“Talking Critically Yet Harmoniously”

It's In Our Bloodlines As Moana Oceania Peoples

Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy
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Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy (Lagi-Maama) is a cultural organization based in Aotearoa New Zealand that we (Toluma'anave Barbara Makuati-Afitu and Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai) formally established in August 2018.¹ What we do involves mediating at the intersection of Indigenous communities and institutional settings, to create a more harmonious and *hoa/soa*/balanced time-space, by imbedding different ways of knowing, seeing, and doing.

As Moana Oceania women of Tongan and Samoan heritage we were gifted the name Lagi-Maama to symbolically represent our ancestral lineages and connections, but also to genuinely reflect the Indigenous foundation and approach of the areas we work in and what we do in true service of our Moana Oceania peoples. The literal and symbolic meaning of our name Lagi-Maama is drawn from Tongan Indigenous knowledge and foundation. *Lagi* symbolically means Sāmoa and literally means sky. It is linked to the realm of heavenly, godly, or divine beings. It also references the future and is associated with taboo/beauty and chiefiness/orderliness (i.e., godliness). *Maama* symbolically means Tonga and literally means light. It is linked to the domain of earthly, human, or secular beings. It also references the present and is associated with enlightenment. *Pulotu* symbolically means Fiji. It references the past and is regarded as the ancestral homeland and after-world of the peoples of Lagi (Sāmoa) and Maama (Tonga).

Why Moana Oceania? The name Moana Oceania was initiated during the research and development process of the Creative New Zealand-funded book, *Crafting Aotearoa: A Cultural History of Making in New Zealand and the Wider Moana Oceania* by Karl Chitham, Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai, and Damian Skinner, published by Te Papa Press in 2019. As part of the research process, a *talanoa* (“talking critically yet harmoniously”) (Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor 'Ōkustitino Māhina, personal communication, 2017) was held with Moana Oceania thinkers, movers, and shakers in the cultural and creative sectors around the use of the term *Moana* in place of “Pacific.” Julia Mage'au Gray of Mekeo, Papua New Guinea heritage spoke strongly against this term for the simple reason that the name Moana is not part of her vernacular. She also spoke about “Oceania” having more meaning to her as a term. Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor 'Ōkusitino Māhina was also part of this *talanoa*; he championed the bravery needed for us to collectively broker new ground by moving away from imposed terminologies for good and embracing our own Indigenous languages. Further discussions post-*talanoa* with Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu led to a decision by the authors Karl Chitham, Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai, and Damian Skinner to go with the term “Moana Oceania” for the following reasons:

The name “Pacific” was given to this region by a Portuguese navigator and explorer in 1521. Ferdinand Magellan’s “Mar Pacifico”—the peaceful sea—emphasizes a narrow perception of the peoples and places of Moana Oceania as peaceful, tranquil, passive, which is not how Indigenous peoples from this region see themselves. Pacific has become Pasifika, Pasefika or Pasifiki, but these transliterations are derived from the same root. Moana means Ocean in the Māori language and in other island nations such as the Cook Islands, Hawai‘i, Sāmoa and Tonga. While it can never be truly inclusive because of the diversity of languages and cultures of Moana Oceania peoples, it has meaning and relevance to this place.

Oceania is another foreign name that was first used in the early nineteenth century. Today it is a popular alternative for Pacific because it suggests a sea of islands connected to each other, rather than isolated islands in a far sea. It is a name that is more meaningful to island nations that do not have the word Moana in their languages. Together, Moana Oceania empowers and privileges Indigenous perspectives. It embodies a worldview that is strongly connected to Aotearoa but has its roots in the wider region. (Chitham, Māhina-Tuai, and Skinner 2019: 16)

In April 2020, Lagi-Maama was approached by Ema Tavola, Director of Vunilagi Vou,² to write a text on the function of art criticism. The context for this request was based on a working collaboration between Ema and Peter Sipeli, a Fiji-based poet, art manager, and founder of the online magazine *ARTalk* Fiji. Ema was asked by Peter to be a guest editor for the May 2020 issue, in which she pitched a theme around the idea of art criticism to start “a conversation about the value of art criticism for us, as a creative community, to strengthen and deepen our understandings and appreciation of each other. Even when it’s hard critique, I think we need to flesh out what critique IS” (personal communication, 5 April 2020). This was the conversation that led to the following text, which was written within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand’s time-space of extended lockdown periods in 2020. However, 2020 basically became a challenging year for creatives and their creative practices and projects, where priorities needed to be re-focused elsewhere. This was the case with Ema, whose focus and priorities were redirected to areas of need for her at that time-space. The following text was written and completed between April and May 2020.

One of our core values as Lagi-Maama is to embrace and be empowered by our Indigenous knowledge and practice of talanoa, “talking critically yet harmoniously”. This knowledge and practice is not (k)new (Meyer 2018).³

There is no doubt that our ancestors actively practiced talanoa as a decision-making tool that helped to refine the best and permanence in creative and innovative thinking throughout our wider Moana Oceania region. If the knowledge and practice of “talking critically yet harmoniously” is in our bloodlines, then why aren’t we owning it and putting it into practice? Why is it not our norm in how we are navigating the cultural, including arts, landscape? And why are we conforming to stereotypes of the Western status quo? A simple solution is, let’s do what our ancestors did! Let’s arm and empower ourselves with our collective inheritance of knowledges and practices from our ancestors, which have been passed down through our own bodies and systems of Indigenous knowledge. Let’s embed the solid foundation that is our collective right, and be empowered by our own Indigenous ways of knowing, seeing, and doing, where “talking critically yet harmoniously” has always been part of our status quo.

In paradoxical ways, it is, in the Moana [Oceania], symbolically thought that people walk forward into the past and, contemporaneously, walk backward into the future, both in the present, where the elusive, already-taken-place past and illusive, yet-to-take place future are, in the social process, constantly mediated in the ever-changing present. In historical ways, however, it logically follows that the past, which has stood the test of time-space, is placed in front of people in the present as guidance, and the unknown future is located in their back, in

the present, informed by past experiences, with the past and future permanently negotiated in the conflicting present (Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor 'Ōkustitino Māhina, personal communication, 2019).

This belief was spearheaded first by the late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa and further developed by Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor 'Ōkustitino Māhina. It reflects a sense of time and space that is at the core of the thinking and practices of various island nations throughout the Moana Oceania region. It is the foundation and is at the heart and mind of what we do as Lagi-Maama, where our approach is informed by this sense of the past, present, and future. Embracing this foundation has enabled us to be “time-space travelers,” enriched not only by the knowledge and practice of our ancestors, but also by what we learn from each project that we work on.

We met while working on a Moana Oceania project at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, in 2016. But we genuinely connected over a talanoa around remuneration for our holders of knowledge / community elders / ontologists and epistemologists, who we (under the umbrella of Tāmaki Paenga Hira institution) wanted to engage with, for their knowledge and expertise to enhance the museum's records. This amazing initiative by Tāmaki Paenga Hira, called the Pacific Collection Access Project (PCAP), was brokering new ground for the museum sector in acknowledging that knowledge and expertise of its collections was also held beyond their walls and within and across our living communities. We, as a Samoan and Tongan working in the museum at the time, also had a responsibility to our communities to ensure that the museum understood the sacredness that was being negotiated. Therefore, it was crucial for us to negotiate a remuneration fee that we felt would represent a genuine gesture of appreciation by the museum. While paving a new path in the museology sector, we could see that the shift required embedding within and across the many layers of the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums) sector so as to better understand the invaluable knowledge and expertise that our Moana Oceania holders of knowledge / community elders / ontologists and epistemologists within and across our living communities would bring.

We understood that the knowledge and expertise that Tāmaki Paenga Hira was asking our communities to share are sacred and have been carried for generations. And because we shared and lived the concepts and practices of the Samoan *teu le vā* and *tautua*,⁴ and the Tongan *tauhivā* and *faifatongia*,⁵ our communities were (and are) always at the heart of what we do. So we needed to look critically, to mediate and speak out, and to make the institution (and other spaces) accountable, but always to educate and inform at the same time. We all know that when the foundation of a *fale*⁶ is not laid properly, there is the risk that the rest of the building is weakened, more susceptible to natural and human disasters, and will not hold up in the long term.

Fast forward to 2020 when a publication called *The Digital Future of Museums: Conversations and Provocations*, edited by Keir Winesmith and Suse Anderson, was launched, in which the importance of “talking critically yet harmoniously” is beautifully illustrated in the chapter “Conversation #2: LaToya Devezin + Barbara Makuati-Afitu” (Devezin and Makuati-Afitu 2020: 43–59). Barbara's contribution to this chapter was based on an interview conversation she had in July 2018 with Keir and LaToya when she was still working at Tāmaki Paenga Hira and leading the community engagement component of PCAP. This is the first published source that talks critically about PCAP and provides real, honest, and moving insights into the challenges of the institutional processes and approaches, as well as the richness gained from what was shared and gifted by our Moana Oceania communities. But this is a conversation that did not resonate in 2018 as it does today. And this is reflected in the foreword written by Courtney Johnston (currently CEO of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Te Whanga-nui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand) when she says:

As we look to the future then, I recommend one particular chapter in this book to all readers. The conversation between LaToya Devezin and Barbara Makuati-Afitu shows, in applied practice, ways of working that could and should form the culture of museums of the future. LaToya, in her discussion of working with African American and other communities, describes a post-custodial model of museum and archival practice, where emphasis is placed not on the physical housing of the object, but the preservation of a community's culture and stories—of institution being of service. Barbara, when asked what is required for institutions to respect and protect the stories and knowledge communities chose to share with them replies, "It's someone fully understanding culturally and spiritually the sacredness of that knowledge that isn't ours, that isn't mine, and wanting to know how we can help—using different platforms—to ensure its safety (Johnston 2020: xviii-xix).

Lagi-Maama have used the notion of "safe space" or "safer spaces," and also see it being used by many of our Moana Oceania peoples. And in the process of writing this piece, we realized the need for us to look critically at what we actually mean by a safe space. Is there such a thing as a safe space? If we are to look at the current devastating situation that we are all experiencing globally, with our war against the COVID-19 pandemic, where are our safe spaces from this contagious virus? Even with the unprecedented closing of Aotearoa New Zealand's borders, are we in a safe space when the virus is already within our borders? With the enforced nationwide lockdown, and being confined to a "bubble" within our own "home," are we in a safe space if someone in our bubble already has the virus or is an unknown carrier of the virus? In looking critically at our own use of safe space or safer spaces, we have come to a more informed knowledge and understanding of how problematic and contradictory these terms are when we do use them.

So we now choose to use "harmonious" and *hoa/soa*,⁷ meaning "balance" or "pair/binary," instead of safe space or safer spaces, when we speak about an environment where open and honest *talanoa* is the status quo. A more harmonious *hoa/soa* time-space is when issues are voiced, debated, critiqued, and mediated until a common ground is reached for the betterment and benefit of the collective and the whole. These are times and spaces that are conducive to the discovery of knowledge, and then the use of knowledge, in that logical order. This has been the case with the decision-making process of our current government here in Aotearoa New Zealand, who were informed with "up-to-the-minute" knowledge from research and experiences happening globally and internally that helped to determine and justify each move we made as a nation. When we are not armed with knowledge production and knowledge application in such environments, that's when we are left with a dissonant and chaotic time-space of personal agendas that are individually driven for the self rather than the collective.

We have a collective responsibility to mediate and disrupt spaces, particularly spaces where we are the "topic" of discussion, or the "contents" of their projects, or the "stories" of their exhibitions; YET our voices, our ways of knowing, seeing, and doing, have not been *genuinely* included in their thinking, planning, and processes. We emphasized and bolded "genuinely," because there is too much "token," "superficial," and "tick-box" inclusion still happening today. A case in point was during a panel discussion last year on the *Oceania* exhibition (held in London in 2018 and Paris in 2019) as part of *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei: This is New Zealand*, a Museums Aotearoa 2019 conference held at Te Papa in Wellington. After the discussion, a question/comment was posed by Lagi-Maama to the panel around genuine community inclusion in the exhibition team's process and engagement, particularly from Moana Oceania communities who have ancestral connections to works in the exhibition. This was of course the "elephant in the room" and sadly shouldn't have been the case, because if we truly embraced the beauty of our knowledge and practice of *talanoa*, this was a missed opportunity for a robust discussion of unspoken issues

about this exhibition. It was also an opportunity that could have drawn on the knowledge and experience of those present (predominantly from the museum sector) for the sharing of knowledge that the *Oceania* team could consider and take on with future projects. As a result of Lagi-Maama's question and comment, we were invited to review the *Oceania* exhibition catalogue. We were honored to do this, as it enabled us, unedited, to speak to the issues of our GLAM spaces not including the voices of our living communities (see *Museum Worlds* 8 2019: 262–291).

We should no longer accept justifications that are “token,” “superficial,” or “tick-box” today; we must return to our existing Indigenous knowledge systems and practices that continue to revolve around and be adapted by our living communities. There are movements led by our own Moana Oceania peoples in creating awareness of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies or ways of being and ways of knowing. These thinkers and activists are part of our living communities, either in their respective homelands or in diaspora. We have our own ontologists and epistemologist who are the subject experts of our cultures—some who have gone through Western learning institutions and are part of the movement to spread and create awareness through their respective work within these Western learning spaces. But we also have our “living treasures,” and experts who have gone through our own cultural institutions of learning and hold PhDs in our cultural heritage with knowledge gifted and carried through generations, such as the Sulu'ape line with Samoan *tatau*,⁸ who continue today to practice and pass on our respective cultural knowledges and practices. These cultural institutions are in the villages of our homelands, and in the community and church halls, garages, and living rooms of our homes in Aotearoa.

Despite the challenging COVID-19 times and spaces that we are experiencing globally, regionally, and locally, we are enriched by our collective inheritance from our ancestors. We are not in these spaces by mistake. We have all been guided into these spaces to shift minds and hearts, thinking and feelings. So, as our forebears have for centuries before us—through knowledge, practice, and talanoa—may we learn to respect the soa/hoa of OUR “diversity in unity and our unity in diversity,” and learn to critique—with love and humility—toward a greater and deeper understanding of talking critically yet harmoniously. We embrace talanoa in its fullness with all its layers: the emotional, spiritual, and physical; the growling, the love, the respect; and the journey toward a shared soa/hoa landing of understanding. Let us stand firmly on the knowledge that is embedded in our DNA and runs through our bloodlines as Moana Oceania peoples. Let us be empowered and do as our ancestors did; by first knowing and understanding, and then utilizing the fine art of talanoa as a refinement tool for robust discussion and debate for the betterment and well-being of our Moana Oceania communities as a whole.

■ NOTES

1. Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy website: <https://www.lagi-maama.com/>.
2. Vunilagi Vou Gallery/Community/Consultancy website: <https://vunilagivou.com/>.
3. The word “K(new)” summarizes both the feeling and the fact of the idea of ancient/new as explained by Meyer (2018) and sourced from Edwards (2009).
4. Teu le vā means “decorating socio-spatial relations” and tautua means “enacting socio-economic services.”
5. Tauhivā means “keeping socio-spatial relations” and faifatongia means “performing socio-economic functions.”
6. Fale is the Samoan and Tongan word for “house.”

7. The concept and practice of what is known in Samoan as "soa" and in Tongan as "hoa" refers to the inseparable but indispensable pairs of equal and opposite binaries that are imbedded in the realities of our Moana Oceania ways of knowing, seeing, and doing.
8. Tatau is the Samoan word for "tattooing."

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