

Cyberspace, place, identity & relationships: Are we digitizing the Vā?

Cresantia Frances Koya Vaka'uta

Panel presentation on Culture, Education and ICT - Cultural Dynamics of the 21st Century

International Conference on ICT & Oceanian Cultures, University of the South Pacific

Laucala Campus, Suva Fiji. Friday February 24th 2012

The world we live in is filled with clutter.

The multi- media dynamic of the 21st century is invasive as Professor Thaman reminded us in her keynote. Ours is a century of clutter and the media convinces us to obtain more clutter - items/objects and technological tools and gadgets that it tells us will improve our lives – the quest is for faster, better and more convenience

Ours is a new age of digital clutter.

Cultural Spaces and the notion of Vā

While we acknowledge that Pacific Indigenous Worldview are specific to each cultural group. There is an understanding that three main principles hold true to these indigenous communities. That is,

1. A deep spiritually rooted sense of culture and place;
2. A sense of connectedness within community, environment and the wider cosmos; and
3. That these culminate in collective & individual belief *that maintaining and nurturing relationships* is critical in order to maintain a sense of balance and harmony towards cultural continuity and survival.

These fundamental principles inform cultural conceptions of relationships which determines:

- (a) how we relate to each other;
- (b) present ourselves to the outside world;
- (c) how we demonstrate our connectedness to place and space, within and outside of our immediate community; and
- (d) act to reinforce our ties to (within and between) communities.

Pacific scholars have and continue to examine indigenous epistemologies, worldview and cultural philosophies emanating from Pacific Indigenous Knowledge Systems (PIKS). Their collective view is that Pacific peoples in general, and specific to their respective communities, have distinct ways of knowing and knowledge that informs cultural identity, cultural memory and cultural practice. (see for example, the works of Thaman 1980s to date; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Gegeo 2001; Meyer 2001; Teaero 2002; Bakalevu 2002; Tuwere 2006; Nabobo 2006 and many many more).

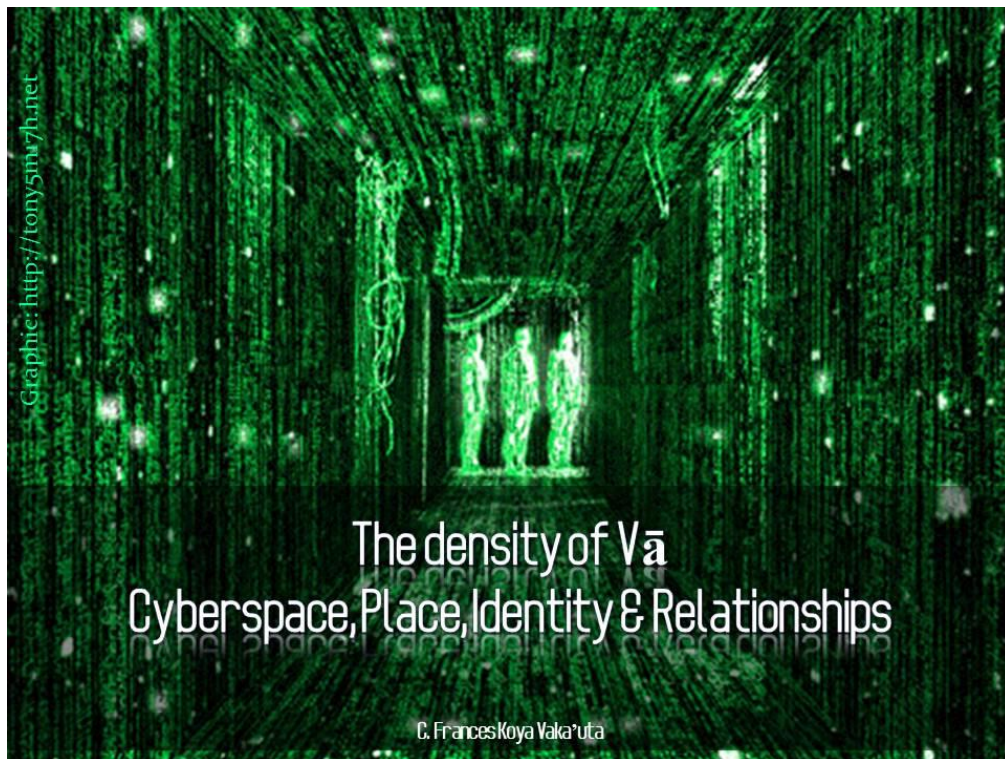
Place is understood to be an imposed criteria that sets out clear *boundaries* of 'here' and 'there'. How we come to know a place is determined by our sense of connectedness or disconnectedness to that place whether physical or symbolic. It is both tangible and intangible sites.

‘Place as land’ provides an understanding of cultural spirituality /connectedness between people and place (as land) in the shared reference of *Vanua* (Fiji), *Fanua* (Samoa), *Fenua* (NZ Maori, Cook Islands), *Fonua* (Tonga) and *Te Aba* (Kiribati).

Land, as ‘place of birth’ is seen as mother, womb, placenta and identity (see Rakuita and Huffer, 2005) and as an extension of both the land and the people (Teaero, 2006). Intangible place refers to social constructs/ worldview comprised of all those cultural markers or *boundaries* that delineate cultural status, relationships and the basic rules for meaningful engagement.

In the Samoan and Tongan IKS, *Vā* loosely is taken to mean *sacred or relational space* (Anae 2010) that determines “...social and spiritual relations between people and that is how [people] relate with one another and the world at large” (Tuagalu 2008, p109).

This spiritual dimension of relationships informs the cultural practice of *Tauhi Vā* (Tonga) and *Teu le Vā*, Samoa) – the practice of nurturing/reaffirming relationships to maintain a sense of place, space and connectedness (Mafile’o 2008; Anae 2010; Mila Schaaf 2005; Thaman 2006; Tamasese 2007, *see also* O’Meara 1990; Mara et.al. 1994;).



The paradox of nurturing e-relationships

There is an unknowing acceptance of cyberspace as a new ‘place’ of being “...which somehow parallels the lived material spaces of human territoriality” (Graham 1998, p167). A number of western scholars explored the notion of *Cyber-space as place* from the early 1990s. Olson (n.d) for example talks about the establishment of cyber sites “...to evoke a sense of place” on the internet. “We ‘visit’ a web ‘site’... We ‘surf’ the web. We ‘enter’ chat ‘rooms’ (p1).

But there is a gap in the literature on the critiquing of cyberspace and place from an indigenous perspective. The only research-based study found was that of Fijians in Brisbane, Australia in which the USP authors, Patrick, Rakuita & Koster (2005) examined the context of ‘national and cultural identity’ and the role of the internet and new ICT-media in the reconstruction of those identities (p13). Their Findings indicate that the physical Brisbane ‘Fijian’ community provided a tangible site in which to situate ‘this’ real-place (Brisbane) connected to ‘that’ place of origin (Fiji). Members of that community in the teens through 20s and 30s age category were seen to be more internet active than the older generation (p31). ICT was viewed by “many young Fijians” as “...an important “way of staying connected”, [for] information and knowledge that contributes to their identity as Fijians(p32).

An earlier reference by Well known Pacific Author Albert Wendt (1996) is cognizant of the transient nature of cultural contexts - “*meanings change as the relationships and contexts change*”. What we are interested in is the changes in the manner and means by which we “nurture, care and cherish the *vā*” (In Sauni 2011, p59).

Negotiating the dynamics of Va Tapuia/ Veitapui or sacred relationships

The process of nurturing the Va - *Tauhi Vā* (Tonga) and *Teu le Vā* (Samoa) carry beliefs and attitudes towards the cultural values of compassion, respect, reciprocity, restrained behavior; service, love; humility; wisdom; patience; unity (see for example, Anae 2007, 2010; Thaman 2006; Nabobo 2006; ‘Otunuku 2011; Sauni 2011; Tuafuti 2011; Te Ava, Airini & Rubie-Davis, 2011). These inform how relationships play out in the socio-cultural context of the Samoan and Tongan cultural space-time continuum.

Cultural relationships which used to be nurtured and maintained in ‘physical place and real time’ are now enabled through ‘cyberspace’ in cyber-place and cyber-time. ‘New’ ICT media offers opportunities for the nurturing and maintenance relationships esp. for those temporarily and permanently dislocated from physical place (land). Incl. diasporic communities i.e. migrants, workers, and students. Opportunities for connectivity within a cultural community bridging gaps and forming relationships that may otherwise not take place in real place and time.

Are we digitizing the Vā?

Internet Social media (bebo, fb, twitter, skype, wordpress & other blogs, email) and new media tools (mobile phones, western union & money gram, etc) enable families to connect in various ways.

Family pages on bebo in the early 2000’s soon gave way to online blogging sites and family trees on facebook. Chat functions on email and facebook also provide an opportunity to ‘talk’ in

cyberplace and space. But the dynamics of relationships and how these are nurtured are also changing.

Yes you may argue this is the global scene – but in the context of small island developing states in the region. What is the impact on our family networks?

The efamily

A Case Study survey of a family of 76 individuals connected on facebook comprised of 14 maternal first cousins (aged between 37 – 53); 18 nieces/nephews (aged between 15 – 35); and 8 Spouses. Adding to total of 40 people in the immediate family network with 36 additional extended family members.

Preliminary findings show that cultural notions of the nurturing of Vā are evident in the online ‘activities’ (types of exchanges) taking place between members of the same generation – first and second cousins. And differential dynamics between members across generations – with parents, aunts, uncles, grandaunts etc... Family members networked through facebook, skype, and email (predominantly gmail) and mobile phone networks texting more frequently than calling due to cost. Members are spread across seven locations - Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, New Caledonia, Australia, and, USA) with the most active online members are aged 15 to 37.

facebook

Single Family Case-study
76 family members linked on Facebook

14 maternal first cousins - 3 males + 11 females
18 nieces/nephews - 6 males + 12 females
32 immediate family members online
8 Spouses - 6 male + 2 female

Total of 40 people in the family network

Extended family
34 Extended family members (through blood)
2 through marriage (not listed as family)

Become a Fan
Like

Selected images from Family archival album spanning from 1920's to 2000's

Two-sides of the coin or: idiosyncrasies

Face-to-face nurturing of Vā still occurs in real time, alongside e-nurturing and new patterns of 'acceptable' boundaries within relationships are being re-negotiated. The sacred relationships between members of a family, such as brother and sister, father and daughter, maternal and paternal familial lines etc... are seen to be changing with public community status on facebook. These real time relationships governed by cultural notions of sacred covenants and *Tapu* are telling of this. We see that family membership within a social network are able to *nurture and maintain relationships but..*

There is also less constructive renegotiation of acceptability and 'norm' as dictated by the governing rules of engagement of the new media.

This is clearly seen in intergenerational 'friendships' within the family networks. For example the language and tone of conversations...and previously unacceptable points of discussion and engagement, such as sharing romantic relationships are now part of the social network culture. An example of this is the open sharing of comments in the "status" box or "what are you doing right now" wall feature; and the sharing of pictures and topics within peer conversations which members of the wider family community are able to see (unless specifically made private).

Nightclub scenes, romantic relationships, cuss words, and age-specific discussions on fashion, relationships and other interest issues are often commonplace in the middle generation category of 18 – 35).

It is peculiar that none of first generation members (aged 37 – 50) comment or rebuke the younger group. Can we interpret this silence as acceptance of *new terms of engagement online?*; or a silent disapproval? Could this be because of perceived 'public' space where the wider circle of 'friends' would be able to see the discussion?

Such 'sharing' of these topics and issues is inappropriate in real-time cultural family relationships, but cyber-space enables a differential set of rules of interaction.

Are there two sets of rules of engagement? If so this could be problematic in *real time* socio-cultural settings.

Computer Tigers and the 'Niu' Age Pacific Islander in search of *poto* ***The 'Niu' Age Pacific Islander will search for poto.***

Whether we like it or not there is an emerging *e-culture* that will continue to influence and inform 'cultural identities' - notions of being and connectedness in the Pacific. Perhaps more commonplace in urban contexts but this will also change with increased connectivity and access. Research and advocacy of ICT must be critiqued from the perspective of the agendas and values of the person(s), organizations, institutions and industries that they emanate from. We would like to think that research and education are value-free – Thaman reminded us - they are not. **We need to discuss identity and place, citizenship and connectedness with youth and consider dual realities - imagined place and cyberspace/time against tangible place and real-time.**

Nabobo (2002) introduced the metaphor of the ‘Computer Tiger’ as “... *dangerous yet desirable animals*; [meaning] *economic and technological advancements commonly associated with globalization*” (p36). The metaphor of the coconut tree is that of a life giving tree used for all its parts ... denoting everything that grounds Pacific islanders - roots, anchors, -identities (which she says) *locates us in the world* (Ibid).

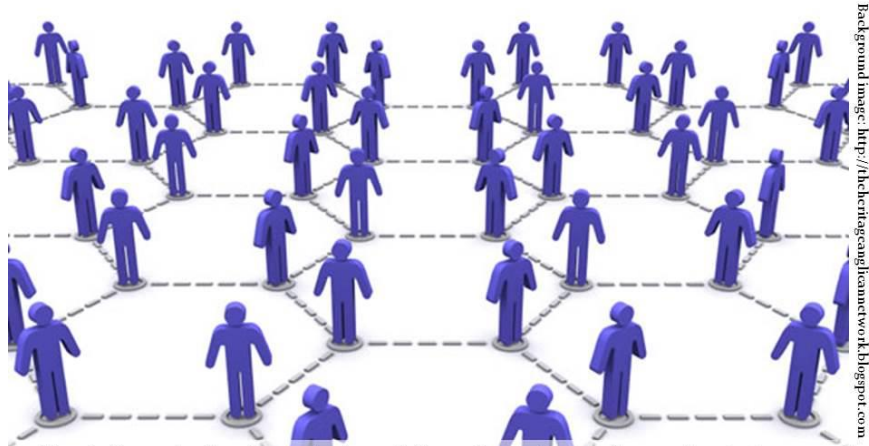


Digital Divide | The culture gap 2012

Cyberspace may offer a ‘reimagining of self’ that is exciting to our youth but what of real time identity and culture? **The virtues of discernment and fortitude are critical components of wisdom.** Can we really hope for the best of both worlds?

ICT has the potential to change the Pacific dramatically as we have seen in the 15 years since the internet was introduced. Much of this has been positive but have we really considered the human impact on our societies and cultural communities? On our youth – the **digital natives or e-generation.**

Is the digital divide wider and more complex than considered previously?



The challenge...is therefore to look carefully at what we have before we dismiss it, to search for meaning and substance within ourselves before going abroad, and to watch for the clutters of life that can unnecessarily impede our focus on what really matters. What matters in the pursuit of indigenous Pacific knowledges is that it survives – and survives because it gives us meaning and belonging. *Everything else is clutter.*

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi (2005)

Have we adequately thought about the kind of society we are growing in the quest to become like ‘the developed world’? Are we becoming mere slaves to the machine in a new world order?

What are the power-relations that drive this space? Is there room to *teu le va* without losing ourselves to the matrix completely, passively waiting for the *Neo* of our time to save us? Or, Maui to again slow the sun?

[Ends]