



*Penina Uliuli*  
*Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples*

Edited by Philip Culbertson and Margaret Nelson Agee, with  
Cabrini 'Ofa Makasiale  
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This collection of 19 essays, written by Pacific people involved in mental health, is a must read for anyone working with Pacific people in New Zealand and Australia. It is a long overdue exploration of the nature of the Pacific experience in New Zealand and in particular the social, religious, and mental health challenges Pacific people face. The name 'Penina Uliuli' means 'Black Pearl'. This is a highly valued gem created by the friction of an intruding particle in the Pacific oyster, and is thus an appropriate title for this collection.

The essays are arranged in four categories headed 'Pacific Identities', 'Pacific Spirituality', 'Pacific Unconscious' and 'Pacific Trauma and Healing'. Each article begins with a short piece about the writer's ancestors and her/his experience of living in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. This offering provides a personal introduction to each essayist and sets the context for the subject of the piece.

Section One, 'Pacific Identities', outlines the importance of the collective aspect of Pacific living, whether that be the church, the family, the village or the sense of belonging to a group of friends. Those trained in Western psychology can easily think that the purpose of their work is to assist the client to individuate. This does not necessarily mean the same thing for Pacific clients and may indeed lead them to further dis-ease.

Section Two, 'Pacific Spirituality', offers four essays, two of which uphold the need for understanding the role of God and the church in the healing of Pacific people with mental health problems. The other two essays challenge the abuses that the churches can and do perpetuate, when they themselves lose touch with the love and care that they are commissioned to provide for their members.

As a psychodramatist I found the third section, 'Pacific Unconscious', the most relevant. A very good article, 'The Use of Symbol and Metaphor in Pasifika Counselling' by one of the editors Cabrini 'Ofa Makasiale, explores the profound impact that Pacific spirituality has on the development of the personality. Given their strong belief in the transcendent, 'most Pacific Island people hold the traditional view that truths come from above. These views are often seen as unchangeable and beyond criticism'. From

my experience of living in Tonga nearly 40 years ago and working with Tongans and other Pacific people in the intervening years as a priest and lay person, I have developed an appreciation of the importance of church and spirituality to Pacific people. Cabrini 'Ofa Makasiale has named a number of significant dynamics that profoundly affect the way that Pacific people think, feel and act because of the centrality of spiritual matters. This knowledge and understanding has assisted me in my work with the Pacific individuals and community groups with whom I am currently engaged.

The other articles in this third section provide useful insights regarding the linking up of Western psychotherapeutic modalities with Pacific thinking. There are also practical suggestions about working with Pacific peoples that lend themselves very well to the psychodramatic method, for example the uses of metaphor and symbol. Perhaps the simplest and most practical suggestion for working with Pacific people comes in an article about 'the thinking heart' — offer a cup of tea at the beginning of a counselling or therapy session.

The final section, 'Pacifica Trauma and Healing', offers case studies of work with depression, violence, substance abuse, pregnancy, adoption, mental illness and gambling. A powerful collection of poems by Peta Palalagi provides a graphic picture of what might be happening with a female Pacifica client as she recovers from an abusive past.

Overall, the quality of these papers is mixed. A couple of the articles sound a little like set piece essays from a counselling course. But don't let that put you off. Even in these you will discover some real gems.