Connected Oceans, Connecting People: Talanoa Across Contexts for Climate Change

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Introduction

While writing this paper, I have been walking my dog among the familiar farmland that characterised my childhood. But something is different. The fields are unseasonably dry and harvested early, left a baked brown and drained yellow in the sun. I take the dust back home with me on my boots. The black leather becomes increasingly lost beneath the brown, hidden deeper beneath the reminder: climate change affects us all… it's just easier not to think about when it's only dust on your boots and not waves up to your knees.

It is well known that the Pacific Islands are on the frontlines of climate change – some have already been lost, and more are expected to be uninhabitable by 2050 (Enari and Viliamu Jameson, 2021). What may be less well known is how Pacific peoples are still fighting to have their stories heard and have justice for their rapidly sinking homes. This struggle is worsened by the challenge of connecting local and global scales of climate impacts, discussions and actions.
Fortunately, there is a rising practice within the Pacific region known as talanoa with the potential to tackle these issues. Talanoa is a Pacific cultural storytelling process rooted in engaging emotions, sharing knowledge and increasing understanding between people and is beginning to be used more widely as it expands into research and international discussions.

I conduct this research as a British university student entering Pacific studies in anthropology and found that literature on talanoa has yet to address how the process is linked across Pacific culture, anthropological research, and international spaces. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by exploring the use of talanoa for climate change across these three contexts, and in doing so calls for the continual increase of talanoa. Understanding and discussing talanoa can demonstrate its capacity to fill a vital missing piece in the global puzzle of facing climate change more effectively due to its potential to grow further as a process for uniting people and increasing climate action.

This paper begins by explaining the relationship between the Pacific, climate change, and Pacific worldviews that must be understood before learning about talanoa. Next, talanoa is explored across three contexts in which it is practiced – culture, anthropology, and international spaces – and analyses how these demonstrate various elements that can benefit climate discussions at different scales. Finally, these contexts are united by a discussion about how talanoa is suited to benefit climate discussions, followed by cautions and proposals for future practice to continue developing talanoa in a positive way. Overall, it is argued that talanoa should continue to be increasingly used within climate discussions to create culturally appropriate collaboration, and effective, meaningful climate action.

The Pacific and Climate Change

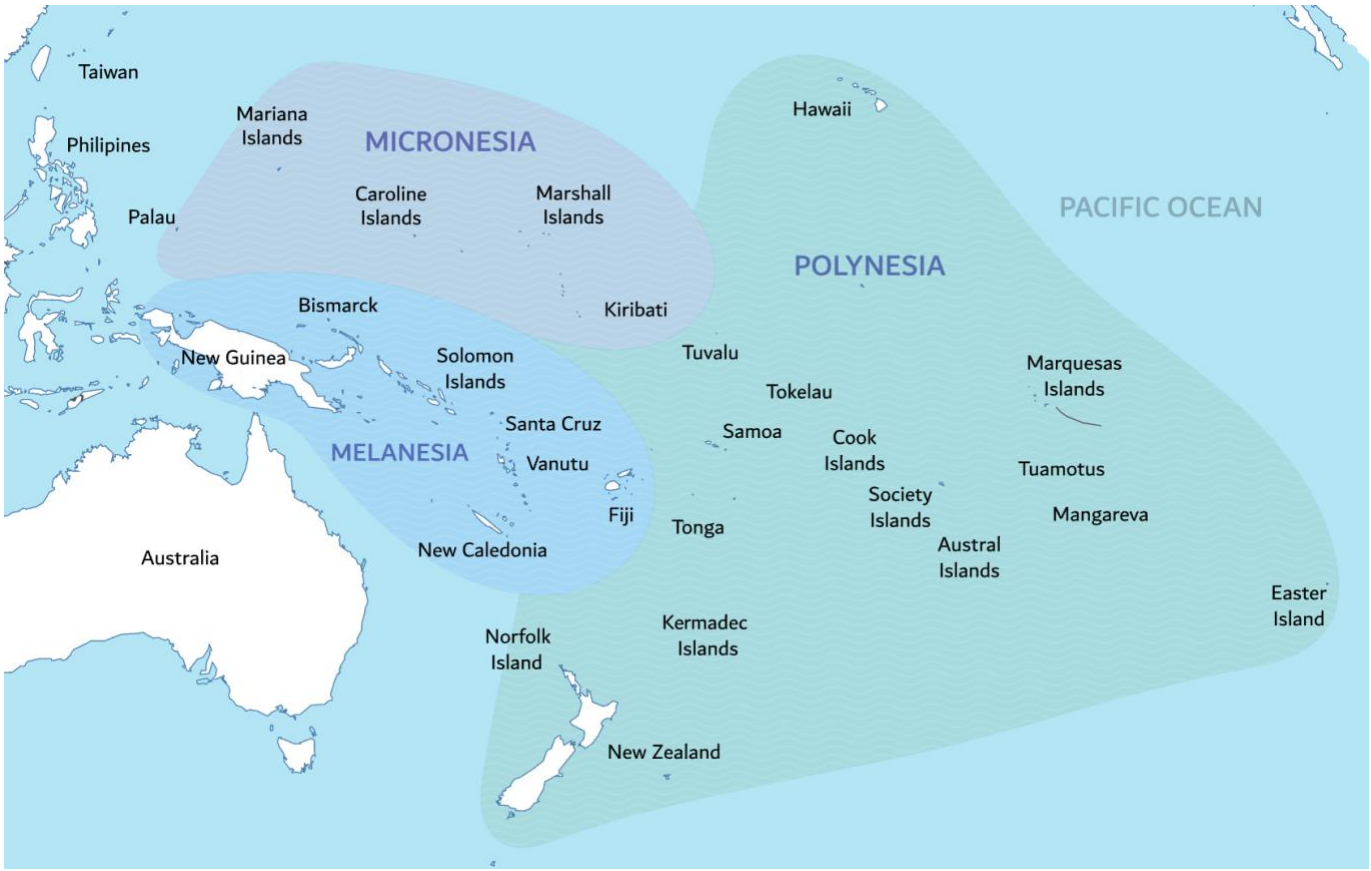

Figure 1. A map of the islands of the Pacific Ocean divided into their three major groups (Kahuroa, 2023). Source: Wikimedia (cropped)

The Pacific: the region at the forefront of climate impacts, but not climate decisions. Amongst the all-encompassing blue of the Pacific Ocean, focus often lies on its innate links to climate change: rising sea levels, increasing storms, coral bleaching, ocean acidification and fisheries depletion. This endless science-based list makes dangers seem 'more real' to those far across the world, but something is missing. The human rights of Pacific peoples are violated by the international community and highest carbon emitters failing to do everything they can to mitigate climate change (Enari and Viliamu Jameson, 2021). More importantly, many communities facing these threats "remain excluded from global discussions and decisions around climate change solutions and policy" (Feetham et al, 2023) – decisions that determine their immediate future. Even in recent decades, when indigenous knowledge has been included in research, it often fails to truly understand how they understand the world (Hollis and Halapua, 2025). So, despite the list of scientific evidence that proves we must be doing more to mitigate climate change, it is equally evident that inaction and exclusion within policy are the largest barriers to climate justice in the Pacific.

If science alone cannot overcome this climate deadlock (Saver, 2018), and the physical world around us is radically changing, then the next step is to also radically

change our perspectives of our place in the world (Hollis and Halapua, 2025). This means critically examining our own worldviews: the ‘mental lenses’ through which we understand the world that are shaped by the cultures we live in (Feetham et al, 2023). Looking to the Pacific, their worldviews have the power to overcome inaction and exclusion, but must be embraced by the rest of the world in culturally appropriate ways to create deeper understandings of Pacific knowledge (Pacific Community, 2020), decolonise power in decision making spaces (Feetham et al, 2023) and produce appropriate and effective action (Nakashima et al, 2012). Talanoa can meet these requirements but is grounded in Pacific worldviews that must be understood first. While the following is an incredibly simplified description of a pan-Pacific model to be accessible to wider audiences (Teariki and Leau, 2023), it is essential to remember that the islands, cultures and peoples of the Pacific are diverse and distinct. As a result, it does not convey the full “in-depth, similar yet distinct” worldviews of the Pacific, and talanoa should not be assumed to be an all-encompassing approach to Pacific ways of knowing (Fa’avae et al, 2022).

Pacific peoples have a “deep, inherited cultural understanding of *island* and *ocean*” rooted in 4,000 to 30,000 years of having “lived in and with and by the sea” (Thompson, 2018). From expertly navigating vast ocean to making homes amongst various islands, Pacific peoples have always been aware of the livelihood and identity that the land and sea provide them (Feetham et al, 2023) and their connections to this world within a web of relationality. Relationality is the foundation of Pacific worldviews: an indigenous way of knowing in which relationships – with other people, our environments, and everything between and beyond that (Teariki and Leau, 2023) – are the foundation of reality and are all connected throughout space and time (Feetham et al, 2023). The basic logic of this can be seen in one of the most ancient examples of Pacific relationality: their navigation skills.

Thompson (2010) describes how, unlike objective systems like maps that take the perspective of a birds-eye view, Pacific navigation takes the perspective of someone standing on a boat. Observing from this position, distances are not measured by time on a watch or miles on a map, but by how they are experienced under certain conditions. For example, one island can be ten days sail away going with the wind, and thirty days sail going against it. Even on land, there is no compass directions, only towards or away from features of the land or sea. Thompson’s description demonstrates how Pacific relationality means that one thing can only exist in relation to another, as direction and time only exist in relation to points of reference. In the same way, nothing can exist without these connections to other things, and so fundamentally, “to know is to relate” (Hollis and Halapua, 2025).

In daily life in the Pacific today relationality is clear everywhere from family to spirituality. Focusing on climate change, their relational connection to the natural world embeds love and respect for the planet into all aspects of Pacific lives – a respect that has allowed them to adapt and prosper for generations within their ever-

changing lands and ocean (Kana'iaupuni and Malone, 2006) and makes them some of the most qualified people in the world for tracking climate impacts in the region (Comberti et al, 2019). While this offers lessons to the rest of the world about recognising the undeniable connections between changing environments, people, policy and action (Lazrus, 2012) it also confirms that "there are no people on earth more suited to be the guardians of the world's largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations" (Hau'ofa, 1994).

The question is: how do we bring relationality into practical reality within climate discussions? The answer is through talanoa, and its use has already begun. The following sections will explore how talanoa has been practiced from its cultural roots to international forums to analyse its role in climate discussions.

Talanoa in Culture

Talanoa is a Pacific cultural storytelling process that is rooted in connecting people and strengthening relationships through engaging deeply with emotions and understanding lived realities. It is "foremost about relationality", where stories increase knowledge, understanding and human connection (Hollis and Halapua, 2025) to create a better sense of who we are in relation to the world around us. Talanoa cannot be practiced from a non-Pacific standpoint as it requires stepping out of Western worldviews to understand relationality (Ravulo, 2025) and in doing so becomes an "amalgamation of the emotions, knowledge, interests, and experiences" (Farelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014) that distinguishes it from normal conversation. While this complexity is essential talanoa, it can be broken down to increase non-Pacific people's understanding.

Talanoa's literal translation consists of '*tala'*, to talk, and '*noa'*, describing a balance or nothingness – meaning to talk about nothing in particular. Expanding upon this basic definition, Tecun et al (2018) break down the specific Tongan theory behind talanoa into a series of interacting elements.
Firstly, *mana* describes the level of power and authority within all things that gives them significance, or potency. The second concept of *tapu* – a varied level of sacredness within things (related to the Western word 'taboo') – is linked directly with *mana* because "something is Tapu because it has Mana". In talanoa where "story is knowledge, and knowledge is gathered through story", this means the more power (*mana*) specific knowledge holds, the more sacred (*tapu*) it is, making it more protected. This all plays into the final concept of *noa* – a state of balance and 'zero' – which mediates *mana* and *tapu* within conversation. In practice, *noa* can range from the start of an interaction where participants level as equals (key to creating space for free conversation) all the way to its end where everyone has spoken their part, and a satisfying conclusion is reached – the state of zero. Finally, the Tongan

philosophy of *mālie* and the feeling of *māfana* encompass these three elements (Fa'avae, 2016). *Mālie* involves sharing the experience of finding joy in understanding each other in a way that uplifts and enriches the heart and mind (Manu'atu, 2016) which produces a feeling of warmness – *māfana* – until the process of learning is over.

This describes how talanoa is a process where people level with each other in a sense of unity to share appropriate knowledge while developing connections. This comes together through storytelling in a manner that is positive and meaningful for those involved. Overall, it creates a "nexus of shared knowledge-sensation-emotion" (Farelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014) which is practically connected through relationality and the visible progression of relationships throughout talanoa (Feetham et al, 2023).

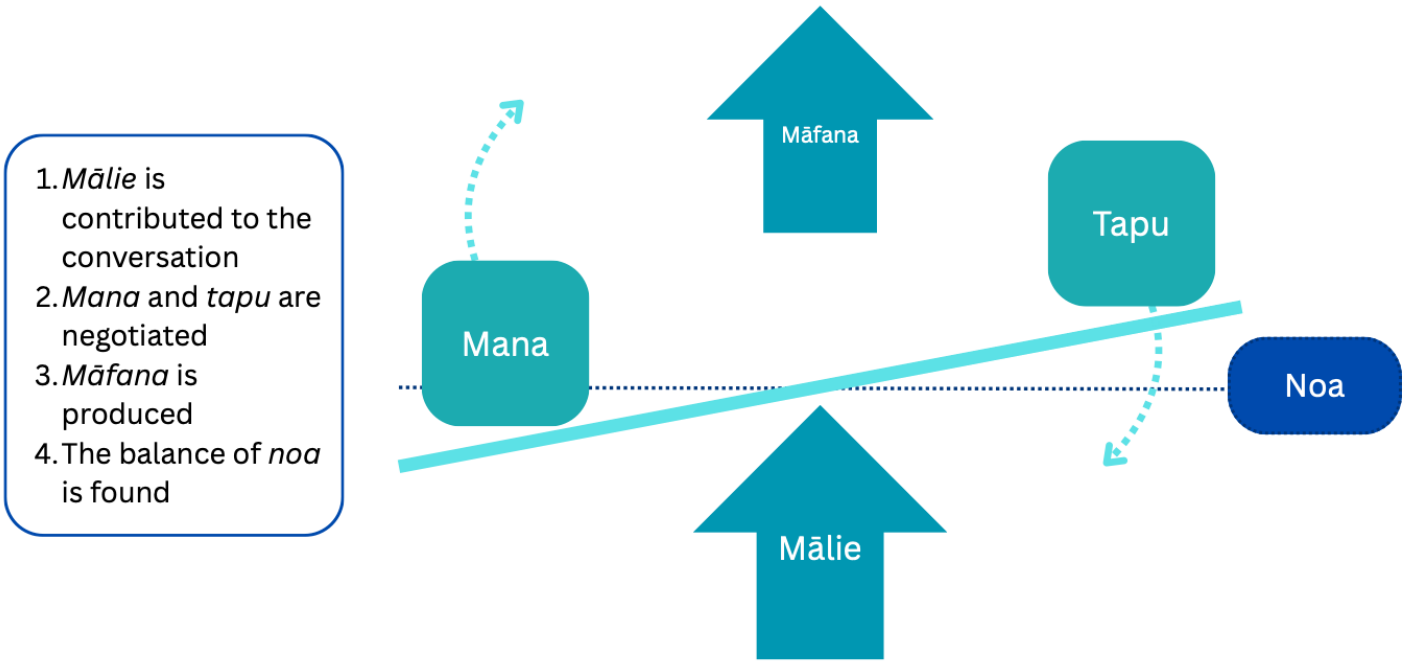

Figure 2. A graphic depicting the Tongan concepts within the process of talanoa

While talanoa can be understood through these basics, it is important to note that talanoa varies across the Pacific Islands as it can be developed as a skill to do anything from teaching and preaching to negotiating and resolving problems (Johansson Fua, 2014). These variations are united by inherited cultural rules that are passed down across generations through oral traditions, making it distinct from later contexts because it is "underpinned by unwritten rules and etiquette" (Robinson and Robinson, 2005). This deep cultural history that makes "talanoa […] natural for most Pacific peoples" (Vaioleti, 2006) and means that regardless of how talanoa may be used in other contexts, it will always exist as a way of knowing in Pacific communities.

The ability of talanoa to stand the test of time and exist in diverse forms makes it a theoretically versatile process (Tecun et al, 2018) for addressing stories and solutions for climate change. Its open discussion and emphasis on interconnectivity

“creates a relational space for reflecting on the profound questions of planetary life” (Hollis and Halapua, 2025), prompting creative solutions and more possibilities for action. Furthermore, if conducted correctly with an “intentional ‘openness’ to [the] diverse life worlds” of those participating (Farelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014), it can also act as a vehicle through which we can empathetically learn and come to understand various other perspectives on climate change too. While the significance of this for larger scale uses will be discussed later, talanoa will always provide a natural space for Pacific peoples to connect to each other through stories, express their shared fears and hopes surrounding climate change, and explore their place within the relationships of our changing planet.

Talanoa in Anthropology

Social anthropology is an academic discipline grounded in learning about people’s experiences and how they see the world. Within this, talanoa has been recognised for the way it “harmonises with [Pacific] worldviews and perspectives” to create the respect and openness needed to freely discuss authentic Pacific perspectives on various topics (Feetham et al, 2023). Over the course of the twenty-first century, Timote Vaioleti has proposed talanoa as an indigenous research methodology and developed its principles beyond its cultural origins (Fa’avae, 2016), giving this oral tradition a written form almost like a theoretical rulebook. This development has been in response to a variety of demands from anthropology, climate advocates and Pacific peoples to “disrupt colonial framings […] and activate mindset shifts” (Fa’avae et al, 2022) in the global community. This ranges from the need for anthropology to “adopt cross-scale, multistakeholder, and interdisciplinary approaches” (Crate, 2011) for climate change, to striving to end historically disempowering and ineffective attempts at including indigenous perspectives in research (Vaioleti, 2006) and climate discussions. Talanoa is slowly being used to up-scale the cultural concepts of the Pacific to meet these demands and has become one of the most prominent research methodologies in the Pacific. However, it is important to re-emphasise that this success should not perpetuate ideas that all Pacific cultures are the same (Farelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014) as there are other Pacific practices also being developed as research methodologies to better suit cultural differences.

In anthropology, talanoa is both a research method and methodology, meaning it can be used as both a practical way of doing things and as a lens for analysing knowledge (Fa’avae, 2016). Within these frames, anthropologists of both Pacific and non-Pacific backgrounds have debated various principles that must be practiced to ensure talanoa maintains its cultural authenticity when practiced by non-Pacific researchers and remains as appropriate and effective as possible for Pacific peoples. While these debates cover many technical and unagreed factors that are

not discussed here, they are important discussions that enable anthropologists to better play their part in accurately conveying in-depth knowledge to broaden global understandings (Crate, 2011). However, there are two reoccurring principles within these debates that are widely agreed upon that hold incredibly useful lessons for anyone using talanoa for climate change.

Arguably, the most valuable principle of talanoa in anthropology is the practice of reflexivity: the ability to self-reflect, be conscious of your social standing, and critically analyse how your worldviews may affect your perspectives and the process of talanoa. Schuster (2022) is a strong advocate for reflexivity, emphasising that "using [an] indigenous methodology within a Pacific context as a non-Pacific researcher demands analysing oneself" repeatedly. This not only allows participants of talanoa to better understand their place within relationality but is also an ethical requirement for anthropologists to be constantly aware of any power they hold as a researcher or racially privileged person that may interfere with their ability to forge genuine connections with people (Feetham et al, 2022). Reflexivity can help forge these connections and create a space for more authentic and insightful knowledge to be shared by helping people embrace "a necessary vulnerability" (Schuster, 2022) that encourages the safety and openness required between everyone involved in talanoa, particularly when discussing such a complex and emotional topic as climate change.

The second principle vital to talanoa in anthropology is the co-production of knowledge, which involves continually returning to participants after talanoa and collaborating with them to ensure the information they have shared is respected and accurate. Anthropologists spend long periods of time living with their participants, meaning they gain higher levels of trust, more personal information, and ultimately the responsibility of 'editorial dominion' (Fa'avae, 2016). To tread the correct line between publishing potentially sacred and personal information, and respecting information that was generously given for the betterment of the community, anthropologists co-produce their outputs. This can be through participants rereading and editing transcripts of talanoa, or visiting participants to discuss the written outputs before publishing (Feetham et al, 2023 and Fa'avae, 2016). Through this, co-production creates knowledge that contains the researcher's and participants narratives, (Fa'avae, 2016) and can remind researchers of their obligation to "design and implement projects that contribute to collective discussions and actions with Indigenous communities" (Feetham et al, 2023). This is particularly significant when talanoa involves discussions of climate change because the co-production of knowledge can produce action that is specifically suited to meet a community's needs and lifestyles, so is more likely to be effectively and continually implemented.

The principles of reflexivity and co-production in anthropology hold valuable lessons for anyone who may practice talanoa, especially if it is associated with climate change. Reflexivity can provide not just a reflection on privilege and power, but on

how one's place in the world relates to wider environmental impacts such as emissions or waste. Furthermore, co-production can constantly remind people of these personal and global responsibilities surrounding climate action and doing more to help the people that have generously shared their valuable knowledge with others. Anthropologists have a professional obligation to practice these principles and discuss more detailed ways in which talanoa should be practiced, but everyone who engages with Pacific peoples – regardless of their profession – has an ethical obligation to strive towards best practice too.

Talanoa in International Spaces

"Talanoa for ambition. Talanoa for action."

These are the words of Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama at COP23 while President for the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC, 2018), introducing the officially termed Talanoa Dialogue to the international community. Calling the world to embrace talanoa as a process for increasing climate ambitions and resolving conflicts, this was the first moment in which talanoa was applied on such a large scale outside of the Pacific (van Ingen, 2022). It was implemented across COP23 and COP24 as a facilitative dialogue to discuss progress towards the goals set in the 2015 Paris Agreement, and revolved around three questions: 'Where are we? Where do we want to go? How do we get there?' (UNFCCC, 2017). With global contributions on an online platform and specific in-person Talanoa Discussion Groups, talanoa was used to facilitate sharing stories for climate change – both the global threats being faced, and the ambitious action already being taken – in the hopes of inspiring an accelerated global response (Presidents of COP23 and COP24, no date).

When practiced on this scale, the Talanoa Dialogue leans more heavily into the equality and empathy of traditional talanoa, as these are the most significant areas of improvement that must be met within an international – and thus often an unequal and disconnected – space. Official descriptions focused on inclusivity and storytelling for the sake of collective good while discouraging blame and hyper-critical debate (UNFCCC, 2017) in order to bring people with wide ranging beliefs together to focus on cross-cultural understanding (van Ingen, 2022). As a result, equality was essential to ensure countries with high emissions or little climate action were not singled out because marginalisation is unproductive when climate change affects everyone and makes their "continued participation necessary" (Kirsch, 2021). Talanoa created a space where collaboration and consensus could be emphasised to momentarily overlook power imbalances and increase understanding and ambition.

With this foundation established, the Talanoa Dialogue was able to focus on building empathy. The storytelling aspect of talanoa was key to centring the “specific, lived experiences” of participants from a variety of backgrounds (Hautzinger, 2024) – taking a more individual and emotional perspective on climate change. The power this personal scale holds is reflected in participants views that “you share so much in a story that you can’t compare […] to a policy position” and that “people had developed a more in depth understanding of where we are coming from” (van Ingen, 2022). This understanding – shared through empathy – makes the Talanoa Dialogue a complimentary practice to the usual strict and emotionless structures of international diplomacy and makes use of the fact that “empathy is one of diplomacy’s best weapons” (Saver, 2018). Through connecting people across in empathetic understanding, the Talanoa Dialogue has the potential to increase levels of commitment and effectiveness throughout climate action (Lemeire, 2020).

It is important to note that there is very little research on the influence the Talanoa Dialogue has had in international discussions (van Ingen, 2022), and the literature that does exist varies vastly in opinion. While some summarise the positive outcomes of diverse contributions, practical lessons and successfully avoiding blame (Kirsch, 2021), van Ingen (2022) highlights a lack of consistency between the overseeing facilitators of the Discussion groups – an issue that may explain why all representatives but one failed to share personal stories. It seems that the facelessness of international politics remained at the forefront of representative’s minds and arguably hindered the building of personal relationships that is so integral to talanoa. However, there was also enough positive feedback to show the potential the Talanoa Dialogue could have if more work is put in to optimise its practice in the future (Lemeire, 2020).

Overall, the Talanoa Dialogue faces the challenge of delivering a usually personal process to over 300 in-person participants, but still successfully avoids cultural misappropriation due to the fact it was gifted by Fiji to the international community and “retains an identifiably ‘Pacific’ spirit” (Hautzinger, 2024). This spirit is not only valuable for the discussions themselves but is significant for allowing Pacific peoples to begin to break through the ‘climate colonialism’ embedded in COPs by using global stages to “feed Pasifika knowledge, culture and approaches into the global agenda” (Boege, 2023). As a result, while the Talanoa Dialogue may seem different to talanoa in other contexts and still needs improvement, it has allowed Pacific peoples to shape their own identity on the global stage and increase the equality and empathy that are key to more constructive and ambitious climate discussions.

Discussion: Stories to Navigate Scale

After exploring talanoa across its cultural, anthropological, and international contexts and how they have been used within climate change, this discussion aims to dive

deeper into how talanoa is linked across these varied scales and break down the factors that make this flexible process suited for climate discussions. This demonstrates exactly how talanoa is an incredible Pacific storytelling process to provide culturally appropriate collaboration and meaningful, effective climate action.

Across the three contexts explored here, their differences come from the way that each scale leans more heavily into different parts of talanoa that best suit the context. Critics may see these differences as inconsistencies, detrimental to its Pacific roots, or “a wishy-washy and mainly vague project with too much of a feel-good factor” to be a constructive tool for climate action (van Ingen, 2022). However, I argue that these divergences prove the flexibility of talanoa as a tool for connecting people. If we look to the similarities in talanoa throughout these contexts - empathy, self-reflection and stories that connect both people and our planet - it is clear evidence of the fundamental ability of talanoa to forge human connection and mutual understanding.

Specifically, this capacity for talanoa to bridge these three contexts is directly suited to address a key issue of climate change that many social scientists have called attention to: how to bridge the differences between global and local scales of analysis (Magistro and Roncoli, 2001). These are made harder to connect by the fact that local scales are just as complex and varied as global scales because factors such as gender, wealth and ethnicity still differentiate personal experiences (Magistro and Roncoli, 2001). As a result, value on local scales can be found in the unique situation of every single person, meaning contributions from “knowledge holders from all walks of life” (Feetham et al, 2023) are needed to reflect these differences. While this can make climate change seem even more complex and confusing, the first person to introduce talanoa as a tool for large scale conflict resolution – Sitiveni Halapua – argued that living with differences is a fact of life, so “understanding them better is a good start” (Robinson and Robinson, 2005). The lens of relationality in talanoa acknowledges connections across these differences and increases our understanding of them, giving it the potential to navigate these scales by bringing people together regardless of the context.

The reason why talanoa at all scales has this capacity is arguably because of its power as a storytelling process. Pacific peoples have a long history of oral traditions that pass down their ancestral knowledge through stories and songs with memorable chants, rhymes and repetition, each with practical knowledge embedded in examples of real-life situations. These make lessons memorable because they construct a personal narrative about “building something that someone actually needs” (Thompson, 2010). Today, stories about our changing land and ocean are memorable because they are also personal narratives about the things we need most in our world – the land and ocean that provide us our most fundamental needs as humans.

Furthermore, stories are scientifically proven to have the ability to overcome climate inaction. This inaction is a common psychological reaction to environmental concerns where denial or apathy allows us to carry on harming the natural world to keep our lifestyles stable (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022). This barrier can be overcome through the emotional engagement of stories because they have “the potential to give evidence meaning, motivate and engage audiences, and give relevance to their lived realities” (Sundin, Andersson and Watt, 2018). As a result, storytelling is an essential compliment to science because it has the ability to give meaning to the lists of facts and policies that we know already, and in doing so can motivate action. Within this lies the final benefit of storytelling: it is accessible to anyone, anywhere. Unlike science and politics, stories can be voiced and understood by anyone from a head of government to a beggar (Kelman, 2010), and can be told in all settings, as shown by records of talanoa being used at “the beach, the vegetable garden [and] the kitchen” (Feetham et al, 2023).

So, if stories are memorable, emotionally engaging, and widely accessible, it is clear to see how climate action can be maximised more efficiently through storytelling. In fact, it is increasingly argued that large scale threats like climate change cannot be dealt with without stories because they bring “humanity to the negotiations” of science and politics (van Ingen, 2022), and so are an essential compliment to these areas that are full of facts but lack action. These factors all combine to show the potential of stories – and thus talanoa – to generate the motivation across the world that is needed to accelerate climate action, include a diverse range of voices, and unite people in protecting our planet and its people.

With the issue of bridging scales in climate change addressed, and the necessity for storytelling proven, we can return to talanoa across climate change contexts and truly see how well suited it is to the current global situation.
Firstly, talanoa addresses injustices and inequality in way that respects and prioritises Pacific peoples through prompting better understandings of Pacific worldviews, reflexivity, and co-producing knowledge during and after the process. Through this, talanoa creates culturally appropriate collaboration that can allow Pacific peoples to decide the future of their home on their own terms (Kelman, 2010).
Secondly, through drawing upon existing knowledge from Pacific peoples (Bryant-Tokalau et al, 2018) and increasing understanding, talanoa can provide effective action by providing knowledge for policymakers to design and implement solutions that are tailored to local situations (Feetham et al, 2023). Furthermore, providing sustainable solutions now is far more cost effective than providing emergency relief after disasters have struck (Kelman, 2010).
Finally, talanoa makes this action meaningful through weaving together a variety of perspectives that respectfully includes indigenous communities in climate discussions (Feetham et al, 2023). Honouring communities that have been overlooked for far too long requires really hearing them – their stories, their knowledge, their world – and taking the time to incorporate this into communities,

research and international spaces. Talanoa works towards this incorporation and provides a meaningful step in the right direction to decolonising Western settings and systems (Ravulo, 2025). This culminates to prove that the use of talanoa across cultural, anthropological and international contexts can create culturally appropriate collaboration and meaningful, effective climate action.

Because of these benefits, it is vital to discuss the possibilities for expanding the use of talanoa, not only to increase the role of the Pacific in climate change discussions, but because this issue is not theirs alone to bear. Through its emotional motivation to increase action, talanoa with non-Pacific groups can increase the pressure for globally influential and high emitting nations to take responsibility for their impacts and their power to increase action against climate change (Bryant-Tokalau et al, 2018). Such action is urgently needed across the world despite global differences – not just for the long-term goals of mitigating the overall impacts of climate change, but for people facing change and endangerment now. Considering the ability of talanoa to create effective, meaningful climate action and Fiji's international 'gifting' of talanoa to the world – done with the expectation that meaningful climate action is enacted in return (Hautzinger, 2024) – I call for the increase in using talanoa for climate change. If talanoa can continue developing and be used more widely in climate discussions with Pacific people, then power can be increased "to tell the stories that need to be told. To generate the action that needs to be taken" (words of Fijian PM Frank Bainimarama, UNFCCC, 2018).

Cautions and Proposals

Advocating for the continual increase of talanoa requires ongoing discussion that grows alongside this ever-developing process. While talanoa is not new, its use beyond Pacific communities very much is, so the challenges and benefits that may arise in different contexts must be openly discussed. To contribute to discussion, this section highlights important cautions to prompt awareness when practicing talanoa, followed by three principles drawn from lessons of the three contexts explored in order to consider things talanoa should strive to include regardless of where it is practiced in the future.

<u>Cautions</u>

- Increasing talanoa must not take credit away from Pacific peoples' ability to skilfully navigate the political technicalities of reports and legislation (Bryant-Tokalau, 2018). Instead, using talanoa should be based on the need to create a space for decisions to be made on Pacific terms to advance justice (Hollis and Halapua, 2025).

- Talanoa must remain authentically Pacific in all uses and avoid being shaped to fit Western participants or spaces. Part of the intention behind using talanoa should always be to benefit Pacific peoples, so non-Pacific participants should make the effort to understand and practice talanoa on Pacific terms.

- Non-Pacific participants of talanoa should be aware that misconceptions rooted in non-Pacific worldviews can perpetuate ignorance and spread the negative and inaccurate views of the Pacific that have damaged Pacific identities already (Vaioleti, 2006).

- Everyone participating in talanoa must be aware of power imbalances and privilege, as these must consciously be addressed in order to create an equal space productive for forging genuine connections with people.

- In talanoa on larger scales, it is important to discuss the balance between political pragmatism and the need to shift perspectives of climate change towards worldviews like relationality (Boege, 2023). The successes and shortcomings of the Talanoa Dialogue can provide a starting point for such considerations.

<u>Proposals</u>

1. Practicing *Tauhi Vā*

Tauhi Vā is a Tongan practice that extends the concept of *vā* – where the space between people is not empty but rather made up of woven threads that hold things together (Teariki and Leau, 2023). *Tauhi Vā* is the act of nurturing this space between and keeping good relations (Tecun et al, 2018) to respect the connections created when building relationships. In talanoa for climate change, nurturing this space can be practiced by doing all we can – from co-producing knowledge with Pacific peoples, to taking public transport or recycling correctly at home – to combat the threats of climate change and advocate for justice. Through this, *Tauhi Vā* can obligate action and maintain the motivation generated when sharing stories in order to remember how, regardless of distance and time, we are all connected to climate change and those on the frontlines through relationality.

2. Being reflexive

While used in anthropology, reflexivity is also a practice that can help everyone who uses talanoa to understand what background they are approaching talanoa from and what things they should be specifically mindful of. It is essential for non-Pacific people to “be aware of the overpowering nature of your non-Pacific self” and how

this may influence your perspective on everything when working in Pacific ways through talanoa (Schuster, 2022). To increase this awareness, Feetham et al (2023) propose that non-Pacific people should have a ‘cultural discernment advisor’: a Pacific guide and collaborator who can ensure talanoa remains true to Pacific voices by clarifying misunderstandings and teaching appropriate practices. This self-reflection should be empowering and not embarrassing as it creates a space where everyone recognises their shortcomings and power and can openly discuss these to increase understanding.

3. Having empathy

Empathy is the foundation for attempting to understand human differences, so is the first step in forging genuine connections. Conducting talanoa without empathy is impossible because emotions are a key component in genuinely understanding other people’s stories and our own perceptions (Farelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014). Empathy can “reanimate the sometimes robotic image of humans” that is created in science and politics to create a better understanding of “what is at stake for people in everyday life” (Lutz and White, 1986). While it is an intentional skill that can take time to develop (Farelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014), empathy is arguably the most important step in ensuring a diverse range of voices can contribute regardless of indigeneity (Ravulo, 2025), and establishing emotional connection to increase action – and hope – to combat climate change.

Conclusion

Having explored talanoa across three contexts – cultural, anthropological, and international – in which it is used to discuss climate change, I argue that this Pacific cultural storytelling process is brilliantly suited for creating culturally appropriate collaboration and effective, meaningful climate action. As a result, I also call for the continual increase in using talanoa alongside open discussions about its development outside of Pacific communities in order to increase climate justice for Pacific peoples and provide emotional engagement to accelerate climate action around the world. Action of this nature is urgently needed to provide those on the frontlines of climate change with the power they deserve in international discussions and sustainable solutions that are collaboratively designed to be as effective and appropriate as possible to protect their communities.

I also hope that in coming to understand talanoa and gain insight into Pacific worldviews, those who don’t get the opportunity to engage in talanoa will still be left with food for thought about changing their perspective of our interconnected place in the world. The Pacific and its peoples may seem oceans away, but talanoa demonstrates how we are all connected to each other and our planet and ultimately

must embrace this to unite in the face of climate change and fight to protect our planet.

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