

Talanoa in Building Democracy and Governance

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A beginning without end:

Every one of us, me and you, has a story to tell. It may be a story about the idea of what you are and where you stand on the issues of importance to your existence as a Pacific islander, or simply as a human being. Another story may be about your identity and commitments, and what you want to recall from the past to be present *now* so as to ensure what you want to achieve in the future. In fact there are as many different stories as there are people to share their various experiences and views of the world in which we live and work. This is where talanoa begins. But unlike a movie, a text, a telephone call, or a good or bad government, talanoa has a clear beginning without a clear end. The presence of a clear beginning together with the lack of a finite end provides the link between talanoa and building democracy and governance. That particular linkage forms a story that I want to share with you today, which immediately brings me to the question about meaning *in* talanoa.

Talanoa as a ‘flow’ of human ideas and experience:

The meaning in talanoa is embedded in questions about ‘what is unique about talanoa?’ and ‘how it is practiced to bring about change, or to preserve and enhance what has changed in the relation of one in a connection with another?’ The question of uniqueness is important to our understanding of the framework of talanoa in theory as well as in practice. Ten years ago in May 19, 2003, I delivered the inaugural public lecture for the establishment of ‘The Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara Friendship Foundation’, at the University of the South Pacific campus in Suva. My paper was entitled “Walking the Knife-edged Pathways to Peace” and defined talanoa as a process of storytelling without concealment. Both in a theoretical and in a practical sense, storytelling without concealment stresses the paramount importance of *noa*, a narrative condition in which there is a demand that storytellers/listeners detach from any pre-determined commitments and preconceived ideas of who (s)he is. It enables the participants to come and develop a sense of belonging together in *noa* without a pre-determined “agenda”. This is the *beginning* of talanoa.

The integrity and the dynamics of the open process itself will eventually shape an “agenda” which every participating storyteller can identify with, and develop a sense of an ownership. More importantly, every participating storyteller must have the ultimate responsibility for every decision and action that emerges from talanoa. This was how it was practiced under the support of the East-West Center in Fiji, after the fateful event of George Speight civilian coup between 2000 and 2004; in the communities of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in 2005 as a response to the national crisis that affected the lives of the people and the institutions of government; and, in Tonga during the Civil Servant Strike in 2005, and the duration of a more structured process of political reform that began in 2006.

In the Fiji talanoa, initial skepticism of political talks with open-agenda in *noa* faded as leaders from different communities came to the realization that dialogue without pre-conditions was the only sensible and practical thing that could realistically be asked of the different people struggling with, and in, the volatile situations where principally there were only values of disrespect, distrust and lack of confidence in the relationships between different communities.

In the Solomon Islands’ talanoa (‘TokStori’), the traditional leaders shaped their own “agenda” in *noa* based on a general question about ‘What are the structures of governance at the *local level* that could help promote the effective flow of information and understanding between community leaders and provincial and national government institutions?’ In his paper entitled ‘Indigenous Governance in Melanesia’ Professor Geoffrey White argued that ‘Recognizing the importance of the local does not mean imagining local communities as existing in a bounded rural universe—rather the “local” today is a place of intersecting flows and migrations linking rural/urban as well as local/national/regional forces of all kinds’ (State, Society and Governance in Melanesia, ANU, Discussion Paper 2007/5, p.14).

In the case of Tonga, faced with an increasingly conflictual impasse between striking civil servants (without a rule-governed organization of a local or international trade union) and the government, a Royal Command was issued from the Privy Council to engage the talanoa process. Later, after the settlement of the civil servants strike, in a collective effort to understand the people’s ideas and commitments to a demand for political reform, the Parliament established a National Committee for Political Reform, chaired by the late Prince Tu’ipelehake, and brought the talanoa process to every village in the Kingdom as well as to the overseas Tonga in New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii, and the mainland USA.

The unique narrative condition of belonging together in *noa* strips away all the myths and contaminations of human hierarchy and reveals the meanings in the different stories that participating storytellers share in their various direct and indirect connections with one another.

The narrative condition of *noa* enables remembrance, communication, and understanding of different stories told *before* the participants *re-attach* themselves to their respective values and commitments as “flow” of ideas involving in a unique connection with past, present, and future experience of human decision and action. That is what is unique about *talanoa*. This means that ultimately the practice of *talanoa* hinges on the narrative condition of bringing the storytelling participants to develop a sense of belonging together in *noa*, which depends on the ability as well as on the acquired skill of the facilitator.

Talanoa in building democracy:

Democracy as an ideal of ‘Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them...or by officers elected by them (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, 1989)’ is sometimes described by some island commentators as a ‘foreign flower’. The word ‘foreign’ is a loaded reference to a number of positive and negative things, including the historical journey of the ideal of democracy from Greece around 508-7 BC, through the development of Western thought and colonialism, and to its final arrival together with the Christian faith, Western education, various Western political systems, and other Western commodities on the shores of the Pacific islands. What is interesting about the label of ‘foreign flower’ as it applies to the ideal of democracy is that the same label does not apply to the historical incorporation of the Christian faith, Western education and commodities into the (so-called traditional) structure of a Pacific island society. As a result, a situation has developed in which the vocal few express their views on what is ‘foreign’, as a euphemism for something unsuitable, and what is ‘traditional’, which implies something more suitable for the locals, and the many receive them without question.

It is commonly held that a democratic form of government should be based on informed public opinion and organized around the promotion of open discussion by the people of public issues. The difficulty arises when ‘the people’ is dissolved into the “imaginary public” in the language of those who hold the position of leadership. A position of leadership comprises of members of a particular group made up of men and women of power who in alignment with their own interests lead or influence others within a given context. This creates a growing increasing gap between those who hold the position of leadership and the “imaginary public”. Often the individual feels that whatever his commitment amounts to, it is no longer has any connection with a leader’s own interests. For such individual, and for many thousands of the people, who feel isolated and displaced from a system of governance, the position of leadership has locked itself into a self-fulfilling relationship with its own conception of an “imaginary public”. When this occurs, positions of leadership become the target of a growing conflict with the people thereby stifles any genuine development of democracy.

Unique role of a talanoa facilitator:

Democracy all over the Pacific islands and the ever increasingly globalised world is being critically re-examined today and subjected to doubts about its own transparency and accountability to the people. There are serious questions about democracy's prospects for survival without a re-thinking and reformation of how it is practiced today. This is where talanoa enters into this picture. Talanoa addresses the growing concern with the increasing isolation of a position of leadership from the intersecting "flows" of commitments involving the past, the present, and the future experiences of the people's own decisions and actions. In the action of building democracy within a given context, talanoa entails a bringing of the different positions of leadership and the people to develop a sense of belonging together in noa, and *then* brings the former into a meaningful connection with the latter. This means that the unique role of a facilitator of talanoa is to be able: **(i)** to become a perspective in noa; **(ii)** to occupy it; **(iii)** to form a sense of belonging together in it; and, then and only then, **(iv)** to bring the different stories of those who are in the position of power into a constructive relationship with the various stories of the people concerned. These constitute what I called the four main strands of a talanoa facilitator. This is what I have been trying to do within a given context of the snail-paced process of political reform in the cases of Fiji between 2000 and 2004, and Tonga between 2005 and 2012.

Talanoa in Governance:

The idea of governance in the practice of talanoa is directly linked to a notion of knowing the *given* rules that control the conduct, the arrangement, and the enquiry into the reality of what men and women in the position of leadership are doing in a planning and a performing of action that either positively or negatively affects the lives of the people concerned. Knowing the rules that control what 'they' (men and women in the position of power) are doing ensures their position of leadership and their possibilities of action *in* a connection with the affected people within a given culture.

It is assumed that the affected people are aware of these rules and can hold leaders accountable for what 'they' are doing. This assumption is out of keeping with what we now know about the shocking events of modern times and the increasing lack of the people's trust in the rules that are supposed to govern what their leaders are doing in a given context. More importantly, we now know that leaders who claim to have a right in setting the bounds and giving the limits of rules are also in a position of power to violate or change those rules to serve their own interests at the expense of people's trust and confidence.

Today governments, regional and international institutions, corporations, churches, labor unions, community-based organizations, administrative bureaus, schools, and universities in a global world all face the challenge of governance. The growth in the people's expectations in association with the revolution in telecommunication such as internet, cell phone, ipod technology etc. is no longer confined to the satisfaction of their own interests. Rather it is pursued in an increasing connection with real concern about the action of others. It can easily happen that, as soon as a leader becomes responsible for the rule that governs the conduct of what he is doing in making important decision about action, he begins to lose contact with the people that his decision is affecting and tends to become more concerned with the preservation and enhancement of his position of power. The value of trust in his rule-governed decision and confidence in his position of leadership are adversely affected. In this connection talanoa as a more realistic philosophical framework is needed if democracy is to anticipate and understand the problem of governance and transparency in today's human societies.

Temporal values of freedom in talanoa:

It is a central value of talanoa that participating storytellers are free to author and tell their own stories about whatever issues that are given to their thinking to un-conceal for others to hear without hindrance. Freedom, in the sense of *real opportunity*, is regarded by some as a central value in itself, and as such steadily, gradually increases (no matter how small the initial opportunity) in an intersecting temporal "flow" through being shared from the past, preserved and enhanced in the present, and continued into the future. It follows that an idea of who (s)he is as a leader, a rule of what a leader is doing, and, subsequently, a position of leadership are to be evaluated and measured in terms of a positive or negative connection with the contributions which 'they' are able to make to the temporal values of freedom to achieve.

At this point in talanoa, and following the narrative requirement of *noa* we have discussed in the preceding sections, the picture of practical governance in a democracy consists in finding a stable position of leadership, just as a stable idea of a leader is required for a stable rule that governs what a leader is doing. Thus the people whose freedoms are positively or negatively affected by a position of leadership must also play a role, through talanoa, in deciding what value they must create and assign to that position of leadership.

Conclusion:

Building democracy and the stable governance of it have to be steadily, gradually developed through talanoa with the four main strands of a facilitator. They cannot be abruptly imposed by a position of leadership upon a people not given the opportunity to participate freely in talanoa. If there is any single principle held in common by all participating storytellers, it is a demand for the freedom to maintain or change the direction of development in their lives.

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