practitioner from the Solomon Islands on the novelty and usefulness of the idea of leadership as creating space for others, understood and collected from a story of school-based leadership in Aotearoa; and the self-reflection evident in an informal storying session which followed a panel storied discussion on leadership and the I-Taukei (Indigenous Fijian) mind. In this tok stori session, those present, Indigenous and otherwise, were able to reflect on the ontological nature of understandings of leadership in their own contextual stories. In these and other ways, the LP conference became a space in which learning took place and leadership was demonstrated in the respectful co-existence of the many Pacific places brought to Fiji by participants, facilitated by the deliberate relational qualities of the gathering. This approach to academic conference space was further realized in the second LP conference, in Honiara, Solomon Islands in 2019.

### **Looking ahead**

For us, Moana (or Pacific) peoples whose relational worldviews deeply influence our understandings of space and movement, the future is likely to

demand the following of us. First, we will need to continue assuming primary responsibility for thinking through our Moana conceptualizations of movement and space and their creative and adaptive applications in an ever-changing Pacific context. This is by no means easy, as the tasks require clarity of vision and coordination of action. This leadership task is critical given that the common trend in academia is to borrow hegemonic ideas, which are often from outside of local contexts. LP is at the forefront of providing leadership, and must continue doing so diligently.

Second, for Moana academic migrants, there is always a values mismatch in our academic encounters. This is because our communitarian worldviews often clash with the predominant individualized values of conventional academia. As a result, the need is constantly for village-like caring and reciprocal relationships. While the LP experience has pointed to a way of responding adaptively to the tensions between values faced by academic Pacific migrants, the LP response needs to be fully researched. Only when researched well will the LP as a local-regional response be understood better, enabling the movement to fulfil its potential to contribute to the knowledge base on academic migrants.

Third, the people-centered storying pedagogy of LP has provided an alternative indigenous creative space for Moana and other academic migrants. This alternative space needs to be nurtured and explored. Through research and exploratory applications along the lines of the emerging scholarship on Tongan talanoa (Fa'avae et al., 2016) and Solomon Islands tok stori (Sanga et al., 2018), we can deepen our understanding of the storying pedagogy and improve its portability for the varied Pacific academic contexts (Sanga et al., 2020) and elsewhere. This is a fusion of methodology and experience aiming to build on the cultural strengths of the past in order to find relevance in the here and now.

Fourth, the LP experience, while offering an alternative approach, is a welcoming and inviting space, which is created by and for Moana academic migrants and others. So far, this approach appears promising and ethical. As a long-term project, however, the LP experience needs to be seriously studied. Research questions must be identified. Case studies need to be undertaken in different Pacific Islands nation states, including in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australian universities. Quantitative surveys need to be done. By undertaking a serious study, the knowledge base on LP as a local-regional counter story can be built logically and sequentially, thereby increasing the potential value and relevance of this strategy for dealing with academic migration in the Pacific region.

## **Conclusion**

In this Dispatch, we discussed ways of understanding the intersections of movement and space derived from the worldviews of Moana peoples, and

explored these via the experiences of Pacific academic migrants through Leadership Pacific. We recognize that considerable applied research is needed for us to understand the value and relevance of Pacific thought on this subject matter. In looking ahead, we have therefore suggested a future LP, which includes this task of identifying and building a knowledge base on Pacific academic migrants. In the short-term, given our familiarity with Pacific worldviews and thought, and through this piece, we suggest that a contextualized creative and adaptive approach has potential to be responsive to and supportive of the needs of academic migrants. Long-term, we suggest that the necessary knowledge base for such contextual approaches is developed in order to further inform global scholarship on finding anti-hegemonic, anti-racist and ethical forms of response to the needs of academic migrants.

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