Policing and Religion in Tuvalu: Perspectives on Navigating Tensions Between Multiple Security Actors

Sara N. Amin¹, Danielle Watson², and Tanya Trussler³

Abstract
Although religious institutions are an important agent of non-state policing, especially in the Global South, there is a limited understanding of the relationship between religion and policing. The Pacific presents an ideal context in which to examine the relationship between religious and policing institutions in Christian majority postcolonial societies. Moreover, state and religious institutions in the Pacific Island States are currently being subjected to powerful processes, including economic liberalization, globalization, and localization/indigenization, producing both opportunities but also contestations and conflicts. Using interviews with police officers, religious leaders, and community leaders, this article examines how police officers negotiate the tensions between (secular) state law, indigenous structures of authority, and religious authorities in Tuvalu.

Keywords
plural policing, religion, Tuvalu, police-community relations

¹The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji
²Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia
³Mount Royal University, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Sara N. Amin, Sociology, CELT 119, School of Law and Social Sciences, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Central, Fiji.
Email: Sara.amin@usp.ac.fj
Introduction

Criminology and policing studies often seem to ignore religion. This is likely, at least in part be due to fact that researchers in these disciplines understand themselves as secular, leading them to perceive religion as irrelevant (McFadyen & Prideaux, 2011, 2014). The ignoring of religion is likely also a result of the growth of policing studies and criminology in primarily secular societies (cf. Spalek, 2008, in relation to policing Al Qaeda). However, religion is not irrelevant to policing; ignoring it leaves a gap in understanding. The current research adds to the literature on policing by examining directly the role of religion in policing, looking specifically at the perspectives of police of the role religion plays in their duties and lives. The link between the two is particularly important in Oceania, where throughout the colonial period and in the post-independence years, the church has been a major actor in the settlement of disputes, interpersonal violence in the community, and other issues that often fall in the purview of policing responsibilities in the “West.” The chiefly system of dispute resolution and community justice became integrated with the dominant Christian churches in each area during the colonial period, both reinforcing each other in their role of maintaining order and social cohesion, as well as supporting similar value and normative systems of expected behavior (Patterson, 2003). This often happened before the formal establishment of colonial administration, and in post-independence, plural systems of justice and policing have continued (Watson & Dinnen, 2020). Arguments for and against these forms of plural policing have often focused on Melanesian countries in Oceania and on the place of kastom (customary/indigenous authority and practices). This is in part because historically, religious and indigenous authorities have been entangled and interdependent in the Pacific since missionization.

However, in the last few decades, there have been important changes in religious diversity, the place of indigenous authority, and the authority of the state in the Pacific. These changes have important implications for policing in Oceania. While the relationship between religion and policing has not been a focus of research in the Pacific, Trnka (2011) has documented the use of “the Jesus strategy” and New Methodism to reform the Fiji Police Force in the 2006 post-coup context to gain legitimacy and discipline. Rio (2011) argues that the Vanuatu police force, increasingly associated with the born-again Christian movement, has restructured, expanded, and represented its practices in theological terms, while large investments by the Australian and New Zealand governments in police capacity-building have simultaneously reconstituted the police force as more independent from state control. These examples in Fiji and Vanuatu speak to important ways that religion and policing are interlinked. Moreover, the dramatic growth of Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical Christianity in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) (Ernst, 2006, 2012; Robbins, 2001) and a trend toward greater formalization of Christianisation of the state and its various arms are reconfiguring the relationship and boundaries between the three main pillars of governance in the Pacific—state, church, and chiefly authorities.

Development aid and economic liberalization processes are also impacting on the power balance between these institutions, often disrupting local
accountabilities of state and church to their communities (Forsyth, 2009; Patterson, 2003; Rio, 2011; Ryle, 2016). Increased assertion of indigenous identity and efforts to decolonize the church and other institutions (Hau’ofa, 1994; Thaman, 2009; Vaai, 2014), and a context of rapid social change are producing new ways and needs for individuals and communities to negotiate mechanisms of social control (Ernst, 2012; Ryle, 2016).

In this article, we explore how police officers in Tuvalu negotiate the tensions between (secular) state law, indigenous structures of authority, and religious authorities. We highlight the interconnections between policing and religion as mechanisms for control, compliance, and conformity, with inherited and sustained colonial legacies. The article further contributes to postcolonial policing discourses by exposing the difficulty of establishing and maintaining foundational prerequisites for law and order maintenance without consideration of all legitimate actors within a specific context. We do this by examining police and other stakeholders’ views on the impact of religion on policing, as well as their perceptions on if and how religion should influence policing practices.

Tuvaluan Context: Policing in a Hybridized System of Justice

Tuvalu is a multi-island sovereign state with a population of approximately 10,507 inhabitants distributed across nine land masses. The most densely populated island, Funafuti, is the country’s capital and central business district. Approximately half of the local population is based on Funafuti, with the other half dispersed across the other eight land masses commonly referred to as outer islands. These outer islands face a constant threat of depopulation and have limited access to basic infrastructure, the cash economy, and modern conveniences (Howes et al., 2021).

As is in many other PICs, law and order maintenance in Tuvalu reflects a combination of the British Westminster system fused with Christian and customary principles and practices (Oppong, 2016; Howes et al., 2021). This hybrid model is a product of the specific trajectory of colonialism in Tuvalu, the way Christianity was established in the islands, and the place of indigenous forms of authority in the development of the state and church (Apinelu, 2018; Goldsmith, 2012). This hybridized Westminster system exists alongside a preserved local government assembly (locally referred to as the Falekaupule) and island council (the kaupule), the executive arm of the Falekaupule on each island (Pratt & Melei, 2018). Local government assemblies, primarily composed of men over 50 years of age, serve as the representative voice of the community on bills under consideration by the parliament, and affect the by-laws, rules, and regulations specific to their respective islands (Howes et al., 2021; Pratt & Melei, 2018). Community control is primarily perceived as under the authority of the executive arm of the local government assembly, headed by the respective island’s chief or headman. All state-appointed stakeholders apart from the police—courts and legal representation—are based on Funafuti.
Counter to the Westminster model that domestic issues require a response from the state police (Watson et al., 2021), day-to-day disputes and disturbances in Tuvalu are often resolved at the family, church, or community level, often through elders playing an authoritative role. While the Western model is premised on ideas of individual guilt, parallel community models are underscored by communal shaming shared among family members of the perceived offender (Braithwaite, 2015; Pratt & Melei, 2018). Family and community interconnectedness are evidenced in the acceptability and continuity of dispute resolution processes involving village chiefs, community and family elders, and religious leaders (Panapa, 2014; Pratt & Melei, 2018).

There is a shift in these dynamics, especially in urban Funafuti, with police being called into disputes (including family violence) that were previously dealt with by non-state authorities (Pratt & Melei, 2018). The last decade has seen growth of legal, political, and societal contestations about how indigenous and state authorities should be ordered (Apinelu, 2018). The place of individual rights (especially related to freedom of religion, freedom of association, and rights of the child) has come into conflict with cultural values and traditional customs. These contestations are embedded in the Constitution, which contains a Bill of Rights, but also prescribes protection of Tuvaluan values (embodied through customary law, tradition, and indigenous authority) (Goldsmith, 2012; Olowu, 2005). Apinelu has argued that the Falekaupule Act of 1997 and the Constitution (Recognition of Traditional Standards, Values and Practices) Amendment Act of 2010 indicate a prioritization of laws and practices that support “traditional standards and values over other constitutional freedoms that may be divisive and threatening to Tuvaluan values” (p. 2).

The above contestations on balancing freedoms and protecting Tuvaluan culture are also linked to how the place of the dominant church, the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (EKT), has been shifting. Historically, the EKT, the local successor of the London Missionary Society which began its work in 1865, has been the state church of Tuvalu and held close to 98% of all church memberships. However, its membership has been declining from approximately 97% in 1979, to 93% in 2002 to 86% in 2017 (Government of Tuvalu, 2017; McRae & Iosia, 1980; Tenten, 2006). While the Catholic church and the Seventh Day Adventist churches have been in Tuvalu since the late 1940s, new churches have also been established in the country in more recent decades: the Baha’i, the Jevovah’s Witnesses, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Assembly of God, Church of Christ, New Testament Church of Funafuti, and the Open Brethren (Tenten, 2006).

Religious leaders in Tuvalu have and continue to obtain positions of great authority in the community (Goldsmith & Munro, 1992; Patterson, 2003, p. 593). Besnier (1994), however, has noted that indigenous authority, and progressively, state authority, can challenge the position of religious authority. In this context of situated authorities, an increasing trend of religious diversity has created not only a challenge to the established hegemony of EKT, but also to the relationships between indigenous authority, religious authority, and state authorities. For example, the historical relationship between the EKT and indigenous authorities has meant that chiefs affiliated with the dominant EKT have banned (through customary law) the presence of other or new
religions. Using the constitutional clause on protection of Tuvaluan values, they have argued that new churches in small outer islands will create conflict and disrupt traditional Tuvaluan values. However, Tenten (2006) predicts,

the relatively unchanging religious climate in Tuvalu to the persisting religio-cultural tradition upheld by most of those who are still very much in control of familial matters—the matai (heads of the immediate family with the extended family) and the aliki (heads of a tribe). This group of traditional leaders constitute 16% of the 50+ year old age group and most of them are members of the EKT. When this section of the population is gone, the religious climate in Tuvalu may change. (p. 457)

Policing in Tuvalu is thus situated in this complex and evolving relationship between state, customary authority, and religious authority. While a modernist perspective would argue that increased state penetration and police legitimacy would progressively reduce these competing sources of authority, a postcolonial approach would ask us to consider how police officers negotiate these tensions between (secular) state law, indigenous structures of authority, and religious authorities in Tuvalu to produce context-specific ways of policing. In particular, in this article we look at the relationships and negotiations between religious institutions and the police.

Method

This study utilized a mixed methods approach. We conducted interviews with senior management team (SMT) and frontline police officers of the Tuvalu Police Service (TPS), religious leaders of the various Christian churches in Tuvalu, community chiefs, the Attorney General, and the People’s Lawyer of Tuvalu to understand their perspectives, directives, and experiences on the changing role of religion and its impact on policing practices. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was utilized to recruit these participants. We were able to interview religious leaders from the EKT, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Brethen Church, the Catholic Church, the Jehova’s Witnesses Church, and the Assembly of God Church, as well as Funafuti-based chiefs from the different islands. Reflecting the entanglements between state, religious, and customary authorities, some respondents were chiefs, high-ranking police officers, and religious leaders or lay preachers or had occupied these roles at different times. Thus, our interviews explored how our respondents negotiated these multiple roles and positions. We also conducted interviews with a smaller group of non-SMT police officers, including younger officers and lower-ranking officers to ensure that we had a more diverse and wider range of perspectives. Initial approaches to church leaders and chiefs were made by a police officer who was assisting us and who had been trained in sociological research methods.

Given the challenges of capturing discretionary practices in policing contexts through direct interviews, self-administered questionnaires were also used. The data collection occurred mainly in Funafuti during March 2020, with some interviews conducted in Suva (Fiji) at the Pacific Theological College, where clergy from Tuvalu
complete their undergraduate and doctoral studies in theology. The timing of the data collection in Funafuti coincided with a training program of the TPS officers, as well as a major fire and the beginning of COVID-19-related quarantine procedures in Tuvalu. This impacted the administration of the questionnaires and resulted in a lower response rate than may otherwise have been anticipated.

Apart from ethics approvals at our respective universities, we also received approval to conduct from the Acting Police Commissioner of the TPS, the People’s Lawyer and the Traditional Council. The University of the South Pacific Tuvalu Campus Director and the former Acting Police Commissioner of TPS facilitated these approvals. Since the research team is all female and from outside the Tuvalu cultural context, we consulted with various stakeholders before data collection to ensure that no gender protocols were transgressed. Since all interviews with religious leaders and chiefs were conducted in informal spaces, we were able to conduct interviews directly.

We conducted 23 interviews and received 18 completed questionnaires (out of the 60 distributed). Interviews ranged between 30 and 90 min and were conducted in English. Only one interview was conducted in Tuvaluan with the help of an interpreter. Interviews with SMT officers were conducted in their own private offices and those with junior officers were conducted in a private office in the TPS headquarters with only the research team present. All interviews and questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis. For this article, we have focused on the data related to the relationship between religion and policing and the themes that emerged.

To ensure confidentiality of participant responses, we have only referred to whether the participant was a police officer, a community leader, or a church leader. Given the small size of communities in Tuvalu, we have not specified ranks, island identity, or church affiliation of any respondent. For police, we have distinguished when a respondent is part of the SMT or not. For churches leaders, we have noted whether it was an EKT or a non-EKT church leader. For community leaders, we have not indicated island identity per se. All quotes that are presented have been edited for clarity.

Findings and Discussion

Three key themes emerged from the analysis: (a) religious faith as a source of strength in policing work; (b) negotiating the power of the church in policing work; and (c) police work needs to be better informed by custom and religion.

Religious Faith and Diversity as a Source of Strength in Policing Work

Religion and faith were noted as important aspect of police, police administration, and external stakeholders’ lives. All police officers noted that their church activities and faith were particularly important in the discipline needed for their work. One SMT officer shared that the place of religion was inscribed in the government, that pastors have an important place across communities, and it was normal that religious faith was part of policing work:
I think our whole government is a religious government. Our crest says Tuvalu Motea Tua, which means Tuvalu with the Almighty God. So, I think yes there is a degree in the police activities that are influenced by our religious belief. I think it’s also a good thing because if we look into our religious belief there are good things. They try to be line with the way we try to make peace in the community. . . In every island community, they have very high respect for our pastors and whenever we have a gathering we always have a place for our pastor, where we always give a chance to the pastor to say something . . . In our police organization, it’s more like we play the same thing too. We always give a chance for the pastor in every gathering, in every social function. Even when we are about to deploy in our police work, we always start our police work with our prayer and stuff like that. (SMT Officer 1, TPS Headquarters, March 5, 2020)

All officers (SMT and frontline officers) noted that daily prayer in the TPS was seen to contribute positively to staff morale and align with the cultural communities that officers came from. Some officers noted that having a former police commissioner and other senior officers who are lay preachers in their own churches was also a positive thing because it could bring more disciplined behavior in the police service.

While members of the EKT church were the majority in the TPS, none of the respondents indicated that there was any conflict or tension within the TPS about being part of other churches. The presence of police officers from different churches was seen as a positive thing because it allowed the police to have access to different religious communities. Both officers affiliated with EKT and non-EKT churches agreed on this. They shared the view that given the approach of the TPS to do awareness campaigns with church leaders about violence, crime, and laws, this diversity with the TPS was helpful. In particular, police interviewees felt that work on human rights, especially that related to women’s and children’s rights, required doing awareness work with all the churches given the important status held by pastors:

What I’m trying to do is for our officers, to also deliver the training to small denominations, especially awareness programs on domestic violence, rather than focusing only on these majority groups. They also need to consider the minorities the awareness program must also reach out to them, the religious minorities. . . Yes, I think it has been working, I mean, personally, the feedback that I have received from our officers who conduct the training for the awareness programs, they are building relationships between the police and the people in the community, so I think it’s also good for them to learn some of the minority religious cultures. (SMT Officer 2, TPS Headquarters, March 4, 2020)

**Negotiating the Power of the Church in Policing Work**

Some officers felt that their own off-duty active participation in their churches and communities was important in gaining authority for their policing work. However, some of the female officers and the younger officers noted that it was important for there to be a clear separation between policing work and the influence of faith and church:
I think there is a conflict when religion tries to influence the police because religion has its own laws. I mean they have their policies and it basically concentrates on the Bible. But us, [the police], we have the laws from the government. This can create conflicts. For example, for myself, as a police I have to respond to human rights violations cases, but in my religion, according to the Bible, we do not have any rights. We only have the right to be called the children of God. . . . But I get doubts because I encourage victims of domestic violence, incest, sexual abuse to speak up. I do that because I have training, because I am an officer, but it makes me doubt through my religion if they should speak up. Also, when a mother or father disciplines the child through just a smacking, to me it’s okay because a child needs to learn, especially because nowadays children’s’ attitudes are different, they really go against their parents. But if the discipline is more excessive, then we as police should take action. . . . Therefore, I don’t think religion should influence our work—if it did, I would not be able to encourage the victims to speak up. (Police Officer Interview 1, Funafuti, TPS Headquarters, March 4, 2020)

This need for a clear separation was also articulated by police officers or church leaders when bringing up situations when pastors attempted to use their own relationships with perpetrators or victims to influence the work of the police. For example, an SMT officer shared how during his investigation of a rape case as a junior officer, the pastor (related to one of the rapists) told the rape victim that the police had moved the case to the church and asked for the church to support in reconciliation (instead of police investigation). The officer found out because the victim came to him crying, not knowing what to do given the pastor had a lot of power but she did not want to do a reconciliation. The officer then had to bring up the matter with the EKT president and the Community Affairs Department and the pastor then apologized and stopped taking this kind of action without communicating with the police. The officer noted that this kind of situation, where church leaders may try to re-direct people from reporting issues to the police, “happens often.” He explained,

I believe we have cases where pastors are involved in resolving matters. I have also heard when I was new in our police organization that our senior officers use these church leaders to resolve domestic violence matters. . . . When I was a new police officer, I considered it as a good thing to do. . . . But I also learned when I was investigating officer and was posted to the prosecutor, that if matters of domestic violence are resolved by the church leaders or pastors, they are not recorded in the court and they can become a serious issue when the violence continues . . . like cases where minor assault cases become a murder case. They didn’t actually take him to court until it was a murder case. . . . it’s still happening because church leaders are very powerful in our communities . . . (SMT Officer 1, TPS Headquarters, March 5, 2020)

At the same time, several officers also recognized that the power of pastors can also be helpful in reaching communities. Some officers shared how pastors have been helpful in specific situations in preventing further conflict and violence in the community. In particular, when officers shared experiences of policing the outer islands, they noted that to prevent physical violence against perpetrators of crime, police have typically
intervened with the support of pastors. Customary forms of punishment can involve physical violence; however, the state requires that such forms of punishment are no longer carried out and that instead the perpetrator (convicted through customary processes) is to be imprisoned. These situations can put police officers in a difficult situation: communities perceive the police working to protect the perpetrator instead of working for the victim and community. In these situations, some officers have found that pastors worked as mediators between community, chiefs, and the police to allow police to escort perpetrators of serious crimes out of the outer islands. For example, one officer shared their experience:

I went to the pastor and talked to him about the situation where people were waiting with spears to attack the perpetrator that we wanted to bring back to Funafuti to process in prison. The pastor then talked to the chief, which changed the mind of the chief (but not all the elders, nor even the majority—just the chief). So then the chief said okay, go with the him [the perpetrator] but he told me: “Hey, if you take that person out of our island make sure he’s in prison.” I said, “yes definitely he’s going to be in prison.” The chief said . . . that our elders won’t be very happy with him but that he didn’t mind, he might step down from his position and maybe someone else was going to take over. So when the boat arrives we escorted the person, we rushed him to the boat safely. . . . So basically, I use the pastor because he has got very high respect from the people and yeah, I use that person in order to get our work done. (SMT Officer 1, TPS Headquarters, March 5, 2020)

Most of the officers (including SMT officers) felt that churches could do more work to support prevention of crimes by reminding and encouraging people to go to the police:

Church and community leaders must remind the people . . . that the police officer is here to help them whatever whenever something happens in their family. You know because sometimes it’s very hard for people to come to the police because they don’t trust the police. . . . So that’s why people don’t come, so we have to talk to the leader and to remind the people that police are here to help them and if they don’t feel comfortable with officers who are on duty they can just always see any officer or executive or commissioner at any time. (Police Officer Interview 1, Funafuti, TPS Headquarters, March 4 2020)

Other officers (more often the younger officers) suggested that churches could help by having the community return to older practices of enforcing times for devotion, in which parents, elders, and youth would all be together in the evenings. They thought this would lead to less crime, juvenile delinquency, and family violence. However, the older SMT officers were wary of this. For example, one SMT officer also noted that there were potential challenges to these ideas:

On the outer islands, they [community elders, supported by pastors] pass laws where every evening at about 7 o’clock, people are not allowed to cycle or ride on the bike for certain periods. . . . Some of the people are not happy with the decisions made. . . . We look at it and see that it’s also helped the police to control people breaking the laws . . . it helps us police. But on the other hand, it also restricted freedom of movement of people,
so people are complaining. This might be a small issue now, but it can develop and become an issue later on. (SMT Officer 2, TPS Headquarters, Funafuti, March 4, 2020)

Both EKT and non-EKT church leaders also agreed that churches can do more to help in crime prevention. For example, one church leader said,

The church has not played any part in, you know, in the educational side of things in different fields. They have so far concentrated on evangelizing or the upkeeping of the spiritual aspect of the people. But I think it should include justice and law I think justice should be the core of the church teachings in every aspect. . . . People see our roles in different ways. When they need action, when they need to retaliate, when they need to react to something that was done to them, or to a disagreement, they go to the law. . . . They go to the police. But on the same issue, if they need counseling, they come to church, and sometimes they do both. . . . So the church should not sit back and relax and say that is police business. We should do our part to counsel, advise, but not in the old way of doing things. Our people have changed, they are more educated. We need to adapt our ways to this. . . . The church on the other side focuses on building peace and maintaining relationships between the people. . . . For the church, the main principle that the church operates on is love and peace and if we make that work, then that will help the police. (EKT church leader, PTC, Suva, October 23, 2019)

**Policing Work Needs to Be Better Informed by Custom and Religion**

Both church and community leaders felt that policing work needs to be better informed by traditional practices and religion. Church leaders and traditional elders both indicated that if police work was to be done effectively, it was important for police to draw on their own religious and community identities and relationships to understand the situation and manage it effectively. For example, one church leader argued,

When the police walk around wearing the authority of the government, they seem to act as if they are uncensored. They can do anything to anyone. . . . When they come in uniform, they take an authoritarian attitude towards the people. So, that kind of authoritarian attitude, triggers two reactions, one of fear in the people and two of anger and it can create an unsafe environment. Both for the police and the people. I have seen police walking up to the door and knocking, demanding this and that. I’ve also seen police in uniform in the drunken state, ordering things. So, that attitude needs to be changed, because policing shouldn’t be done with a dominating attitude, an authoritarian attitude. It should be done in a relational attitude, where you go with respect. But I’ve also experienced in some cases where police come in a very respectable manner, in a very relational manner where they know how to approach the people. . . . I think something needs to be done to cultivate an attitude that is more relational in how they [the police] execute their duties. The problem is that our police are not trained in-country; they’re trained outside and were trained in western techniques of policing. Some of the police are recruited without training, who were young graduates who were educated elsewhere [e.g., Fiji] as well so they don’t have a true grasp of the way of relating person to person in the Tuvaluan context. (EKT church leader, PTC, Suva, October 23, 2019)
Many police officers, especially those in SMT positions, agreed that policing approaches needed to be improved and changed. For example, one SMT officer noted that until about 10 years ago, policing approaches were still rooted in institutionalized practices rooted in colonial times, which he described as follows: “they were trained by the British in Kiribati and yeah I have heard stories about their brutality.” While officers agreed that things had improved, several officers recounted that there were still problems of some officers (some new, some older) using older ways of policing that were inappropriate. Another officer noted,

Police need to understand that our job is not always about locking people up, or all the time arresting them. It is about policy and talking and dealing with people. If we build up a good relationship with the community, its leaders, its members, then in times of a crime, in times of problems and all, we will get their assistance. (Police Officer Interview 1, Funafuti, TPS Headquarters, March 4, 2020)

SMT officers noted that building relationships with church and community leaders was key, especially in the outer islands where only two to three officers are posted per island. Police often agreed that proper training and contextualized training that supported learning the ways of the islands, and how to build relationships were important in improving policing work. While some of the SMT noted opportunities for such contextualized training and development in specially negotiation type skills, it was clear that this type of training was not systematically available to all officers, especially those on the ground. In the interviews, many of the younger police officers noted that they would like training that would allow them to understand how to manage situations that seemed to put the three authorities in conflict. This was a concern not only for policing the outer islands but also in Funafuti. Some police officers argued that they would like more support from church leaders and community leaders in these moments.

In the outer islands, there was also a sense that police officers posted there were not properly aware of customary practices, and this impacted on how relationships between church, indigenous authority, and state were managed in specific situations. Our interviews with the junior officers also revealed a self-awareness that they lacked the understanding of the specific laws they were enforcing and that they would like to get the training needed to understand laws and policies better so that they could be more effective.

It is important, however, to note that the critique of the police was also linked to a critique of the state, imposition of external policies/frameworks, and a lack of contextualization in policymaking and implementation. For example, one church leader noted,

When the Church teaches that we need to discipline our children, and when the police lock-up parents for disciplining their children, people are caught, where does it stand? Because its [the church’s] teachings are not recognized by the law. But this national convention of the right of a child, the right of a person are formulated in contexts, which are different from the context of the world—and they need to be contextualized. To have that, to harmonize it with the, with the current context. This is happening because the country seems to be dominated by Western world criteria. If you go and sign into this convention,
you will be or will not be able to get this or that. . . . So, signing these conventions is part of Tuvalu’s struggle to be recognized globally and the international platform. However, once signed, we are left with the implementation of it. And that is where I think work needs to be done. Because signing it is not a problem. But implementing it, as presented in the convention is problematic. (EKT church leader, PTC, Suva)

Police officers seemed to have a similar perspective to this, especially in relation to the convention of the rights of the child. Many officers, SMT and junior officers, pointed to the challenge of dealing with breaches against the rights of the child—especially that it conflicted with both religious and cultural approaches to raising a child and it was creating more conflict within families and communities. While junior officers negotiated this tension by drawing on the perspective of law and religion being separate, many of the SMT advocated for context-specific training of police officers. This latter perspective focused on the need for training that would further develop knowledge as to how state, indigenous and religious authority works, as well as developing the interpersonal and cultural skills needed to negotiate these different relationships and authorities. Based on both the interview and questionnaire responses of junior police officers, we see that they also think there should be more cooperation between the three authorities and that elders and church leaders should be more involved.

However, several officers and church leaders did point to one of the challenges of cooperation between the three authorities. They pointed to the dominant place of the EKT and its efforts to stop other churches by drawing on their historical relationships with community leaders to create barriers to other churches. One police officer (affiliated with the EKT church) noted, “it’s not really fair to the newer churches,” but because of how EKT churches are able to work with community leaders to ban new churches in the outer islands, “the police have to remove the preachers of other churches for their own safety.” It was clear though that while some understood the need for laws and actions like this to prevent conflict on the islands between different churches, others saw it as an overextension of the power of the EKT church. Non-EKT church leaders agreed with the latter view, pointing to what they felt were ways the EKT tried to pull strings at the Falekapaule to maintain an advantage. The head of the Falekapaule (a member of the EKT church) also confirmed that the historical position of the EKT and the social status of pastors have created conflict with the Falekapaule, especially in their efforts to limit the activities and access to resources of the non-EKT churches. As such, there is a concern about how the church manipulates community responses that results in the need for police responses to secure individual safety, which has direct impact on police resources.

Conclusion

Policing in a context where there are multiple criminal justice actors requires the ability to balance competing ideas. This research found that, in Tuvalu, police have to negotiate their right to police with communities and that the church(es) play an
important role in facilitating that access but also in creating challenges for the police, especially with both growing gaps between church and indigenous authorities, as well as new churches. This seems to place police as secondary actors in law and order maintenance (Panapa, 2014; Pratt & Melei, 2018; Taafaki, 1983). While this may be seen as problematic or as a weakness of the state and/or the police, it can also be seen as a practical way to deal with limited resources and build police legitimacy and improve capacity for more focused responses in a contextualized way (Watson & Dinnen, 2020). Plural policing that involves authorities and relationships embedded in people’s lives can help to continue to decolonize the state system and how colonial legacies of law and order were instituted in postcolonial societies.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that from the perspective of the participants in this study, there is a pervasive anxiety that the relationships that ensure peace and stability in communities are changing and even fraying and that there is a need to re-build these relationships, making space for new faiths and rights, and also re-ordering powers. While we see that there is an increasing presence of police in the lives of people, especially as a discourse of rights emerges and people assert their rights and look to the law for solutions and resolutions, we also see that police are being called into situations they feel they are not full ready for. While calls for reform in policing in the Global North push for bringing in different stakeholders and services to redistribute the powers and responsibilities of policing, there may still be pressures in postcolonial states like Tuvalu that are driving police to take on more. There is also the danger of parallel policing authorities such as the church(es) engaging in practices that erode the rights of individuals, particularly members of vulnerable groups. These dynamics speak to other works in the Pacific that highlight how women, sexual minorities, and children may experience increased insecurities in efforts to make space for hybrid forms of enforcement and regulatory authorities (George, 2008, 2016, 2018; Forster, 2011). What seems crucial and important in supporting policing in such a context is to help police develop the negotiation skills needed to work in this evolving situation.

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**Author Biographies**

**Sara N. Amin** is currently senior lecturer of sociology at the University of the South Pacific (Suva, Fiji). Her research focuses on the areas of migration dynamics, identity politics, gender relations, religion, and education. She is also engaged in the scholarship of transformative pedagogy.
Danielle Watson is senior lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. She conducts research on police/civilian relations on the margins with particular interests in hotspot policing, police recruitment and training, as well as many other areas specific to policing in developing country contexts.

Tanya Trussler is the criminal justice coordinator and an associate professor in the Department of Economics, Justice, and Policy Studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada. Dr. Trussler’s research interests include violent crime, policing, crime prevention, homicide clearance, and public perception of crime and criminal justice.