An island of milk, honey, and taro

Anthony Rees

Initial complaints
The murmuring motif is one of the key features of the wilderness sojourn narrative, that part of the biblical story between the dramatic events at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus and the long-awaited entry to the promised land at the beginning of the book of Joshua. Wandering through the wilderness between Mt. Sinai and Canaan, tired, hungry, insecure and vulnerable to a variety of external threats, the people of Israel’s minds also wander, and together they begin to imagine (and remember) all manner of things. An interesting aspect of the murmuring motif is that the murmuring has a variety of objects. There are complaints about Moses’s leadership, about the elevated cultic position of the Levites, and about the lack of water. The literary pattern is straight-forward, with slight variations: the people complain amongst themselves about something; YHWH responds with some act of violence, be it a plague (Num. 11:33), a fire (Num. 11:2), snakes (Num. 21:6) or something similar; the people come to Moses with their complaint; Moses intercedes for them, at which point God responds, either with judgement and justification in the case of Moses’s and Aaron’s special position (Num. 16), or in the case of an absence of water, miraculous provision (Num. 20).

Food complaints
However, there is another complaint which is prominent, and it is this one which I want to consider here, and that is the matter of food. The census data which opens the book of Numbers projects a population of around

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2 million people. To contextualise, that is approximately the combined populations of Fiji, Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia and the Solomon Islands. Now I don’t know how the appetite of the wandering Israelites compared with those of my friends in the Pacific. It is likely that long days spent wandering make for large appetites, which serves to make sense of the recurring complaint. What I do know, is that if there is a degree of correlation, a lot of taro will be required.

The most prominent text in regards to food in the wilderness narrative is Numbers 11. The text follows the usual pattern: the people complain, leading to YHWH burning up some of the outer-lying parts of the camp (v. 1); the people come to Moses who prays, and the result being the fire abating (vv. 2–3). However, a group described as a “rabble” had a strong craving, and with the threat of the fire gone, they resume their whingeing ways. At this point, the reason for the complaint is stated: “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.” (vv. 4–5). This great diversity of food is contrasted against the far simpler diet that they were being forced to endure: manna, and things made from manna. The outcome of the complaint is the provision of a great swarm of quail that the people enjoy, though a little too much, as it turns out. While the meat was still in their teeth, a plague ravages the camp, and those who had the cravings were put to death (v. 33).

There is an important point to be made here concerning food that will re-emerge later. The food of the imperial centre in Egypt has made a profound impact on the Israelites. Diversity and richness abound in Egypt, and that combination has impeded the collective ability to remember. The account of the Israelite experience in Egypt, as we read it in Exodus, paints a picture of cruel, unmitigated oppression; and the attempted crushing of spirit and, crucially, identity:

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour . . . The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks upon the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks they imposed on them. (Exod. 1:11–14, NRSV).

Yes, there was food, but it came with the reality of ruthless taskmasters and cruel work conditions. Or perhaps we might argue that immediate
hunger has impeded the Israelites’ ability to remember. They remember the food but forget the oppression.

An interesting inner-biblical contrast to this is the story of Daniel. In Daniel 1, Daniel's primary act of resistance against the empire was his refusal of the empire's food (Dan. 1:8). In this later period, Daniel believes that the eating of that food and drinking of that wine constitutes a defiling act, and, instead, requests a subversive diet of vegetables and water. The rejection of that food becomes an important personal symbol of identity, and the good health that Daniel enjoys on account of the rejection of that food is representive of God’s presence with him in the land of captivity, and the great success he comes to enjoy there. If Daniel symbolises the ideal Israelite, or, collectively, the ideal Israel, food becomes an important identity marker for Israel, and a way of maintain the blessing of God.

Later, in Numbers 13 when spies are sent into Canaan, the evidence of the quality of the land is the fruit that the spies bring back: grapes, pomegranates, and figs. Indeed, the land flows with milk and honey (v. 27) and the spies are able to bring back a range of fruits. These three fruit are significant. Grapes could be made into wine and raisins. Symbolically, grapes are an image of faithfulness, sour grapes of unfaithfulness. We might read these “good grapes” as a symbol of God’s faithfulness in relation to the land. What has been told, is true. Pomegranates represent fertility, given the abundant number of seeds they contained. They were fruits of unusual beauty and desirability. Figs were symbolic of fertility, bearing fruit for up to fifty years. In Isaiah 28:4, we read of the excitement with which they were eaten once ripe. Additionally, they were baked in cakes. The evidence of the fertility of the land builds upon the symbolism of faithfulness manifested in the grapes. This is a land that will provide and support this new people. So while these fruit may appear to be straightforward, even mundane, there is a point being made in their presentation. These fruit don’t only represent the fertility of the land, they represent culinary diversity, and a departure from the monotonous diet of manna which seems to irk them so much. To those who had remembered the melons, leeks, and cucumbers of Egypt, this must have been a sight for sore eyes!

However, the positivity of the report is tempered by a sobering reality: the land’s inhabitants are strong, and their cities well-fortified. This should hardly be a shock. The evidence that the land is fruitful should have been enough to make clear that its inhabitants are well nourished and strong!
Against this anxiety stands Caleb who urges the people to go and take the land, with the hand of Yhwh with them. However, his ardent plea seems to intensify the doubt in the minds of the other spies, who suddenly tell stories of a land which devours its inhabitants. The meaning of this is unclear. Budd relays a series of views regarding this phrase and concludes by claiming that what is meant is that the land is infertile and insecure, greatly at odds with the initial report. This report ends with the spies claiming they felt “like grasshoppers” when compared to the mighty men of the land. The land flowing with milk, honey and luscious fruits, a land home to well-nourished and strong inhabitants, was promptly painted as a dangerous, devouring place, ready to chew up the Israelites.

I think it is reasonable to assume that the change of tune that the spies make in relation to the land is driven by anxiety, and not any form of reality. It is reasonable to assume that a people who had spent their lives in captivity, and then wandered around a desert for a while might have certain anxieties about their capacity to win any sort of battle, so I don’t want to condemn them for their doubts. But their doubt has nothing to do with the land itself, which is clearly a fertile, hospitable place. My interest here is more to do with the complaint in the wilderness. The people are wandering in the wilderness with the hope of a promised land as their motivation. This land is their “inheritance”, a gift from God, quite at odds with the land that they find themselves in. So, I want to suggest that the rejection of the food of the wilderness—the manna which bores both their taste-buds and eyes—is actually a rejection of the land itself, rather than being specifically about the food. The food, and the attitude towards it, comes to symbolise the land. The land of manna is rejected land because it is not their real home; the land of milk and honey (grapes, pomegranates, and figs) is the Israelites’ real home—their own land.

An important point to raise here is that the Promised Land, Canaan, was home to other people. The foods which appeared to signify the assurance of God’s provision was stolen food from the people to who Canaan was indeed home. We will return to this is due course.

**Home in the Islands**

Against the backdrop of this biblical concept of home, we now turn to of the concept of land in Fiji, a concept best described by considering the word “vanua.” While vanua is a Fijian word, the concept it describes has wider
application, being a common idea throughout the nations of the Pacific. *Fenua, fanua, fonua, hanua*, each of these variations from Maohi Nui, Samoa, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands expresses similar cultural ideas about land. Each of these words is related or parallel with the word for womb or placenta in the respective languages, an association that manifests in the richness of the relationship imagined between the people and the land.

Applying the spatiality nomenclature of Soja, in particular the concept of third-space—that is the combination of imagined and real realities of a particular space—we begin to understand the ideas expressed in *vanua*. *Vanua* is not simply space or place, not simply the people, but it does include those things. *Vanua* is a means of livelihood, mother, a way of making sense of time and events, a link to ancestors and tradition, a crucial aspect of personal and collective identity. The *vanua* is the place where an ancestor landed. It is not owned, but rather it owns the Fijian. When a child is born, a part of the umbilical cord is buried in the ground and, at times, a tree planted there, symbolising the child’s continuing connection to *vanua*. The Fijian person’s identity and name derive from *vanua*. The great Fijian statesman, Ratu Sukuna, said that for the Fijian, land was a kind of divine ordinance, given to guide one’s life. It is to be served, but in return it offers help in difficulty, care in times of trouble, and protection from all manner of danger. It is clear that the Fijian understanding of land, and by extension, other Pacific understandings bear remarkable similarities to the understanding of biblical Israel’s relationship to the land, particularly this notion of divine inheritance and the tracing of one’s identity to a particular ancestor.

**Home and food in the Islands**

I come now to food. As mentioned previously, *vanua* is a way of making sense of time and event, and this is particularly true in relation to the rural economy that continues to dominate most of Fiji’s islands. Certain foods, including root vegetables such as yam, dalo, and cassava, are grown throughout the whole year. They are called *kakana dina*, which translates as “real food,” and are high in symbolic value, and continue to be used in ritual observances through offerings to chief and priest. If you are fortunate enough to eat with Pacific people, these root vegetables are the staple of their diet. And, in my experience, Pacific people who live away from their islands miss these foods, the constant reassuring presence of home, of *vanua*. Away from one’s
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vanua, potatoes, rice, and other palagi food are a poor substitute for the kakana dina of the islands. Here we return to the point made previously. The food of Canaan, the figs and pomegranates and so on discovered by the spies, is imagined as the kakana dina of the Israelite people. But that is not quite true. Those foods are the kakana dina of the land’s original habitants—those whose destruction is commissioned in Deuteronomy and reported in Joshua. The taking of the land brings with it the taking of the food of the land. Conversely, the kakana dina of the people of the wilderness is rejected. The sojourn in the wilderness features very little interaction with other peoples, aside from the battles of chapters 21 and 31, with their lands taken and settled in for a while, but with their food never becoming the kakana dina of the invading force. The myth of the land and the myth of the fruit of the land are inextricably linked, absorbed into the action of human migration.

It is this phenomenon I want to touch briefly on here, before drawing to a close. Pacific Islanders are not immune to the world’s migratory patterns, and, increasingly, islanders leave their vanua in search of financial benefit. Given the regional proximity, large communities exist in New Zealand and Australia, though these are not the only destinations. This exposure to the realities of globalisation bears significantly on Pacific communities abroad, and now also, at home, as diasporic islanders visit or even repatriate.

This cultural shift has been the subject of significant scholarly attention, and not surprisingly. But in relation to food, or the fruit of the vanua, a fantastic image has been presented by Terry Pouono: “Coconut juice in a coca-cola bottle” Pouono’s paper engages the identity issues confronted by Samoan migrants in New Zealand, and particularly those within his church, the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa. Those issues are not entirely relevant to what I am talking about, in so far as he is concerned with Samoan culture more broadly. What is of note here, is that the image Pouono uses to encapsulate Samoan identity, and here again I broaden the scope to include the Pacific more generally, is a coconut, a staple food for Pacific people. The bringing together of the fruit of the vanua, the source of life that is used in a multitude of ways for survival in day-to-day living, with the corporate bottle, a symbol that is foreign to Pacific values, ideals, and belief systems, creates a crisis. The image is one of uncomfortable hybridity. The fruit of the vanua has no place in a coca-cola bottle. Samoan identity, Pouono argues, is trapped in the bottle. Was the cola in the bottle
drunk first? Was it sampled or consumed? Has it left its mark? Or was it simply discarded, no match for the fruit of the vanua?

I return here to the point I made previously about the Israelite memory of Egyptian food, and relate it to the contemporary Pacific experience. The people of Israel were travelling from an imperial centre towards a promised land. The people of the Pacific are making, in some sense, the opposite journey: they are leaving places thought to be divinely given, for foreign places. The fruit of the vanua is left behind and replaced by the food of the new empires. In Daniel 1, Daniel chooses to reject the richness of the empire’s food. It is a way of maintaining his identity. Does the coconut juice in the coca-cola bottle indicate a compromise, perhaps a necessary one? And if so, does the consuming of the empire’s food create a chasm between people and vanua? And for those who return, is the kakana dina sufficient? Or does a generation of Pacific people, who grew up away from the vanua, pine for the food the empire? If so, does the rejection of the fruit of the vanua indicate a rejection of vanua herself?

Conclusion

Israelite experience in the liminal space of the wilderness had her imagining the great richness of what was behind in Egypt, and the hope of what may lay ahead in Canaan. In the landless, homeless place, food emerges as a powerful symbol. The memory of the rich food of Egypt (which overshadows the memory of the crushing oppression that they endured there), along with the food of Canaan that lay ahead, the land of milk and honey, and, as it turns out, a whole bunch of fruit, provides a stark contrast to the meagre offerings that the wilderness provides for them. Food, then, becomes a way of identifying with place. The wilderness is not home, precisely because the food is bad. Or perhaps the food is bad precisely because it is not home. The divinely given land is the Israelites’ true home: the land of milk and honey. The rejection of manna is symbolic of a rejection of land and demonstrates the lack of emotional, spiritual attachment to that place, an attachment which is evident in the way “the land” is depicted.

For the people of the Pacific, vanua is home. We have seen the deep sense of attachment that the people have to the land and its produce—the kakana dina. As Tuwere notes, to be cast out is to be cut off from one’s means of life. Vanua and her produce, the divinely ordained home, like the divinely given land of Canaan with her milk, honey, and fruit, is absolutely
central to the construction of identity. However, it is also clear that this sense of attachment is beginning to hold with less force. The migratory patterns of Pacific people have led them to new imperial centres: new lands with new foods. Globalisation has brought an increased variety of foods in the region. The consumption of those foods, by choice, convenience, or necessity, is changing the identity of people; and as that occurs, the connection with *vanua* is loosened. So the question becomes this: is the new home imagined as the true promised land? Or is it still *vanua*, the (is)land of milk, honey, and taro?

**Endnotes**

1. This paper was written during a period in which I was a fellow of the Centre for Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University. I am grateful for the sustained period of reading and reflection this support facilitated. I wish to dedicate this paper to my friends and colleagues throughout the Pacific region.


4. This is not to suggest that the census data presented in Numbers i is accurate. Scholars largely agree that these numbers are an invention, the product of a demoralised Israel centuries after the events described, hoping to revitalise and inspire a new Israel. Two million is certainly too large a figure to be considered reasonable. However, establishing an accurate number, or verifying the historical veracity of the exodus, is not my concern here. Instead, I refer readers to the excellent commentaries of Milgrom and Levine, and the article of Davies.

5. Later in terms of the biblical narrative, though not necessarily of the provenance of the text. Not also that Daniel’s experience was in Babylon, not Egypt.


11 Ilaitia S. Tuwere, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2002), 36. It is worth noting here that *vanua* does not mean womb in Fijian, as its cognates do across the Pacific. Nonetheless, Tuwere adopts this widespread understanding of the word in the development of his theological position.


14 Tuwere, *Vanua*, 49.

15 Tuwere, *Vanua*, 35.

16 Tuwere, *Vanua*, 36.

17 *Palagi* is a word used across the Pacific to name people of European ancestry.

18 It is worth noting that *kakana dina* has a hierarchy of sorts. Imported foods, such as sweet potatoes and cassava, have grown in prominence across the Pacific, but their increased availability has only served to increase the symbolic value of more traditional items, most notably taro. Taro, now more expensive than alternatives, carries a new symbolic value of abundant generosity on the part of the host. See Roger Haden, *Food Culture in the Pacific Islands*, Food Culture around the World (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 57–61. Also, Nancy J. Pollock, “Food Classification in Three Pacific Societies: Fiji, Hawaii, and Tahiti,” *Ethnology* 25, no. 2 (1986).


21 Tuwere, *Vanua*, 36.