

Forum

Oceanic Activism: A Talanoa on Land, Love, and Resistance

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Introduction

As scholars of Oceania, we maintain our commitment to the communities we come from and work with as acts of resistance to colonial and settler colonial violence in our daily lives. We believe these acts of resilience are forms of activism that challenge its narrow constructions of activism. As scholars of Oceania, we believe this relationship encompasses responsibilities to protect land and resources for the next generation(s). In order to do so, the people of Oceania engage in acts of resistance to imperialism, militarism, racism, and other settler colonial formations that have often appeared in less recognizable forms. Therefore, the contributors to this piece will share their perspectives on the nature of activism within Oceanic contexts and the various values from Oceanic communities that continue to inform daily lives through an examination of specific events of the political environment in which Indigenous concepts operated. The four of us share examples of community activism in communities: Juliann Anesi details tautua, the Sāmoan concept that has guided disability activism in Sāmoa, Alfred Peredo Flores discusses the CHamoru practice of ináfa'maolek and the Brown Movement in Guåhan, Brandon J. Reilly reexamines women's acts during the Chamorro-Spanish Wars through the prism of placental politics, and Kēhaulani Vaughn details understandings of aloha 'āina, which continues to fuel Kanaka Maoli activism till this day. All contributors articulate concepts from Oceania that continue to shape and inform daily lives. At these intersections, this essay details the ways that Oceanic resistance and activism is complex, nuanced, and takes place in various locales such as village sites, sacred sites, schools, churches, and the home. Oceanic activism highlights the ways that culture is integral to Oceanic resistance as people continue to confront colonialism and settler colonialism and while they continue to chart paths for future generations.

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Juliann Anesi: Tautua

In the 1970s, church, civil rights, and non-governmental organizations introduced disability services to Pacific Island countries. These organizations aimed to encourage the full participation of disabled people in their communities. Prior to these programs, disabled students faced several challenges that undermined their ability to attend school. Their exclusion was due to limited resources, social programs, and services. However, at the core of this exclusion were negative attitudes and stereotypes that position the disabled as “broken” and “unfit” to belong in the community. The organizing efforts by parents, families, disabled women, and community members, most of whom were Sāmoan women, paved the way for disabled people to attend two schools, Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai.

For our purpose, I offer the Sāmoan concept of tautua, used in disability activism by the founding members and schools’ organizers as an oceanic concept that reframes the Western notion of activism and inclusion—which often deals with nondisabled people. Tautua is similar to how mutual aid and care work are used by care collectives or mutual aid or community-based mutual aid groups, often by disabled and queer people, to meet each other’s needs and to actively practice interdependence—a principle that values support from various sources and people as opposed to the normative emphasis on individuality and independence (Nishida 2022, 3). Specifically, tautua is a broad concept that guides the disability activism of the schools’ organizers, who founded the first educational institutions to teach students with intellectual and physical disabilities in Sāmoa. The establishment of these schools in 1979 and 1980, respectively, changed the Samoan education system and attitudes toward the education of the disability community.

The concept of tautua translated to English means service, assistance, or a contribution to customary events. Tautua, respect, reciprocity, and alofa (love) are foundational Samoan values. The term tautua derives from the fa’amatai (“chiefly” system), and Samoan custom recognizes the different kinds of tautua (e.g., services to the village, church, or family) as essential to the welfare of the community.¹ The organizers consider their disability activism as a form of tautua, especially a type of tautua that resists traditional, masculine, and normative ideas of service.

Samoan women’s disability activism not only changed the education system but also how Samoans viewed the disability community as a part of the wider community. Samoan women’s leadership as disability activists applied the Samoan concept of tautua (service) as a frame to help the community understand disability while advocating for an inclusive culture based on Samoan understandings of inclusion. They positioned these understandings as people’s relations to the land, responsibilities toward each other, and the spiritual world. The fluid definitions of disability also share an intertwined history between the medical model approach to disability as a process to restore normalcy and the eugenics movement to make the “perfect” human race by eliminating people with undesirable characteristics from the population. Tautua sketches how the organizers redefined disability while also making it legible to Samoan understandings. The use of community knowledge like tautua demonstrates the intricacies of these interactions while making it difficult to generalize a monolithic disability perspective across geo-political and socio-political spaces. The schools’ organizers used tautua as an organizing strategy that suggests the normalized,

gendered, and ableist ethos of Samoan culture toward the disability community. The notions of *tautua* informs relations to homeland and facilitates the construction of disability and belonging within the Samoan context by understanding its intersectional relations with body and land.

Alfred Peredo Flores: Ináfa'maolek and the Brown Movement

One of the core CHamoru values is the concept of *ináfa'maolek*, which translates as “to make good to each other.” This principle reminds CHamorus to consider how their individual actions may impact other people, the community, and even the land (DeLisle 2022, 4).² But this Indigenous practice does not simply guide how CHamorus live their daily lives. In fact, *ináfa'maolek* has also inspired CHamorus and non-CHamorus to participate in collective action and community organizing.³ This can be witnessed through the actions, language, and writings of contemporary community organizations in Guåhan and in the diaspora. Thus, CHamoru activism through an oceanic concept of *ináfa'maolek* is rooted in a culturally Indigenous practice of collectivity and community, which is different from Western notions of activism that are primarily grounded in political justice. While many of Guåhan's contemporary community organizations have invoked *ináfa'maolek* as a core value, I believe the Brown Movement (BM) provides a useful example of one of the island's less known post-World War II organizations that embodied an oceanic concept of activism.

Founded in the early 1970s, the BM was one of the first post-World War II community organizations to openly criticize the US military for its seizure of CHamoru lands during the war and after. In an interview with journalist Wai Chi Lau, BM co-founder Joaquin Perez stated, “They're [US military] not going to get any more land.... We don't want them to get any more land.... A lot of us are sick and tired of the military” (Lau 1971, 4). These statements and others made by anonymous BM members were damning because some CHamorus, especially the *manāmkō* (elders) of this era, still viewed the US military as their liberators from Japanese military occupation during World War II. The pervasiveness of this pro-American sentiment would also be underscored by the fact that CHamorus had one of the highest enlistment figures and killed in action death rates per capita amongst US soldiers in the Vietnam War. However, Perez's comments and the BM's objectives were not simply about preventing the US military from taking additional lands; they were actually advocating for future generations. Perez also stated, “The average age on this island is about seventeen years old, which means that there is a hell of a lot of kids that are coming up. One of these days my little girl is going to be big, and she's going to get married.... What are my hopes for my son-in-law having a piece of land if the military keep taking it over? Or if foreign companies keep coming in and building these gigantic hotels?” (Lau 1971, 4). Perez's beliefs indicate that his (and by extension the BM's) criticism of the US military's land taking was to ensure that future generations would have access to land. As in the case of many Indigenous communities, land, water, and the sky are the foundation for their epistemology and cosmology. Like many of the organizations that would come after it, the BM's *ináfa'maolek* for future generations can be interpreted as activism within an oceanic concept.

Brandon J. Reilly: Placental Politics before 1898

Perhaps the true locus for political, even revolutionary, change is not the battlefield or the ballot box but the local village, and the requisite tools are not arms or votes but instead seemingly ordinary acts in daily life. CHamoru women's diverse actions in sustaining community in Guåhan during the Spanish-Chamorro Wars (1670-99), understood as events of what Christine Taitano DeLisle has theorized as "placental politics," offer an example.

DeLisle (2015) describes placental politics as "a native-inspired theory and practice of being and action informed and guided by ancient ideas of self in relation to land and the primacy of stewardship of land amidst enduring colonial transformations." Further, "the social and cultural histories of native women's embodied labour as it relates to land can inform continued struggles in the new colonial and settler colonial landscapes in Guam" (n.p.).⁴

Spanish colonialism's role in institutionalizing patriarchy is well attested (e.g., Brewer 2002; Silverblatt 2021; Sousa 2017). These changes are particularly evident in the places where the Catholic Church played an outsized role—and the Mariana Islands is one such place. Given the missionaries' eager participation in building colonialism, one would presume that the resulting changes to the sexual order would more closely resemble Spanish patriarchies over time. Certain institutions did change—the so-called "bachelor houses" (*guma' urritao*) disappeared, as did later the Indigenous shamans (*makhana* or *kakahna*), and Christian marital practices came to replace precolonial CHamoru ones.⁵

At the same time, a closer look at developments on the local, village level, offer a more complicated and uneven picture of how—and even if—patriarchy took root. In the crucible of foreign invasion, war, plague, and other horrors, colonial reports describe how women undertook reconnaissance work, cared for the family to sustain liberatory war, and weaponized their wombs, among other forms of defiance (Reilly 2020). A common denominator for many of these acts was the need to perpetuate the life of the community. That is why in one instance, a woman chief was the principal agent who initiated a cessation of hostilities (Anonymous 1992, 407-12).

These variegated acts of resisting, parrying, or accommodating colonialism on the battlefield, but far more often away from it, provide some suggestion of the nature of "activism" during this epochal period in Guåhan's history. They indicate that the smaller-scale, highly local, and even microscopic events at the village level, authored by women within their families and clans, were the principal drivers of change. Approaching this history as placental politics opens up a wider array of practices than we currently apprehend by the term. Then, as now, activism emerged from the everyday.

Kēhaulani Vaughn: Aloha 'āina

As a Kānaka Maoli living in Turtle Island, I am reminded of the deep and interconnected relationship that I have with my homeland through the Hawaiian cultural value and practice of aloha 'āina. Aloha 'āina details the reciprocal and intimate connection to land that Hawaiians have and is generally understood as love for the land. Native Hawaiian scholar Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio further notes that this relationship to land cannot and must not be

understood as patriotism, as it is sometimes translated (Osorio 2020). Instead, Osorio details the significance of aloha ‘āina through the words of Native Hawaiian scholar Noenoe Silva. Osorio notes, “Silva reminds us that aloha ‘āina is a complex concept that includes recognizing that we are an integral part of the ‘āina and the ‘āina is an integral part of us (Osorio 2020, page 341).” Osorio also notes that this tremendous love and connection to land assists in connecting others who also share an immense love for the land that is undeniable and indispensable to their peoplehood/nationhood. Although Hawaiians refer to this love as aloha ‘āina, the people of Oceania and other Indigenous communities have similar concepts. This sovereign love and relationship with the homeland is what propels Hawaiians, those of Oceania, and Indigenous people all over the world to continue their resistance to the destruction of their land and sacred sites. This daily resistance recognizes a love and kinship with land that resists Western understandings and relationships with land based on extraction. Additionally, Indigenous peoples all over the world have genealogical ties to land through creation stories and believe that they are responsible for taking care of place because of the kinship between land and Indigenous people.

People who are engaged in similar practices and relationships to land such as aloha ‘āina recognize each other and have been engaging in collective resistance all over the world. These direct actions can be seen with Mauna Kea, Line 5, Standing Rock, and many other daily acts of refusal. This collective activism amongst Indigenous people is to support one another in protecting land, water, and life for the next generations. It is a direct resistance to ongoing colonialism and settler colonialism. It is also a particular refusal that regenerates life and hope and asserts a love for the land, the earth, and for us as Indigenous people. Therefore, aloha ‘āina reminds Hawaiians that our daily resistance to settler colonialism is necessary. We stand with others from Oceania and other Indigenous people around the world who are actively loving ourselves through our love of land. This assertion of love is the greatest reminder that we still exist and continue to assert ourselves as Kanaka Maoli and, overall, as Indigenous people.

Conclusion

“Activism” as a category manifest in complicated understandings that Indigenous communities invoke for survival. The examples of activism shared in this article show efforts of resistance and valuing of cultural knowledge that overlap and highlight communities, cultures, and geographies in Oceania. They demonstrate Tongan and Fijian scholar Epeli Hau’ofa’s point that Oceania is a vast space—directly responding to the imperialist view of Oceania as scattered, isolated entities in need of external confinement and guidance. In Hau’ofa’s (1998) work, the ocean becomes a space of connection and intimacy, and the traffic between islands a cultural and economic advantage.⁶ Likewise, the activism and concepts shared in our essays reiterate a collective resistance to colonialism, settler colonialism, and militarism by invoking CHamoru, Kanaka Maoli, and Samoan cultural practices that guide and honor Indigenous agency and resistance to erasure and occupation. It is this angle of activism that complicates narratives to Indigenous survivance, especially through the efforts of female identified, elders, and scholars. Our essays hope to bring together various forms of activism: a collective, cultural, and Oceanic-

guided effort to inform communities and help enable them to negotiate and resist geopolitical designations such as small, distant, and vulnerable.

Notes

- ¹ See Fa'aea and Enari 2021; Ta'isi 2018; Anae et al. 2017; Suaalii-Sauni et al. 2018.
- ² Also refer to Bevacqua, 2020.
- ³ See Oberiano and Ong 2021.
- ⁴ Also refer to DeLisle 2015.
- ⁵ See Coello de la Rosa 2015 and Reilly 2020.
- ⁶ See Genisis 2017.

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