



# SA-MOANA THEOLOGY:

‘A Way of Doing Things’  
*Empowered by Faith  
for Humanity and Ecology*

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Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding,  
Oceania is hospitable and generous,  
Oceania is humanity rising from the  
depths of brine and regions of fire deeper  
still, Oceania is us. We are the sea; we are  
the ocean...."

Epeli Hau'ofa, We are the Ocean; selected works.

### Introduction

In Oceania, certain unnatural manifestations have impacted the way faith communities are responding to the reality of climate change. These unnatural manifestations pose great danger to the Oceanic people, threatening the existence of our culture, lands, and the ocean; all that sustains and informs us of our place in the world. In other words, the oceans have become angry, the land disgruntled, the people it once entrusted to keep the balance have abandoned them. The tipping point of catastrophic climate change is upon Oceania; it is upon the world.

### In Search of Home: Exile in the Pacific

Despite this reality of climate change, the people of Oceania refuse to remain silent. We are responding by fighting the extraction of natural resources and its effects on the ocean and land on many fronts. For example, the continuous subjugation, displacement, and cultural genocide of the indigenous people and land of West Papua New Guinea by the government of Indonesia is an example of 21st century colonialism, something the Pacific people of Oceania struggle to overcome still today.<sup>1</sup> This particular fight, the West Papuan struggle, has cultural and ecological implications that

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<sup>1</sup> See Carmel Budiardjo and Soei Liong, *West Papua: The Obliteration of a People* (Surrey: TAPOL, 1988).

are the result of western corporate interests (under the watch of the Indonesian military) in natural resources. According to a recent article from the online source World Energy News; “There are currently 63 uncommitted cargoes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) for 2017 delivery from Indonesia’s Tangguh and Bontang projects...[said] the country’s Director General of Oil and Gas.” Furthermore, “The 63 cargoes is the equivalent of about 6.99 million tons of LNG, based on Reuters calculations...Despite the inability to use the gas domestically and falling demand abroad, Indonesia has approved an expansion of the Tangguh LNG project in the country’s West Papua province that will boost annual LNG production capacity by 50 percent.”<sup>2</sup> It is the exploitation of fossil fuel resources like LNG, copper, gold, and logging that have kept our brothers and sisters from West Papua in an often times violent struggle for full autonomy from Indonesia. The oppression of native West Papuan people is a direct result of foreign interests in the resources of the land, pushing the people further to the margins, especially due to the Indonesian Governments Transmigration program that has resettled over three quarters of a million native Indonesians to huge mining sights along the Indonesia/PNG border. Such programs are a direct attempt to force indigenous people to lower altitudes away from prospective mining zones. The plight of West Papua has prompted great concern within the faith communities to look closely at how the exploitation of these resources through colonial systems and power structures are directly affecting indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> Recently, a statement from the Catholic Women of West Papua was released expressing the urgency of the conditions West Papuan’s face daily: “We want you to know that we are not free. We are confined in a situation that is full of violence. Because of the Indonesian police and military we do not feel safe in our own land.”<sup>4</sup>

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2 Wilda Asmarini, “7 Million Tonnes of Indonesian LNG Uncommitted for 2017 Delivery,” World Energy News (2016): accessed Oct 24, 2016, URL: <http://www.worldenergynews.com/news/million-tonnes-indonesian-lng-uncommitted-for-2017-652605>.

3 Australia West Papua Association, Sydney: accessed Oct 26, 2016, URL: <https://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/cline/papua/core.htm>.

4 Statement of the Catholic Women of West Papua in Response to the Visit of the Bishops’ Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands to the Diocese of Jayapura, Papua (2016), accessed Oct 26, 2016, URL: [https://cjpbrisbane.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/2016-09-04\\_statement-of-the-catholic-women.pdf](https://cjpbrisbane.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/2016-09-04_statement-of-the-catholic-women.pdf)

This lens of Sa-Moana theology calls the people of Samoa to action. How should we go about doing Sa-Moana theology; how do we go about doing a Sa-Moana theology that promotes an energy ethic for all of creation?

In addition, rising sea levels have impacted all islands of the Pacific. However, they are more visible on islands like Tuvalu, with the average height of the islands only 2 meters (6.6 ft.) above sea level. Low-lying islands like Tuvalu are the most vulnerable to rising-sea levels. “According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s assessment, we’re in for at least one to three feet of sea level rise by the end of the century.” Some, like NASA scientist James Hansen and other climate researchers warn that sea level is rising much faster than expected, with the possibility of “as much as a 10-foot sea-level rise in as little as 50 years.”<sup>5</sup> One Tuvaluan pastor relayed to me in 2015, “the people are moving further inland because of coastal villages being uninhabitable due to the salt water—which usually finds its way up to the front door—overwhelming the soil used to grow food.” Another person, a seminary student, stated, “most of my family are either already in Australia or merely awaiting to be relocated to other Pacific islands.”

It is the testimony and lived experiences of the people that has compelled faith leaders to become more proactive in their fight against climate change. Especially, given the fact that climate change has given rise to a new humanitarian crisis in the making, namely, *climate refugees*. With more and more people displaced, either by unnatural manifestations, or simply because they are no longer able to tend to their lands as their ancestors did, *exile* is their only hope for survival. These issues, amongst others, have been given great priority in the Pacific by local villagers, governments, and faith leaders

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5 Cole Melino, “Meet the World’s First Climate Change Refugees,” Eco Watch (2016), accessed Oct 26, 2016, URL: <http://www.ecowatch.com/meet-the-worlds-first-climate-refugees-1882143026.html>.

because they are the most imminent threat to our people, cultures, and ecosystems that shape the anatomy of Oceania. In this regard, climate change poses the greatest threat to humanity because its destructive power has yet to reach its full potential. If the local struggles for justice from places like Tuvalu and West Papua are continuously ignored by so-called developed countries who promote unbridled energy consumption for capital gain, the likelihood of climate change becoming irreversible is inevitable.

There can be no compromise, for it is compromise that has led us to this disturbing reality, endangering our future generations, as well as the life of our planet.

### God's Agency in the World

What can we do? How can our small islands impact climate change? These are the types of questions many Pacific people are asking themselves. Speaking from my own faith tradition of the Congregational Christian Church of American Samoa (CCCAS), and the cultural lens of the *Fa'a Samoa*,<sup>6</sup> Samoans are accustomed to applying traditional concepts to new actions that illumine the indigenous wisdom of those concepts. Fittingly, a response to the very present danger of climate change merits a holistic understanding of the traditional terms of *Tiute* or *Faiva*, as used by Ioelu Onesemo in his co-authored book with CCCAS General Secretary and theologian Ama'amalele Tofaeono, *Constructing SA-Moana Contextual Theology*. Onesemo uses the two terms, *tiute* and *faiva*, to articulate the active role of *Sa-Moana* theology. He states:

To really bring out the full sense of the word *tiute* or task in the vernacular of *Sa-Moana*, and to distinguish it from nature and purpose, a consideration of the term *faiva* fit in well here. *Faiva* initially refers to a fishing activity. In conceptual terms it is a process that is actively in progress. It also means specialty, skills, crafts, expedition and exploration.... *Tiute* speaks of task as process and method of a *Sa-Moana* theology. In some sense, *tiute* speaks of duty, skills, expertise, responsibility, crafts and expedition. Ultimately, it comes down to *tiute* as to how we should go about doing *Sa-Moana* theology.<sup>7</sup>

This lens of *Sa-Moana* theology calls the people of Samoa to action, both in relation to their cultural and Christian identities. Here, *tiute* can also inform the Samoan-Christian of his/her duty in righting the brokenness caused by humanity with nature. The question posited above; how should we go about doing *Sa-Moana* theology, can be extended by asking; how do we go about doing a *Sa-Moana* theology that promotes an energy ethic for all of creation? Asking this question can help Pacific people understand their own tasks, responsibilities, and duty in preserving our common home. Fundamental Christian teachings of love, fellowship, communion, and unity were pivotal in Samoan people accepting the Gospel of the early missionaries. Although first shared not without a high degree of Eurocentric superiority that overpowered indigenous wisdom and traditions central to Samoan culture, these universal truths of the Gospel were embraced because they pre-existed the arrival of missionaries. For example, the confession of sins against God and creation is fundamental in Samoan culture. Samoan people view confession not necessarily as an act coerced by shame or guilt, or incited by wickedness; rather, confession on behalf of the individual for the community clears the pathway for newness, it incites new thought and right thinking. In adapting a more sustainable energy ethic, Samoan people, and all inhabitants of Oceania must cast off life threatening acts that are hurting our oceans, earth, and all living organisms. Confession can be seen as the

6 Literally, *the Samoan way of doing things*.

7 Ama'amalele Tofaeono, Ioelu Onesemo, *Constructing SA-Moana Contextual Theology* (Pago Pago: Taumainu'u mau Publishing Ltd., 2016), 65-66.

individual act of Pacific people for the betterment of the global community. If it is true that humanity has ruptured the great balance of life, then, it is humanity that must make even greater strides to restore that balance. This entails a total rejection of harmful consumer ethics that quenches our *want* for over consumption. We, the people of Oceania, confess that interchanging our complicit *wants* for a more life sustaining *need* based consumption is vital in moving forward, a return to the indigenous ways of existing and embracing simplicity again. Erin Lothes highlights this point well by stressing that “the value of simplicity can easily become lost and inefficient.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, simplicity is often compromised depending on class values. This denigration of class values is one example of how capitalism infringes ancient traditional values of simplicity.

**The island people of Oceania are doing our part. We call upon the world to take similar actions by investing in renewable energy that will secure all our futures.**

The class divide plays a significant role in who is most affected by climate change in tropical settings like Samoa/American Samoa. Samoans who are at or below the poverty line rely heavily on the natural resources of the islands. Fresh groundwater resources have begun to diminish with the lower classes obviously feeling the brunt of this reality. According to a recent study conducted by the Pacific Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments team (Pacific RISA), the American Samoa Environmental Protection Agency (ASEPA) tested samples of ground water during 2002–2014 confirming that poor surface water quality is an ongoing problem in my homeland of American Samoa. These testings’ produced alarming results like impaired streams or watersheds; a significant decline in stream water quality impacting aquatic life; and numerous beaches classified as “not supporting” public swimming. Pacific RISA also reported that landfills—the

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8 Erin Lothes Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 88–90.

result of consumerism—were sources of contamination affecting the earth and already deteriorating underground water storage tanks, especially during high levels of rainfall. Furthermore, the report addressed the need to strategize in light of these alarming results:

Freshwater resource managers in American Samoa are facing climate change issues. A projected increase in frequency and intensity of extreme rainfall events, rising sea level, and rising air temperature are among these climate-related dynamics. This affirms the need for effective climate change adaptation strategies, particularly with respect to protecting water quality.<sup>9</sup>

Amongst other public reports, these findings express the imminent danger tropical ecosystems face due to climate change, affecting all forms of life on the island. There is a dire need for Pacific people to adapt new ways of life that can help secure the future of generations to come. Pope Francis, in his recent Encyclical on the environmental crisis *Laudato Si*, calls for a radical transformation of cultural, social, political, environmental, economic and religious practices that are hurting all of creation. For Samoa and the Pacific, some of these changes must involve investment in long term rainwater and groundwater conservation. There is a huge problem with the waste generated from plastic water bottles on small islands that are then dumped into landfills further contaminating the earth. Reducing consumer complacency would require public trust in the water systems available for consumption, i.e. tap water, private and public. This, of course, is one small step towards sustainability, but nonetheless equally significant at the local level in making a global impact.

Therefore, on a much larger scale, the move towards renewable energy would be extremely beneficial for people living on such small land masses like the Pacific islands. As is, our reliance on corporate controlled sources of energy (coal, natural gas, oil, etc.) paralyzes our ethical sensibilities towards the earth. And although we must hold those who carry the ‘greater sin’ accountable, by no means does it extricate us of our own sins against the

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9 Pacific RISA, “Fresh Water and Drought in American Samoa (2016), accessed Oct 26, 2016, URL: <http://www.pacificrisa.org/?s=American+Samoa&submit=Go>.

earth. In Matthew's rendering of the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus asked the masses: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" To be agents of God's love and grace in the world commands *radical renewal, self-reflection, and accountability*.

**We petition the spirit of God to enter the hearts and minds of those nations leading in CO2 emissions to help make climate change be a solvable problem of the 21st century.**

### **Sustainable Energy: A Hope for The Future**

The island people of Oceania are doing our part. We confess that we are accountable for the future survival of our biological and natural kin, the ocean and land. However, in the spirit of community, we call upon the world to take similar actions by investing in renewable energy that will secure all our futures. We petition the spirit of God to enter the hearts and minds of those nations leading in CO2 emissions to help make climate change be a solvable problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Investing in eco-friendly sources of energy like; *Biofuel, Biomass, Geothermal, Hydro and Tidal power, Solar, Wave, and Wind power* are all feasible options that can lead to real progress. To realistically consider these sources of energy for the future, the present day corporate manipulation of fossil fuel prices must be scrutinized from all angles. According to *Oil Change International*, an online journal that exposes the systemic ways fossil fuels are internationally priced to appeal to consumers, a fossil fuel subsidy is "any government action that lowers the cost of fossil fuel energy production, raises the price received by energy producers, or lowers the price paid by energy consumers. Essentially, it's anything that rigs the game in favor of fossil fuels compared to other energy sources."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore:

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<sup>10</sup> Oil Change International, "Fossil Fuel Subsidies: An Overview," (2016), accessed Oct 28, 2016,

One of the most urgent reasons to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies is the rapidly dwindling carbon budget—the remaining amount of greenhouse gases we are able to emit while having a hope of staying below the temperature warming limits agreed to by world leaders. Simply put, we can only afford to burn less than a quarter of known fossil fuel reserves. In this context, putting public money towards finding and burning more fossil fuels just doesn't make sense.<sup>11</sup>

We realize that this transformation entails a radical break away from dependence on fossil fuels, especially considering that the "G20 governments—which includes many of the world's most developed countries...are providing support to oil, gas, and coal companies to the tune of \$444 billion per year, between direct national subsidies, domestic and international finance, and state-owned enterprise investment."<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, these are difficult but necessary actions towards sustainability. Said otherwise, it is time to *halt fossil fuel funding* and invest in clean energy.

The science clearly supports what people in the Pacific are experiencing; *climate change is real!* However, the corporate entities that profit from the denigration of our common home continue to deny the findings of scientists concerning the imminent destruction of our planet. Regarding this point, it is vital that faith and scientific communities *reconcile* their differences and begin a process of healing to hold fossil fuel corporations accountable for their actions, and preserve the divine and natural gift of life central to both science and religion. As Pacific people of God, faith communities of the world are invited to stand with us, to take on *tiute* in their own distinct ways. It is no longer enough to just *recycle* and *go-green*. Rather, the visible trajectory towards ecological decay in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands that leaders of faith communities find their voices to advocate for large scale change. This means that faith communities must be inclusive in their ministries. In other words, the Gospel to the disenfranchised, subjugated, poor, and down-trodden is not solely a ministry referring to humanity; rather, it is a universal, cosmic,

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URL: <http://priceofoil.org/fossil-fuel-subsidies/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

and holistic Gospel of compassion towards nature as well. If the earth is in peril, it is our responsibility as Christians, and kin, to heal, nurture, and protect her.

In the Pacific, faith and spirituality is a fundamental truth of our identity. Our actions are strengthened by our prayers for God to guide us on this journey towards sustainability, and we invite the so-called developed world to take part in this journey towards sustenance. As previously mentioned, we the people of Oceania have chosen to be God's agency in our part of the world concerning climate change. Koreti Tiimalu, 350.org Pacific Coordinator, recently stated during a week-long prayer initiative to raise awareness in the Pacific: "We cannot build a Pacific Climate Movement without engaging our faith communities. Faith is pivotal to our people, and like the ocean, it connects us. In the face of the climate crisis, we need prayer to carry our people and faith to build resilience."<sup>13</sup> We ask that faith communities, governments, and people worldwide pray for us. More importantly, our hope is that your prayers for the Pacific are compelled by serious interests to fight climate change in your own countries by investing in renewable energy. There can be no compromise, for it is compromise that has led us to this disturbing reality, endangering our future generations, as well as the life of our planet.

### To Touch the Face of God: An Invitation

Customarily, in Samoa, it is only fitting that I bid *Soifua* (farewell) in the manner of which I greeted you *Talofa* (greetings), with the words of the great Pacific poet and writer Epeli Hau'ofa:

'Oceania' connotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised in this environment were at home with the sea. They played in it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked in it, they fought on it. They developed great skills for navigating their waters, and the spirit to traverse even the few

13 350 Pacific (2016), accessed Oct2016, URL: <http://350pacific.org/prayforourpacific/>.

large gaps that separated their island groups. There was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers. From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flow of wealth. They travelled to visit relatives in a wide variety of natural and cultural surroundings, to quench their thirst for adventure, and even to fight and dominate.<sup>14</sup>

**As Pacific people of God, faith communities of the world are invited to stand with us, to take on tiute in their own distinct ways. The visible trajectory towards ecological decay in the 21st century demands that leaders of faith communities find their voices to advocate for large scale change.**

These words reign true even today. However, more and more people of the Pacific find themselves leaving their islands, not because of trade or social networking, but rather, to find new homes or to inform others of how climate change is affecting their people and ecosystems. Our global faith community must take action to disrupt the norms that have generated abnormal weather patterns, forced (through greed and abuse of power) human migration, and the total depravity of God's creation. For Samoan Christian communities, God's tutelage expresses itself within the framework of an active *Sa-Moana* theology. It is a *way of doing things* that "is empowered

14 Epeli Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands*, The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 6, Number 1, Spring 1994, 147–161. First published in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Vijay Naidu, Eric Waddell, and Epeli Hau'ofa. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, The University of the South Pacific, 1993.

by prayers and true faith. It functions on the principles of togetherness and solidarity in commitments to make it a reality in the present contexts. Its essence is to have hope in God. It has to have faith like Jesus Christ that works to bring about liberation and salvation for *Sa-Moana* in context, and for humanity and ecology at large.”<sup>15</sup> And although the people of Oceania continue to witness the dying earth and sick oceans, we confess that redemption is contingent upon holding responsible the primary cause of nature’s suffering: Us. To truly liberate the earth from our sin we must take a moral stance in defense, and allow God to breathe new life into her. We must prove to God that we, the human community, is worth trusting again, for to fail is not an option. A Samoan pastor gifted me one day with invaluable wisdom, he said: “My grandfather once told me that it was the white man who came to teach us the Gospel, today, I can proudly say, it is I, the barbarian, the pagan, and the savage who is teaching them how to be Christians and stewards, and I believe, even in the spirit realm, every time I say that he enjoys a good laugh ” In sum, we, too, have a witness, a Word to share with the world, and we pray that the world will take heed, as Christians, people of faith, and human beings.



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<sup>15</sup> Oneseemo and Tofaeono, 203.