

## Eve, the Serpent, and a Samoan Love Story: A Fāgogo Reading of Genesis 3:1-19 and Its Implications for Animal Studies

### Books & Culture

Brian F. Kolia, *University of Divinity (Australia)*

*Editor's Note: Regular readers of the Bible & Critical Theory journal are aware that the "Books & Culture" essay in the Review section of each issue takes on a complex cultural item or process not typically treated in scholarly book reviews and reads it through the lens of biblical text and criticism (particularly as mediated via critical theory). Previous essays have focused on British politics, zombies, literary fiction, comic books, and the Museum of the Bible. This issue's essay intentionally complicates our idea of both "book" and "culture" (and, to a degree, theory, in this case, Animal Studies), as well as moving attention away from US and European cultural productions by offering a re-reading of Genesis 3 from the perspective of Samoan oral folk lore. RS*

Picture this: It is night-time, and the owls are hooting from a distance as you are sitting in a traditional Samoan Fale—an open house consisting of a thatched roof held up by strong wooden poles that allows the cool Oceanic breeze to pass. You have just finished supper, and now you are relaxing, awaiting a story known as Fāgogo. Fāgogo is the art of Samoan storytelling that involves a space where spirits roam and animals possess human-like qualities, a space where animals have conversations with humans and, in some stories, have relations with humans.

Such ancient tales spring to life through talanoa. Talanoa is a common term in Pasefika to denote conversation, yet it is more than conversation; as Jione Havea states, "Talanoa is the confluence of three things: story, telling and conversation. Talanoa is not story without telling and conversation, telling without story and conversation, or conversation without telling and story. Talanoa is all three—story, telling, conversation—as one" (2014, 210). Talanoa and fāgogo go together because fāgogo emulates the art of talanoa as the storyteller is careful and intentional in her use of language to weave together a magical description of the world of the story, not only to tell the story but to be persuasive in doing so.

As a method, I propose that, in reading, we do not lose the magic of storytelling and see the intent of the story. In other words, to read in order to understand that stories are telling truths as opposed to telling *the* Truth. Stories communicate values and morals, which is also important in Fāgogo. We must then assume the role of listener and faalogo ("hear") the story as though one of our elders was narrating it. This will act as a hermeneutical framework for my re-reading of the story of Eve and the Serpent in Gen. 3:1-19 in order to provide an alternative reading that sees the tale in Genesis as a love story in light of a well-known Samoan tale known as "Sina and the Tuna ('eel')."

## Hearing the Fāgogo of the Story-Teller: Decolonizing Non-Indigenous Thought

Is there an oral aspect to Gen. 3:1-19? Can we “hear” it? In order to hear something, we need something to be said or read aloud. The word faalogo is derived from the word logo, which means “to alert,” that is, to alert someone of news. The prefix faa-intensifies the action. So, upon the deliverance of such news to a person, the act of alerting is intensified through hearing or “faalogo.”

Before I progress, it should be made apparent (if not already) that the fāgogo is indigenous to the Samoan people. I say this because as Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, Western methodologies do not apply all that well to indigenous communities (Smith 2012). The historical and philosophical questions promoted by Western methodology do not resonate with indigenous beliefs and understanding (Kolone-Collins 2010).

So that the story in Genesis 3 can find resonance with Samoan listeners, and perhaps find room for other indigenous readers, in order to find resonance with the biblical stories, I draw upon a well-known fāgogo (“Sina and the Tuna”), a fāgogo that, like Genesis 3, tells of a rendezvous with a serpent. In this story, the human does not rule over the animal, but, rather, they speak and reason together as fellow creatures.

### Fāgogo as Hermeneutical Lens

It is imperative that, prior to re-reading Genesis 3, the fāgogo hermeneutical lens with which I re-read the text is outlined and explained. Fāgogo is from a Samoan perspective, and as such, I wish to clarify my perspective of reading.

Fāgogo implies that the text is a tala. The word “tala” means story or tale, but in the Samoan language certain words can take on both a verbal and a nominal sense. Tala in its verbal sense means “to open” or “to unpack,” as though the text is a package needing unpacking. So when fāgogo is told, it is a package layered with meanings that need to be tala—unpacked, unfolded. The process of tala does not mean discarding the packaging, but, like the presentation of an ie toga (a traditional Samoan “fine mat”), tala denotes the action of opening up—that is, to open so that the whole can be seen in its complete state. The packaging is therefore part of the product. This is to expose the tala in order to give the storyteller an opportunity to tell the whole story and for the audience to hear the whole story.

More importantly, fāgogo is postcolonial, as it gives indigenous readers the opportunity to read the story in light of their own context, to highlight oppressive and colonizing voices, and thus to raise their own questions of the text. The hope is that indigenous readers can locate the liberating message in the text.

### The Fāgogo of Eve and the Serpent

In this reading, I contend that the text (tala) has multiple layers that need to be opened (tala). On opening up, one cannot ignore the encounter between Eve and the serpent. Such an encounter is intriguing from a Samoan perspective because it echoes the fāgogo of “Sina and the Tuna.” This is a love story, an encounter between the beautiful Samoan girl Sina, who is seduced by a friendly eel. Before we continue, I must tell you the fāgogo of Sina and the eel (or the Sina fāgogo).

There are many versions of the tale, not only across the isles of Polynesia, but also in Samoa.<sup>1</sup> I will tell the version from the village of Matāvai on the Samoan island of Savaii since it is claimed that the first encounter between Sina and the eel occurred at the rock pool there that is known as Mata o le Alelo (“Eye of the Demon”).

In ancient times, there was a beautiful taupou,<sup>2</sup> named Sina, from the Samoan village of Matāvai. Word of her beauty travelled far which attracted a young man from one of the neighbouring islands. This young man was so fond of her beauty that he wanted to be with her every day. Knowing that she would often come to the village rock pool to bathe, the young man turned into an eel and lived there so that he could see her. Sina, as a result, did not fear the eel and would meet with him every time she went to bathe. However, as the eel grew fonder of Sina, Sina began to fear the eel and was overwhelmed by his obsession. The eel continually urged Sina to live with him, but Sina found the request impossible and left him. Hurt by Sina’s absence, the eel became depressed and sought death as his only option since he could no longer be with Sina. But, before his death, he gave his final request to Sina: that upon his death, he wanted her to bury his head. From his head, a tree would grow with fruit that will feed Sina and her children. It was his dying act of love for Sina. Sina granted the request and, as a result, the coconut tree was born. Every time you husk a coconut, the coconut resembles the face of the eel whose heart was broken by the love of his life.

The main agenda of the Sina fāgogo is etiologic; it is a fāgogo told to explain the origins of the coconut tree. Yet it is also a love fāgogo—a rendezvous between two lovers of different worlds, a forbidden love. This is what we view when we tala the fāgogo: We have a view of an etiological fāgogo, but also a fāgogo of love. In the same spirit, I will seek to tala (open) the Genesis story of Eve and the serpent, to view the story in its totality, like viewing an ie toga in whole. As such, I want to explore the themes from the Sina fāgogo which can also be heard in the Genesis story. Specifically, I wish to highlight seduction, agency, and the significance of fruit. I will close with a discussion of the implications of this reading for Animal Studies.

**Seduction:** The idea of seduction in Genesis 3 is not new (Ellens 2006, 55). The motive behind the serpent’s seduction of Eve is quite commonly associated with the temptation of the fruit. However, I find that, like the eel, the serpent is rather interested in the woman, including the woman’s nudity. In 3:1, the Hebrew word used to describe the serpent is ‘arum which means “shrewd,” yet it sounds very similar to erom, the word for “naked” (Wenham 1987, 72). Ironically, this is how Adam and Even end up; as Gordon Wenham writes: “They will seek themselves to be shrewd (cf. 3:6) but will discover that they are ‘nude’ (3:7, 10)” (1987, 72). The question that arises from the Sina fāgogo is why the man would turn into an eel. The eel in Samoan mythology is a phallic symbol, so its sexual

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, in Samoa there is an expression “e tala lasi Samoa” which translates “there are many versions in Samoa.” The point of this expression is that the stories and legends of Samoa all have some connection to particular villages and, depending on which village you consult, you are bound to receive a different version. No one village can claim to own a legend if it is connected to multiple villages.

<sup>2</sup> Taupou is the name given to the high chief’s daughter, who under Samoan custom must be a virgin.

connotations are obvious. J. Harold Ellens argues that serpents were also a phallic symbol (Ellens 2006, 55). However, I contend that taking the form of an eel meant that there was room for exploitation (or perhaps *sexploitation!*). Knowing that Sina would come down to the rock pool, it was the perfect place to gaze on Sina.

So the serpent, who was the shrewdest of the animal kingdom, was able to move about freely and admire Eve. His movements and his access to Eve demonstrate this. Eve was nude, a fact that the serpent had known all along. But Eve may have been mesmerized by the serpent's seduction, just as Sina had been initially dazzled by the eel. Yet when Eve's eyes were opened (Gen. 3:7), she realized she was nude. This part of the story reads like a bitter end, but I can hear the echoes of the Sina fāgogo here as Eve realizes her nakedness. It is the unravelling of the serpent's request to Eve. The serpent tells Eve in v. 5 that she and her husband will become like gods. As seduction, it was an invitation for Eve to come into the serpent's world: the world of knowing good from evil, knowing right from wrong, the world of gods! Eve was seduced to the point that not only did she eat the fruit, she also seduced Adam. This seduction, which proved too much for Sina, caused Eve's downfall. In both cases, the seduction was overwhelming, and in both cases, it is covered up; Sina leaves the rock pool never to return, while Eve sews together fig leaves to hide her nakedness.

**Agency:** Eve has often been portrayed as the culprit in the Fall (Bakhos 2012, 615). Yet, like Sina, Eve is taupou since she is also a daughter of the high chief (i.e. YHWH). As taupou, she is given stature as a leader. She may not have made the best decision, but she did *make* the decision. The onus and the pressure of being a decision-maker is usually afforded to men in the biblical narrative. Eve, the taupou, turns the tide against such misogynist attitudes, as she becomes the commander of her destiny. Eve is a virgin, but a powerful virgin: a taupou!

**Fruit:** The echoes of the Sina fāgogo continue to vibrate in Genesis 3 when Eve eats the fruit. The image of Sina drinking from the coconut is rather sexual, when considering the appearance of the coconut. The coconut is depicted as the head of the eel, with its two eyes and mouth. When Sina's lips are planted on the coconut for a drink, it is as though Sina is kissing the eel and enjoying its juices. It is not known what sort of fruit Eve ate, but the image of Sina drinking the coconut may add an element of sensuality to Eve's eating of the fruit for Samoan (and island) readers, or other coconut lovers. The seduction by the serpent was sure to have an effect on Eve's senses and, as a result, she enjoyed the fruit so much that she was willing to seduce her husband into eating it also.

## Implications for Animal Studies

Fāgogo tells the story of the āiga ("family," "clan") and its predecessors and its indigenous religion. Each āiga worshipped a family god, yet they did not worship idols. Ancient Samoans believed in the immortality of the soul and believed the gods had reincarnated as elements of the earth and sea, particularly its sea and land animals. Efi, a former Head of State for Samoa but also a well-respected custodian of Samoan mythology and indigenous knowledge, explains for example the significance of the fish species, through a story from the village

of Fagafau. One of its head fishermen in ancient times was a man named Pupu Luki who went one afternoon to fish for naiufi (one type of shark). Efi tells that:

[T]he village would get excited at the prospect of a good catch. Prayer vigils would be held by his family during the night to ask the gods for protection over Pupu and his companion. Fishing was not perceived as an exercise in luring, trapping and killing mercilessly, but of inviting the fish to honour the village chief's mana by being an equal adversary and then ultimately by gifting himself to the chief to help bolster or sustain the chief's status. It is believed that the naiufi are a special gift, a direct endowment from Tagaloa [the creator god of the Samoans]. This is evidenced in the honorific term for sacred fish, which is *tamasoaalii* (*tama soa* meaning aide to; *ali'i* meaning chief): God Tagaloa's gift was for these sacred fish to become aide to the chief (Efi 2014, 46).

Naiufi and fish were not primarily food in indigenous understanding, they were gods, adversaries, chiefs. They were respected as equals and were considered sacred. This is evidenced by the name given to the turtle, which is *i'a sã* (*i'a* meaning fish, and *sã* meaning sacred or holy).<sup>3</sup> Yet, as mystical as the *fãgogo* world is, they tell a truth, and that truth was that animals were given respect (*fa'aaloalo*) as chiefs, gods, and as equals to humans. Reading the story of Eve and the serpent as a *fãgogo* is therefore a retrieval of those ancient sentiments towards animals and embrace of the truth that is being told. A *fãgogo* reading, therefore, has significant implications for Animal Studies. I would like to focus on two important implications this *fãgogo* reading has for Animal Studies and the Bible.

First, the story of Sina and the eel exemplifies the equal status of species in traditional Samoan understanding, as the eel's rendezvous with Sina demonstrates. Sina and the eel converse without any objection from the village, which is significant given the village regulates any inappropriate behaviour. The conversation, then, between Sina and the eel is never deemed inappropriate, thus blurring out any boundaries between species. Also, in the *Matãvai* version of the story, it was the eel's own decision to end his life since he could no longer bear the thought of being away from his love, Sina. As such, Eve and the serpent could also be perceived as equals. They converse without objection and learn from one another. Ironically, the serpent acts more on his intuition than Eve, and becomes a model of wisdom for Eve (Towner 2001, 43). Eve is so absolutely smitten by the serpent's wisdom that she eventually eats the forbidden fruit and her eyes are opened (Gen. 3:7).

Second, the *fãgogo* gives a voice to the Other, i.e. the animal Other. The animal Other speaks, and speaks with love, and also with wisdom. Contrary to Emanuel Levinas's doubts about whether or not a snake has a face (Wright, Hughes, and Ainley 1988, 171-72), in *fãgogo* the animal Other has a face, and in Samoan folklore that face must parallel immortality of the soul, because, as

---

<sup>3</sup> In Samoan folklore, the turtle was deemed *sã* (sacred) because of its power in saving fishermen who were lost at sea. In modern times, the fishing of the *i'a sã* is largely forbidden, as most villages in tandem with the Samoan government, have conservation projects for the turtle.



the eel dies, its face lives on through the coconut. This reinforces the point that the serpent was not Satan, but was just more “shrewd” (‘ārûm) than all the other creatures in the Garden (Gen. 3:1). More significantly, the serpent was a part of the environmental āiga who also had a face that was acknowledged by the human Eve in conversation. The Samoan word for respect is fa’aaloalo and its root word is alo which means “face.” This means that fa’aaloalo has the sense of being face to face with the Other (Va’ai 2006, 168-69). Eve conversed face to face with the serpent; she gave the serpent fa’aaloalo.

### **Conclusion: Gen. 3 as Fāgogo**

The echoes of the Sina fāgogo ripple through Genesis 3 and, since a fāgogo is the form of storytelling for island natives, the story of Eve and the serpent, from an island perspective, can be seen as a fāgogo. From a fāgogo perspective, the Genesis story is macroscopic and liberating.

First, Islanders are connected by the ocean. As Epeli Hau’ofa recognized, the ocean is a bridge-way between islands, as opposed to a boundary. Hau’ofa argues that our island ancestors “did not conceive of their world in microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it” (Hau’ofa 2008, 31). Colonial attitudes have long caused islanders to believe in their tiny existence, as just a “dot on the map.” Yet fāgogo manifests Hau’ofa’s contention, and this is my contention also. When reading Genesis 3 from a fāgogo perspective, the Eden narrative is therefore also macroscopic in the sense that, as an alternative to it being a story that takes place in a garden, the encounter between Eve and the serpent can be seen as a crossing of boundaries between species.

Second, fāgogo is liberating. It is liberating for the Other, yet not just the human Other (as Derrida 2008, 108, insists, critiquing Levinas), but inclusive of all creatures. As an islander, I am greatly sympathetic to the animal Other. In recent times, the sacred status of animals has been replaced by mistreatment, exploitation, and violation. This is the reality that lies beneath the fāgogo: the reality of creatures who were once spoken of as equals to humans, carrying the immortal spirit of the ancient gods. Today, the ancient stories are being whispered as animals are being reduced to Others for whom humane ethics do not apply. So, when I speak of the animal Other, I am speaking of a fellow species in the environmental aiga who must be respected. They are a symbol of love, wisdom, and immortality. This is the call of indigenous readers who see animals being reduced to culprits, scapegoats, and food: for the animal Other to be given the respect and status they deserve.

Finally, tala-ing up stories enables us to see the whole *tala* in all its complexity, and, as we see with the story of Eve and the serpent, there is more to it than just an aetiology explaining “how the first human couple came to be alienated from the irenic conditions of the Garden of Eden” (Brett 2000, 32). What we see and hear are the ripples of the fāgogo illuminating other layers of the Genesis narrative that tend to be discarded. The effort of this fāgogo reading is a reclaiming of those layers to discover alternative readings of the tala (story), and these readings *tala* (open up) the world of the text to macroscopic proportions, which can be both liberating and magical, but at the same time, tragic.

## References

- Aichele, George, Fred W. Burnett, Robert M. Fowler, David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Wilhelm Wuellner. (The Bible and Culture Collective). 1995. *The Postmodern Bible*. Edited by Elizabeth A. Castelli, Stephen D. Moore, Gary A. Phillips and Regina M. Schwartz. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bakhos, Carol. 2012. "Genesis, the Qur'ān and Islamic Interpretation." In *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, edited by Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen, 607-34. Leiden: Brill.
- Brett, Mark G. 2000. *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Edited by Marie-Louise Mallet. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Efi, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese. 2002. "More on Nuance, Meaning and Metaphor." Keynote Speech at the Pacific Fono: Moving Ahead Together. Pataka Museum, Porirua NZ: Capital Coast District Health Board.
- Efi, Tui Tupua Tamasese. 2014. "Whispers and Vanities in Samoan Indigenous Religious Culture." In *Whispers and Vanities: Samoan Indigenous Knowledge and Religion*, edited by Tamasailau M. Suaalii-Sauni, Maualaiva Albert Wendt, Vitolia Mo'a, Naomi Fuamatu, Upolu Luma Va'ai, Reina Whitiri, and Stephen L. Filipino, 37-76. Wellington: Huia Publishers.
- Ellens, J. Harold. 2006. *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*. London: Praeger.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. 2008. *We are the Ocean: Selected Works*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Havea, Jione. 2014. "Bare Feet Welcome: Redeemer Xs Moses @ Enaim." In *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*, edited by Jione Havea, David J. Neville, and Elaine M. Wainwright, 209-22. Semeia Studies 75. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Mettinger, Tryggve, N. D. 2007. *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2-3*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Kolone-Collins, Sueala. 2010. "Fagogo: "Ua Molimea Manusina": A Qualitative Study of the Pedagogical Significance of Fagogo-Samoan Stories at Night-for the Education of Samoan Children." Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.
- Towner, W. Sibley. 2012. *Genesis*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Va'ai, Upolu Lumā. 2006. "Faaaloalo: A Theological Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Trinity from a Samoan Perspective," Ph.D. Dissertation, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Wenham, Gordon J. 1987. *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary 1. Dallas: Word Books.
-

Wright, Tamra, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainley. 1988. "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas." In *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, 171-84. London: Routledge.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)