



REFLECTION ARTICLE

Wilful Ignorance, Invisibilisation and Coloniality: A Pacific Practitioner's Reflection on the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration

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Abstract

This reflection critiques the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration from a Pacific practitioner's perspective, exposing how coloniality persists through exclusion, silencing, and symbolic extraction. It situates the Declaration within a broader pattern of wilful ignorance and invisibilisation that has long undermined Pacific recordkeeping and information governance. Drawing on lived experience and regional data gaps, it links archival neglect to human harm, gendered devaluation, and weakened regional solidarity. Ultimately, it argues that true decolonisation requires rebuilding Pacific-led recordkeeping systems and restoring genuine partnerships, where solidarity is measured not by rhetoric but by whether the systems we create safeguard Pacific lives and dignity.

Keywords: *Pacific archives; recordkeeping; coloniality; invisibilisation; Indigenous data sovereignty; information governance; decolonisation*

I write this from a place of both immersion and disquiet, as a Pacific practitioner who has lived through the cycles of enthusiasm and neglect that shape our regional recordkeeping landscape. My reflections are necessarily entangled with my own complicity and frustration. I've been both a participant in and a witness to the promise of solidarity and the silence of exclusion, the celebration of indigeneity and the belittlement via tokenisation and performative acknowledgement.

I want to see the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration as progress, as a shining beacon to guide us to safe and prosperous waters. But every time I look at it I see and feel coloniality using indigeneity. An aspirational and well-meaning declaration draped in the language of inclusion although formed through exclusion, and ceremonially launched with symbolic extraction. It stands apart from Pacific Island realities, disconnected from our experiences. In doing so, it ignores our challenges and compounds them as part of a process, which projects harmful hierarchies we thought and hoped had long gone. I am continually forced to face the question: How do we give life to a finely crafted declaration that appeals to

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our conscience, even when it overlooks our needs and did not properly include us in its creation?

This reflection is my attempt to grapple with that tension; to think through what the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration means when refracted through the lived conditions of Pacific recordkeeping, where colonial legacies compound a self-inflicted wilful ignorance causing harm to Pacific peoples, and how we might find ways to bring much-needed change.

When records fail, people die

A few years ago, the mother of someone dear to me became unwell. Her doctor suspected breast cancer and recommended surgery, but needed test results to confirm. What followed was a deeply frustrating and painful delay caused by poor recordkeeping. For almost 2 years, she returned to the hospital three times for blood tests. Each time, the results were lost. As her condition worsened, and with no diagnostic clarity, the doctor eventually said, ‘Let’s just go ahead with the surgery’.

Thankfully, she survived the surgery. But not long after, she passed away. The ordeal caused her and her loved ones deep pain and lingering anger. Why did she have to suffer the worsening of her condition because of a failure in care? Why did the system amplify her struggle instead of easing it? And the most haunting question of all: Did she have to die? If the records she needed had not been lost, twice, and she had received timely surgery, might she still be here today, cherishing her grandchildren and watching them grow?

Her doctor was also constrained by the system’s failures. Given the ethical imperative of the Hippocratic Oath to ‘do no harm’, we must consider the emotional and professional strain of repeatedly ordering blood tests for a patient whose condition was visibly worsening. Deprived of essential diagnostic data, how could he reasonably fulfill his duties? The system demanded professional standards without providing the tools required to meet them.

When records become weapons

In the lead-up to Fiji’s 2022 general elections, the FijiFirst Government under Frank Bainimarama and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum passed the 2021 Electoral Registration of Voters Amendment Bill. This law required all eligible citizens to register to vote using the exact name on their birth certificate. Political observers viewed this move as a deliberate attempt to disenfranchise indigenous Fijians.

But the law’s impact extended beyond ethnicity, disproportionately affecting married women. To retain their right to vote, many were forced to undergo the costly and humiliating process of legally altering their birth certificate to reflect their married name – as if they had been born married, erasing the lives they lived before. The policy sent a troubling message: that their identity was incomplete without marriage, that they didn’t matter until they got married.¹

When data are suppressed, inequality grows

For over a decade, the same government collected ethnically disaggregated data while preventing its public release. Officials justified this policy by claiming ethnicity statistics were divisive and incompatible with ‘common and equal citizenry’.² In practice, it operated as a mechanism of control. Suppressing ethnic data did not eliminate inequality, it removed the

evidence needed to track how disparities were changing and where they were intensifying. National averages were used to claim progress while disaggregated patterns essential for clarity and accountability remained hidden.³

Research by Fiji scholar Mere Nailatikau (2024) shows that ethnic disparities in education, employment, and home ownership persisted throughout the 2006–2022 ban period, with some gaps slowing in improvement or widening. By blocking access to ethnicity-based statistics, the government insulated itself from scrutiny and prevented independent assessment to gauge if policy gains were equitably distributed. What cannot be publicly shared, cannot be publicly examined or contested.⁴ Data suppression thus reshaped collective understanding, allowing political narratives of equality and meritocracy to stand largely unchallenged by statistical evidence; and in the face of a very different lived reality for a growing portion of the population, namely Fiji's indigenous people.

The abuse of power became explicit in 2021 when the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBS) released Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) tables disaggregated by ethnicity and religion. The figures upset the government's narrative of race-neutral progress. Within days, FBS CEO Kemueli Naiqama was dismissed.⁵ Naiqama publicly defended the survey as an 'honest snapshot' of Fiji's poverty situation,⁶ while civil society organisations and regional observers described the dismissal as politically motivated, raising serious concerns about the independence of Fiji's statistical system.⁷

By punishing the release of disaggregated results the state sent a clear message: evidence contradicting official narratives carries consequences. This suppression dispossessed the public of data they owned, forced researchers to rely on overseas repositories to access Fiji's own census microdata, and transformed recordkeeping from a public good into an instrument of political control.⁸

The Declaration's blind spot

These examples demonstrate a core mismatch between the Declaration and Pacific island reality: the presumption of stable archival infrastructures and a sound wider information governance environment. Where the Declaration calls for recordkeeping authorities to incorporate indigenous ways of knowing and being, the primary issue for Pacific islanders is the need to establish sound and effective recordkeeping systems and safeguards to ensure the actual provision of basic public services, and to protect the public from the coercive politicisation of official government records and data.

Wilful ignorance

Sadly, the Pacific has a marked resistance to recognising official records as essential information assets vital for the proper conduct of government business, or as documentary heritage, which comprises a considerable portion of society's recorded collective memory. This is a wilful ignorance which continues to harm our people, and is a manifestation of what the esteemed Professor Epeli Hau'ofa termed 'belittlement' in his seminal essay 'Our Sea of Islands'.⁹ It was a critique of development and what he saw as a doctrine of dependency, where external dictates of the 'smallness' of Pacific Islands would be internalised and projected further by Pacific decision makers as co-perpetrators of our own demeaning. This has played out clearly in the Pacific information and knowledge management sector, which has routinely been deprioritised and defunded,¹⁰ with the predictable consequence of compromising the Pacific's evidential knowledge base.

A history of being ignored

In 2005, the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA), understanding the critical role good records play in preventing mishaps like those mentioned above, wrote to all Pacific Island Government heads and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) urging for recordkeeping to be included in the region's key strategic document, The Pacific Plan. They called for the 'Development of national public recordkeeping strategies in support of transparent, accountable and efficient governance and the inclusion of requirements to make and keep good public records in national policies and legislation on governance and access to information'.¹¹ This sadly didn't get any traction.

Four years later in 2009, the Republic of Nauru approached PARBICA for input into their own submission to PIFS, also calling for recordkeeping to be made a regional priority. Once among the richest countries in the world per capita, Nauru had since lost much of its wealth, and due to poor or non-existent records was not able to track where the money had all gone, nor take anyone to task. Unfortunately, this initiative to prioritise Pacific records, and information governance also came to naught.

Closer to home in Fiji, in 2009 the National Archives of Fiji (NAF) had finally won the attention of the Fiji Public Service Commission (PSC), resulting from a costly recordkeeping mishap at PSC headquarters. In response, NAF used the PARBICA model recordkeeping policy guideline to develop a draft Fiji National Records Management Policy for whole of government. This was forwarded to the PSC, and I departed to undertake 2 years of master's education at Monash University. During my time there, I received an email from a colleague from NAF that the PSC had issued a watered-down version of what we had submitted to them. It seems that the entire exercise had largely turned into a box-ticking exercise.

In 2015, PIFS put a call out to the region for submissions on areas of concern that should be made a regional priority. PARBICA again put its hand up with a submission, but the Specialist Sub-Committee on Regionalism which assessed submissions recommended that the submission not be forwarded for consideration by the Forum's leaders. Later in 2017, Fiji returned to national strategic planning and all departments were instructed to send submissions for consideration. Included in NAF's submission was a proposal for a proper service-wide information governance initiative to take a more strategic approach to government information. After initial positive feedback, we were then told this could no longer go ahead. After frequent attempts at securing an explanation, the central planning agency told us that such an initiative could only be accommodated under the 'enabling environment' section of the plan, but this could not happen because this section belonged exclusively to the then Attorney General (who was also the Minister of the Economy, Civil Service, Communications, and Climate Change).

The predictable consequence

Ironically, and not surprisingly for Pacific information management practitioners, the Forum and other development players have had a difficult time securing evidence, data, and information to accurately track their development targets:

'In addition, for all countries, there is a lack of comprehensive data on all the Millenium Development Goal indicators, and where data is available, there are concerns about the quality of the data.'¹²

‘Not all of the 132 Pacific Sustainable Development Indicators are measurable by data based on international methodologies, and for some others there is limited data available. As a consequence, only 48 percent of the indicators can be measured at this time. Of most concern is the lack of data to measure regional priorities of climate change, ocean and seas or “life below water,” and quality education.’¹³

‘Looking at data availability by goal (figure 3.1), there are significant data gaps in Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 14 (life below water) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), each with less than 30 per cent sufficient data available. Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), each have less than 50 per cent sufficient data availability.’¹⁴

‘The assessment of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is impeded by inadequate data. Out of the 231 SDG indicators, only 133 possess sufficient data to assess progress, demonstrating that the unavailability of data remains a significant impediment to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Across Asia-Pacific, on average, only 52 per cent of the indicators have two or more data points, while more than a third of the indicators lack data altogether.’¹⁵

While Pacific information and knowledge managers have been trying to lobby for the prioritisation of Pacific information and knowledge, Pacific decision makers have persistently depowered the sector while simultaneously decrying the poor state of Pacific statistics and Pacific data. They have not been able to – or are just wilfully ignorant to see that these two phenomena are connected. That one cannot have a steady, accurate, authentic, and useable flow of statistics and data without the necessary ecosystem or supply chain.¹⁶

This belligerence reflects a deeper dynamic: in the Pacific, recordkeeping and information management is often rendered invisible.

Invisibilisation

Invisible work is a concept introduced by sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels in 1987, describing the essential yet often overlooked labour that underpins both households and organisations. This type of work remains hidden because it falls outside formal systems of compensation, recognition, or measurement. It encompasses routine, relational, and maintenance tasks, frequently carried out by women, which enable visible productivity but are excluded from economic and institutional definitions of value.¹⁷ This perfectly encapsulates how Pacific decision makers and their advisers have treated Pacific information and knowledge over time.

Gendered devaluation

Firstly, this work is highly gendered. It is seen as ‘women’s work’ and not the type of endeavour that Pacific males should typically undertake. At the time of writing, I am engaged in a consultancy with a Pacific organisation, attached to its Information Management team with three full-time employees, all women. I am the only male, and present only in a temporary capacity. This composition is typical of records, library, and information management teams across our region.

The sector is not even considered a speciality. It is seen as rudimentary work anyone can do. So pervasive is this sentiment that it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: collections and registries are routinely staffed by officers for whom records or library management is

an added responsibility. It is not uncommon for these roles to be handed to drivers and cleaners.

The development paradox

The development industry has also added to this pattern of invisibilisation in the Pacific. As far back as 2002, Wareham cautioned that Pacific recordkeepers would have a difficult time getting the attention of Pacific decision makers because the region is still recovering from the trauma of the spread of Christianity, and then colonisation, and is now being bombarded by the pervasive development agenda and its many initiatives.¹⁸ This is an accurate diagnosis. While practitioners try to see development ideas and initiatives as important opportunities to highlight the importance of records information and knowledge, these development initiatives are so plentiful and all-consuming that they leave little space for our concerns to be considered seriously. For example, the United Nations Development Programme Pacific office has been carrying out a Right to Information awareness programme at the University of the South Pacific over several years, but little attention is given to the creation, management, and useability of actual information. Such information is presumed to magically exist and be in good order, with little to no effort or investment put into its ongoing care.

Exclusion from national information policy initiatives

In Fiji, this pattern extends to landmark information policy. NAF was consulted neither in the drafting of the Information Bill (2025) nor the National Digital Strategy despite being government's official recordkeeping authority and custodian of the nation's permanent records, as well as the legal deposit library.¹⁹

This invisibilisation is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Fiji government officials leaving the role of Government Archivist substantively vacant for almost 6 years. The post was made vacant in October 2019, and it was not filled until July 2025. The NAF is also the national legal deposit library, which makes it the National Library of Fiji. So the head of two of Fiji's information and knowledge institutions was left vacant for 5 years and 8 months.

Creeping coloniality

Listing these examples gives me no pleasure. In fact, it is painful to recount. But at the risk of being accused of 'admiring the problem', I feel it is important to get a proper understanding of the realities for Pacific practitioners. And while external pressures have a strong bearing on the profession, for the last decade or so these have been matched by pressures within the broader professional community as well. The impacts have been considerable, culminating in the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration.

The erosion of solidarity

The Pacific once thrived on archival solidarity. In the early 2000s, senior leaders from Australia, New Zealand, and the Islands worked collaboratively to develop the *Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit* – a pioneering regional initiative that became a global reference. But this spirit of mutual empowerment has waned, and the 2019 Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration, instead of reviving that solidarity, is the emblem of its erosion.

Established in 1981 with members from 20 Pacific nations and territories, PARBICA was once a vital forum where leading practitioners could meet, share insights, and address strategic priorities. It served as a critical space for action and agenda setting in the sector.

However, a troubling bifurcation has emerged. The Heads of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and Archives New Zealand (ArNZ) have become largely inaccessible to their Pacific counterparts. Neither has participated in a PARBICA conference based in the actual Pacific islands since 2007. Where there was once collegial, direct contact among the heads of national archives across the Pacific, we have witnessed a shift: the heads of the two largest institutions now primarily engage with more developed counterparts in Europe, North America, Asia, and Australasia through the Council of Australasian Archives and Recordkeeping Authorities (CAARA). Pacific archivists now communicate among themselves in PARBICA, with the NAA and ArNZ representatives not having real decision-making powers. This has effectively created a two-tiered system where strategic concerns are discussed without Pacific Islander input at one level, and at the second level Pacific information and knowledge managers are left to do constant firefighting around operational issues, rendering us decreasingly equipped to deal with current and emerging challenges. This shift devalues Pacific information and knowledge management and perpetuates a hierarchy in which island nations are seen as lesser.

The Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration: coloniality dressed as progress

From my perspective the Declaration looked like the International Council on Archives (ICA) response to the high visibility of the growing Indigenous Data Sovereignty movement, which itself gained impetus from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and was supposed to demonstrate a solid commitment to decolonisation in archives. Framed as progressive, it reproduced coloniality in form and function.

Three colonial dynamics were evident: exclusion, silencing, and extraction. Firstly, no Indigenous Pacific Islander was involved in the consultations or working groups that shaped the Declaration. Secondly, by excluding us, our voices were effectively silenced in a global conversation that claimed to make space for and elevate Indigenous peoples and our concerns. Thirdly, the finished Declaration was presented for Pacific delegates to support, extracting symbolic endorsement from our indigeneity without our active participation through the whole process.

Although First Nations Australians and New Zealand Māori were involved, their professional communities have not meaningfully engaged with Pacific Island archivists over time. This is a weakness of PARBICA, it has not been able to build enduring relationships between Pacific Island indigenous practitioners and their indigenous brethren in Australia and New Zealand who have their own specific needs and barriers. We hope to change this.

While I understand that not every indigenous group could be represented in the ICA Expert Matters Indigenous Working Group, several factors combine to make the manner of the authoring of the Declaration and its launch especially disappointing:

1. NAA and ArNZ are both category A members of PARBICA; they should know (used to know) how to do things in an inclusive manner.
2. PARBICA represents a region holding over 1000 languages and cultures spread across the Pacific Ocean, about a third of the earth's surface area.

3. None of the Pacific Island members were party to the authoring of the Declaration, and so it does not reflect our challenges and needs. Silenced and invisibilised by our own.
4. But our indigeneity was used to rubber stamp the Declaration at the 2019 launch, to much fanfare. This was repeated at the 2024 'Opening the Archives' joint ASA ARANZ & PARBICA Conference. There were photo opportunities and joint speaking engagements all geared at signalling to audiences a level of connection that is not there in reality. Scheduling these opportunities was probably born from good intent, by those trying to build a reconnection. But without the genuine involvement at the Director General level, these well meaning efforts are undermined and reduced to being a "shot in the dark". No follow up. High in performativity and low on substance. Indigenous Pacific practitioners exist only to be wheeled on to conference stages in sporadic fashion. Meaningful connection and consultation is only to happen among the developed institutions and countries. This is not how we used to do things.

A standard worth meeting

I come back to the lady who was made to wait. The grandmother who endured three rounds of blood tests, each time her results vanishing into a system that could not hold onto the information needed to save her life. I think of her doctor, bound by his oath to do no harm while stripped of information required to fulfill that pledge. I think of her family, left with the unbearable question: Did she have to die?

This is the standard against which I think this declaration should be measured. Not by the elegance of its language, but by this single question: Would this have saved her life?

The Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration speaks of Indigenous knowledge systems, of cultural sensitivity, of decolonising archives. These are worthy goals. But for Pacific island peoples where we indigenous are the majority, the crisis is more fundamental. We need recordkeeping systems that work. We need test results that don't disappear. We need birth certificates that don't become weapons of disenfranchisement, and we need our data not to be deprived us, nor used against us.

This declaration does not speak to our lived reality. It does not speak to the wilful ignorance that has depowered our sector for decades. It cannot name the invisibilisation that leaves our national archives (and national library) leaderless for nearly 6 years. It cannot confront the creeping coloniality that turned regional solidarity into a two-tiered system of haves and have nots.

While the principles the Declaration seeks to uphold, indigenous self-determination, meaningful participation, respect for our ways of knowing, these remain vital. We don't need permission to claim them. They are ours by right.

The path forward requires Pacific practitioners to strengthen our own networks, to refuse invisibilisation, to advocate relentlessly for the infrastructure our people deserve. It requires our Australian and New Zealand colleagues to return to genuine partnership and recognise that solidarity cannot be performative. Most importantly, it requires all of us to hold ourselves accountable to those we serve.

She deserved better. Our people deserve better, and we need to keep working so the systems we build can answer her family's question differently: She did not have to die. The records were there. The system worked. She lived to hold her grandchildren. That is the declaration worth making, that is the work worth doing.

Postscript

Since this article was submitted, a welcome development has occurred. At the PARBICA bureau's first meeting of 2026, the Chief Archivist of Archives New Zealand was in attendance. This is an encouraging sign of renewed interest from ArNZ's leadership. We receive it warmly and hope that this is the beginning of much needed change.

Notes on contributor

Opeta Alefaio is grateful to be a child of the Pacific Ocean (Moana/Wansolwara), born and raised in Viti (Fiji) with Tuvaluan and Fijian ancestry. Fortunate to have served in the Fiji public service at the National Archives culminating with 8 years in the Directorship, he is now a PhD candidate at the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. Opeta was the joint recipient of the 2011 Margaret Jennings Award conferred by the Australian Society of Archivists, and in 2019 was made a Member of the Order of Fiji. He is on the steering group for the Digital Pasifik, was a member of the inscriptions sub-committee of the UNESCO MOWCAP programme, is a bureau member of the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA), and is a former executive board member of the International Council on Archives (ICA).

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