THE VANUA IS FO `OHAKE

JIONE HAVEA

THIS TALANOA, TELLING STORY, shoots out from three people having a talanoa (conversation), telling and sharing thoughts and imaginations. Three males to be precise, but their sex should not sanction nor hinder this talanoa (story). Nor should we imagine that this talanoa (telling) tells everything about their talanoa.

A talanoa ultimately fails to capture the talanoa it tells. Even if I argue that ‘this is a true story,’ as storytellers are known to do, do not assume that I will tell everything from the talanoa of these three men from different generations, and different walks of life.

A talanoa must be shared, so that it tells. I therefore share this talanoa, hoping to also unmask romanticised views on the practices of oral and storytelling cultures. A talanoa can also pierce and transform, stretch and transcend, in addition to retelling and remembering memories.¹

BETWEEN MORNING AND LUNCH, one cool Fijian day, outside

¹ For the sake of ones who do not understand the lingo, ‘talanoa’ is a word used in several (but not all) of the native Pasifika languages; it refers to the (three in one) triad of story, telling and conversation.

In the world of talanoa, story dies without telling and conversation; telling becomes an attempt to control when one does not respect the story or give room for conversation; and conversation is empty without story and telling. In talanoa cultures, there is no separation between story, telling and conversation. They interweave in talanoa.
a meeting house where smart-talking people were gathered, welcomed and entertained; three persons, two Fijians and one Tongan, stood with their backs to huge unfinished woodcarvings. Withdrawn from the views and agenda shared among the gathered people, almost like a congregation, these three old men shared their talanoa within the hearing of logs, birds, trees, crawlers, rocks, and so forth, at a spot where most congregants would rather be.

The time was in-between, between the equalling darkness of the previous night and the next event in the program, lunch, a meal, another congregating opportunity.

The place was outside of the meeting place, outside in terms of both location and ideology, but in the open in terms of space and creativity.

Woodchips littered the surroundings but as we say in Tongan, the fo‘i toko-tolu (these three, this trinity) did not notice the reclining figures that the woodcarvers were trying to impress and express.

The atmosphere of the recalled talanoa was work in progress, unfinished carvings, anticipating, and fearing, the chiselling of carvers to give them more detail. The carvings reclined as if they refused to stand up, as if they would rather just lie there, resisting completion and the digging, engraving and gouging of the carvers.

The unfinished carvings are fo`ohake, they lie on their backside where they have been laid. Or should I say that they were dropped, dumped, where they now lie? They lie there, in the many senses of the term: there, they lie!

THE TOPIC OF THE talanoa was vanua, a Fijian word that can mean land, place, country, district or village. Vanua also refers to people, who are the lewe ni vanua (inner part of the land), and the flesh of the land.

The identities of indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) intertwine with vanua to the extent that without vanua the people are soulless.
Vanua is the ground of belonging, the locus of being Fijian, the means of livelihood and the nurturer of life. Vanua is life. Without vanua, indigenous Fijians lose something significant of their Fijianess.

In our sea of islands, the words for land is basically the same — vanua (Fiji), hanua (PNG), fonua (Tonga), fanua (Samoa), fenua (Wallis and Futuna), whenua (Māori) — and they carry similar meanings.

This talanoa on vanua started because one of the two Fijians is preparing for a PhD thesis that aims to transform the roles of the matanivanua, as herald for a chief and as spokesperson for the people, into a mata-ni-vanua hermeneutic, eyes and face (mata) of vanua, and he was seeking the wisdom of the senior Fijian on vanua.

The Tongan was listening in, eavesdropping, because he is aware and critical of, and sorry for, the assault Ma`afu and his men, from Tonga, committed upon the vanua o Viti, land and people and identity of Fiji and Fijians.

THIS TALANOA HAPPENED OUTSIDE and in-between, surrounded by incompleteness and splinters of wood, and by splintering thoughts.

It started at the entry to a meeting place. And it shifted away from the meeting place, coming to rest, at this point, delayed, for now, at this talanoa that I am sharing.

This talanoa is therefore about shifts, movements, and splinters, fragments, that come to rest, that come together, as if to congregate, on this occasion, on their telling, upon the face of incompleteness. This talanoa is therefore a meeting place.

THE TONGAN ASKED THE senior Fijian, ‘Kerekere Pio, what do you think about when you hear people talk about vanua?’

Pio queried, in response, ‘Na vanua?’
‘Io, na vanua,’ Joeli, the other Fijian interjected.
It is not unusual, or impolite, for islanders to jump into a talanoa; a talanoa is usually inviting, seductive, interactive and communal.

‘Isa!’ Pio then made a sound with his mouth similar to the sound one makes when she or he sucks on the mouth of a coconut or kisses the forehead of a grandchild.

The three men chuckled, like children again, appearing not to know what to say next.

Then there was silence.

Then more chuckling, this time, it feels, because of uncertainty. You know how those kinds of chuckles sound.

‘Come, let’s move over there and talk,’ Pio requested.

The three moved away from the meeting place, toward the reclining unfinished woodcarvings.

One of the woodcarvers was there, holding a smoke in one hand and a stick in the other, and he greeted the three. They talked for a little while, and then the three returned to the reason why they were in motion.

‘Why do you ask me this difficult question?’ Pio inquired further.

Joeli interjected again. ‘I know the common understanding of vanua, but we were wondering if you have other thoughts.’

Joeli was not ignorant of Fijian cultures. As we say in Tongan, ko e tangata na‘e ai hono kuonga, he is a man who had his era (which means that he knows something, he has been around).

Pio nonetheless goes on to recall those common understandings, not in disrespect for Joeli but partly for the sake of the Tongan, partly in order to remind himself of what his culture says about vanua, and partly in order to find a gap, a fracture, an opening in those understandings through which he might locate a shift.

It got repetitive. But repetition is an essential part of talanoa. And patience is required when islanders get into the talanoa moods, because the talanoa may circle and ripple around, touching here and there, before landing anywhere.

More repetition and patience!
Suddenly, Pio’s eyes sparkled. His face relaxed into a smile. He put the stuff that he was carrying on the ground, as if to touch the vanua, seeking permission to continue, then his hands stretched out, palms facing down, then back again, and again, almost like a Samoan dancer.

Silently at first, then he explained, ‘The vanua is a figure lying down!’

There was silence. This time, it was the silence of awe, not knowing how to continue.

Pio continued, ‘If you look at the way a Fijian village is structured, you can see its head, its body, its arms and legs. The head and body of the village will die if the legs don’t go fishing, and if the arms don’t turn the plantation. The hands and feet will be lost if the head separates from the body. The vanua is like that, and it is lying down.’ Reclining. Relaxing. Resting.

There was silence! This time, it was the silence of respect for the insights of a wise turaga.

Questions rippled to Pio from several directions.
‘When did the vanua sit up?’
‘When did it stand up, so that Fijian societies become hierarchical?’
‘What roles did western colonisation and Christianisation play in raising up, erecting, the vanua?’
‘How do we get the vanua to lie down again?’
‘Can we relax the vanua so that it lies back down again?’
‘Should we keep the vanua standing, but encourage it to move?’

Again, Pio wisely replied, ‘Come! Let’s go eat. It’s time for lunch!’

A TALANOA IS DIFFICULT to complete, or contain. It lives on, beyond each of its tellings. Actually, each telling gives it new life.

The next time I see Pio and Joeli I shall ask them:
Did the vanua lie down willingly?
Was the vanua lulled into lying down?
Seduced, maybe?
Was the vanua knocked down?
Suggesting that ‘the vanua is fo’ohake’, lying or fallen on its back, materialises these questions. That the vanua is lying down, is obvious. But why? And in whose interests?
What about the chips? And the unfinished woodcarvings?
As I await the next talanoa, may we remember that vanua refers to much more than land.
Vanua also has to do, among other things, in our sea of talanoa, with identity and belonging.