

'ARTS' of MOANA OCEANIA

SCOPING RESEARCH – OVERVIEW

By Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy



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What are Moana Oceania arts?

Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy was commissioned by Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi in January 2020 to carry out a scoping research on the arts of Moana Oceania. The name 'Moana Oceania' is used in place of the imposed and problematic term 'Pacific' to empower and privilege Indigenous languages and perspectives. It embodies worldviews that are strongly connected to Aotearoa New Zealand but have their roots in the wider Moana Oceania region.

There is currently a knowledge gap in the mainstream arts sector of a more cross-cultural approach and understanding around what art is. Taking a holistic approach, knowledge does not exist outside of our cultures and languages. All three components are inseparable where knowledge is composed within and across our cultures and communicated in our languages.

We often hear about the value of 'art' and the importance of 'art', but for many of our island nations, 'art' is not our word. Moana Oceania peoples are forced to fit our ways of knowing *into* a 'general' Western frame, that in turn isolates and ignores our 'own specific uniqueness'. This research will hopefully be the start of shifting the axis in the right direction.

Tāmaki Makaurau is a unique, living and thriving cultural hub for our Moana Oceania cultures and creative communities. Of the 17 island nations identified in the 2013 census, 15 have the majority of their population living in Tāmaki Makaurau.

If we are to genuinely understand and advocate for how **the arts** are valued, by all 17 island nations in Aotearoa, we need to first know **what art is** from their various Indigenous worldviews. This means looking critically at the current status quo of the arts sector here in Tāmaki Makaurau, and Aotearoa wide, and acknowledging that all people do 'art' – but it is organised, performed and created differently within different cultures.

Our Approach

The knowledge for us to 'understand' *what art is*, is held by our cultural experts within and across our living Moana Oceania communities. Our approach is always to start a 'talanoa', which is our own Indigenous concept and practice of talking critically yet harmoniously; a conversation journey that is all encompassing of the emotional, spiritual, and physical realms.

This research took place in late January to the end of May 2020. The latter part was during the COVID-19 lockdown and provided some 'new ways of doing' that had to be navigated carefully. There were elders we couldn't engage with digitally due to cultural protocols and others were unable due to COVID-19 issues within their own borders.

We reached out to individuals from 15 of the 17 identified Moana Oceania communities, and 'received' insights from the following nine: Cook Islands (Rarotonga), Fiji, Niue, Tonga, Rotuma, PNG (Mogei), Solomon Islands (Mala'ita), Kiribati and Hawai'i. Starting from our own established networks and communities provided us with a navigation map that also helped guide us to other cultural knowledge holders when required.

The whole concept around 'what art is' raised some interesting and deeper talanoa within and across our communities. One said they had 'never' had the conversation around 'what art is' from their 'lens' because for them art **is** culture. Another expressed that while open to

this project they needed to go back and engage with their wider community and elders so as to contribute *as* a collective. One was irritated by us asking for their ‘Indigenous worldview’ when we imposed a page limit saying “who are you two to put limitations around this most critical piece of research, you are asking us to squeeze into a few paragraphs what our culture is, so it will come in the form it comes.”

Our approach was left organic and open, allowing each contributor to provide in whatever form they felt was appropriate.

Stories we were gifted

The stories that were gifted truly honoured the unity of our Moana Oceania communities through their diversity of knowing, seeing and doing. It spoke loudly to the fact that we need to **stop** always reverting to generalizations of Moana Ocean cultures, creativity, and arts without firstly knowing, then understanding our points of difference and what makes each of us unique.

Each of our nine stories have been gifted in different forms and shapes. Some have gone straight to the point of expressing what art is from their perspectives, giving viewers a taster of a depth and breadth that is still to come, such as the following: from Kaetaeta Watson and Louisa Humphry (Kiribati) and Dr Michael Mel (Mogei, Mt Hagen area, Papua New Guinea [PNG])

“‘Art’ is not our word, it is ‘yours’ because we do not have a word for ‘art’ in Kiribati. Everything we ‘made/make’ was functional and made for a purpose so therefore the concept of ‘art’ is very different. We have a Kiribati word which is Te Rabakau – which means ‘knowledge’ – knowledge taught to me by my mother, by my grandmother and which I am therefore responsible for passing on to others including our children and our community. It is knowledge that is shared that I then have to practice and to refine the skill of. Yet still, it is so much more than that – it is my Kiribati culture, it is Kiribati-pride, it stirs within and throughout me as an iKiribati person – it is a gift.” **Kaetaeta Watson & Louisa Humphry (Kiribati)**

“There is a way to describe and share the idea of art and making art from the Mogei view. The skill and dexterity of the maker with which a tool (digging stick, axe, woven net-bag), or an adornment object like a head-band made of gold-coloured peels of orchid stalks and iridescent green scarab beetles, a carved pearl shell, or sets of beads made from cowry shells) may be admired. But for the Mogei, what is even more significant is the way the person using the tool or wearing the adornment is able to achieve the task or performance. A Mogei person ‘sees’ the task or performance and experiences art in terms of the level and depth of accomplishment with the object, an activity, or a performance or ceremony through *Kanamb*. A literal translation would read ‘I look/watch’. *Kanamb* is not about an inner world watching an outside world. *Kanamb* can refer to as “seeing through ones’ eyes”. A Mogei person can see through their eyes. The Mogei also ‘see’ via ones’ skin, ears, nose or in visions revealed during deep sleep. *Kanamb* relates to ‘seeing’ objects, ‘watching’ performances, ‘listening’ to poetry through refined eloquent language in speeches, occurrences in dreams, or in

‘reading’ the environment. The environment may include the call of a bird, formation of clouds foreboding rain, sighting of insects, marsupials, lizards, and snakes. The appearance and actions of certain people, what they say and their actions ‘seen’ during dreams; the colour and tone of the worn adornment on a performer; the sharpness and shape of the cut of the blade slicing food; these can provide through *kanamb* an opportunity for rumination and interpretation.” **Dr Michael Mel (Mogei, PNG)**

Others have provided a “101” on Indigenous knowledge systems. For example the insights from Hawai’i and Mala’ita in the Solomon Islands:

“...I think that’s the seed of how Hawaiian knowledge systems were and where they were planted. We are so unique, as people, as practitioners...in our principles, and our love of land and care of people. We’re very specific, and we’re island people. And those thoughts actually boiled into my Doctoral thesis, and that is Hawaiian epistemology. And it asked the question, what is knowledge, what is the difference between knowledge, knowing and understanding or Mana’o ‘I’o, Mana’o Lana and Aloha. And we have unique ways to respond to that question. And responding to that question and how it reflects throughout the world has been my discipline, has been my love, and has been my joy to practice these things.” **Dr Manulani Meyer (Hawai’i)**

“The Malaitan mind is a construct that represents the authentic Malaita context-specific embrace of beliefs, norms and modes of behaviours, ways of knowing, doing and creating knowledge (all of which are captured by the concept, *falafala* [culture]).”
“...Malaitans perceive reality as socially situated, integrated and wholesome. As creatures, humans are assumed to be a mere part of such a world. The actors and actions of creatures are spatial and exist within time. Both speech and silence are equally important as knowledge-making strategies. To Malaitans, all that constitute the socio-spiritual world are connected in an unbroken chain; hence, this view is cyclical. By contrast, a lineal view of reality separates, isolates, privileges, and highlights the parts and their changing natures.” **Dr Kabini Sanga (Mala’ita, Solomon Islands).**

And then there are those that are still processing their thinking around what art is by reflecting on the distinction between their own personal experiences as part of communities living in diaspora and those that live in the homelands. For example, our gift from Niue:

“A tufuga who lives in diaspora is known as a Lagi-tua-taha as opposed to a tufuga who lives in Niue who is a Lagi-tua-ua. In the Niue context a tufuga is someone who has acquired knowledge and skills both in creation and spiritual understandings of a specific practice. Tufuga knowledge and skills were only passed onto selected people. Knowledge and skills were safeguarded as mana (power) was vested in the tufuga. Lagi-tua-taha tufuga in the diaspora were those that had acquired their skills and knowledge through study or training in western institutions or through their own self-acquisition. Several tufuga in the diaspora are currently active in the revival and maintenance of Niue’s creative expressions.” **Dr Nuhisifa Seve-Williams and Ioane Aleke Fa’avae (Niue)**

What these stories illustrate is that our Indigenous knowledge systems inform our unique ways of knowing, seeing and doing today. It continues, in varying degrees, to be practiced within and across our living, diversified yet unified, Moana Oceania communities here in Tāmaki Makaurau and Aotearoa wide, other diaspora communities worldwide, and in our homelands.

Filling the Knowledge Gap

The focus of this research was to highlight the knowledge gaps within and across the cultural, creativity and arts sector around what art is from our Moana Oceania worldviews. This has not yet been genuinely acknowledged, valued and considered, on par with the current dominant knowledge system and infrastructure in a more balanced way. It is only when this happens, that an environment for more dynamic, inclusive and enriching cross-cultural talanoa and advocacy can take place.

The only way to address this knowledge gap is to recognise and accept that the realities of our diversities and complexities can bring unity and that we can be united in our diversity. The general stereotypes around Moana Oceania are further complicated when there is no one 'worldview' for nations like PNG or the Solomon Islands. For an island nation like PNG, with more than 800 languages, we have been gifted with a Mogeï view from the individual perspective and experiences of thought leader and creative Dr Michael Mel. We also gain an insight into a Malaitan mind of the Solomon islands through the published work and ala lā / tok stori / talanoa with Associate Professor Kabini Sanga.

This research highlights the need for more work around genuinely engaging with our wider Moana Oceania communities so as to be better informed by their knowledge and understanding from their respective worldviews. Embedding this foundation will ensure the knowledge gap is lessened. It also builds a genuine foundation for real engagement with our living diaspora Moana Oceania communities in Tāmaki Makaurau, and Aotearoa wide, so as to gauge a deeper understanding of our dynamic knowledge systems that inform how we do 'art'.

What next?

If there is one thing, we would like readers to take away, is recognising our collective empowerment of being united in our diversity. This is beautifully expressed in the following statement of our gift from Fiji:

“Art, in a western framework is viewed in a museum or art gallery mostly credited to an individual, who is viewed as the sole creator. The physical space is strictly determined by a curator who is the expert of the exhibition concept. In comparison to the Fijian way of looking at art, it is totally the opposite. Our art is communally owned, celebrated through ceremonies, songs and dances and worn through tattooing, tapa (masi), and through our iTaukei language (Vosa Vakaviti).” **Dr Tarisi Vunidilo (Fiji)**

This is our call to action! We hope this research creates the needed shift of the axis through a collective movement of disrupting the status quo. Now is the time to go beyond hearsay by embedding the knowledge and the capacity to ensure Indigenous voices are heard and perspectives are embedded in the hearts, minds and policies of our cultural, creative and arts sector.

We hope that cultural institutions and the sector develop, adopt and embed policies and processes that acknowledge the different Indigenous knowledge systems that exist within and across our wider Moana Oceania living communities in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa wide, and beyond. And for this work to be led and guided by our Indigenous living communities.

We hope this research will engage our younger generation (and those to come) to: retain and use *their* Indigenous knowledge systems as a foundation to build and stand firmly on; and to take ownership of whatever shape and form it has revolved into. We also hope it will ignite a talanoa that will lead to a further exploration into their own ancestral lineages.

While we were only gifted ‘nine’ stories, we also started talanoa with other island nations who were invited to contribute in whatever way they wanted to, and at their convenience. These talanoa are in progress and will be ongoing with the next iteration of this project.

Readers - as you delve into each of these stories, please note that they are from the individual views of our contributors based on knowledge and experiences placed before, next to and in front of them.

This research is brokering new ground. We draw on the words of one of the contributors for this project, Dr Kabini Sanga, who said:

“...we say in Mala’ita, you are kwaia tala, you are people who are clearing the first path, in that space...People who kwaia tala, are not only walking along the path, they’re actually creating the path as they walk as well on it.”

We acknowledge all of our collaborators and contributors for their openness and bravery in coming on board and collectively to ‘kwaia tala’ a pathway that has been long overdue. Once a pathway is cleared then it will soon become a familiar and well-trodden path of knowledge and understanding. This in turn will lead to an environment that is more inclusive, genuinely diverse and dynamic, where talking critically yet harmoniously is the status quo.

Image captions/credits:



Name: Mbu Rui

Description: *Mbu Rui* is the ceremonial axe for the Mogeï. Crafted by skilled crafts person, it is owned and held by the *wo nuim* – a male knowledgeable in history of lineage and ancestry, articulate and proficient in language and poetry, respectful and considerate in demeanour, conducts his affairs with wisdom and insight, and maintains material wealth and links to neighbouring clans. It is a marker of him as *wo nuim*. Carried in the hand or worn with the handle tucked in his bark belt on the side and blade facing back, he steps out for an oration during special exchange ceremonies.

Credit: Collected from the Mt Hagen area in the early sixties and sold recently in a Sydney Tribal Art Fair. In private collection.



Name: Drua

Description: This is a model of a Fijian drua, a double hulled sailing canoe. The Fijian drua was the largest and finest ocean-going vessel which could range up to 100 feet in length. They were made by highly skilled hereditary canoe builders and other specialist makers for the woven sail, coconut fibre sennit rope and paddles.

Credit: Commissioned and made by Alex Kennedy 2002, collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, FE011790

Link: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/648912>



Name: Ilili Niue

Description: This ilili Niue was made by tufuga ilili Niue Hana Tauekipaoo in 2014. The body of the fan is intricately woven young coconut leaf with a wooden handle and coconut sennit fibre lashing interwoven with pandanus leaf. Ilili Niue are only made for special occasions and Hana, at 82 years old, is the only surviving tufuga of ilili Niue and currently resides in Niue.

Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 2015.14.4, 56756.4

Link: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-779937?c=ecrm%3AE22_Man-Made_Object&k=2015.14.4&ordinal=0



Name: Manu uo

Description: Manu uo, a bird-shaped ornament, possibly of much spiritual significance to a asi (salt-water) tribal group from the island of Mala'ita in the Solomon Islands. It is made of wood with trochus shell inlay. As a manu uo, it is used as a centre piece of a fishnet especially one owned by a fata-abu (priest). It would have been collected in the late nineteenth century and is now looked after by Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum.

Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 15602.

Link: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object515352?k=malaita%20fish&ordinal=13



Name: Te kao

Description: Te kao, a mesh carrying net that is used to hold moray eels while travelling home from fishing at sea. It is made of te kora, coconut fibre string, with the circular 'neck' opening created using coconut leaf midribs and bound by te kora. It is from island of Beru, in the Kiribati islands.

Credit: Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 1936.295, 23995; 75

Link: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-90561?k=kiribati%20fishing%20net&ordinal=4



Name: Taura tatai

Description: This taura tatai, fishing line, from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands was added to Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum's collections in 1899. It is made from wood and coconut sennit fibre string, braided using a 3-ply technique.

Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 8343.

Link: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-575625?p=2&k=cook%20islands%20fishing&ordinal=2



Name: Tofua

Description: This tofua or waist garment is from the island of Rotuma. It is made from vovoi or pandanus - with a finely woven waistband, decorated with green and blue coloured wool and the body comprised of ruffled strips of vovoi.

Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 1949.11

Link: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-71415?p=2&c=ecrm%3AE22_Man-Made_Object&k=Rotuma&ordinal=16



Name: Makau

Description: This makau or fishhook from Hawai'i is finely carved from wood and intricately lashed with 3-ply braided coconut sennit fibre. It was gifted to Te Papa Museum in 1912.

Credit: Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, FE000361. Gift of Lord St Oswald, 1912.

Link: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/863654>



Name: Pāletu'a or Kali 'o Hina

Description: This pōvai or club, is known as Pāletu'a, shield and weapon or Kali 'o Hina, Headrest of Hina. It is used in faiva no'o'anga, the Tongan performance art of shark-catching. Hina is one of Tonga's deified ancestors where, amongst her various domains, she is goddess of faiva no'o'anga. Made of wood, it is completed carved with the Tongan kupesi or pattern veimau, meaning 'ordered water flow' – where the surface is calm and ordered but the water underneath is dynamic and chaotic.

Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 1931.245, 16405;

L26 https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-101661?c=ecrm%3AE22_Man-Made_Object&k=no%27o%27anga&ordinal=0



Te Taumata
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