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An Ethics of Eco-Relationality

From an Oceanic Perspective to the Global Conversation

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Upolu Luma Vaai, Rev. PhD

Principal

Professor of Theology & Ethics

Pacific Theological College

Fiji Islands

What is Relationality?

- In Oceanic relational philosophy, all of life is an assemblage of relationality. Therefore relationality is in our blood. We came into being through relationships. And it is through us and in us that relationships continue. Relationality underpins all values and practices of Oceanic indigenous communities. Life is constituted by the flows of intensities of relationships. Hence movements of relationships are neither rigid nor static.
- Therefore as indigenous peoples, we don't just understand. We understand reality and life according to the rhythms of relationships. We interpret life according to structures and dynamics of relationships. In other words, relationality is the hermeneutical key to understanding life and wellbeing. It underpins the structure of knowledge and shapes the culture of learning.
- Eco-Relationality argues that everything, meaning all of life, is complex yet interconnected, sacred, dynamic and fluid, and of course living. Eco-relationality is wrestling to understand the 'individual' as part of the 'community' and 'community' as imaged in the 'individual'. Relationality is the whole, the sum of unity and distinction, connection and difference, communality and individuality, life and death, secular and sacred. A relational ethical person is one that should have a holistic grasp of both.

Ethical Strands of Eco-Relationality

I will discuss only the 4 strands of Eco-Relational Ethics, and especially the challenges, and how these 4 might contribute to strengthen online ethics, quality, and sustainability

1. Complexity and Multidimensionality

- Eco-Relationality is an ethics of complexity. It deals with navigating multiple strands of life. Multiple dimensions of being and becoming. So it goes against a kind of single-strandic linear way of thinking.
- Most students in the Pacific grew up in oral cultures. Orality is uncomfortable with a single/linear one-truth way of thinking because it deals with complexity. With how people navigate complex structures, relationships, and systems of life that usually starts in communities, not in classrooms. The question is whether mainstream education is willing to take on oral stories and traditions as part of quality learning. Wellbeing, quality, and sustainability depends on this navigational process. Oral stories for example do not promote central characters, but rather all characters and faces are brought to the fore to be recognised and acknowledged in the storyline.
- Education in this respect has an 'all-ness' mindset as opposed to a 'oneness' mindset promoted by the gospel of uniformity.
  - This philosophy teaches learners about adaptability to complex situations, to changes and new challenges such as covid19, especially shifting from traditional to modern, and in our case, face to face to online planform.
  - It is the same tool used by Pacific island communities to respond to climate challenges. It boosts their resilience and finding new possibilities of growth through navigating complexities, igniting critical consciousness and analytical engagement.
  - Of course the challenge is still there, as many of them grew up in tight relational cultures and contexts, while face to face relationship is lost, relationality is the same tool used to navigate the complexity of the 'new normal'.
  - Perhaps we need a theology of education to shape a values-based ethics of education, to challenge this monarchical God that continually shapes our theological educational ethics. Relationality can assist online learners to move away from this 'one way of doing things' (or so-called 'correct normal') in the education system to have a broader perspective of what we mean by best practices. It encourages students to shifting boundaries of spaces of learning and thinking to achieve life and wellbeing.

2. Interconnectedness

- That all of life are connected. This notion of '*mutual inclusiveness*' is critical to knowledge and learning in the Pacific. *I am **in** the land and the land is **in** me. I am **in** the community and the community is **in** me.* This philosophy of 'inness' underpins eco-relational ethics. It promotes the 'we are' logic as opposed to the 'we have' logic that underpins the neoliberal development narrative and models that is so entrenched in our education system.
- One of the challenges of online learning is moving into another kind of new online connectedness. Another community apart from the learners' biological and identity communities.
- Whether the learners will lose their community and relationality that is so key to Pacific peoples wellbeing is a discussion for another time. But here, losing real people, real faces, real interactions, and real relationships replaced by screens is an issue of 'isolation'.
- However in relationality, especially in this notion of 'inness' the community is continually part of the individual as he/she enters the online world. That is because the individual carries his/her community, including the land, ocean, ancestors, and so forth. As we say in Samoa, "home" is always a "carried home". We carry our home with us. While this does not work for all people, the challenge is to find ways to promote a sense of holistic wellbeing on online platforms. And there is no simple answer to this. But one can argue that the more one is rooted in the community, the more he/she is connected to such community online, and the more he/she finds the courage and ability to navigate another new world with confidence.
- The question that will still need to be addressed is how relational values key to wellbeing change if shifted to online platforms. Hence the struggle of striking the balance for example, between individuality and communality, or in our case, standards and wellbeing, face to face and online, is critical to online ethics. A false relationality holds on to just one aspect of these, this notion of oneness. Quality assurance should not just be about compliance and standards, but also about wellbeing and community. This is why creating a 'wellbeing environment' of education is key to success.
- In this interconnectedness also, there is a challenge to shift from a *market-driven education* focus that pushes the idea of compliance and standards policed by a centre of knowledge, into a *life-driven education* focus. The challenge still is how we can develop that holistic culture and aspect of life, life with others, with the land, with the community, as we move to online platform. This is why forums like these are important, esp the notion of building bridges, to address issues that lead to the suppression of values that promote life and wellbeing for the sake of a market ideology.

3. Fluidity

- In eco-relational ethics, life is always fluid. This is because relationality does not focus on institutions and policies, although they are very important, it focuses on peoples and deep connections.
- In other words, education is a relationship, not a mere academia, at least from a relational perspective. Now again, how will this relationality enhanced as we move to online learning? I ask this question because in the Pacific, sustainability whether under the challenges of climate change, covid19, or in the educational arena depends on deep relationships and connections with each other, with the land, with cultures, and spiritual traditions. Not on money and institutional systems. Life and wellbeing is dependent on the "we are" culture. Not on the "we have" cultures promoted by capitalist idea of growth.
- Because of the fluidity of life within relational structures, learners are encouraged to shift from a '*must be*' philosophy that is promoted by this single-strandic approach to a '*let-be*' philosophy of life. The 'must be' philosophy focuses on institutions, policies, compliance, and standards of excellence developed by someone else.
- This 'let be' philosophy focuses on people and learners and multi-disciplinary intergration and relationality. It allows learners to discover with others. To be dynamic and creative to learn and live, even outside of what is normalized and conventionally approved. This is very hard if we are shaped by the '*must be*' philosophy especially if our institutions are built on the notion of colonial standards and gatekeepers of knowledge who police the use of those standards. In the relational '*let be*' philosophy of life, we are free to discover, to find passion, and to take risks. And learn from mistakes which is not supposed to be perceived as sin. Failure therefore is not an issue here. Rather it is the consent to fail and to die before rising which is the issue.

4. Spirituality

- Relationality is the matrix of spirituality. Spirituality functions within the flow of the interweaving of bodies, language, art, culture, movements, relationships, and so forth.
- Spirituality is the recognition and realization that there is a sacred and spiritual world beyond everything we see. That trees, land, ocean, are spiritual beings that have their own world, values, race, and economy. They are capable of relating and living. That the world is a spiritual household that only has life through interactions and care.
- Recently I published an article titled '*We are therefore we live: Pacific Eco-Relational Spirituality and Changing the Climate Change Story*' where I argue about the huge gap in the current dominant climate change narrative where spirituality and relational values are sidelined. If we're working to assist Pacific people who are at the frontline of climate change, then at least recognise their relational values and ethics that are central to their wellbeing.
- In other words, spirituality speaks of the wellbeing of the whole. Not just human dignity, but also perhaps 'life-dignity', including communities and the Earth. A holistic approach to life. As opposed to a compartmentalized and categorized thinking and form of life promoted by this single-strandic educational approach.
    - The challenge is how online platform enhances this relational interconnected and holistic spirituality.
    - The challenge is how we can turn the online platform to serve what we call in many Pacific islands the VA, the relational space, not only as a space of learning, but also as a space to promote the spiritual values of respect, love and care for all of life, that is fundamental to relationality. Digital VA, shifting the VA from the real to virtual, is something raised by many Pacific educators as one of the challenges to online education. And Pacific educators are still struggling to put up mechanisms to assist learners on how not to lose spirituality in the virtual world.

Spirituality of Time

- The spirituality of TIME is critical to Pacific online learning. Relationality functions in a very different concept of time. Slowness of time, sometimes called *Pacific time*, or *Fiji time*. This is usually criticized by the West contributing to slowing down decisions and development. In the Pacific, the spirituality of time, shapes all decision making. To achieve a wise decision (we call this WISDOM), slowness is critical to achieve a decision that has less consequences. In learning or decision making, critical discernment and consultative process with the land, ancestors, ocean, for example, is key to achieving what we called WISDOM.
- So Pacific islanders like to postpone things. Very bad on deadlines. This is a challenge for us here. Sometimes it's because of the slackness. Sometimes also it's because they are still engaged in the consultation process and haven't reached a solid solution. The challenge is that, many Pacific learners, find it difficult to adjust to online learning, especially the time aspect. If they struggle to submit assignments for example during face to face, imagine what will happen online?
- That is why the philosophy of education has change. From a 'teaching' to a 'mentoring' approach. The former carries elements of 'know it all' mentality that has normally shaped conventional education. It comes with power and pride. The latter, the 'mentoring' approach, allows us to learn enough to learn that we do not know enough. In the mentoring approach, students are encouraged to write their own story rather than given a story. Make their own decisions and be responsible in their commitment without being policed or controlled. To find their passion, and sustainable path in the complexity of online learning. This will definitely take time, especially in the Pacific that is way far behind in terms of technology. But this is where the philosophy and ethics needs to change if we're moving towards creating a new story in the new normal for a new kind of education system that is based on relational values and spirituality.