

# THE PRICE OF GIVING: RELATIONSHIPS & CULTURAL INSIGHTS AS BUDGET LINE-ITEMS OR VALUED CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE SACRED VĀ?

Co-authored by:

**Julia Arnott-Neenee** (CEO and Co-founder of Fibre Fale) &

**Dr Sandy Harman** (Project Lead at Innovation Unit & member of Pasifika Funders Network)

*It's not for us to define koha. It's also not for us to define meaalofa and other similar Pasifika practices. This article aims to share insights and experiences that we are privy to, and spark discussion about how Pasifika community groups are valued by funders.*

Language and framing are powerful. As Pasifika people working in the philanthropic sector, we notice the commonly used terms in philanthropy and funding – and how these influence the way people in the sector think and behave. For example, 'giving', 'donating' and 'granting' are all uni-directional terms; these completely contrast with the notion of reciprocity that underpins Pasifika cultures and values.

That's one of the reasons why relationships between some funders and some Pasifika community groups are fraught or non-existent; from the outset, those funders are engaging in a 'relationship' to do something *to* or *for* the other party – and there's something distinctly transactional and paternalistic about it. This automatically creates a distinct disconnection, the foundations of how two or more potential groups may engage with one another. The Pasifika concept of Vā offers a cultural concept that seeks to explain the relational space between one another. As Pasifika peoples we view reciprocal relationships as sacred, with a much more nuanced and deeper understanding of ourselves as beings within a collective and reciprocal life. A different lens when put alongside funders' mindsets.

At the same time, we are often asked by Pasifika community groups why it is so difficult to access funding. When you put yourself in the shoes of those who are operating from a space of relational and reciprocity - you may be able to quickly see how the power imbalance (amongst other things) of funders and fundees already provides difficulty. Pulling apart the funding process for a start, the process itself is not a relational one - often you're filling out online forms where at best you get to introduce yourself to the funding party via a video recording, at worst nothing at all. The funders are often faceless - therefore already breaking the opportunity for a relationship to be formed and built from. Not knowing who you are writing an application to personally, not presenting your stories and lived experiences, the heavy emphasis on written questions upon questions, and no emphasis on whakawhanaungatanga and talanoa... This funding process leaves many frustrated,

deflated, exhausted – especially because they continue to hope that their contribution and existence to society will be valued. These community groups are filling gaps where local and central government and existing mainstream systems and services are failing our Pasifika communities. They take the time to write up detailed funding applications and share their stories and insights and knowledge – only to be turned away by funders for one reason or another. Have we ever looked at funding applications and proposals as a form of engaging? Or are funders the only ones who get to define what constitutes engagement and set the rules of that engagement too?

When koha and meaalofa are inserted into non-Māori and non-Pacific settings, we can end up with a range of problematic practices. One such problematic trend is the homogenising of koha and meaalofa, e.g. the ‘blanket koha policy’, where a funder has taken it upon themselves to decide that \$50 is somehow a standard monetary gift for any community group that turns up to a one-hour consultation or workshop. The funder ‘really wants to include Pasifika community voice’. Meanwhile the contractor facilitating the consultation/workshop is apparently so highly valued that they walk out with \$500. And so we’re right back to transactional and paternalistic again. We are also back to the power imbalance, as the communities who are the ones funders are seeking to ‘help’ - as defined by the funder; our time is valued as lower, and our perspectives deemed less ‘expert’, more ‘grassroots’. Since when and by whom was it decided that having expert knowledge of lived, grassroots, or cultural experience means that an hour of your time should be valued at such a reduced amount - a nod to how our cultural expertise is not reflected monetarily at an equivalent let alone equitable level. Which ironically goes against funders’ aspirations towards achieving equity for Pasifika and other communities...

But let’s add another layer: some funders also think it’s fine to help themselves to cultural and community intellectual property at the same time, to further their organisational goals. So they haven’t really *given* very much, despite being in the business of ‘giving’... but they’ve certainly *taken* a whole lot – and they’ve taken it from the population group with the highest level of income inequity in the country. And the community groups in attendance are supposed to be grateful for the \$50 (which of course they will be, because we all know we’re not supposed to ‘bite the hand that feeds us’). Again, what would happen if the roles were reversed? If community groups helped themselves to funders’ IP, with the same level of privilege and assumption that they should be ‘grateful’ we are taking an interest, and grateful that we want ‘their voices to be heard’. We very much doubt that a \$50 voucher reflects generational development of that IP, or that the extraction of it under the guise of ‘helping’ would stand in legal practice.

This is where double standards really kick in. In a business setting, you have heavy contracts, negotiations, on-going meetings, setting mutual expectations and agreed outcomes, two-way NDAs, and a price is settled based on the scope of information being exchanged with hard boundaries and terms like ‘scope creep’. In this funding setting, all of a sudden it is only one party that is writing agreements, there is no negotiation, no setting of mutual

expectations and outcomes, no two-way NDAs, a price is decided by one group and that does not change no matter the information that is released, and there is continuous scope creep. It's a little frightening to see how quickly some people default to homogenising and diluting cultural practices for the sake of convenience, or 'fairness' (although surely we're all educated enough on social justice and equity to know that giving everyone the same thing doesn't actually equal fairness?).

The meaning of meaalofa is a gift or thing of love. If philanthropy was born from a love for humanity, and meaalofa is intended as a manifestation of love, we actually have two very compatible concepts that could work together in harmony. But for that to happen, we would need to challenge this uni-directional concept of 'giving' and 'granting', and instead recognise the broader social fabric we're part of and the incredible contributions our Pasifika community groups make. Whether it's meaalofa, me'a'ofa, apinga aroa, or other forms of Pasifika reciprocal gifting practices, what if these cultural concepts supported a different approach to funding that was based on the inherent value in reciprocal relationships? What if Pasifika groups engaged with funders and felt appreciated and supported – and funders felt appreciated and supported too, and that became a norm in the sector? What if the philanthropic sector demonstrated aroha/alofa as the foundation for meaningful engagement and exchange? What if we re-framed how we see and treat each other?

We know this is easier said than done - but it starts with being able to reflect on and critically analyse current practices and behaviours. How do you currently approach koha and meaalofa? Do you cluster koha and meaalofa together for convenience and attach a standard monetary amount to value people's time contribution only - instead of valuing each situation, relationship and knowledge exchange? Have you taken it upon yourself to re-define a cultural concept like 'koha' to meet your own organisational needs - and not ever thought of that as cultural misappropriation because 'everyone else is doing it too'?

Who guided your current practices? If they were people with cultural expertise involved, what explicit or implicit parameters were set - e.g. did you task a single individual to develop a one-page policy for you in a tight timeframe with heavy emphasis on budget limitations and not setting 'precedents'; or did you actually resource them to explore collectively how they could bring cultural best practice into your organisation in mutually ethical and appropriate ways?

When cultural gifting goes right with funders, it's often because there are a handful of staff and trustees within funding organisations with high cultural intelligence who go over and above as individuals representing their organisation. But when funders don't have appropriate cultural gifting practices in place, it can put their Māori and Pasifika staff in compromising positions and leave them with a disproportionate burden to carry on behalf of the organisation.

If your cultural gifting practices need attention, a next step might be adequately resourcing people within and/or outside of your organisation with cultural knowledge and expertise, to help you develop culturally sound practices. Instead of starting from 'what do we need' or reducing it to an operational task, perhaps start with a discussion-based approach and reflect on who you have valued relationships with, who you want to have valued relationships with, and who can help you work out how to best value those relationships in practice.



*[Photo features a fou/fau from Tuvalu]. Cultural practices come from authentic, often complex systems and contexts. Adopting/adapting cultural gifting practices like meaalofa outside these contexts without expert cultural guidance and safety measures, disrespects the diverse identities and traditions of Pasifika people and communities in Aotearoa - and risks divorcing these practices from their traditional value sets and complementary practices.*

Culture is alive, complex, experiential, and full of variables and intangibles. It would be difficult to summarise what cultural gifting best practice looks like for Pasifika, because it's highly contextual and each Pasifika cultural grouping, relationship and engagement situation is distinct. But we know what cultural best practice *feels* like. When the Vā - that sacred relational space between people and things - is nurtured and people feel seen, respected and valued, it's palpable.

*Special thanks from Pasifika Funders Network to Julia Arnott-Neenee for accepting our invitation to co-author this piece on koha and meaalofa. If you're interested in digital equity for Pasifika in Aotearoa, we encourage you to check out Fibre Fale, co-founded by Julia Arnott-Neenee and Eteroa Lafaele: <https://www.fibrefale.com/>*