

STORIES OF US
Creative & critical reflections on reclaiming the symbol as text
In art and education in Oceania

Dr Cresantia Frances Koya Vaka'uta
The University of the South Pacific
December 2, 2015
National University of Samoa, Apia, Samoa

Your highness, Vice Chancellor and President, the conveners, fellow-presenters and colleagues it is an honor to be here. The conveners, fellow-presenters and colleagues it is really a privilege to have been asked to present a keynote at this conference and I thank the organizers, particularly Professor Sina Vaai for extending the invitation. My presentation is titled STORIES OF US: Creative and Critical Reflections on reclaiming the symbol as text in art and education in Oceania.

Before I begin I offer a poem about the early beginnings of my love for words, stories, and indigenous heritage. Robert asked us yesterday to think about our early recollections of reading and I have to say that my early efforts to read at school are not pleasant memories. My recollections of stories in the home however are quite the opposite and set in motion my life's journey not only as teacher, but as a writer and artist, educator and activist. So here goes...

I was born to a Samoan/Irish daughter
and an Arab/ Indian son, who made Fiji their home.
I was born and raised in Suva,
very catholic
and very Samoan.

My childhood was a childhood of trees,
and night time stories

Mama would call us to the rosary
That she would recite in Samoan each night
The rosary beads clenched tightly between her fat brown fingers
A fan in her left hand

The fan had many uses
It kept her cool her on a warm night
Or chased mosquitoes that came too close
But most often
It was the handle of that fan
Which warned a sleepy child that the lotu was not yet over

I sat cross-legged afraid to fall asleep
Counting down to the end of lotu
I loved when prayer time was over

Because it meant that the stories could begin
And I could close my eyes
And imagine the wonderland that was Samoa
And the many spirit people
Who walked the earth
Shape-shifting...

And so, I learned the family stories
Birthed in Sale'imoa and Nofo'ali'i

And I learned the love of a culture

But I was deprived of language
And given instead this foreign tongue to think and speak
Having been instructed
In no uncertain terms
That my first duty was to listen to my elders
And the second was to excel in school....

SLIDE 2 Introduction

The Arts and Indigenous knowledge continue to exist on the periphery in education and in national development discourse in the islands. In education, despite post-independence aspirations of autonomy in setting educational development goals, subjects of study, curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment and evaluation remains for the most part, driven by education systems conceptualized in the developed world, for classrooms, schools, teachers and students in the developed world. This western influence imbues every aspect of education including teacher training and preparation. The culture gap (Little, 1997) that exists perpetuates a model of teaching and learning that is decontextualized – too far removed from Pacific teachers and students realities of being and understanding. The culture gap is defined by Angela Little as the dissonance or space between educational expectations of home and school cultures arguing that the greater the gap, the more likely students were to experience learning difficulties. What this translates to is a situation in which teachers and students must relinquish cultural ideas of holistic learning and instead conform and aspire to unfamiliar educational goals. Those who are able to make this transition easily succeed, while those who are unable to do so invariably fail.

In schools across Oceania, the arts remain a field of study of untapped potential. While many teachers recognize the value of the arts as a subject and as a cultural inclusive pedagogical instrument, they lament that the arts remain on the periphery because it is not examined. This is telling of the predominant view of the value and purpose of education – that of academic pursuits measured purely through written tests and standardized examinations.

The majority of our children do not have the opportunity to learn contextual knowledge, let alone indigenous content and all too often the art that they learn at school is derived from western art forms, still life and portraiture for example. In English classrooms, while there is opportunity for reading and critiquing the works of other writers, Pacific writing is not always included and teachers' generally inform children of the themes and plot, character development of the texts studied so that they may memorize and regurgitate these in tests and written exams. Creative process in all forms of art, conceptual art and creative writing is not emphasized in the content-full, examination-driven education systems we have inherited from the colonizer and continue to perpetuate.

The last ten years has seen the arts emerge as an important sector for economic development. In this new development model, driven in the region by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Culture Division within the Human Development Program, many workshops have taken place focusing on capacity building and information sharing with arts councils, practitioners, administrators and artists. The focus of these have mainly been to provide an understanding of the role that the arts can play in contributing to improved livelihoods for artists and their communities and their contribution to economic development. The gap however, has been in recognizing that the model for art development promoted is again premised on western models where systems already in place, are understood, supported and fully functional. In the Pacific, this is not the case (Vaka'uta, 2013).

In the broader development discourse, while education is still seen as a means by which to provide human resources for the workforce and to prepare young people for further academic endeavour, there is little emphasis on human development or the preparation of citizenry for the kinds of communities and societies that we would like to see in the future in our islands. There is little to no emphasis on life skills or what it means to belong, and to be a 'good' citizen or participatory member of our cultural communities and the nation.

It is against this backdrop of a values and cultural dissonance in education and development, that my presentation is set. It is premised on the core belief and agenda for Education in the pursuit of relevance, quality, resilience and sustainability for all Pacific island children and their communities. I believe that when we recognize the value and benefit of indigenous knowledge and heritage arts, we will begin to understand what it means to be resilient and to thrive in our small island states.

Pacific Cosmologies and Cosmogonies – Stories of Creation as Stories of US

For some time now, I have been fascinated by Pacific creation stories, myths and legends, viewing these as entry points into cultural cosmologies and cosmogonies. They provide the starting point for my discussion of symbol as text.

When we talk about cosmology (the known cosmos or universe) and cosmogony (our understandings of coming into existence – the origin of life) we are referring to contextual framings or positioning within the Universe as we know it and our conceived world or space as well as our place within it – Our Believable worlds.

Our epistemologies rest within these frames.

Let me share just one example of a reference point in Samoan and Tongan mythology.

SLIDE 3 The plover

The plover features in both Samoan and Tongan creation stories. Scientists have monitored Pacific Golden Plovers migrating thousands of kilometers without stopping from Hawaii to Alaska in spring and back again in autumn. The narrative of the two stories tell us that their creators knew something about the travels of this bird.

SLIDE 4 (Samoan quote)

The plover is said to have flown over the early expanse exploring creation. In the process of his/her journey (there is gender differentials in various versions of the story) the plover is responsible for the emergence of people. An early documentation of the Samoan Creation chant *O le Solo o le Vā* is a narrative from the perspective of the Plover (i.e. the song of the Plover) as documented by Fraser in 1897. The title of the chant is suggestive, as Vā (space) may be analyzed on two levels as both cosmological space (Fraser, 1897) and, as ‘interpersonal space’, Samoan Head of State, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi Efi (2009) summarizes the story of Tuli. The Va speaks of relational spaces – sacred covenants between Gods, sea, sky, land and all that exists with the known universe. He also explains the placement of recognizable symbols or motifs within tapa and tattoo designs in Samoa.

SLIDE 4 – b (Tongan quote)

In Tonga, this story correlates to Kiu in the Tongan Talatupu’a with the slight differentiation in identity of the plover – while the bird is seen as Tagaloa’s messenger in the Solo - the Talatupu’a identifies Kiu as the manifestation of the deity Tangaloa ‘Atulongolongo himself who shape shifted to explore the newly formed world. In both versions the plover acts on instruction of the higher ordered Tangaloa to peck at the vine and in so doing begins the human narrative ‘in’ and ‘engaging with’ the world.

This story is a narrative or representation of us,– a tale of a believable world constructed by our ancestors in pre-colonial and pre-Christian times.

In an interesting twist, Craig (2004) in his Handbook on Polynesian Mythology details the Samoan and Tongan stories of creation and the cosmos and in his re-telling of the Samoan story we see the grub or worm broken into two pieces which became the first two men. His story continues that one day the two men went fishing and one of them died from an injury caused by a particular kind of fish. It is Tuli who complains to HIS father who sends a messenger to bring the dead man back to life but with the instructions to change his sex to female. The two then went on to populate the earth.

In Craig’s Tongan version, the grub is broken into the three pieces but that it was Maui who travelled to Pulo-tu to find them wives. The three couples then populate the earth.

SLIDE 5 Tapa design detail

Understanding the cultural significance – or rather the narrative of the representation of US – the story of us through the journey of the plover is a significant feature in both Samoan and Tongan /tapa cloth i.e. seen in the designs Fa’a Tuli/Fa’a Vae Tuli (Samoa) and Ve’etuli (Tonga).

While the plover is Kiu in the tongan language the name of the kupesi or tapa design in Tongan Ngatu carries the Samoan name for the bird. This is telling of the cultural ties between the two cultural groups possibly of the period of Tongan occupation and/or of the arranged marriages between nobilities in days of old. The latter appears to be more probable given that this design is reserved for wedding beddings and considered a high ranking kupesi.

SLIDE 6 An Artists representation

An artwork completed in 2006 by my husband whose art is informed by Tongan mythology, metaphor and symbolism depicts the same story. He explains that its allegorical representation is open to the viewers’ interpretation. He describes the white hands as the movement of Tagaloa Tufuga (the builder) who in some versions of the story, is depicted as throwing rocks down to create a resting place for the plover. In the Tongan version, the worm is pecked into three parts namely Kohai (who is it?), Koau (It is I) and Momo. I recall a discussion that he had with the late Professor Epeli Hau’ofa in which he as an artist expressed the possibility that the three people who emerged from the worm, could in fact represent three genders, male, female and another. Epeli was not immediately convinced but supported the creative process of the artist and agreed that our myths and legends, the old stories of us – were indeed open to interpretation holding meaning for our existence today. In fact, a project that Epeli had tried to start with Niu Waves, was that of creating new Myths and Legends – stories of contemporary times. The writers of the group while keen to explore new possibilities in their writing, were notably apprehensive about what fictional myths and legends might do for future generations. The idea just seemed sacrilegious.

SLIDE 5 Pacific conceptions of Art

The building blocks for many of our symbols are found in Lapita pottery. Here we see on the right images of lapita and their designs from the Tupou College Collection housed at the Tongan Cultural Center in Nuku’alofa. On the upper right, Kupesi (Tongan tapa design tablets made from coconut ribbing) and below, a collection of Samoan Siapo Elei boards.

Pacific heritage arts are still poorly understood and the way we see categorize and value the arts in the Pacific is influenced by introduced western conceptions of art. An example of this is found in the language used to categorize heritage arts as handicrafts and the artisans who produce them as ‘craftspeople’. The concept of handicrafts comes from an archaic western conception of creative works made by hand decorative and sometimes functional in nature. They are not considered art and do not share the platform with fine arts. Handicrafts in the west include the likes of papier-mâché lamp stands, cloth doormats, patch work, table mats, etc. These crafts may be made from recycled home ware and

waste materials such as plastic bags, bottles, old clothes and the like. It is derogatory that our heritage arts, our tapa and mats for example – our cultural wealth - are still clustered within this.

My doctoral studies examined two heritage art forms, Tapa and Tattooing in Samoa and Tonga and in order to prepare for field study I had to first understand how Pacific islanders conceptualize their own heritage arts. I found that Pacific heritage arts act as repositories of indigenous knowledge; they are epistemological sites that tell us about cultural worldview and life philosophies. From production through to ritualistic exchange and use within the cultural economy, they tell us what it means to be a member of each cultural community – what it means to be and to belong. I found that these important cultural expressions are designed as symbolic representations of a way of life.

They reflect indigenous our understandings of how the world as we know it came to be and our place within that world. Sadly, this deeper understanding of our own heritage art forms has all but been lost for many of our peoples who have now come to see our arts as the west perceives it through what Visvanathan (2002) calls the “museumization of the other” (In Thaman 2004, p14). This exotification or objectifying of indigenous heritage arts to museum artifacts reduces knowledge and removes cultural significance. The emphasis is narrowed to the processes through which they are catalogued and how they were acquired (Hanlon, 2003).

SLIDE 8

I present six tenets through which we may begin to rethink our conceptions of Pacific heritage arts. These are functionality, spirituality, social order, gendered spaces, relationships and symbolism. I agree that by understanding the significance of these art forms within the cultural lens we may not only improve our treatment of the art forms themselves, but we may begin to critically and creatively re-conceptualize our ideas about heritage and contemporary arts as well as - education for sustainability in the islands.

The heritage arts are primarily functional in nature serving very specific purposes within the broader cultural practice; and as such are valid and valuable cultural epistemological sites of knowing, being, doing and belonging.

They contain narratives of Spirituality and Spiritual indigenous notions of nurturing cultural ‘balance’ are imbued in the conception, creation and cultural function of the arts in the relational spaces within which these art forms are exchanged and used.

They tell the narrative of social order and are central to understanding cultural maintenance of socio-political hierarchy within the cultural community.

They speak of gendered spaces demarcated in the creation, production and use of the arts in cultural practice premised on indigenous notions of gender roles and relations.

They hold narratives of relationships where the cultural/ritual practice of art production and use are indicators of relationships reflective of the collective dynamic of Pacific communities; and,

They are narratives containing much symbolism represented in the various art forms and relating in varying degrees to the first five tenets (Koya 2013, p.83).

Each site of intersection between knowledge, knowing and knower presents unique windows into the frames within which we seek to position ourselves, negotiating our physical and metaphysical selves, within family and community, and with the ancestors and the generations to come. When we strip our heritage arts of these tenets and view them simply as objects or artefacts, we relegate them to the same old objectification of the 'exotic' - the romanticised view of the noble savage, the unschooled native and open our Indigenous knowledge systems to cultural genocide. Something that our current education systems are doing very well in teaching our young people that our own ways of being and doing are less valid than western ways of the same.

What emerged from my study were the significance of story-telling and genealogy and the importance of knowing one's place and role within the greater cultural community. It was especially moving to see how the two select heritage art forms may be viewed as cloaks of protection – where the tattoo covers the wearer with a second skin – filled with text that speaks of genealogical connections, of cultural commitment and of roles and responsibilities. The tapa cloth as cloak of protection worn as outer clothing and bedding at birth, at marriage, and at death – also covered in text that speak of the same connections and purpose.

As someone born into an independent Pacific island nation – Fiji, even though I was raised on night stories of Samoan genealogy and culture, spirit stories of the ancestors and totems that gave me life; my western education took precedent. I was deprived of a language, having been taught that I needed to speak English well, to read and write in English and to do well at school. For the first twenty years of my life, culture and education remained two separate parts of my existence. The two did not complement each other and indeed because of my own value and love for culture learned in the home, discovered my own culture gap meant that while I did well at school, I did not enjoy it. It was decontextualized, alienating and frightening. I could not be who I really was and instead learned to thrive while pretending to value the subject content and examinations that I had to endure. Over those two decades, the text remained what I read in books and the oral stories and traditions of the home were simply food for the soul - what gave my life purpose and a sense of connectedness. Because I loved the stories so much, at age sixteen I decided I would begin to purposefully write my grandmother and mother's stories down. I sat with them for many hours over the years revisiting previous notes and trying to find deeper levels of understanding in their stories of life, of the ancestors, and of the supernatural.

Slide 9 The symbol as textual knowledge – as narrative

In oral traditions our stories and various forms of cultural expression transmit cultural knowledge across the generations. It is in this context that I emphasis the role of cultural symbols – the symbol as textual knowledge – a narrative.

Formal education introduces us to the text as words, the smallest parts of language which hold meaning. These words as symbols is easily comprehended – which when we know what they represent - make meaning of the written word - sentences and paragraphs, and essays, and novels – and the oral – spoken word through what is said and what is implied – the hidden multiple layers of meaning known only to insiders. Through our words, metaphors come to life – as ideas, shared beliefs, as contextual truths. But what of the symbol itself – a motif as text – an abstract alternative system of seeing, knowing and reading the world through a cultural literacy that can only be acquired within community.

As a young halfa kasi growing up in a homeland not of my own genealogical roots on either side of the family tree - it was interesting to note the way that people engage with tapa cloth. From a young age, I learned about how it was made, its purpose and value. We had three elei boards at home, one holding patterns designed by my great grandmother, Fa'amalepe for siapo making and two that had been designed by my mother in Fiji and used to make fabric elei prints. I asked about the designs and what they meant and was referred to stories of old – stories about the creation of the world. Stories were also connected to my grandmother's malu – a prized cultural possession that she lamented would be forgotten when she died. These designs were specially made for me, she would say proudly, and they represent my family lines. It was interesting to note during my research journey that others also speak of their tattoos in the same way – a series of cultural text that has meaning and is read by the wearer and the wider community negotiating and renegotiating relational spaces.

Many of the Samoans I spoke to did not remember Siapo stories in the same way that Tongans did – perhaps a reflection of the role that Ngatu continues to play in Tongan society. For a culturally literate Tongan, the Ngatu may be likened to a greeting card where the message had to be aligned with the purpose for which the tapa cloth was prepared. Just as you would not dream of using a sympathy card at a birthday or graduation, the designs or kupesi on a funeral ngatu would not be the same as the celebratory blessings that were imprinted on a bridal ngatu.

SLIDE 10

Contrastingly, tattoo knowledge had all but disappeared in Tonga, while in Samoa, the skin-stories are preserved and continue to be practiced widely. In Tonga, there was little awareness that the Vavau Code of 1839 had banned the practice of tattooing along with circumcision under the label of idolatrous ceremony.

[T]he first written code of laws in Tonga promulgated by George Tupou, then king of Vava'u and Ha'apai...reads (in "Wesleyan Missionary Notices" of 1840) "It is not lawful to tātatau (tattoo), or to kaukau (circumcise), or to perform any other idolatrous ceremonies: If anyone does so, he will be judged, and punished, and fined for so doing" (Suren 2009, p119).

It is interesting to note that the center female is a Tongan woman sporting what Ferdon (1987) describes as Lafa, a scarification by burning concentric circles on the skin. Its purpose and significance are not detailed.

SLIDE 11 Who is telling our stories?

Who is telling our stories and how are they choosing to do so? These are two questions that my husband and I continually deliberate. The representation of Pacific peoples by non-Pacific peoples and Pacific islanders alike is informed by various standpoints. Invariably, the influence of imperialist, hegemonic, colonial and Christian frames come together in documented representations and interpretations of who we are or who others say we are. The standpoint of each voice filtered by lenses that speak for or against indigenous ways of seeing and being.

It is interesting to note that in both Samoa and Tonga, much change has taken place in terms of representations of ourselves through the symbols derived from Tapa and Tattooing. A Samoan academic admitted that she had never thought about the meaning of the *ie elei* that she regularly wore nor of the fact that these days, they predominantly feature male *Pe'a* designs previously considered unthinkable for a woman to wear. While there are many forms of *elei* print in the market today, one that piqued my interest is that of the tattoo design now emerging on *Siapo* – both male and female. The male is seen here on the left – a similar fabric hangs between other cloth at the upper right and lower right.

And if we were to reconsider the purpose and function of Tapa, where each design holds meaning and tells a story of our history, is this acceptable? Should we simply take it as an inevitable cultural change in the face of the market economy or should we take the time to reflect on what these mean for representations of us – and acceptability within traditional rituals of relational presentation and exchange? And does it matter- why and to whom ?

SLIDE 12

Similarly in Tattoo practice, we see both traditional and contemporary representations used as a means to represent identity – our stories of connectedness. The upper centre image here depicts a growing practice in Tonga, where young people choose to wear *kupesi*, previously reserved for *Ngatu* on their bodies as identity markers. Many of the young people I spoke to said they did not know that Tattooing was once a cultural practice but they had chosen to write their stories on their skin using purposefully selected *kupesi* that identified them as proud to be Tongan.

What we learn from tapa and tattoo culture is that we tell our stories in many ways, and the main constant being – the symbol as text. Soriano and Medina (2009) explore the body as language and expression of indigenous Australian cultural identity. They say:

In the Indigenous Australian oral culture, Tradition and Law are transmitted orally – through songs, tales, legends, etc. – and by visual expressions – engravings and drawings made on rocks, on the ground, on material objects, on bark and on the human body–. Drawings and engravings transform the surface on which they are made from profane to sacred, since they are the transmitters of cultural myths and beliefs, generation after generation. The body, one of the supports of visual expression, actively participates in the transmission of myths, relegating the design to a secondary place. The most important thing is the transmission of the myth and not the way it is transmitted, or the result. The mythological narrative or legend surpasses the aesthetic line of vision (p99). Essentially, the narrative takes center stage, the symbol is simply a carrier.

The same is true of our oral cultures and this disputes early accounts for instance Kramer and Marquant that our designs and motifs were nothing more than decorative. They tell our stories.

SLIDE 13

To bring the conversation back to writing our stories – the focus of this conference - I recall an early lesson in creative writing from Subramani in my undergraduate years. One of the many lessons that Subramani instructed us on was that of situating our work. Where are the signposts in your narrative? He would ask. “What is it in your story that tells the reader without you prefacing yourself - that this is a Pacific story? How will a reader know? He went on to show us how something as simple as writing in a particular street, a brand of lolly, or local lingo could help do this.

When thinking about the symbol as text converging with written narrative, we can see from many of the presentations so far, that our established writers already fluidly incorporate these into their works. However, my main focus has been and is that of the emerging Pacific island writer and artist – much like the youth panel we heard on the first day. Their voices are influenced and informed by television and the internet – they write what they know and many unfortunately do not know our heritage. Many young people do not have the luxury of learning about myths, legends and genealogies. In urban contexts of working parents and nuclear families, our young learn about the world they live in at school and through the media, they situate themselves, sometimes more as global citizens with global, generic voices accented strongly with the curled r’s and rap culture of Americanized SLAM Poetry and international spoken word for example.

Through no fault of their own they are deprived of knowing, seeing and becoming tellers of Pacific tales that speak of who we are socio-culturally. It is for these young people, too often deprived of language, and culture, and for their teachers, that I advocate this way of seeing the symbol as text and narrative so that they may learn to critique and create strong Pacific stories of us.

This means more research and writing on Heritage arts, Pacific pedagogies and methodologies and teaching young people – who will not have the opportunity to study the arts or creative writing at University. It is they who will learn to embody the symbol as text and the text as symbol in order for authentic Pacific artistry that speaks of the 21st century reality in our sea of islands.

In this last section, I weave in examples of the kinds of work that I have been privileged to engage in with other artists and writers in Fiji and the wider Pacific, attempting to locate our symbols and images in our writing and our select art forms.

In the late 1960s with the establishment of The University of the South Pacific, a young cohort of Pacific writers emerged under the umbrella of the South Pacific Creative Arts Society which produced the MANA publication. Names such as Albert Wendt, Subramani, Konai Helu Thaman and Marjorie Crocombe soon became known for their poetry and short stories. It is interesting to map the slow decline of interest in supporting and publishing the works of Pacific island based writers. Many international publishing houses view the market as simply too small. While other writers emerged in the 1980s, and 1990s, the number of published works by Pacific island based writers over the last 15 years is dismal on the whole. This does not include writers of Pacific descent based abroad.

While the early groups of Pacific writers wrote about their realities with a large body of protest poetry highlighting the impacts of Christianity, Colonialism and modernization etc in the islands, I wonder what of contemporary Pacific writers' interests? There is much material on cultural misappropriation, climate change, the impacts of mining, NCDs, language and culture loss and so much more – who is writing these stories?

Limited capacity building and publishing opportunities in the islands necessitated a shift from writing to advocacy. I began looking for strategic partners to help develop writing in the region. Along the way, collaboration formed with the Commonwealth writers' foundation and I began to work to get information about their short story competition out into the region. I recalled that Sia Figel had gained much traction from her own Commonwealth prize and wondered if the same might happen for at least a handful of other aspiring 'closet' writers who did not have an avenue to share their work.

SLIDE 14

Five years later of this advocacy work and I was extremely proud to be informed that the Pacific recipient of the short story prize for 2015 was Mary Daya Rokonadravu, a friend and fellow writer who had resisted writing for publication for over two decades. Choosing instead to write for herself. Her win is an accomplishment in that she is a previously unknown Pacific island writer and a female to boot.

It was particularly encouraging given that in 2012, I had been the Pacific representative on the panel of judges for the Commonwealth short story prize and had seen for myself just how rigorous the competition is. Each judge was assigned over 200 stories to read through which we categorized approved, rejected or classified as maybes. We then had to go through these stories again and again in order to shortlist down to 20, then to 10, then to 5, then to 3. It was exhausting. During our panel meetings I noticed a number of things, first that those with the loudest voices and the most assertive mannerisms, usually ended up convincing the others of their points of view. Also, there was a real hegemonic paradigm which saw the stories deconstructed in a western frame – in terms of structure, style, characters and story line. I felt privileged for the experience and to be able to express alternative views at these forums even though as a competition, it meant that some very good stories had to be eliminated in the end.

As a result of the commonwealth writers' partnership, we were able to organize a successful writers' workshop held in Suva in February this year. It was jointly hosted by The Fiji National University and USP. This workshop saw 12 emerging writers participate in hands-on writing development activities over two weeks. We also hosted a Pacific writers conversation which I moderated comprising Konai Helu Thaman, Subramani, Mohit Prasad and featuring a video presentation by Lani Wendt Young. The panel titled "Who is telling our stories" aimed at raising awareness about the importance of literature in Pacific island development and mapped the individual and collective journey of these writers'. I was amazed to enter the auditorium to find that 200+ people from all walks of life were interested in what the panellists had to say. Feedback from those in attendance was overwhelming; they said they had waited for so long for such events, that they were interested in writing and in reading – a powerful message for all of us involved who had thought that the love for writing and Pacific literature had diminished. As it turns out what has diminished is the publishing outlets, and accessibility to Pacific literature as well as forums to discuss these.

SLIDE 15

On the home-front, the collaboration between FNU and USP, Peter Sipeli a young, energetic and avid writer and arts-advocate and I work closely in facilitating activities and events for emerging artists and writers. The fact that he is my first cousin also helps in our close affiliation towards this shared goal. In addition to the commonwealth writers' workshop we have worked on a number of other successful projects including Sokota: Educating for Sustainable Lifestyles through the Arts Project. Sokota is an indigenous iTaukei concept meaning to embark on a voyage it encompasses the spirit of seeking, finding, and sharing new discoveries and take others along on the same journey. That project saw 20 artists tell their stories about NCDs through various art forms including the heritage arts. Sokota the 2013 exhibition was the outcome of a six-month intensive capacity building of these artists to become health advocates.

SLIDE 16

More recently, a group of young poets have formed a creative writing group which meets every Wednesday at a designated creative space at FNU campus to develop writing and performance skills. The group has performed at numerous SLAMs and readings in Suva and Nadi over the last two years and is largely made up of USP and FNU students.

SLIDE 17

The current focus of the collaboration between the two Universities is the revival of MANA, which we hope will see in the coming year, a publishing outlet for established and emerging writers alike. We are currently working with Subramani who is based at FNU and Konai Helu Thaman at USP, on organizing a functional collaborative secretariat for MANA in 2016.

A final effort worth mentioning that focuses on information sharing is the Pacific Island Writers' Network, a facebook community page which acts as a space within which writers may share literary events and opportunities including calls for publications, recent publications, residencies and the like. The group currently has 359 members from around the world – writers' of Pacific heritage and those based in the islands and abroad. A sister page – the Pacific Island Artists Network provides the same for 156 artists who work in other art mediums.

An end, beginning or circle:

When we recognize the value of pacific heritage arts as epistemological sites, we can see the benefits of teaching creativity beginning from the known to the unknown – that is beginning from story-telling, privileging the oral before introducing the written.

And, significantly - bringing together various art forms within the discussion of story-telling through creative expression. Our teachers need to learn that the indigenous tell stories in multiple ways – the symbol as text – has meaning, and power in ways that transcend our current thinking about seeing the world – Manulani Meyer aptly surmises *“we simply see, hear, feel, taste and smell the world differently”* (2001).

Current literature on the teaching of arts in schools shows that there are many benefits for young people including improved enhanced problem solved and improved academic performance. These coupled with benefits of indigenous knowledge makes for a strong case to include arts curriculum as a core subject of study and as pedagogical tools that teachers must learn to use effectively.

SLIDE 18 Quote

SLIDE 19 Quote

SLIDE 20 Quote

SLIDE 21

The challenge therefore is to learn new ways of bringing these wide and varied examples of cultural expression – these symbols into our literary arts. The onus will be on writers' themselves to begin this journey.

The artists - heritage artisans, contemporary artists and writers – are telling our stories through a variety of traditional and new mediums. They tell the story of us – and it is our task to support them, to critique them and to celebrate them because their stories are our stories – they present opportunities for us to reflect creatively and critically in an active process of reclaiming the symbol as text in art and education in our islands.

Here we see a shared tapa design the manulua the artists depiction beneath – Tongans say that to see two tala (white birds) Flying high up in the clouds is an omen of good luck, blessing, good news, fortuitous – In the artist's depiction the use of the colour green bring an additional layer of symbolism to the artwork – green the colour of new life and prosperity. On the right we see an art installation put up for school children to critically think about climate change and what it will mean for them.

SLIDE 22 – END