13

Oceanic diplomacy: Learning from talanoa diplomacy

JOPE TARAI

The Talanoa Dialogue introduced in 2017 to the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP 23) by the then Fiji prime minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, was hailed a success in replacing the initial structured Facilitative Dialogue format. The Facilitative Dialogue had been intended as a stocktaking exercise to review the collective contributions of parties towards their commitment to the Paris Agreement in 2015. The design and modality of the Facilitative Dialogue was an ongoing process, which Fiji capitalised on to amplify the prime minister's international profile, in his new role as the COP23 president. To amplify and distinguish his COP23 presidency, Bainimarama and his team rebranded Facilitative Dialogue as Talanoa Dialogue. This rebranding was an obvious attempt at Oceanic indigenisation of international diplomacy, as a marker of distinction for the term of the COP23 presidency. The Bainimarama government subsequently emphasised Oceanic and cultural values related to *talanoa* as a concept. These included avoiding confrontational exchanges while building

empathy and understanding in climate-related discussions. At the outset it seemed novel and empowering to some, who saw this positioning as a promotion and cultural appreciation of indigenous and Oceanic identity (indigeneity) within a Eurocentric diplomatic system. However, a deeper examination reveals an insidious form of cultural appropriation and careless exotification by Fiji as a state entity, through the direction of the Bainimarama government.

This chapter argues that the talanoa concept was co-opted by the Bainimarama government within the Fiji state, which subsequently resulted in the appropriation of a shared Oceanic concept and reckless exotification of Fijian indigeneity. It clarifies this argument by detailing critiques and instances of what can be best described as forms of 'cultural cringe'. The chapter is reflexively informed by the author's positional relationality, as an indigenous Fijian commoner and researcher of Pacific diplomacy and regionalism. It discusses what talanoa is and what it means within the Fijian context and generally in Oceania. Furthermore, it connects to the noted significance and successes of the Bainimarama government's adoption of the term in international climate diplomacy. The chapter concludes by outlining a cautionary framework, through a set of grounded questions designed to help avoid appropriation and exotification of indigeneity and culture in Oceanic diplomacy.

Indigenous Fijian positionality

It would be incomplete to critically examine Talanoa diplomacy as an extension of Oceanic diplomacy without recognition and acknowledgement of Pacific culture and context. In effect, cultural context and spaces underpin Pacific research methodologies and the emphasis of the Pacific peoples' ontological and epistemological position (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Naepi, 2019; Thaman, 2003). Through notable Pacific thinkers, Pacific-grounded research design and framework is more or less centred on positionality and relationality, sometimes referred to as positional relationality (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Hau'Ofa, 2008;

Malungahu, 2022, 2022; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Naepi, 2019; Thaman, 2003). Positionality and relationality are an acknowledgement and recognition of a person's varying identities and roles that can relate to one's research context (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Rowe, 2014). As such, this chapter is informed, guided and will be clarified by the author's relational positionality as an indigenous Fijian commoner and long-suffering student of Pacific diplomacy and regionalism. The author is a struggling PhD student, perceived cisgender male Fijian tax or debt payer and continues to survive relative to the apparatus of the Fijian state and its government. Positional relationality creates a reflexive method and approach to critiquing social and cultural constructs. This is perhaps best articulated by the timeless words of Epeli Hau'ofa, 'every analysis of social and cultural situations is in part a self-exploration by the analyst' (Hau'ofa, 1990).

In essence, the chapter is informed and grounded through the author's intersecting and relational identities as an indigenous Fijian commoner. This is aided with reflexive and ethnographic observations of diplomacy from within the Fiji state and society.

The Talanoa Dialogue

The word *talanoa* in the broad indigenous Fijian understanding means simply to talk to another in sharing stories or views. Pacific scholar Sitiveni Halapua describes talanoa as 'engaging in dialogue with, or telling stories to each other absent [of] concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds' (Halapua, 2008). As a concept, talanoa is acknowledged across a number of Pacific Island nations, some of which include, Samoa, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue and Hawai'i (Prescott, 2008). Talanoa has also become a qualitative method in Pacific research methodologies, which has been specified by Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) as much deeper than the method of an 'informal open-ended interview'. Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) argue that empathy is a central element

in talanoa in unpacking the socio-ecological political impacts and culturally appropriate forms within research methods. The Bainimarama government has now catapulted talanoa into international diplomacy and statecraft.

The Talanoa Call to Action was announced at the 24th presidency of the Conference of the Parties (COP24) in 2018, which was built through the COP23 presidency to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2018). The announcement was aimed to engage a wide expanse of related stakeholders in mobilising concerted efforts towards the ambitions of the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Paris Agreement in 2015 was hailed a success for a number of reasons. One of these was the acceptance of 1.5°C as the global temperature limit, instead of 2°C. This was an important common position for the Pacific countries that was seen regionally as a reflection of the Pacific's influence in their international efforts (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program, 2015). The significance of the Pacific's involvement was a testament to its ongoing regional and internationally positioned groups and narratives. By 2017, Fiji sought to capitalise on the Pacific's international presence and amplify its role and relevance as the COP23 president. This led to the introduction of the Talanoa Dialogue under the Bainimarama government of Fiji, with Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama as the COP23 president at the time. The dialogue format, previously called the Facilitative Dialogue, was seen as a central stocktake component of the Paris Agreement. Within a cycle of every five years, a stocktake on nationally determined contributions was required to guide progress towards collectively agreed goals (Rajamani, 2017). However, there wasn't a clear design and modality for the Facilitative Dialogue at the time (Rajamani, 2017). In the development of the design and modality, talanoa was introduced by an expert working group through the input of Fiji's UN Ambassador at the time, Nazhat Shameem Khan (Vaidyula & Ellis, 2017). This quickly developed into the Talanoa Dialogue under Fiji's COP23 presidency. The Fiji COP23 presidency at

the time outlined key guidelines to operationalise the Talanoa Dialogue at an international level.

The Talanoa Dialogue consisted of two structures, namely the preparatory and political phase (COP24) (Fiji Government, 2018). The preparatory phase involved a number of interactive events, which included the launching of an online platform where stakeholders effectively participated and engaged in the processes. The processes culminated in analytical policy insights that were directed by three guiding questions (Fiji Government, 2018). These questions included: Where are we? Where do we want to go? and How do we get there? In essence, the preparatory phase was to create evidence-based positions to inform the political phase. A central element in this phase was the inter-sessional Talanoa Dialogue that saw an opening plenary and a full-day of working group meetings, which then reported to the plenary. The political phase was guided by the preparatory phase. The political phase was focused on an interactive participation format for the ministers, as a stocktake of collective efforts in the nationally determined contributions of the Parties (Fiji Government, 2018). In sum, the main features of the dialogue included the collation of online submissions, discussions and input to be guided under the authority of presidencies of COP23 and COP24 to finalise a report, which will be informed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (Fiji Government, 2018). Interestingly, the other features of the Talanoa Dialogue included the dialogue being constructive, facilitative, solutions oriented, devoid of confrontational exchanges and conducted in the 'spirit of Pacific tradition of Talanoa' (Fiji Government, 2018).

Significance and successes

The Talanoa Dialogue was hailed a success in terms of its process, structure and Pacific positioning. Fiji was particularly self-congratulatory in hailing the success of the process in creating a space to share stories

and inspire action. At the end of the political phase as COP23 president, Prime Minister Bainimarama highlighted the dialogue as a critical solutions-focused tool that would drive more action towards a grounded global climate agenda. Bainimarama thanked the delegates for embracing what he described as the '*Talanoa* spirit' that did not involve finger-pointing and blaming certain parties, while capturing the world's imagination with the Pacific concept of inclusive decision-making (Kate, 2018; Toitoóna, 2018).

In terms of structure, there was much optimism about the inclusion of non-state actors, such as civil society and private sector representatives in informing the preparatory phase, which was then to report to the political phase involving ministers. There was a sense of a dual structured layer, with a more inclusive process at the outset producing insights that inform the political layer, comprising the key ministerial decision-makers. Optimistic suggestions were focused on the technicalities of having the Talanoa Dialogue as a staging ground for global stocktaking that was due to take place in 2023 (Lesniewska & Siegele, 2018). It is unclear as to what extent this was possible, as there wasn't much detailed by the Fijian COP23 presidency with regards to the modalities that may have been used to test or stage possible global stocktaking. In addition, it is also instructive to note that the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic may have had an impact on focus and planned global stocktaking progress.

The most significant point of praise was around the veneer of Pacific Island positioning and leveraging of the so-called Pacific ways of engagement in the international diplomatic system. Kirsch (2020) claimed that Fiji's leadership was to counter the passive representations of Pacific Islanders in global climate change and the depiction of vulnerability that came with climate impacts. Kirsch (2021) further argued that Fiji's facilitation of policy discussions on climate change was by no means a form of cultural appropriation by a multilateral system, neither was it an intentional communications framing by Fiji. In essence, the dialogue was lauded as an important Pacific-inspired framing, positioned within the politics of global climate change.

Of all these acclaimed successes of the Talanoa Dialogue, the claim of Pacific positioning, leveraging and implied cultural appreciation or promotion is perhaps the most misguided and exaggerated claim.

Critique and cultural cringe

The Bainimarama Talanoa Dialogue was a Fiji-centric representation that was facilitated through a cunningly concealed form of cultural appropriation and exotification of indigenous identity, which subsequently skewed representation of the Pacific. In effect, at a regional level there was little to no consultative engagement with key Pacific neighbours; therefore, the Bainimarama Talanoa Dialogue was anything but Pacific. Pacific scholars and observers with deeper informed knowledge have followed quite closely how the Fiji state co-opted the concept and term *talanoa* without adequate due respect for informed inclusion, participation and engagement of its Pacific neighbours. The Bainimarama government at a regional level did not consider consulting its key Pacific neighbours, especially the most climate vulnerable on the use of talanoa as a pan-Pacific positioning and leveraging tool. There wasn't any due consideration of at least broaching the use of the term with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, as the convening space for Pacific states. Granted, all states are free to pursue their national interests but the indigenous term of *talanoa* is a shared concept that does not belong to one state alone. Evidence of this self-motivated positioning was noted by Fiji-based Pacific Conference of Churches Climate Officer Frances Namoumou. Namoumou observed that Fiji refused to allow Kiribati and Tuvalu to take on key climate issues such as climate resilience, mitigation and financing at the COP23 in Bonn (Rika, 2018, p. 21). Former Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga later confirmed the claim of being left out but preferred to avoid any diplomatic confrontation with Fiji, opting to re-emphasise the call for global climate action (Rika, 2018, p. 21). Internally, Fiji non-state actors and other Pacific officials were concerned at the blatant disregard the Bainimarama government and COP23 presidency had demonstrated towards its Pacific neighbours.

At a national level, the Bainimarama government, as key driver of the state of Fiji, neglected to consult the indigenous leaders or at least consider engaging an indigenous representative body. In fact, the Bainimarama government's political legitimacy had been mired by the prime minister's role as the 5 December 2006 military coup leader and his earlier actions in the 2000 civilian coup (Firth, Fraenkel, & Lal, 2009; Narsey, 2017). Compounding this is the fact that the closest indigenous representative body in Fiji that could have been consulted on the use of an indigenous term in diplomatic statecraft, the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), was abolished by Bainimarama in 2012 (Sakai, 2016). This was mainly due to the GCC lack of support for Bainimarama's regime in the wake of the 2006 coup. In a display of what can be best described as anti-indigeneity, targeting language specifically, the Bainimarama government disallowed the use of the vernacular in parliament in 2014 (Kumar, 2023). In 2019, the Bainimarama government augmented indigenous traditional protocols, by removing representative acknowledgements, when the state received the then Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle and Prince Harry (Tarai, 2019). In addition to these two incidents, there were other non-consultative changes relating to the indigenous ethos and structure, such as the controversial Bill 17 amendment to the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940 (Tarai, 2022). These series of incidents, whether coincidental or otherwise, demonstrate the lack of respect (as a state official not as an indigenous individual) for indigeneity by the COP23 president. Therefore, the Bainimarama government lacked legitimacy and the right to use an indigenous Pacific term and concept on the global stage.

It is very little wonder that COP23 Bonn meeting appeared to trigger what can be best described as moments of 'indigenous cultural cringe'. Moments of cultural cringe are instances when appropriated cultural practice, language and indigeneity are carelessly replicated and mimicked within incompatible settings or contexts. These instances can trigger a visible or concealed reaction of embarrassment or humiliation among the

indigenous owners or custodians of the given culture. These moments are more often than not only discernible through grounded indigeneity and positionality. Therefore, most non-Pacific islander researchers, scholars and commentators may be incapable of experiencing or understanding these instances of indigenous cultural cringe. This is not to suggest that cultural practices can never be interpreted or must be rigid and inflexible, but its evolution and interpreted appreciation must have the informed and grounded permission of its custodians.

Notable moments of indigenous cultural cringe include the poorly planned or inappropriate show casing of kava bowls and related ornaments, coupled with the generic presentation of indigenous Fijian warriors on varying stages during the meeting. As seen in the second image in Figure 20 (see next page), miniature Fijian hair combs were strewn from a central kava bowl as ornaments. There is no way that a kava bowl would be strewn with combs in demonstration of a gathering within the wider indigenous ethos. Even if such demonstrations were merely ornamental, they still indicate a negligent consideration of display, control and appreciation of indigeneity and culture. The generic Fijian warrior symbolism not only reeks of state-sponsored exotification of indigeneity but it is also a reductive colonial trope of the indigenous Fijian as nothing more than a masculine, war club–bearing brute. Compounding these problematic misrepresentations is the obsessively Fiji-centric nature and positioning of display, veiled in the guise of a collectively shared Pacific concept.

Conclusion: Cautionary conceptual frame

The Bainimarama government's positioning of the concept of talanoa in an international diplomatic dialogue structure is understandably admirable for keen advocates of Oceanic diplomacy. It was undoubtedly unique in its opportunity and placing within the architecture of climate diplomacy. However, it cannot be denied that the key driver of the state

Figure 20: cultural cringe moments

A display of Fijian objects to highlight the Sunday climate talanoa's Pacific origins (Pic: IISD/ENB | Kiara Worth)

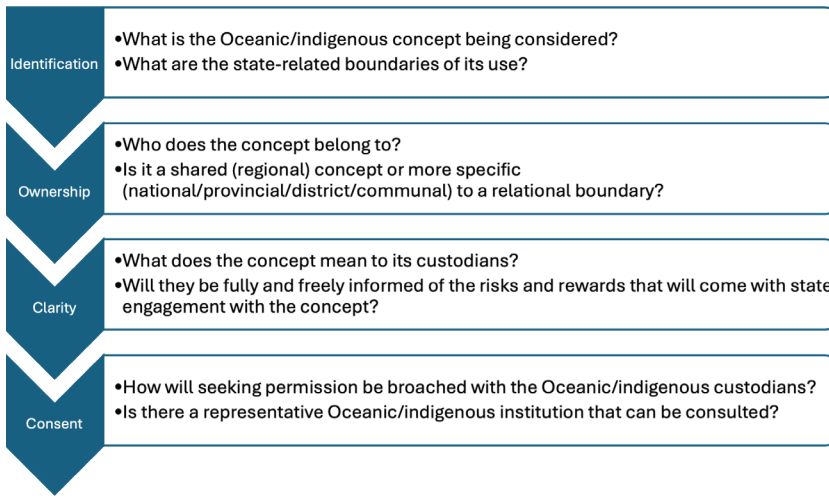
Photographs by Kiara Worth. Image sourced from UNFCCC and IISD/ENB –used in https://www.climatechangenews.com/2018/05/07/sunday-talanoa-climate-negotiators-talk-like-people/

of Fiji at the time, the Bainimarama government, had neglected to fully consult and seek permission from its fellow indigenous Pacific Island states, as well as its own indigenous people. The regional dimension is especially important considering the shared nature of the concept across a number of Pacific states and the regional prioritisation of climate action. As such, Fiji, and more specifically the former prime minister, lacked Oceanic (regional) and indigenous (domestic) legitimacy and authority to use and proclaim the concept internationally. This provides an important point of consideration, that being an indigenous leader within an indigenous majority country, in a state or official position, does not automatically qualify a person to use and guarantee they will have a legitimate appreciation of an indigenous concept. Conflating

indigenous permission through an official or public position can result in neglecting open and free consultation with indigenous custodians and practitioners of the culture and identity. Ultimately, such forms of conflation, without genuine consultation and possible consent, become superficial and tokenistic forms of indigenisation.

In sum, the case of the Bainimarama Talanoa Dialogue provides an outline for a cautionary framework in the future use of Oceanic diplomacy. The framework is structured along guiding questions, which are anchored around the Oceanic or indigenous concepts of identification, ownership, clarification and custodian-determined consent (Figure 21).

Figure 21: A cautionary framework for using Oceanic Diplomacy



Source: Author's own work.

The given cautionary conceptual frame is open and dynamic but serves as a guide to avoid Oceanic diplomacy succumbing to state sponsored appropriation and exotification of indigenous concepts. Any well-intentioned state motivation concerned with indigenising diplomacy can be susceptible to tokenistic forms of representation. Even a state such as Fiji, with a majority indigenous population, led by an indigenous leader, was careless and negligent in respecting the shared meaning and value of talanoa. It ironically did not talanoa

with its Pacific neighbours and its own indigenous people while it hypocritically tried to promote the use of the concept internationally. More time and genuine engagement in freely consulting and engaging with the indigenous or Oceanic custodians would augur well for the appreciation and promotion of Oceanic diplomacy. These matters cannot be rushed or time-bound through policy deadlines or political pressure but require deeper more meaningful relational engagement.

Acknowledgements

Like most things in Oceania, nothing is possible without shared ideas, thoughts and views. As such, in the course of thinking, writing and rewriting this chapter with its intersecting ideas, I'd like to thank and acknowledge a number of Oceanic thinkers. First, I'd like to acknowledge the Philosopher, Poet and gentle soul, the late Pio Manoa for his endless words of wisdom shared over big bowls of kava in Pacific Harbour. Second, I thank my contemporaries for their shared time, knowledge, patience and encouragement in grounding my disjointed thoughts: Vani Catanasiga, Amerita Ravuvu, Fulori Manoa, Kalolaini Waseimoala Monica Lomani Waqanisau, Iliesa Wise, Sevanaia Sakai and Ratu Eroni Tawake Rakuita. Last but definitely not least, I thank Greg Fry, Morgan A Tuimaleali'ifano and George Carter for your overwhelming patience and guidance in this process. *Vinaka saka vakalevu*.

References

Farrelly, T., & Nabobo-Baba, U. (2012, 3–5 December). *Talanoa as empathic research*. [Paper presentation]. International Development Conference, Auckland.

Fasavalu, T. I., & Reynolds, M. (2019). Relational positionality and a learning disposition: Shifting the conversation. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, *18*(2), 11–25.

Fiji Government. (2018). *Talanoa Dialogue* [Presentation]. COP23, Suva. https://prdrse4all.spc.int/sites/default/files/session-5_talanoa-dialogue.pdf

Firth, S., Fraenkel, J., & Lal, B. V. (2009). *The 2006 military takeover in Fiji: A coup to end all coups?* ANU Press. http://doi.org/10.22459/MTF.04.2009

Malungahu, G. (2022, June 22). *Pacific research methodologies, methods and wider considerations* [Lecture], Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Canberra.

Nabobo-Baba, U. (2006). *Knowing and learning: An indigenous Fijian approach*. Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Nabobo-Baba, U. (2008). Decolonising framings in Pacific research: Indigenous Fijian Vanua Research Framework as an organic response. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, *4*(2), 140–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/117718010800400210

Naepi, S. (2019). Pacific research methodologies. *Oxford research encyclopedia of education* (p. 10). Oxford University Press.

Narsey, W. (2017, May 3). Fiji not between the Devil and the deep blue sea [Blog post]. *Narsey on Fiji – Fighting censorship*. https://narseyonfiji.wordpress.com/2017/05/03/fiji-not-between-the-devil-and-the-deep-blue-sea-3-may-2017/

Prescott, S. M. (2008). Using talanoa in Pacific business research in New Zealand: Experiences with Tongan entrepreneurs. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, *4*(1), 127–148. http://doi.org/10.1177/117718010800400111

Rajamani, L. (2017). *Structuring the UNFCCC facilitative dialogue* [Background paper]. Centre for Climate Energy Solutions, Centre for Policy Research. https://www.c2es.org/document/structuring-the-unfccc-2018-facilitative-dialogue/

Rika, N. (2018, September). Smoke and mirrors – Fiji's COP untruths. *Islands Business*, *44*(9), 20–22. https://emag.islandsbusiness.com/wp-content/uploads/flipbook/8/book.html

Rowe, W. E. (2014). Positionality. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research* (pp. 628–628), SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406.n277

Sakai, S. (2016). Native land policy in the 2014 elections. *The people have spoken: The 2014 elections in Fiji* (pp. 135–156). ANU Press.

Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program. (2015, December 16). *The voice of the Pacific and the Paris Agreement*. https://www.sprep.org/news/voice-pacific-and-paris-agreement

Tarai, J. (2019, January). Breaching indigenousness (indigeneity). *Islands Business*, *45*(1), 24–25. https://emag.islandsbusiness.com/wp-content/uploads/flipbook/19/book.html#p=25

Tarai, J. (2022). Fiji. *The Contemporary Pacific*, *34*(2), 457–466. https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2022.0067

Thaman, K. H. (2003). Decolonizing Pacific studies: Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom in higher education. *The Contemporary Pacific*, *15*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2003.0032

Toitoóna, R. (2018, December 22). How successful was the Talanoa Dialogue in COP24? *Solomon Star Newspaper.* https://earthjournalism.net/stories/how-successful-was-the-talanoa-dialogue-in-cop24

Vaidyula, M., & Ellis, J. (2017). *2018 facilitative dialogue: Identifying options for outputs and outcomes, and key questions for modalities* (OECD/IEA Climate Change Expert Group Papers, No. 2017/04). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. https://doi.org/10.1787/6169b164-en