

MAX QUANCHI

“Who Are We Without Land?”: Climate Change, Place, and Identity in the Work of Joycelin Kauc Leahy

Abstract

This research note describes the work of Joycelin Kauc Leahy, an artist, writer, curator, and climate activist. The author focuses on the ways Leahy addresses the relationship between climate change, land, and identity—especially in Papua New Guinea—through her research, curatorial projects, and illustrated children’s literature.

Keywords: *Joycelin Kauc Leahy, contemporary art, Papua New Guinea, climate change, children’s literature, curation, Morobe Province, Tami Islands*

Climate, land, and identity have always been at the heart of Indigenous village life in the Pacific. Recently, these three related topics have been valorized globally as subjects of debate and advocacy at international forums, conferences, and in a body of scholarly literature. In addition, artists have responded to the challenge of climate change using a variety of formats. These works highlight the resilience of local communities, their custodianship of the land, and the numerous ways in which village identity may be maintained in the face of outside forces—sometimes familiar, sometimes inexplicable and unexpected, both environmental and human. The complex, overlapping relationship between climate, land, and identity can be followed through the artistic output of Joycelin Kauc Leahy, an artist, writer, exhibition curator, and climate activist.

Leahy was raised in Wagang village, east of Lae, in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and earned an undergraduate degree in journalism at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby. She later obtained a master’s degree in museum studies at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. Leahy’s research, curatorial projects, and creative work respond to climate change in Pacific communities. Using her talents as a visual artist, writer, and climate warrior, from 2009 to 2011, Leahy curated the touring exhibitions *Pacific Storms* and *Lusim Land*, which engaged more than thirty Pacific artists collectively. She then

decided that her message also needed to be told through art and storytelling. Merging her personal, scholarly, and artistic interests with the culture of village life in PNG, in 2015 she wrote “The Song of the Turtle,” which won the PNG Literature Award for best children’s story. Her continuous involvement in promoting an activist relationship between culture, art, and environment inspired Leahy to write, illustrate, and publish a children’s book, *The Lazy Little Frog* (2022, Fig. 1). It includes thirty-three original watercolours illustrating a tale of village life in Papua New Guinea, including daily problems, friendship, and adaptation to climate change.¹ As an artist and writer, Leahy draws on her own upbringing, experience with other Indigenous communities, and scholarship to bring the clamorous and volatile global discourse on climate change in a meaningful and accessible way to her home community.

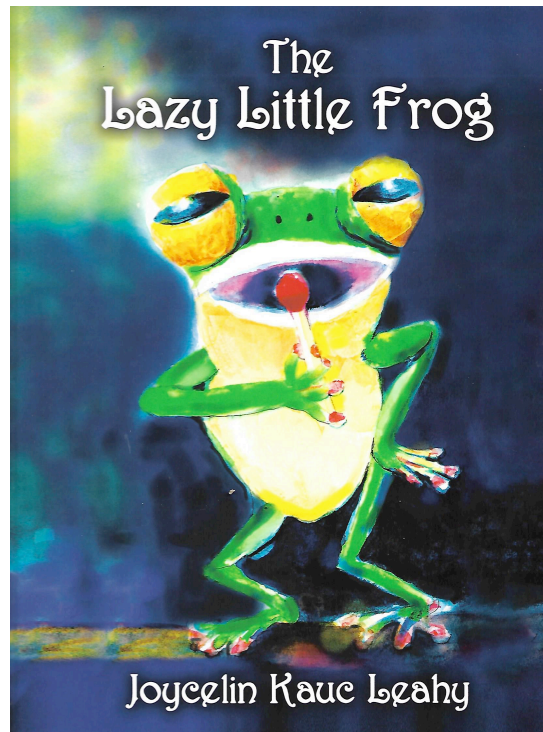


Figure 1. Joycelin Kauc Leahy, *The Lazy Little Frog*, 2022, front cover. Courtesy of the artist

Fieldwork

Leahy acknowledges that her earliest grasp of heritage, cultural identity, and environment developed as she watched and listened to her grandmother, kin, and clan while growing up in Wagang village. She also acknowledges the importance

of the eighteen months of fieldwork (2009–10) she conducted in the Tami Islands for her master’s degree.² Leahy worked in the two ancestral Tami villages of Wanam and Kalal. In the 1930s, a third Tami community was established on the mainland. The Tami people are globally renowned for their art and sculpture—including carved wooden bowls and masks, now found in museums around the world—and their magnificent voyaging canoes used in an extended network of trade and social relationships.

Leahy’s fieldwork shaped her thinking on how Indigenous peoples, such as the few hundred in the Tami community, respond to rapidly evolving changes noticeable in their islands’ biodiversity, their culture, and their heritage. While conducting research, she made the disturbing discovery that despite the Tami villagers’ awareness of unusually frequent and large storms and tidal surges, increasing salination in northern New Guinea, erosion, unpredictable seasonal weather patterns, and other negative impacts on the environment, they did not have the term “climate change” in their vocabulary. This was remarkable, as the terms “climate change” and “rising sea level” have been increasingly known around the world since 1993, when the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) began issuing its annual *WMO Statement on the Status of the Global Climate*, an authoritative and often-cited source.³ She realised that because most of the international debates about climate change occur far from small Indigenous communities across the Pacific, they are unknown to them. Leahy’s Tami Islands fieldwork highlighted for her the difficulty of bringing the Tami Islands experience to the world’s attention, and of identifying a single voice for the wider Pacific when isolated village communities still characterize much of the population. Beyond PNG’s island communities, the term “sea level rise” is also mostly unknown among the millions of highlanders that live in towns and remote villages in the rugged mountainous interior of Papua New Guinea.

Leahy realized that in stark contrast to small, remote island communities like the Tami—who face challenges to their environment, heritage, and culture on a daily, local basis—inland Pacific communities and concentrated urban populations are not so directly affected by or aware of these dangers. While remote coastal communities stoically get on with the business of survival, in cities people chant climate-change-awareness slogans, wear t-shirts, put up posters and banners, march in the streets, and attend fundraising concerts and art shows. For example, in Fiji, where nearly half the population lives in the urban sprawl of Lami–Suva–Nausori, a huge billboard at the entrance to the University of the South Pacific in Suva asks passers-by to help save Tuvalu from sinking. But how many Fijians actually know where Tuvalu is, or that it is a nation consisting of nine atolls

endangered by sea levels rising? Despite these causes, public appeals, and the dramatic vision offered by the billboard being worthwhile, their impact on urban Fijian attitudes, knowledge, and opinions about the effects of climate change is difficult to measure.

Leahy tackles the three themes of climate change, land loss, and maintaining cultural identity by documenting how the Tami community utilized customs, beliefs, and practices to manage climate change, loss of lands, and environmental dangers, including the traumatic experience of being uprooted and disconnected from their ancestral land or homeland.⁴ She details the strong intangible and tangible bonds between environment, spirituality, cultural practices, language, song, custom, and ritual.

Curatorial Projects

Concurrent with her studies at the University of Queensland, Leahy curated two large touring exhibitions by Pacific artists responding to climate change. These exhibitions were shown in the Australian cities of Bundaberg, Logan, and Brisbane. The thirty-three visual, digital, and performance artists in these exhibitions came from twenty-two Pacific Island nations and territories with the aim of giving voice to the real and urgent concerns of Pacific Islanders about *lusim land* (lost lands) and the devastation caused by rising sea levels.

In the catalogue essay for *Pacific Storms* (2009), Leahy comments that world leaders were, at the time, meeting at a UN climate change conference, known as the Copenhagen Summit, to draft an agreement on climate change action. In a curatorial statement two years later for the 2011 version of the catalogue (also titled *Pacific Storms*), Leahy declared, “Pacific Islanders are not separated from their land or their environment; land and sea are part of their life.”⁵ She pointed out that if there was an unrealistic response to climate change by developed nations, it would have “tragic consequences for the islanders” in terms of land loss, the salination of gardens and wells, and changes in tidal patterns.⁶

The artworks in the exhibitions made Leahy’s point glaringly obvious. Works by two Fijian artists were included in the traveling *Pacific Storms* exhibition: *Looking for Dry Land* (Abraham Lagi, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 100 cm)⁷ and *I Crave for Water to Quench my Thirst* (Irami Buli, acrylic on canvas, 185 x 85 cm).⁸ In his artist statement, Lagi noted that “looking for dry land is going to be a dilemma for many indigenous Pacific Islanders . . . (They) will need a miracle to save their land, the basic element of their existence.”⁹ An eye catching and message-laden

triptych, Lagi's painting depict Pacific Islanders struggling to climb to safe, secure, dry land. Lagi's artworks emphasize Leahy's warning that interconnections to land and sea are fundamental to village lifestyles, and that, increasingly, low-lying island and coastal Pacific Islands societies are seriously endangered by climate change.

Other artists in the *Pacific Storms* exhibition focused on the three linked themes of climate change, land loss, and identity, including Winnie Weoa of PNG (*Climate Change: Relocation*, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm), Jean-Claude Toure Garae of Vanuatu (*Uncertain Future*, acrylic on canvas, 93 x 182 cm), and Anare Somumu of Fiji (*Sunken Dreams*, acrylic on canvas, 110 x 88 cm).¹⁰ In his artist's statement, Somumu commented, "Losing land to foreigners, climate change and sea level rise means we will lose it forever. Who are we without our land?"¹¹

As an activist, Leahy had pursued these same expressions of concern, despair, and hope through her children's stories and in exhibitions, basing her advocacy on her life experiences as a villager, an artist, and an Islander. Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas note, in the foreword to the catalogue for the huge Royal Academy of Arts exhibition *Oceania* in 2018, that "the poetics of water have informed the ways Islanders have imagined and formed their places of dwelling and belonging."¹² Leahy agrees, stating that "tangible and intangible heritage provides Pacific peoples with an endless source for artistic expression."¹³

Children's Literature and Illustrations

In addition to her curatorial work, Leahy continues the synergy between art and environment by merging art with storytelling in her illustrated children's literature projects. Her reflection on her village background crystallized in her prize-winning short story "The Song of the Turtle" (2015) and book *The Lazy Little Frog* (2022). Leahy decided during her postgraduate studies that her priorities would become raising awareness of the threats to the tangible and intangible heritage of a coastal village way of life and of the loss of Indigenous languages due to diasporic movements. *The Lazy Little Frog* was the result. She decided that to plant ideas in young people's minds she would rely on storytelling, an integral aspect of New Guinea and Pacific upbringing.

In *The Lazy Little Frog*, a rooster named Kande Kaks and a lazy frog named Loki discuss their survival options. Loki declares, "Times are changing. Life is hard but it is what you make of it, especially if you work together." The rooster replies, "That's right, if we are kind, loving and respectful to each other we will always live

well.” This home-spun wisdom is at the heart of a story about discovering village life, rivers, and forests, and the problems of finding food, boredom, and petty controversies. Watercolours vividly illustrate Leahy’s depictions of the animal characters (Fig. 2). Early in the story, young readers are told why Loki the frog has abandoned his swamp home and relocated to a kitchen in the village: “Loki’s entire family and their forest homes had been destroyed by bushfire and logging. The sea level rise had made swamp water too salty.” No other explanation is required, as powerful evidence of sea level rise, salination, and logging have become more prevalent in young readers’ lives across the region.



Figure 2. Joycelin Kauc Leahy, “Mama Maria the pig,” watercolour illustration in *The Lazy Little Frog*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

The author notes that *The Lazy Little Frog* is a work of fiction, but the setting is clearly her village, Wagang—recognizable by the mention of local

landmarks, for example a Japanese wartime shipwreck and two local rivers. The opening spread includes a vibrant view of the village on the left and a house on pilings surrounded by hibiscus flowers on the right (Fig. 3). Other illustrated pages include a panorama of the ocean, homes, and canoes, and a scene of Mama Maria the pig and Loki the frog exchanging threats and laughs.¹⁴ The story closes with Loki and Kande Kaks the rooster becoming “best friends” following a series of arguments, name-calling, and adventures.



Figure 3. Joyceline Kauc Leahy, “While fishing canoes lay idle in the shade,” watercolour illustration in *The Lazy Little Frog*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

The Lazy Little Frog is a wonderful story, with an underlying global message of survival in a world affected by climate change that adult readers will immediately notice. It is written for readers in grades three and four, but the story suits children ages two to twelve years old. It is a pleasure to see youngsters interacting with the pictures, calling out the names of the animal characters, and nodding in agreement to the verbal exchanges between the rooster, the frog, and the pig. When I read this story aloud to a four-year-old and two-year-old, ad-libbing parts

when the text was complex, they smiled and nodded, and clearly identified with the rhythm of village life represented by the animal and insect characters.

The Lazy Little Frog joins a pleasing array of other children’s books that are taking efforts a step farther by familiarizing young readers with this global campaign. These include Oliver Jeffers’s *The Fate of Fausto: A Painted Fable* (2019), Neal Layton’s *A Planet Full of Plastic* (2019), Lucy Bell’s *You Can Change the World* (2020), and Aunty Joy Murphy’s *Wilam: A Birrarung Story* (2020).

When schools purchase *The Lazy Little Frog*, they receive a Teacher’s Note with guidelines for class discussion. A portion of the proceeds from the book’s sales goes to an education campaign started by Leahy to promote and preserve languages in PNG. The back cover of *The Lazy Little Frog* includes several endorsements; Russell Soaba, a PNG author, notes that the book is “beautifully told in a lively and colourful Papua New Guinea way of storytelling.”¹⁵ This quote highlights the growing popularity—and power—of Pacific voices speaking out about climate change, and its threats to the land, water, and Indigenous people in the place they call home.

Conclusion

Thirteen years after the 2009 Copenhagen Summit, regarded by most observers, critics, and commentators as a failure due to its disarray and weak climate-action outcomes, youth around the world are protesting in the streets; activists are gluing themselves to gallery walls; and dancers, poets, artists, and performers are making angry and insistent calls for change. Today, all levels of print and electronic media are featuring climate-change stories. For example, in 2018, the *New York Times Style Magazine* asked twelve contemporary artists to contribute works and statements to their print and online feature *12 Artists On: Climate Change*,¹⁶ and in 2020, Artsy.net ran the story “These Ten Artists are Making Urgent Work about the Environment.”¹⁷ In 2020, the core team at Artists & Climate Initiative, an organization that “uses storytelling and live performance to foster dialogue about our global climate crisis,” announced they would use the term “‘planetary emergency’ in order to clearly communicate the urgency of our situation.”¹⁸ In February 2023, Leahy joined researchers, scholars, writers, artists, filmmakers, curators, and cultural actors from Australasia and French-speaking Oceania at a symposium on “Art and Environmental Concerns in Oceania: Cultural Expressions of Climate Change across the French-Speaking Islands in the South Pacific,” held at Sydney University.¹⁹

The impact of Leahy’s fieldwork in the Tami Islands, her activism, and her advocacy are an exemplar for future researchers, artists, and activists. Her actions have led directly to four impactful outcomes: the *Pacific Storms* and *Lusim Land* exhibitions, which included engaging local Pacific islander communities; her appointment as a consultant to the South Pacific Community Team of the Festival of Pacific Arts, tasked with ensuring that the festival addressed tangible and intangible heritage; her involvement in PNG’s Western Province by leading workshops aimed at poverty reduction through small business projects in artifact production and distribution; and her children’s storybook, translated into vernacular languages to engage young minds.

PNG artist Daniel Waswas, speaking about his paired artworks in the *Pacific Storms* exhibition—*Distortion or Fragmentation 1 and 2* and *In the name of Capitalism 1 and 2*—highlights the way that Pacific art calls for recognition of the role that the ancestors have played in “keeping our environment, people and culture thriving together harmoniously.”²⁰ *The Lazy Little Frog* ends on the same note, with young readers learning that the frog and the rooster “worked together and shared their food as they learnt from each other.”²¹ This universal sentiment of sharing, learning, and friendship is a powerful message, one that can be traced from Leahy’s work on art exhibitions to *The Lazy Little Frog*, and in many other art forms now emerging across Oceania and around the world.

Max Quanchi has taught Pacific history at Queensland University of Technology, University of Papua New Guinea, and University of the South Pacific. His research is on the history of photography in the Pacific. He has guest-edited special issues on photography for Pacific Studies, the Journal of Pacific History, and the Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies. Since 1996, Dr. Quanchi has convened panels on photography at the semiannual Pacific History Association conferences. He has published several books, including the monograph Photographing Papua: Representation, Colonial Encounters and Imagining in the Public Domain (2007), which focuses on the colonial frontier in Papua New Guinea. His most recent publication is An Ideal Colony and Epitome of Progress: Colonial Fiji in Picture Postcards (2019), coauthored with Max Shekleton.

Notes

¹ Joycelin Kauc Leahy, *The Lazy Little Frog* (Port Moresby: PNG Publishing, 2022). The book is available in English, Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin, and Motu editions. See <https://lazylittlefrog.com/>.

² The Tami Islands are located just off the Huon Peninsula, south of Finchhafen. See <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Tami+Islands/>.

³ *WMO Statement on the Status of the Global Climate* (Geneva: World Meteorological Organization, 2010). For the most recent of many reports globally, see *Climate Change in the Pacific 2022 Historical and Recent Variability, Extremes and Change* (Canberra: The Climate and Oceans Support Program in the Pacific [COSPPac]/Bureau of Meteorology, 2023).

⁴ Joycelin Kauc Leahy, "Pacific Calls for Climate Change Justice to Safeguard Heritage," Master's thesis, University of Queensland, 2009.

⁵ Joycelin Kauc Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2011* (Brisbane: Beyond Pacific Art, 2011), 6.

⁶ Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2011*, 9.

⁷ Irami Buli's painting was included in Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2011*, 27.

⁸ Joycelin Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2009* (Chapel Hill, QLD, Australia: Beyond Pacific Art, 2009), 20-21.

⁹ A. Lagi in Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2009*, 26. Lagi's painting is part of a series titled *Our Lives: Look for Dry Land* (2010, acrylic and oil on canvas, 93 x 33 cm, 95 x 40 cm, and 91 x 58 cm). Author disclosure: my lounge room wall at home is dominated by this series of three large paintings by Lagi.

¹⁰ These works were published in the *Pacific Storms* exhibition catalogues: Winne Weoa, *Pacific Storms 2009*, 68; Jean-Claude Toure Garae, *Pacific Storms 2011*, 22; and Anare Somumu, *Pacific Storms 2011*, 56.

¹¹ Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2011*, 56.

¹² Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Oceania* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018), 27.

¹³ Leahy, *Pacific Storms Brisbane 2009*, 8.

¹⁴ The book's designer was Roland K. Daure.

¹⁵ Leahy, *The Lazy Little Frog*, back cover.

¹⁶ Zoë Lescaze, "12 Artists On: Climate Change. A Dozen Artistic Responses to one of the Greatest Threats of Our Time," *New York Times Style Magazine*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/22/t-magazine/climate-change-art.html>.

¹⁷ Shannon Lee, "These 10 Artists Are Making Urgent Work about the Environment," Artsy.net, April 20, 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-10-artists-making-urgent-work-environment>.

¹⁸ The Artists & Climate Change Core Team, "A Note on Terminology," *Artists & Climate Change, Building Earth Connections*, January 2020, <https://artistsandclimatechange.com/about/a-note-on-terminology/>.

¹⁹ *Art and Environmental Concerns in Oceania: Cultural Expressions of Climate Change across the French-Speaking Islands in the South Pacific*, February 15–17, 2023, The University of Sydney, accessed June 9, 2023, <https://slc-events.sydney.edu.au/calendar/french-francophone-symposium-art-environmental-concerns-oceania/>.

²⁰ Daniel Waswas, artist statement, in Leahy, *Pacific Storms 2011*, 76.

²¹ Leahy, *The Lazy Little Frog*, 42.