

## Sacred Vā-Rhythms

### A Book Review of Winston Halapua's *Waves of God's Embrace, Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean* (2008)

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#### Article abstract

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## SACRED VĀ-RHYTHMS: A BOOK REVIEW OF WINSTON HALAPUA'S *WAVES OF GOD'S EMBRACE, SACRED PERSPECTIVES FROM THE OCEAN* (2008)

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**Abstract:** This book review is a talanoa (discussion) with Winston Halapua's 2008 text, *Waves of God's Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean*. This review is an interpretation and evaluation of the text and Halapua's narrative musings. Readers are invited to engage with Indigenous concepts and forms of creative criticality, fronting Oceania meaning-making and sense-making through storytelling, poetry, and proverbial or wise sayings. In my review, I employ sacred vā-rhythms to engage in talanoa with key themes, ideas, and insights noted by Halapua, a well-respected religious leader and academic. I offer questions and provocations about God's embrace and the ways in which sacred vā is framed today as being in-relationship with the more-than-human world (i.e., the fonua-vanua-whenua and moana) for Tongan as well as Oceania families across Oceania and the diaspora.

**Keywords:** Oceania Moana; creative criticality; waves of God's embrace; sacred vā-rhythms

Relational rhythms are at the heart of Indigenous and intergenerational meaning-making in the Moana (Oceania). The special issue is a call for these creative forms of sense-making. Through art as the expression of human creativity and imagination, in his 2008 text *Waves of God's Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean*, Winston Halapua weaves together descriptive narratives, poetry, and proverbial sayings. His storytelling of what life was like growing up in Tonga with his family, and studying, working, and living in other places across the Moana echoes intergenerational aspirations, experiences, and expressions of faith in God. In this review, I articulate Halapua's sense-making and meaning-making of the Moana, using Tongan ideas and frames of creatively critical understanding (Dyck et al., 2022). Dyck et al. describe creatively critical sense-making as a "practice reliant on Indigenous Moana ways of knowing-seeing-feeling-doing-being" ( p. 37). I employ talanoa (storying or dialogic practice) and vā (relational space, relational connection) in my practice of creative criticality, taking a decolonial approach to meaning-making.

While published 15 years ago, the persistent themes in Halapua's text—the richness of human diversity in Oceania and our mutual need to be in-relationship—are still pertinent issues today. Written to captivate an intimate understanding of God, Halapua's desire was to help readers appreciate the profound spiritual wisdom that resides in local communities' knowledge and practices. *Waves of God's Embrace* expresses humanity and its deep connections with the more-than-human world, represented as sacred stories depicted by Halapua through his life journey across Oceania and the diaspora. The applicability of Halapua's text in today's global pandemic COVID-19 context provokes contemplation of the ways sacred relations and perspectives are meaningfully articulated by local Oceania people themselves. At the same time, his text allows today's Pacific-heritage youth, born and raised in the diaspora, to question and sense-make the ways in which their migrant parents and grandparents' narratives and aspirations can be actualised, meaningfully captured, and operationalised throughout their ongoing mobilities across the diaspora of Australia, USA, Aotearoa New Zealand, and certain parts of Europe (Faleolo, 2020; Faleolo, 2023; Fehoko et al., 2022; Hafoka, 2021; Sione et al., 2023).

*Waves of God's Embrace* is a reminder of the intricate and intimate perspectives of an insider's lived experiences, a turn from how Oceania was often colonially depicted in the past by those outside—those who took on a more romanticised yet extractive lens to their descriptive interpretations of Oceania and its Indigenous peoples, cultures, knowledges, and places. Halapua captivates readers by storying the ways he embraces sacred knowledge, bringing into close talanoa (discussion, dialogue) his unfoldings of human interaction with the more-than-human world. *Waves of God's Embrace* is a legitimate source that can be added to the existing body of literature linked to Oceania history and theological study.

As a former Anglican archbishop and theologian scholar, Halapua is not a stranger to regional religious leaders, academics, and their networks. His late father was a Minister and the first Anglican Bishop in Tonga (Fox, 2020). After leaving Tonga at the age of 18 in the mid-1960s for higher education at Fiji's theological college, Halapua likened learning about the various faiths and religions to a consumption of diverse "delicacies. Eating all these varieties widened my horizon. And trying to communicate beyond you with others, that is actually the blessing of this country you won't find elsewhere. Its Fiji as a multicultural country. Trying to be together. You will see the ecumenical [uniting Christian churches] side." (Fox, 2020, para. 6).

Halapua's (2008) reference to "being "authentic" in the text allows readers to see and hear the importance of his inner stirrings about his connection with God, God's people, and the more-than-human world. He stated:

There is a sense in which this book emerges from the fires of my inner life. It is a lava flow of passion. It has emerged as I have walked beside the sea, as I have known myself as much a person of the ocean as my Polynesian ancestors. . . . But now I feel compelled to write from a great need to be *authentic*, to give heed to inner stirrings, to articulate that God is to be encountered in experience within this immense and pulsating universe.  
(p. 3)

Although the term *metaphysics*—the branch of philosophy that interrogates the idea of reality, time, space, and existence—is not mentioned in Halapua's book, his stories and lived experiences, as well as theological training, embraces an awe of God's creations, the universe, and how such co-existing connections between humans and the more-than-human world are relational and sacred.

## Summary of Content

There are many meaningful and illuminating insights contained in this text, which is arranged into seven chapters. A large portion of the book gives precedence to the ocean as gifting life (see Chapter 3); ocean as embrace (see Chapter 4); ocean as space (see Chapter 5); waves of justice and peace (see Chapter 6); and deep ocean (see Chapter 7). Moana as both ocean and Oceania is symbolic of the in-depth meanings linked to Indigenous knowledge. The moana/Moana (i.e., ocean/Oceania) is a central site and context for Halapua's unpacking of relations and connections across places and spaces in Oceania. These sacred relations between humans and the more-than-human world (i.e., God, ocean, land) are creatively woven together in the text, which infuses bible scriptures, Halapua's lived experiences, and poems written by friends, colleagues, and family over time.

*Waves of God's Embrace* begins by inviting readers to engage with Halapua, his home Oceania, and his desire for readers to “. . .walk alongside [his] sharing of insights; to participate in the exploration set out in [his] writing, to find your own passion and to make your own discoveries” (p. 2). He provides context for how and where the idea to write such a book began, and the significance of the ocean as a connector for his thinking and writing across cosmopolitan cities and small Island states, from St Heliers Bay in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, to Fiji, Tonga, and other parts of the region. Halapua's storytelling flows across diverse places in Oceania, reminding me of the late 'Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) talanoa, claiming the interconnected nature of Islands in the region. This was evident in Hau'ofa's (1994) reference to Oceania as “our sea of [interconnected] Islands”(p. 159), affirming how the moana (ocean) is at the centre of understanding the deep connections between the many Islands that appear geographically scattered on maps, yet hold deep ancestral, historical, and cultural ties.

### **Talanoa as Discussion, Interpretation, and Evaluation of the Book**

My deliberate naming of “Sacred vā-rhythms” in the title of this review, comes from a desire to emphasise vā and its relational vibes or rhythms, and to honour Halapua's reference to sacred relations and perspectives, at this particular moment during the postpandemic context (i.e., a connection to tā/time). Sacred vā-rhythms reflect the sacredness of vā and the ongoing relational encounters experienced across fonua-vanua-whenua (land in the Tongan, Fijian, and Māori languages) (Ka'ili, 2017). Halapua depicts sacredness as an embodied state of being in-relationship with his Christian God, and makes practical references to how churches in the region fight back against climate change and the human-induced violence that continues to threaten Oceania's natural environment. The text, however, does not always provoke future-focused talanoa on the implications of climate change and natural disasters regarding members of their communities becoming climate refugees. Today, becoming climate refugees is a real risk for community members whose Islands are constantly threatened by tropical cyclones, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and sea levels rising.

Halapua's text does not always allude to the tensions associated with one's diverse positionalities. As a practicing Christian and researcher working with Indigenous and decolonial ideas and approaches, Halapua's text is a reminder of the complexities associated with our positionalities in the dominant Eurowestern academe. I continue to be confronted by my choice to live as a Christian and engage with the socio-political tensions and Indigenous responsibilities associated with advancing decolonial research agendas at university. Turning to talanoa, vā, storytelling, and poetry have provided ways for me to creatively and critically express meaning and understanding of

Halapua's text and my own positionalities and Indigenous responsibilities from Aotearoa New Zealand whenua-fonua-land.

Justice and peace are key themes in Halapua's text. His talanoa reminds us that unity is key to justice and peace, and why it is important to embrace Oceania's diversity. Indifferences to one another have plagued ethnic groups within and across small Island nations. *Waves of God's Embrace* addresses both past and contemporary issues that threaten Oceania communities' existence. Although Halapua does not emphasise the idea of vā in his text, the ways in which he stories the challenges and the need for closer collaboration and partnership between church organisations and governments emphasises close connection as being key to achieving unity in action against today's problems.

Halapua's descriptive accounts and stories are inspiring, however, I am unsure whether today's more youthful generation of Pacific-heritage people living in the diaspora, across cosmopolitan nations like Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the US would make meaningful connections with them. What does it mean to story such sacred relational connections in the diaspora, on fonua-vanua-whenua not native to Tongan people? *Waves of God's Embrace* raises questions for me, given that more and more Tongan communities are dispersed and somewhat displaced across the diaspora.

## Talanoa as Having Sacred Offerings in Oceania

"Talanoa is about the sacredness of listening. In order for all to hear one another, talking must go hand in hand with listening" (Halapua, 2008, p. 65).

The cultural practice of talanoa is another meaningful thread (Vaiolleti, 2006). Halapua's brother, the late Sitiveni Halapua (2000), was one of the earliest scholars to capitalise on talanoa's cultural relevance and significance during the coup in Fiji (see Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014). The in-depth nature of talanoa can be observed through its derivatives. One example, tālanga, means "to have a friendly discussion" (Churchward, 2015, p. 447), "interactive talking with a purpose" ('Ofanoa et al., 2021, p. 4), and a "Tongan way of talanoa (orality, story-telling-talking). . .[an] open-ended mode of conversation that invites multiple perspectives, options, solutions and/or meanings" (Vaka'uta, 2009, p. 129). Talanoa as well as tālanga are gifts that offer meaningful opportunities for people to learn, listen, observe, and feel sacred relations and understandings. Talanoa is one of Oceania's many gifts.

Talanoa is articulated by Halapua as a practice that enables the gifting of God's loving embrace. As a valued practice amongst Island states in Polynesia, talanoa is an

oral tradition that imparts knowledge, values, and practices from generation to generation. Halapua proposes talanoa has four gifts to offer the world: talanoa gifts space for a process of coming together to emerge; talanoa offers a way of securing justice; talanoa offers listening as a sacred practice; and talanoa as valued dialogue offers profound contributions.

Diverse languages, faith, religions, peoples, cultures, and Islands are truly valued by Halapua and he seeks to honour these in his religious and community leadership practices. Although *Waves of God's Embrace* captures a regional leader's perspectives of sacredness, I am left to contemplate how everyday Pacific people in the diaspora understand and activate their ways of being in-relationship with God and the more-than-human world. In particular, how do sacred vā-rhythms convey the relationality and deep connections that flow and shift across spaces as Tongan kāinga (extended families) continue their movement across the diaspora? (Fa'avae, in press). My own parents and siblings, for instance, after having settled for over 32 years in Aotearoa New Zealand, made the decision in 2018 to officially relocate to Perth in Western Australia, their new place of residence. For them, Perth offered more opportunities to achieve their parents' aspirations to own their own property as inheritance for my siblings and their grandchildren. My siblings' decision to leave the familiar place of Aotearoa New Zealand in search of improved opportunities for themselves and their next generation reflects their commitment to honour our parents' struggles, emphasising the symbolic and aspirational nature of sacred vā-rhythms. These vā-rhythms echo mālie (inspiring, empowering) and māfana (heart-warming, heart-felt) vibes. These are sacred intergenerational talanoa that are often missing from scholarly publications.

While Halapua does not emphasise the transient nature of vā for communities and families in the diaspora and its ongoing relational rhythms that are carried across spaces and contexts in this book, he affirms the place of land and ocean, and these help him affirm God's wisdom in creation of the material world. For example, “. . . I marvel at the gravitational pull of the moon and sun and the rotation of the earth and moon which produce the [ocean] tides. I am aware of being embraced by the mystery and energy of a cosmic rhythm” (p. 2). Halapua's stories and poems symbolise sacred and profound deep learnings about his desire to know more about God and the diverse communities and waves of religious faith in Oceania.

## **To Conclude: Talanoa and Spiritual Depth**

To show the philosophical and spiritual depth in Oceania knowledge, language, and culture, Halapua applies Indigenous yet predominantly Polynesian-centred concepts, values, and metaphors. He uses talanoa to showcase Oceania's spiritual

depth. This can be both useful and challenging for the next generation of Pacific-heritage young people who are born and raised in the diaspora, and whose connections to their homeland may not be as strong as their migrant parents and grandparents. Halapua ends by introducing *Theomoana* (coupling of theology and the moana or ocean) as a new gift that provides the space for Oceania voice and perspective to engage in talanoa (conversation, dialogue) with theology—the science of God or of religious truth (see Halapua, 2008). Halapua notes a prayer written by a young person from Vanuatu:

*O Jesus,  
be the canoe that holds me in the sea of life,  
be the steer that keeps me straight,  
be the outrigger that supports me in time of great temptation.  
Let your Spirit be my sail that carries me through each day,  
as I journey steadfastly on the long voyage of life. Amen.*

(Prayer of a young person from Vanuatu, cited in Halapua, 2008, back cover of book)



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