

Vā Fealoa’i – Nurturing the Space Between People and Between People and Nature

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Abstract This article explores the Sāmoan concept of *vā fealoa’i* meaning ‘nurturing the space between people; and between people and nature’ and how it is embedded in my art practice, which reflects local, global and glocal considerations including a socially engaged, community outreach project involving Sāmoa’s third gender community that aims to highlight the specificity of their local experience with climate change, which is often neglected by governments and NGO’s. This article will also examine a textile exhibition entitled サモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) that explores the often hidden histories between Japan and the Pacific and specifically Sāmoa that goes beyond geopolitical boundaries as a man-made idea; and a video work, entitled *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023), which addresses environmental colonialism disguised as foreign diplomacy.

Keywords Contemporary art. Pacific. Exhibitions. Community outreach. Gender.

This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online. Cf. <https://samblog.seattleartmuseum.org/tag/samoan-art/>; <https://samblog.seattleartmuseum.org/2022/12/saturday-university-yuki-kihara/>; <https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement>; <https://yukikihara.ws/artist-statement>.



Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Submitted 2023-09-28
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

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Citation Kihara, Y. (2023). “Vā fealoa’i – Nurturing the Space Between People and Between People and Nature”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 183-196.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/001

At first glance, the vast oceanscape in my exhibition *Paradise Camp* appears idyllic, synonymous with unpolluted and vacant white sandy beaches that are constantly re-created by the tourism industry. First presented at the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion as part of the 59th Venice Biennale, this immersive panoramic wallpaper depicts an oceanscape from the Manusina Beach Fale in the village of Saleapaga part of the district of Aleipata in Upolu Island, the Independent State of Sāmoa [fig. 1]. Idealised beach scenes are also commonly featured on the screen savers of millions of people around the world, becoming ironic or clichéd in popular culture. However, those clichéd images of white sandy beaches are real places in Sāmoa with real people who have lived there for generations, faced with real life issues.

The village of Saleapaga was one of the worst hit villages during the 29th September 2009 tsunami that took the lives of 189 people. The slow recovery from the tsunami is compounded by rising sea-levels. Scientific data shows that the global average for sea level rise is 2.8-3.5 millimetres a year, compared to Sāmoa's sea level rise measuring up to 4 millimetres a year. Approximately 70% of Sāmoa's population and infrastructure are located in low-lying coastal areas which makes them extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

The impact of sea-level rising triggered by climate change can be seen along the coastlines in Upolu Island [fig. 2], where saltwater encroaches on the land and overtakes the fresh water that deciduous trees rely upon for sustenance. The salinisation of the soil as a result of sea level rise poisons living trees, leaving a haunted ghost forest of dead and dying timber. The dead trees can be seen during low-tide before they are covered by high-tide. This causes stress and panic to communities living in coastal areas who have to consider moving further inland, where the strain is often directed at the members of the *fa'afafine* (assigned male at birth who express their gender in a feminine way) and the *fa'atama* (assigned female at birth who express their gender in a masculine way) – an Indigenous third and fourth gender communities in Sāmoa that falls outside of the Judeo-Christian gender binary are often used as scapegoat to blame Climate change, despite *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama*'s under recognised contribution to their clan, village and the nation. In addition, the absence of the legal recognition of *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama* in Sāmoa means that the experiences of the heteronormative community are prioritised in data collection that informs policies and legislations. Subsequently, Climate change resource distribution informed by policies that enforces Western gender binary classifications undermines the collective resilience between *fa'afafine*, *fa'atama*, *fafine* (Woman) and *Tane* (Man) which sustained Sāmoa for over the past 3,000 years. These compounding issues impact me personally as I also identify as a *fa'afafine* based in Sāmoa.

Sea level rising is depicted in my floor image *Moana Rising* (2023) at Powerhouse Museum, Gadigal land Sydney [fig. 4]. The image also



Figure 1 *Oceanscape* (2022) by Yuki Kihara.
Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa, New Zealand

references the actions taken to address the *fa'afafine* and the *fa'atama* community's lack of visibility within climate change spaces. On the 1st July 2021, I helped organise a Climate change workshop directed at the *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama* community as a way to building understanding and resilience against Climate change with the support of the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association (SFA) and the Pacific Climate Change Centre (PCCC) [fig. 3]. The workshop came about as a result of my consultation between PCCC and SFA, which became a catalyst in bringing the organisations together to a talanoa in an open and transparent dialogue. For me, representation of *fa'afafine* and *Fa'afatama* communities in the *Paradise Camp* exhibition was not enough to address the practical and pragmatic approach that needed to address more immediate issues affecting the *fa'afafine* and *fa'afatama* communities.

The word *Moana* is a pan-Pacific word used to describe the Pacific Ocean. Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt describes the Pacific as having close to over 20 thousand Islands and over 2,500 Indigenous languages actively spoken every day (Wendt 1976). The Pacific Ocean is so vast it occupies one-third of earth's surface making it the biggest liquid continent on earth. In his 1993 essay "Our Sea of Islands", the late Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa wrote:

Continental men, namely Europeans, on entering the Pacific after crossing huge expanses of ocean, introduced the view of 'islands in a far sea'. From this perspective the islands are tiny, isolated dots in a vast ocean. Later on [they] drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that confined ocean Peoples to tiny spaces for the first time. Today, these boundaries define the island states and territories of the Pacific. (1994, 153)

I extend Hau'ofa's idea of the 'colonial boundaries' to describe the geopolitical divisions between Asia and specifically Japan and the



Figure 2
Artist Yuki Kihara at Mulivai-Safata
in Upolu Island, Sāmoa in 2022.
Photo courtesy of Yuki Kihara



Figure 3 Group photo of the members from the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association
at the Climate Change workshop presented by the Pacific Climate Change Centre,
1st July 2021 in Upolu Island, Sāmoa. Photo courtesy of Yuki Kihara



Figure 4 Yuki Kihara, *Moana Rising* (2023). Floor work commissioned by the Powerhouse Museum for *Paradise Camp* (2020-23) exhibition curated by Natalie King. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific, where the growing influence of Chinese aid projects together with the Fukushima nuclear disaster has seen Japan pivot to the Pacific as an opportunity to forge new diplomatic ties which was formally neglected. However, the aim of my *siapo* kimonos is to shed light on the human relationships developed between the meeting of cultures that goes beyond the rhetoric of diplomatic relations and geopolitical agendas that colours Sāmoa Japan relations today.

In 2015, I came across an old kimono owned by my late Japanese grandmother Masako Kihara where the colour of the kimono reminded her of *siapo* – a hand-made Sāmoan backcloth made from the *Lau u'a* (paper mulberry tree). This was the initial inspiration to bring together textile traditions from Sāmoa (*siapo*) and Japan (kimono) into a cross-cultural fusion to create a series of *siapo* kimono where kimono made from Sāmoan bark cloth is presented as sculpture.

The title of the series is adapted from a popular Japanese song entitled サモアのうた (*Samoatou no uta*) in Japanese meaning 'A Song from Sāmoa'. The work is adapted from a title of a popular Japanese song featured in music text books for elementary school students in Japan. The origin of the song was developed as a result of a visit by NHK film crew or the National Broadcasting Corporation who were filming in Sāmoa during the late 1950s. A young anthropologist, Sachiko Hatanaka, acted as a mediator between the film crew and the local Sāmoan people. Hatanaka arranged to film the children from Sapapali'i Elementary School singing and dancing. Later, NHK wanted to use the scene of the Sāmoan children and translate the Sāmoan lyrics into Japanese, but before Hatanaka could find a translator, NHK found a lyricist to create Japanese lyrics to match the scene and melody. The scene of the Sāmoan children with Japanese lyrics was later sung by the NHK's Tokyo Children's Choir in the NHK's "Minnanouta (Songs for All)" series. This resulted in a great hit and was published in the music textbook for elementary school, which continues to be sung today. Upon inspecting the Japanese lyrics to the song however, it describes Sāmoa as a paradise on earth settled by noble savages.

The cultural links between Japan and Sāmoa has been theorised by Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt, who compared the Sāmoan notion of *vā* to the Māori and Japanese notion of *wā* (和). He explains that

Vā is the space between, the betweenness, not an empty space, not a space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships and the contexts change. A well-known Sāmoan expression is 'Ia teu le *vā*'. Cherish/nurse/care for the *vā*, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism: who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of *vā*, relationships. (Wendt 1996)

There are many facets of *Vā* in Sāmoan culture however in the context of this essay, the notion of *Vā fealoa'i* meaning “to nurture the space between people; and between people and nature” would be appropriate in describing my intent in creating awareness between the multi-layered relationship through art.

It is from within this context of the *Vā fealoa'i* that my work entitled サ-モアのうた *Sāmoa no uta* (*A Song About Sāmoa*) (2019-23) – a five year project was developed. Here, the cultural function of the Japanese *kimono* and the Sāmoan *siapo* which both serve as a repository of ancestral stories are brought together as a metaphor to re-frame the relationship between Japan and the Pacific and specifically Sāmoa, taking an Indigenous interpretation of trans-Pacific identity, gender, and history, while referencing my own interracial Sāmoan and Japanese heritage as a point of conceptual departure.

There are a total of 25 *siapo* kimonos presented between 2019 till 2023, ultimately forming one major mural. The *siapo* kimonos are also presented alongside my Japanese grandmother's silk kimono which first gave me the inspiration, and to also honor her passing.



Figure 5 Phase 1 “Vasa (Ocean)”. 2019. Part of サーマアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand

Phase 1 entitled “Vasa (Ocean)” (2019) portrays the current state of the surrounding ocean in Sāmoa where sea creatures and corals are being threatened by global warming and frequent cyclones. A flock of *Tūlī* (Pacific Golden Plover) that migrates between Serbia, Alaska, Japan and across the South Pacific has stood witness to the changes in the Moana for centuries [fig. 5]. “The Great Wave off Kanagawa” woodblock print by Japanese ukiyo-e artist Hokusai, created in late 1831 has been adapted to represent the shape of the tsunami like waves in reference to the tsunami disaster in Sāmoa in 2009 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011 with both places sharing the same sea floor.

There are virtually no corals left in Sāmoa due to the impact of cyclones, natural disasters and rising ocean acidification since the seventeenth century, which coincides with the arrival of first Europeans in Sāmoa. The coconuts floating on waves allude to the Japanese poem *Yashi no mi* (A Coconut) by poet Shimazaki Tōson please include poem. The poem was inspired by Shimazaki’s friend, the folklorist Yanagita Kunio, who found a coconut on Iragomisaki Beach in Aichiken in central Honshu Island, which led him to believe that the origins of Japanese people were from the South, perhaps Okinawa or the Pacific Islands. The floating coconuts also share the ocean waves alongside a floating plastic bag and coke can alluding to the human impact on the ocean.



Figure 6 Phase 2 “Fanua (Land)”. 2021. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand

Phase 2 entitled “Fanua (Land)” (2020) serves as a forewarning against Sāmoa’s speculative future that favours economic development and globalisation at the expense of traditional knowledge systems and the local environment [fig. 6]. The newly built Vaisigano bridge in Apia was officially completed and opened to the public on Tuesday 11th August 2020, constructed with the assistance of the Japanese government which commenced in April 2018. The new bridge is 75 metres long and 1.5 metres higher than the previous bridge which was in danger of extreme floods as climate change became intensified over the years. For me, the creation of the new bridge symbolised a stark warning about the future as pandemics and climate change reinforce each other as an existential threat, particularly for vulnerable people in Pacific countries.

Japanese aid together with aid from other industrialised countries in Sāmoa are part of what Development studies scholar Dr Masami Tsujita calls an “aidscape” where much of Sāmoa’s infrastructure is heavily funded by foreign aid are slowly changing the aesthetic of the local culture in addition to influencing the way Sāmoa elect countries for the United Nations Security Council. “Fanua (Land)” (2020) aims to raise questions about the impact foreign aid projects have on the sustainability of the local environment in Sāmoa, among others, including the introduction of invasive weeds by live stock from abroad overtaking traditional medicinal plants and clearing of lands to accommodate for the already struggling tourism sector at the expense of endangering the local habitat. The absence of people in the *siapo* kimono aims to highlight how earth’s climate and ecosystems are being impacted as a result of human activity.



Figure 7 Phase 3 “Moana (Pacific Ocean)”. 2023. Part of サモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand. © Gui Taccetti

Phase 3 entitled “Moana (Pacific)” (2023) serves as forewarning against the increasing levels of resource extraction including fisheries and seabed mining by foreign powers seeking to affirm their geopolitical dominance across the Pacific Ocean [fig. 7].¹ The surface design of the *siapo* kimonos portrays a chaotic oceanscape with nuclear testing occurring in the background while a series of hands pierce through the mushroom clouds uprooting marine species while deep-sea mining are simultaneously happening in the Pacific. The hands from the sky are loosely inspired by an ancient lore describing the genesis of the Sāmoan word ‘*Pālagi*’ – where Sāmoans upon seeing the first Europeans across the horizon, believed they had pierced (*Pā*) through the sky (*lagi*). In and among the chaos, however, we see a Pacific double hull canoe using traditional navigation methods sailing across the ocean as a symbol of Indigenous resilience while foreign vessels arrive nearby to compete for domination.²

The missile launched from the Japanese submarine (from the *siapo* kimono on the second left) alludes to an incident which occurred on 13th January 1942, where a Japanese submarine surfaced off Tutuila Island between Southworth Point and Fagasa Bay in American Sāmoa. The Japanese submarine fired 15 shells aimed at the U.S. Naval Station in Tutuila Island only for the first shell to fall at the rear of Frank Shimasaki’s store which did not detonate. Ironically, the store was owned by one of Tutuila’s few Japanese residents. The store was closed, as Mr. Shimasaki had been interned as an enemy alien.

¹ <https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement>. This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online and quoting those sources.

² <https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement>. This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online and quoting those sources.



Figure 8 Phase 4 “Taiheyō (Pacific)”. 2023. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand. © Gui Taccetti.

Phase 4 entitled “Taiheyō (Pacific)” (2023) is inspired by my visit to the Spa Resort Hawai’ians in Iwaki city in the Fukushima prefecture in Japan in 2015; and how history of the resort resonated with the 1962 film entitled *King Kong VS Godzilla* [fig. 8].

In 2015, I conducted site visits to Fukushima prefecture, among others, including the Spa Resort Hawai’ians (SRH) – one of Japan’s biggest hot spring park located in Iwaki city. SRH’s marketing campaign which catered towards the local people relied heavily on the aesthetic of Polynesian tourism. SRH was also the venue for the PALM8 Summit (Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting) held in May 2018 chaired by Sāmoa Prime Minister Tuilae’pa Sailele Malieolegaoi, and hosted by Japan Prime Minister Shinto Abe. The PALM Summit is often seen as an extension of Japan’s history of colonial and imperial expansion across the Pacific.

The ongoing diplomatic relationship between Japan and the Pacific is ironically played out in the popular Japanese sci-fi film entitled *King Kong VS Godzilla* (1962) directed by Ishiro Honda, which portrays the Pacific through a colonial lens. In the film, a Japanese corporation called the ‘Pacific pharmaceuticals’ kidnaps King Kong from Farou Island – a fictitious Island in the Pacific and transported to Japan, where King Kong escapes from captivity and battles recently released Godzilla, a prehistoric sea monster empowered by nuclear radiation from an American submarine. The film also features Japanese actors brown-faced as Pacific people worshipping King Kong as a god. During their fierce battle in Japan, King Kong and Godzilla destroy Atami Castle and both fall off a cliff together into the Pacific Ocean. After an underwater battle, only King Kong resurfaces, and swim towards his Island home. There is no sign of Godzilla, but the Japan self-defence forces speculates that it may have survived.

Symbolically, Godzilla represents a powerful alliance between Japan and US which saw US building nuclear powerplants across Japan as a show of technological advancement against King Kong representing the Pacific as ‘the other’ being less advanced. However, Phase 4 sub-theme

entitled “Taiheiyō (Pacific)” (2023) reframes the film’s fictional plot by making reference to the reality of nuclear waste – created as a result of Japan/US alliance – leaking into the Pacific Ocean from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi power plant in 2011; thus impacting the ecology, marine life and fisheries that Japan and the Pacific countries both rely on for food security. This paradoxical relationship alludes to the late Teresia Teaiwa’s definition of “militourism” as a “phenomenon by which a military or paramilitary force ensures the running of a tourist industry, and that same tourist industry masks the military force behind it”.



Figure 9 Phase 5 “Tūli’s Flight”, 2023. Part of *サーモアのうた (Sāmoa no uta) A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand. © Gui Taccetti

Phase 5 entitled “Tūli’s Flight” that is currently in production will be presented jointly as a solo exhibition held at Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand opening on the 1st of December 2023 [fig. 9].

Environmental colonialism disguised as foreign diplomacy is explored in my single channel video work entitled *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) which juxtaposes video footage of environments filmed between Sāmoa and the Netherlands. The right side of the screen features a handheld video footage capturing Tropical Cyclone Gita and its chaotic aftermath filmed in Upolu Island, Sāmoa in 2018; while the left side of the screen features a video footage of gentle smoke coming out of a factory chimney filmed during my fellowship hosted by the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands in 2019. While Sāmoa in the Pacific and the Netherlands in Europe are geographically distant, they are both connected by a shared global ecosystem albeit with excessive levels of carbon emissions by the latter that’s triggering global warming and climate change.

The Cambridge dictionary defines *Smoke and Mirrors* as “intended to make you believe that something is being done or is true, when it is not”. The video work serves as a metaphor where the title alludes to how foreign aid often serves as a smoke screen to conceal greater climate impacts experienced by low and middle income countries than richer counterparts, informed by a history of imperialism and colonialism that has devastated biodiversity therefore impacting people’s livelihood and their close dependence on thriving ecosystems.



Figure 10a-e Stills from *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) single channel video work by Yuki Kihara

Smoke and Mirrors (2023) serves as a clarion call to decolonise our perceptions about the natural environment and to partake of a richer and more equitable exchange between people and places.³

Conclusion

The works featured in my chapter allude to the Sāmoan Indigenous reference of *Vā fealoa'i* by shedding light on space that nurtures the relationship between people; and between people and nature including the vast *Moana* that connects us all. They also explore the nuances between gender, race, climate change and representation and their intersectionality that often compound each other to marginalise Indigenous peoples and call to action against government agencies for the inclusion of *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama* experiences and perspectives into climate change policies. サモアのうた *Sāmoa no uta* (*A Song About Sāmoa*) (2019-23) series illustrates the stories hidden in the space-between the geo-political borders of Japan and the Pacific and specifically Sāmoa through a process of cultural fusion partly informed by my ancestral ties and interrogates Japan's occupation of the Pacific from an Indigenous perspective. *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) serves as a metaphor to highlight environmental colonialism disguised as foreign diplomacy. It is my hope that Talanoa Forum can help shed light on lesser known stories about the *Moana*, while sparking dialogue about the origins of current challenges, and potential ways to overcome them.

³ <https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement>. This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online and quoting those sources.

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