

The complexity of being woven together: A microhistory of Talua Ministry Training Centre

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Introduction

This paper will use the archives of the Presbyterian Research Centre to analyse the complexity of being woven together as it relates to theological education in Vanuatu. It is impossible to appreciate Christianity in the Pacific, and development in Vanuatu, without considering theological education. “Theological Education ... is not foreign, neither was it imposed, but it was born out of desire and necessity.”¹

Local desire

The first theological college, Ministry Training Centre, in Aname, Aneityum, in recognition of the need for indigenous leadership. In 1895, Tangoa Training Institution aimed for equality, contextualisation and local agency. A third Presbyterian institution, Aulua Training College was established in 1977. Again, local agency is central. “The training must take “place within the culture and life of the people.”

A fourth College, Talua is an amalgam of the second - **Tangoa** - and third – **Aulua** - Colleges. Formed in 1988, it committed itself to values of being bilingual, ecumenical, self-supporting.

A Pacific frame

A genuinely Pacific frame is provided by Charles Forman, who in two papers on theological education in the Pacific outlined what I will call a **historic** model and a **recent** model.

	Historic - “Pacific style” theological education	Recent – “theological schools in the true sense”
Location	Close to villages. Students connected to familial networks.	Major centres. Results in travel and accommodation costs. Students removed from familial networks.
Curriculum	Taught in vernacular – “theology ... needs to be in touch with the deepest feelings of the student.” ² Theology. Reading and writing. Gardening ie village-sustaining	Taught in English. Theology Sociology Theoretical frames allow critique. Greater library resources, but of an “alien” tongue. International higher education benchmarking.
Study requirements	Low pre- requisites Less time for study, due to practical	Higher pre-requisites. ⁴ More time, due to less practical requirements.

¹ Fiama Rakau, *From Aname to Talua. A Brief Survey of Theological Education in Vanuatu*, 1.

² Forman, 165.

² Forman, 165.

	gardening requirements. ³	
Economic	Cheaper, both in staff and by ensuring student support.	Requires significant external funding, for staff and for student support. ⁵
Educational	Theological colleges are the main educational option, so gained the most capable students	More educational options, so theological colleges are competing for students
Demographics	Average age 40	Younger cohort in twenties.
Teacher	One teacher	Team, often with a “high degree of dependence on foreign personnel.” ⁶
Summary: Development analysis	Localised in “heart language”; leaders “handle a bush knife.”	Further from culture, encouraging critical reflection and freedom from tradition. More costly.

This table enables us to appreciate the complexity of development when it comes to theological education. The historic model is more localised in contextual practise. It provides a “heart language” education, keeps theology within village life and culture and ensures that after training, leaders can still “handle a bush knife.”⁷ In the new model, the search for enhanced (Western) standards increases costs and abstracts theological students from context. This enhances intellectual reflection freed from tribal elders, yet produced students who “cannot handle a bush knife.”⁸ Such are the complexities of development.

Application to Talua

Applying Forman’s model to Talua, we find a blend of **historic** and **new**.

	Talua
Location	New
Curriculum	Historic and new
Study	Historic and new
Economic	Historic
Educational	New
Demographics	New

Talua has the advantage of remaining close to the culture, yet finds itself facing educational limits. To raise educational standards requires increased

⁴ “The schools increasingly insisted on entrance examinations and moved toward higher educational standards for admission.” Forman, 161

³ “here were classes in the morning and gardening in the afternoon.” Forman, 155.

⁵ “This has been made possible for the theological schools only because many churches, recognizing the need for more highly trained men, have been willing to contribute food and funds to relieve the theological students of the necessity for manual work.” Forman 165.

⁶ Forman, 162.

⁷ “After an academic training only at Onesua [High School] the pupils cannot cope with the village situation, they cannot handle a bush knife, gardening is difficult and strange” Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, Newsletter No. 21, March 1989, 1.

⁸ Ibid, 1.

capacity, which is difficult given the culture and economy of Vanuatu, where many people still live a largely subsistence lifestyle.

Shifting partners

The opening of Talua, in 1988, included representatives from denominations in Australia and New Zealand.⁹ Each can be theorized as an actor, shaping Talua. This has complexified the development of Talua. If we had time, we would develop this under two headings: gender and custom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have outlined how theological education in Vanuatu was driven, from the beginning, by a vision for local agency. The aims - for equality and contextualisation in 1895 - and self-help in 1977 were extraordinary. Theological education played a key role in developing leadership that contributed significantly to Vanuatu's independence. However, since the 1960's, theological education in the Pacific has been complexified, by changing modes of theological education, shifting dynamics with partner agencies and the fragility of Pacific economics. Talua is neither **historic** nor **recent**. Is the Ni-Van desire for local agency unrealistic in today's globalised world? Or, might the birth of digital technologies provide ways for Colleges to remain local, affirm their distinctives, yet share resources with other indigenous theological providers? In other words, using the words with which we began: Can "Theological Education ... [be] not foreign, [nor] imposed."

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⁹ Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, the Uniting Church in Australia, Presbyterian Church of Australia.

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