

Profile of a Comparative and International Education Leader: Kabini Fa'ari Sanga

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Abstract

This article is a biographical sketch of Professor Kabini Fa'ari Sanga, highlighting his education, academic formation, and significant contributions to Comparative and International Education (CIE). Born in Mala'ita Province, Solomon Islands, and currently Associate Professor at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, Sanga has played a pivotal role in advancing Pacific regional education and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems. He introduced the concept of relational leadership, co-founded the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) and the Pacific Education and Research Foundation (PERF), and pioneered the Melanesian Tok Stori research methodology. As Co-President of the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) and Executive Committee member of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), he has promoted the indigenization and internationalization of Pacific scholarship. In recognition of his distinguished service to education and leadership, he was appointed Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) by Queen Elizabeth II.

Keywords: Kabini Fa'ari Sanga, Pacific education; regionalism; relational leadership; decolonization; Indigenous knowledge; Tok Stori research; comparative and international education

Biography

Kabini Fa'ari Sanga hails from the province of Mala'ita in Solomon Islands. He was born in the late 1950s to a mother who was related to the ramo or warrior strand of Mala'ita society. Kabini's father was a fata'abu or tribal high priest in what was a theocratic society. The fata'ubu were instructional people, spiritual leaders in an animist culture. However, with his brother, Kabini's father turned to Christianity and became a pastor under the influence of South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC) missionaries. As this happened before World War Two, Kabini was brought up in a Christian setting, although some tribal members were, and remain, animist.

In the pre-Christian days kastom (traditional) villages were actually hamlets, collections of three or so houses of close relatives. Under the influence of Christianity, larger villages developed that included a church building as a new form of focus. It was in one such village situated on the small islet of Ngongosila that Kabini grew up, owning turtles as pets, speaking tribal and introduced languages, and worshiping in an evangelical tradition. In later years, Kabini, like other members of the Gula'alā, became an alafa, a role which functions as a form of lordship, giving advice and problem solving in a kastom frame. He remains alafa of the Gula'alā and his Christian upbringing and faith provide the foundation for his academic and professional work.

Kabini has navigated various forms of international education all his life. Although neither of Kabini's parents had been schooled in a European sense, unlike his sisters Kabini and his three brothers were sent to a series of schools in which they experienced much success. His first school, at Kwai, was in a village setting, a canoe paddle away from Ngongosila. Then Kabini moved to an SSEC boarding school, further up the Mala'ita coast from where he would often return home by walking and swimming. This was followed by another two years at Su'u Senior Primary School, another Christian-run school. Later, Kabini was selected for King George VI (KGVl) school in Honiara, one of the few secondary schools in Solomon Islands at the time, in the Solomon Islands capital district on Guadalcanal island.

In pre-independence Solomon Islands, the British influenced education in profound ways. As a consequence, Kabini learned to straddle two worlds, that of a school such as KGVl where most teachers were British or Australian and the curriculum included cultural markers such as Shakespeare's Macbeth and soccer (Kabini was in the 1st XI); and that of the village where kastom remained dominant. In a way that embodies Gegeo's (2001) writing about space and place, Kabini was socialised to navigate two worlds by not confusing them and remaining himself in both.

From KGVl, Kabini travelled to the regional University of the South Pacific (USP) campus in Suva, Fiji. There he was a student of the late Ron Crocombe, Foundation Professor of Pacific Studies and staunch regionalist in a time where several Pacific Island Nations were yet to become independent, an influential figure in Kabini's life. Kabini became a tutor for Ron and was involved in student politics along with Steve Ratuva (now Distinguished Professor) and Lopeti Senituli (current immediate past-president of the Tongan Law Association). As a Melanesian, Kabini provided a balance to the weight of Fiji and Fijians in regionalist thinking. At this time, Kabini met and married Jennifer Taufu of Tongatapu, Tonga with whom he has two adult children.

Post Solomon Islands independence, Kabini made his way to Canada through Commonwealth scholarships, gaining a Master's degree and a doctorate in a period that was punctuated by work at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education and the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education. He also returned to work at USP, serving as Director of the Institute of Education. In 2000, Kabini moved to Aotearoa New Zealand and began working at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) where he continues as Associate Professor.

Consistent with this background, Kabini's various relationships, activities and initiatives have centred a Christian world view in which people are assumed to be dignified from being made in the image of God. A relational scholar, Kabini has been able to both articulate and execute kastom alafa responsibilities and embrace the uniqueness of the individual before the Almighty. Aligned with this approach, education as a means of encouraging human flourishing is central to Kabini's life, as is the importance of leadership understood as relationships of influence. As will be seen below, Kabini's involvement in education through regionalism, CIE and research has been unwavering in terms of commitment to people whatever their background, whether from village, bush or academic contexts.

Regionalism

From his time at USP under the influence of Ron Crocombe, regionalism as a way of framing relationships in education (and elsewhere) has been a hallmark of Kabini's professional activity. Regionalism to Kabini means leveraging the collective strengths of those at home in the Pacific region who, to quote Epele Hau'ofa (1994), live in a 'sea of islands'. This means valuing diversity and uniqueness while enjoying and building on connections in order to encourage human flourishing. Kabini's regional engagement has been deep and wide and speaks of the wealth of his knowledge and the scope of

his generosity. Only a few examples are given here to indicate Kabini's life work of commitment to the development of the shared success that is regionalism.

Kabini's involvement with USP, the regional university, has featured extensive periods as council member, including executive committee work and engagement with the 12 Pacific Islands Ministers of Education of the USP Council. Over a prolonged period, he has given advice to Pacific national governments, participated in the Pacific Islands Ministries of Education Forum and guided initiatives such as the series of regional educational frameworks that have been developed. Kabini has also supported frontline educators in the region through frequent training including mentorship in Fiji and Kiribati, leadership in Nauru, curriculum in Niue, educational sector planning in Vanuatu, and inclusive education for the Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, Fiji and Vanuatu. Kabini's regional involvement has also included work on the 2023 UNESCO Futures Project, consultancy with public bodies and various ministries in many jurisdictions.

There has been a growth in national universities in Pacific Islands Nations, and from his base in Aotearoa New Zealand Kabini has diligently supported these institutions. For example, he has encouraged thinking regarding Indigenous research at the University of Papua New Guinea; offered mentorship in research and publication at the National University of Vanuatu; supported research, mentoring and conference engagement at Solomon Islands National University; and he has organised research publication guidance at the National University of Samoa. In these and other ways, sometimes framed through MOUs but often a matter of personal relationships and a clear regional agenda, Kabini has strategically given time and expertise to build capacity in the Pacific region.

Kabini is a Pacific regional thought leader. With Professors Konai Thaman and the late 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki, in 2006 he established the Pacific Education and Research Foundation (PERF). This body has its own constitution, autonomous Board of Trustees and a secretariat, and encourages critical thought, research and dissemination. Over an extended period Kabini has also established and subsequently convened the NZAID Pacific Scholars Leadership Network, the Network of Pacific Educators, the Solomon Islands Leadership Network, the Pacific Students Leadership Cluster, and the Leadership Pacific International Executive Committee. In addition, in 2020, recognising the diasporic experience of Pacific academic migrants, Kabini inaugurated the Solomon Islands Research Network and Mentoring Tok Stori which provides communication, advice, debate, discussions, news and mentorship to Melanesian post-graduate students in their diverse settings. Kabini's personal, academic and mentoring relationships have supported Pacific presidents, government ministers, an archbishop and other church leaders, traditional chiefs and public intellectuals.

Regionalism to Kabini is a matter of bringing people together so that relationships can develop in shared time and space, even if this needs to be in a virtual environment. To this end, Kabini has convened/co-convened more than 30 conferences and symposia over three decades. Recent examples include the Vaka Pasifiki Education Conference, Solomon Islands (2016); the 49th Annual Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES), conference, Aotearoa New Zealand (2018); the Leadership Pacific International Conference, Honiara (2019); the 50th Annual OCIES Conference, Fiji (2022); and the inaugural virtual conference on Melanesian Tok stori (2023). Through these events, Kabini has sponsored connections between academic and educators within and beyond the region, offering many village or 'bush' people from Pacific islands the chance to engage with international contexts, and providing openings for those from the four winds to engage with Pacific people, cultures, education systems and philosophies.

Comparative and International Education

Kabini's direct engagement with the CIE community began with people relationships, specifically with Eve Coxon, who invited Kabini to be keynote speaker at the first conference of OCIES to be held in a Pacific country and under the newly agreed name of Oceania CIES (formerly ANZCIES). This was hosted by USP in Vanuatu in 2015.

In his keynote, Kabini voiced his view of educational and scholarly leadership as relational. He shared a vision for the future direction of OCIES, not as an exclusive club of members, but an expansive, inclusive community of histories, ideas and relationships that are connected by and through difference. He invited OCIES to engage with the unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and to experience tension and vulnerability through collective safety.

In 2016, at its annual conference at the University of Sydney, OCIES members voted to establish a co-president structure, and Kabini was elected as co-president alongside Zane Diamond. Later he was co-president with Rebecca Spratt. Historically, the field of CIE has taken Pacific Island Nations as places that others come to research and write about, rather than the source of CIE scholarship (McLaughlin, 2017). Thus, the change in name and the establishment of a co-presidency signalled a significant shift for CIE and for OCIES. Through his co-presidency Kabini continued his mentorship and commitment to building a community of education leaders across the region. During this tenure, OCIES memberships approximately doubled. A significant increase was also evident in the number of people engaging with OCIES through online and in-person events and via publications.

A new vision and mission for OCIES over 2018/19 was led by Kabini, culminating in the re-establishment of the General Committee to support the expanding activities of the society and to create more leadership opportunities for members. Kabini held the position of co-president throughout the period of the Covid-19 pandemic with its constraints on travel and face-to-face connections. Kabini mobilised OCIES members to see the resultant uncertainties and tensions as opportunities. This led to connective online spaces including the Wellington Southerlies tok stori series and online OCIES annual conferences in 2020 and 2021. A review of the Society's journal took place under Kabini's leadership, which re-confirmed the value of the journal for the society and wider education scholarly community.

Through his engagement with OCIES Kabini has taken on an increasingly active role in supporting the leadership of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), including representing OCIES in key WCCES global forums. Kabini has served in several significant roles in the WCCES governance structure including as a member of the WCCES Executive Committee (2018-2022), Chair of the WCCES Special Projects Sub-committee (2019-24), and Co-Chair, WCCES Conference Sub-committee (2023-24). Both in WCCES and OCIES, colleagues have recognised Kabini's wisdom and the value of his direction including an international-Pacific orientation, and steps that hold the worlds of the village and global communities in productive partnerships.

Education and research agendas

Among his many areas of involvement, two agendas relevant to CIE indicate the breadth and depth of Kabini's intellectual contribution. The first brings together regionalism, education and celebrations of the sanctity and uniqueness of people. Kabini was central when the Re-Thinking Pacific Education movement began as an idea in the inaugural Symposium on Researching the Delivery of Aid to Pacific Education at the University of Auckland in December 2000. Following this, from April 25 – 27, 2001, a colloquium entitled Re-Thinking Pacific Education, was held at USP under the umbrella of an MOU between USP and Kabini's own VUW, supported by funding from the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency. The colloquium gave rise to the *Tree of Opportunity* (Pene et al., 2002) anthology of papers and the

'rethinking' initiative and movement was born. The premise of the Re-Thinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) was that Pacific peoples had the philosophies, capabilities and experience to re-orientate education in the region away from colonial models towards local relevance, addressing the question posed at Solomon Islands independence of 'Education for What?' (Bugotu et al., 1973). The scope and influence of RPEI can be seen in accounts such as van Peer and Abella (2021), the number and breadth of texts that cite the *Tree of Opportunity*, initiatives such as the Graduate Certificate of School Leadership which has offered discursive space and support for school leaders in Pacific contexts, the series of Vaka Pasifiki Education Conferences such as the 2025 edition in Marshall Islands, and the shaping of successive generations of policy including the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF).

A second, related agenda has been elevating the visibility and application of Indigenous approaches to knowledge transmission in the Pacific region. A good example of this is Kabini's deliberate development of Melanesian tok stori research within the wider umbrella of Oceania Oralities research. Others have claimed a paper co-authored by Kabini from the 2017 OCIES conference in Nouméa to be "the first detailed and critically analytical article published about tok stori as a research methodology" (Radclyffe & Ale'eke-Bemama, 2024, p. 452). In support of global scholarship as well as Melanesian scholars, Kabini has curated a corpus of academic literature on tok stori that has influenced others in areas as wide as archaeology, climate change, and evaluation. Through the Oceania Oralities Framework, Kabini has sought to ground research conducted through traditional oral practices in ontology, and to enable researchers working in different oral traditions to find common ground while celebrating uniqueness. Kabini was the first to publish traditional teachings in his own language (Sanga, 2014), Gula'alā, and continues to research through oral means and publish in print as alafa to support his own tribal grouping.

Recognition

Among the many forms of recognition experienced by Kabini is his popularity as a PhD supervisor. Kabini has supervised over 60 doctoral students and examined many more. He has also mentored and supported colleagues across a range of universities to progress their research and teaching careers, many of whom have gone on to take up senior roles. Over many years, Kabini has been invited to operate in multiple advisory roles such as with the New Zealand Agency for International Development, the New Zealand Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Police, and the Pacific Cooperation Foundation. Kabini was the only Aotearoa New Zealand-based academic invited to participate in a great number of New Zealand government missions including the 50-member 2023 NZ Pacific Mission to Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Tonga. This was led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and involved senior representatives of government, business and community sectors with the aim of further deepening connections between New Zealand and Pacific Island neighbours. Beyond his work at VUW, Kabini's reach as an educator has included invitations to be a guest lecturer at USP, the Australian National University, the National University of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands National University and Fiji National University, as well as delivering training sessions for the Pacific Islands Forum, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Hong Kong Institute of Education and the New Zealand Agency for International Development. A keen supporter of the Commonwealth, in 2018 Kabini was pleased to be appointed by Queen Elizabeth II to be Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit.

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