

## COMMUNITY VOICE

### The conference as feast

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The first known use of the term ‘conference’ was in 1572. It is an English term borrowed from Middle French and Medieval Latin with derived meanings that include contribution, discussion and a sense of bringing together, to which the notion of exchanging opinions became later added (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The term ‘feast’ was first recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and includes an intriguing mix of solemnity and celebration, bringing together ideas that stem from the sacredness of the temple and the happy idea of a holiday (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), echoing a sense of holiness—a day of no routine work in which reflection on higher powers and the meanings of life have space. The conference, when imagined and executed as a feast in our Oceania region, brings together interaction, debate, celebration and the sacredness that derives from a consciousness of living under a shared sky and surrounded by a shared ocean, both of which speak of greater powers than our own, reminding us of our responsibilities to the world and each other.

The OCIES 2023 Conference held at Fiji National University’s Natabua Campus, Lautoka, was called as a feast. Fiji is part of Melanesia, and Melanesian feasts have their own characteristics and sequential structures. Who is involved and their roles are important determinants in Melanesian feasts. These factors affect what the feast will look like. Not all feasts involve the eating of food. Some mortuary feasts, for example, are not centred on food consumption. However, even mortuary feasts involve distribution and exchange (Foster, 1990). The conference as feast provides a focus on wealth, distribution and connection.

Not everyone can call a Melanesian feast, and those invited always want to know, ‘Whose feast is this?’ A feast-caller needs status so their group’s leaders, relatives and those with whom they have alliances will loyally support and attend. A feast may be a public event, but local, contextual and personal relational webs act as the foundation, providing appropriate goods and willing hands, hearts and minds to enact the call. The OCIES 2023 conference was a feast called through an alliance of Associate Professor Kabini Sanga of Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington and solo Co-president of OCIES, and Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Dean of Education and Humanities, Fiji National University and longstanding OCIES member. The alliance brought international and Fijian teams together to provide intellectual and programme leadership, physical and spiritual nourishment, hospitality and opportunity for participants from far and wide.

In egalitarian cultures, leadership is not understood as the prerogative of a supreme leader. A feast is a loosely coupled activity where specific people exercise control over their areas of responsibility. Those charged with pig distribution do not wait for permission but rely on their knowledge of context and negotiation to deal with unforeseen problems. They know they are the fitting people to do their set activity, and they act and control events within a given framework and understanding. Once the frame is set, conversations are for information-giving, not decision-making. The public nature of the event means the credibility of the whole community is at stake—to be reduced or enhanced depending

on the contribution of those involved. In the conference as a feast, roles such as identifying and garlanding esteemed visitors, chairing parallel sessions, handing over the OCIES *vaka*, organising food and drink, and caring for strangers are to be accomplished to the best of one's ability. The staff of Fiji National University did all of these tasks well.

Because a feast is an open invitational event, one can never be sure who will arrive. Responsiveness is, therefore, a key skill that ensures that a feast is a time of affirmation and reaffirmation. Leaders of *mana* (potency, honour) must ensure that the *mana* of feast-goers is protected and enhanced. Attention to how people and things are named, how food is served, and the many ways nurture is provided—all of these contribute to a *mana* economy. Affirmation comes through the way one is treated. Exercising care for others whose value systems and, therefore, needs are outside of conference conventions makes feasting an effective lens for conferencing. The conference as feast means relationship development is paramount, and appreciation for the content of the conference is a matter of appreciating those who bring it as a gift.

Leadership in Melanesia, as elsewhere in Oceania, involves service. In OCIES, we serve our elders by honouring them and ensuring they have a platform to speak and recognition for their contributions. We embrace our young ones through means such as the 'New and Emerging Researchers of Oceania' mentoring sessions. We welcome strangers through invitation and, in some cases, financial support, enabling them to become friends. We make intergenerational conversations possible so that change and continuity remain well-balanced. And we create spaces for disparate people to come together to spark new ideas, alliances and opportunities. In the conference as a feast, intellectual attention and critique takes place in a wholesome, integrated environment where the service ethic enables the whole to be greater than the parts.

This community voice contribution has honoured the Conference Community. We conclude with some voices from that community:

Participating in the 50th Annual OCIES Conference held in Lautoka, Fiji, proved to be an invaluable experience in my capacity as a teacher-researcher. This conference afforded me the opportunity to forge collaborative connections with fellow researchers from the Pacific region, which, in turn, enriched my capacity for critical thinking and scholarly writing. Through active engagement in discussions and the presentation of my research, I not only garnered recognition for my contributions but also received constructive feedback from esteemed peers within the field of education. It fostered an environment conducive to knowledge exchange and personal growth.

This was not a conference of academics, rather a family reunion reigniting the flames of ancient oceanic intellectual traditions. These flames shed light on our contemporary and future challenges and warmed the weary hearts of educational navigators in the wake of a tumultuous global pandemic.

In these accounts, celebration and discussion go hand-in-hand under Oceania skies, OCIES is a family, and the conference as feast has done its relational work leaving participants satisfied but with a lasting taste that encourages.

## REFERENCES

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