

# Indigenous Intergenerational Relational Rhythms Sustaining Tongan Language and Culture Across Time (Tā) and Space (Vā)

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Résumé de l'article

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## INDIGENOUS INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONAL RHYTHMS: SUSTAINING TONGAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ACROSS TIME (TĀ) AND SPACE (VĀ)

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**Abstract:** This article unfolds intergenerational sustainability and relational rhythms through Tongan language and culture and the interrelationships between older and younger Tongan people and between Tongans and non-Tongans in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). It also unpacks the interconnected ways in which Tongans as Indigenous people honour the inseparability and sensibilities of knowing–seeing–feeling–doing–being–becoming Tongan across tā–vā (time–space) in language and cultural realities, and their implications on Tongan people’s success in life. I argue that there is still space to strengthen Tongan language and culture through intergenerational relationships between Tongans in Ioto-Tonga, the motherland, and communities settled in tu’a-Tonga, the diaspora such as Aotearoa NZ.

**Keywords:** Tonga; language; culture; identity; intergenerational; tā–vā (time-space); diaspora; Indigenous

**Fofola e Fala ka e Alea ē Kāingá**  
**(Roll Out the Mat for the Kin to Talk)**  
***Proverbial Tongan Saying***

Fofola e fala ka ē alea e kāingá (Roll out the mat for the kin to talk) is a proverbial Tongan saying linked to a call on the family to talk about a very important issue (Māhina, 2004). Sustaining Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa NZ is an important concern to discuss as there are different depths of understanding of Tongan culture and language between older and younger generations both in Tonga, the motherland, and the diaspora such as Australia, the United States of America (USA) and Aotearoa NZ. These diverse understandings vary, often associated from being conservative to being liberal Tongans. In Tonga, the changes to language and culture are slow and gradual while changes in the diaspora are much faster. The Tongan people in the diaspora face bigger challenges linked to the maintenance of their own heritage language and culture because they are a minority group amongst the dominant Western culture. The sustainability of language and culture, therefore, depends on the intergenerational sources that sustain, continue, and support the thriving and flourishing of the next generation.

Calling forth the Indigenous Moana (Oceanian) Theory of Tā-Vā, I unpack the ways in which social reality is mediated using Indigenous concepts that are philosophically rooted in Tongan culture before European contacts. These concepts include Tongan core values, social relationships, metaphors and proverbial sayings, as discussed in later sections of this article. These are demonstrated through the leadership of Tongan scholars and their non-Tongan colleagues, Hūfanga 'Okusitino Māhina, Maui Tā-Vā-He-Ako Tevita Ka'ili, and Kula-He Fonua Ping-Ann Addo (see Ka'ili et al, 2017) who use tā (time) and vā (space) to capture the relational rhythms that are key to understanding how intergenerational Indigenous knowledge is sustained, through Tongan language and culture in the diaspora. Tā and vā (time and space) are imbued through analysis on factors including people's age, knowledge level in Tongan language and culture, and their place of residence—whether they live, or have lived, in the motherland or in the diaspora at certain periods of time in their lives. The Tongan Indigenous intergenerational relational rhythms of tā (time) and vā (space) are key to understanding how to sustain Tongan language and culture in the motherland as well as in the diaspora.

In this article, I first explain Tongan language and culture. Secondly, I discuss Tongan identity. Thirdly, I explore the sustainability of Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa NZ. Finally, I posit the importance of Tongan Indigenous theorisation and practice of tā (time) and vā (space) through the metaphors of fakatoukatea (skillful at both ways), mo'ui fetokoni'aki (help each other) and mo'ui fakapotopoto (sustainable livelihood). Each metaphor extends the relational rhythms of intergenerational knowledge sustainability, a way forward towards

highlighting and capturing Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa NZ and around the world.

**Tongan Language and Culture**  
**Ko e ‘Otua mo Tonga ko Hoku Tofi’a**  
**(God and Tonga are my Inheritance)**  
***Tonga’s Motto in the Coat of Arms***

The expression of Tonga’s motto *Ko e ‘Otua mo Tonga ko hoku tofi’a* (God and Tonga are my inheritance) by King George Tupou 1, the monarch that unified the island kingdom, is stated in its Coat of Arms. That God and Tonga are my inheritance reflects that Tongan families hold close to heart Tonga’s language and culture. Tongan people are proud to declare that they were never colonised by any worldly foreign powers and that their tofi’a or inheritance is only to God, people, and their land. Tonga’s motto binds all the Tongan people together around the world which is significant in sustaining Tongan language and culture throughout generations both in the motherland and the diaspora. International sports, especially rugby league, through the Mate Ma’a Tonga (MMT) meaning to die hard for Tonga, is a portrayal of how male players embody Tonga’s motto and express tā-vā as intergenerational markings across places and spaces. The film *Red, White & Brass*, (2023) depicts how Tonga’s motto is vital to Tongan people’s existence and how the next generation navigate and negotiate their cultural identities as being Tongan-born and -raised on the settler-colonial fonua (land) of Aotearoa NZ, Australia, and the USA. The practicality and longevity of this motto for Tonga, therefore, is through the continuity of its language and culture.

Symbolically, Tongan language and culture come to stand for each other in the minds of both Tongan heritage and non-Tongan heritage in which, in part-whole fashion, its songs, social structure, customs and traditions, proverbs, beliefs, blessings and curses are written and verbally constituted (Ferguson, 2006). The loss of a language and ways of oral communication can result in a loss of culture and traditional cultural ways of knowing and doing. Taumoefolau (2023), a Tongan linguist, in a group email conversation with Tongan academics in Aotearoa NZ stated that:

Knowledge (like ideas, thoughts, concepts, message, content, and such like) has no existence on its own, unless it is expressed in a language. Also knowledge (what one is expressing/saying) and language (the means of expression) are so closely intertwined and automatised that they may as well be two sides of the same coin. (personal communication, January 2023)

Although Tongan language and culture is evolving, the basic core cultural values are the same as they have been for centuries (Blamires, 1939; Cummins, 1977; Martin, 1991; Parsonage, 1942). Hence, the saying “Oku kei Tonga pē ‘a Tonga” (Tonga is still Tonga)

(Fanua & Webster, 1996) which implies that, despite human and environmental evolution the essence of being Tongan (language and culture) is the same for centuries. The basic aspects of Tonga's unwavering language and culture are discussed in the following sections.

### 1. Tongan Language (Lea Faka-Tonga)

The official languages in Tonga are Tongan (Lea Faka-Tonga) and English (Lea-Faka-Pālangi). Tongan language is one of the most ancient of the Polynesian languages and is a branch of the Austronesian language family (Campbell, 2001). It has unique characteristics in both spoken and written form. It is historically significant because it includes many old words and expressions for ancient customs and cultural practices such as the phrase *sia heu lupe* in (pigeon snaring) and the word *fāngongo* in no'o'anga (shark fishing), that are now extinct or no longer practiced (Kalavite, 2022). In the language, there are levels of vocabulary and usage that reflect Tonga's hierarchical social structure known as the honorific register. This is where different vocabularies are used for the king and the royal household, nobles, and commoners (Ministry of Education, 2007). The structures of Tongan and English languages are different which prevents the smooth transfer of meaning making from Tongan into English (Taumoefolau, 2004). Many Tongan words have no English equivalent and cannot be translated correctly and effectively (Cocker & Kalavite, 2014).

Tongan language, as a means of communication, is crucial to expressing the cultural ways, attitudes, beliefs, and actions associated with being Tongan ('ulungaanga faka-Tonga), which characterise the Tongan society (Kalavite, 2014). Tongans who are born and raised in tu'a-Tonga (the diaspora) struggle with speaking Tongan and often find it hard to understand and conduct Tongan customs and traditions, resulting in loss of meaning and understanding within conversations (Taumoefolau, 2006). This deteriorates language and aids cultural loss because both are linked (Taumoefolau, 2023). Similarly, knowing and being able to converse in Tongan language is an important feature of Tongan identity because language is not just an instrument for communication; it is also an important, constitutive, feature of a community's identity (Ferguson, 2006). Thus, if Tongan language is lost in the diaspora, it will cause serious harm to Tongan culture and identity (Kalavite, 2010).

### 2. Tongan Culture (Mo'ui pe Anga Faka-Tonga)

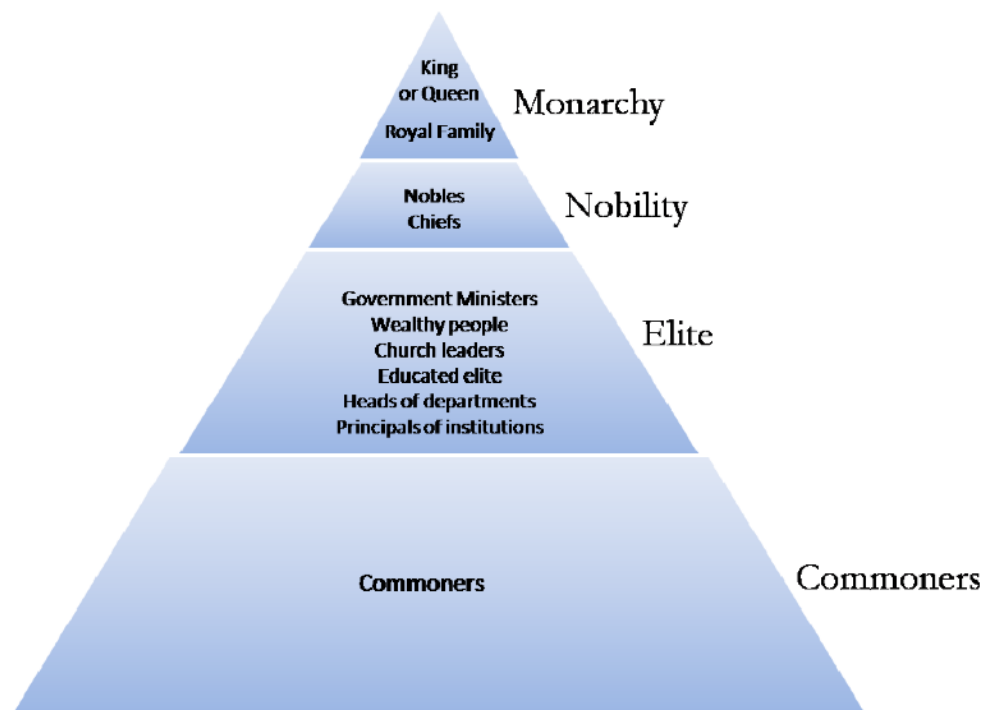
There are five fundamental aspects of Tongan culture that are important and are still practised today. These are: kinship ties (nofo 'a kāinga), customs and traditions (ngaahi tukufakaholo), core values (ngaahi 'ulungaanga mahu'inga), religious beliefs (tui fakalotu) and ako (formal education) (Kalavite & Uele, 2023). These features are described in the following sections in no particular order of importance.

#### 1. Kinship Ties (Nofo 'a Kāinga)

Tongan kinship ties are based on two important aspects; the social hierarchy and kinship circles. Tongan peoples' lives are controlled by their positions in the social hierarchy as well as how they are related to one another as relatives in the kinship circles. These are demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2 below. In Figure 1, the Tongan social hierarchy

(fokotu'utu'u 'o e nofo faka-Tonga) consists of four successive layers, or strata, of people each with their own code of behaviours, rights and duties, and accepted living standards. The king or queen and his/her royal family at the apex, nobles and the chiefs in the second layer, an emerging layer of elite in the third layer and, at the base of the hierarchy, are the commoners.

**Figure 1**  
*Tongan Social Hierarchy (Kalavite, 2010)*

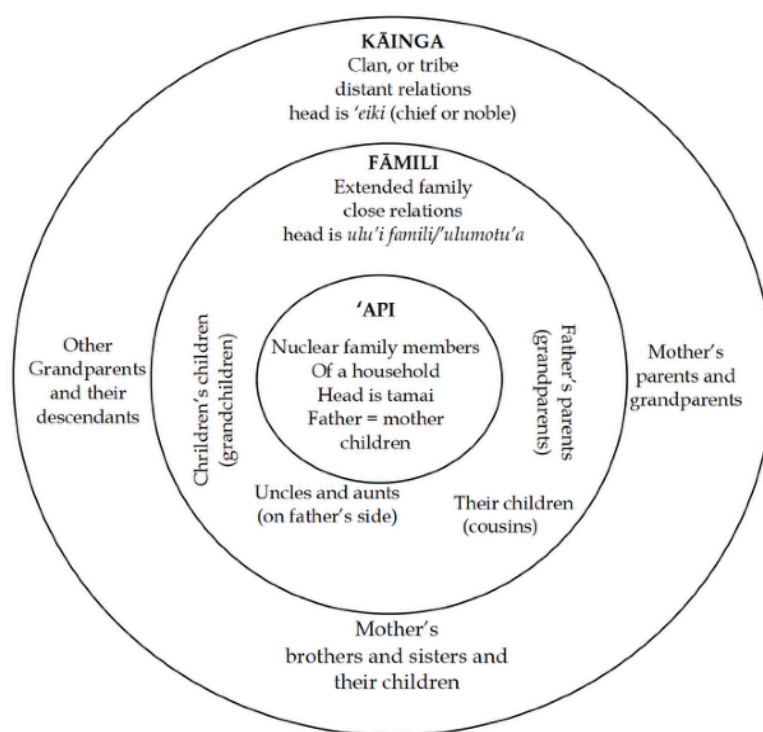


The importance of the social hierarchy in the Tongan society is that the higher a person is in the hierarchy, the more power, respect and mana<sup>1</sup> they have, and the seemingly less challenging life becomes. This is in comparison to other Tongan people who are not of that status and do not always have similar access to economic capital and privileges. Success in life helps to increase their status up the social strata, cross social barriers, and achieve higher honours in the society (Kalavite, 2010).

In Figure 2, the kinship circle is the other basic social unit of Tongan culture that shows how a person is related or connected to other people in the family and community. These are a series of ever-widening circles where the core is the 'api (household), the inner

circle of close relations. It is the nucleus of the father, mother and children, and the head is the father (tamai). 'Api may also include other kinfolks such as grandchildren, sons-in-law, cousins, uncles, aunts and so on who stay in the household. The next outer circle is the fāmili (family), which is the wider circle of close relations headed by a headman ('ulumotu'a). It is an extended family consisting of varying numbers of kinship households and may include 50 to 100 relatives who live in different households. The outer circle is the kāinga/ kolo (village, clan or tribe) of distant relations, which usually includes all members of a village and is headed by a nōpele or 'eiki (noble or chief). People coming from the same place would consider themselves as belonging to the same kāinga (tribe) or matakali (clan) (Kalavite, 2010).

**Figure 2**  
*Kinship Circles (Kalavite, 2010)*



Kinship ties through the social hierarchy and kinship circle serve as a social welfare system in Tonga where obligations and responsibilities are reciprocated. These relationships are the principal cohesion features of the Tongan society which are very important and meant to pass on from generation to generation (Kalavite, 2012).

**II. Customs and Traditions (Ngaahi Tukufakaholo)**

Tongan customs and traditions are very complex in terms of the various obligations (fatongia) expected of certain people. Within their relationships in the Tongan kinship ties

system, no two persons hold the same rank (Bain, 1967). A person's status can be higher or lower in rank in relation to other people within the society; depending on age, sex, or distance of relationship, and with other members where they can have rights or duties (Gailey, 1987). These reciprocal roles are best illustrated during cultural ceremonies such as birthdays, weddings and funerals, with the roles of the fahu<sup>2</sup>, fā'ēhuki<sup>3</sup> and the liongi<sup>4</sup> (Blamires, 1939; Luke, 1954). For example, the fahu is the highest position at cultural celebrations where s/he and their families are honoured and have rights to everything (Rutherford, 1996). On the other side, the liongi in funerals and fa'ēhuki in weddings and birthdays hold the lowest position where they, and all their families, are expected to serve everyone. In this case, they have no rights whatsoever during these cultural events. Individuals, therefore, have dual roles in their entire lifetime where they are positioned as a fahu with their mother's kāinga but liongi and fa'ēhuki with their father's kāinga (Crane, 1978).

### **III. Core Values: 'Four Golden Pillars of the Tongan Culture' (Ngaahi 'Ulungaanga Mahu'inga Faka-Tonga - Faa'i Kaveikoula')**

The overarching core value in the lives of Tongan people is living together in a cooperative lifestyle (mo'ui fakatokolahi) and helping each other (fetokoni'aki) where they keep good relationships (tauhi vā) towards one another through their cultural obligations (fatongia). The underlying purpose of their lives is to maintain good relationships and strong communities that are based on strengthening social capital (Taufe'ulungaki, 2003). These overarching principles are based on four significant values known as the 'four golden pillars (faa'i kavei koula) of Tongan culture'. These are; faka'apa'apa (respect), tauhivā (good relationship), lototō (generosity/humility), and mamahi'ime'a (loyalty/commitment). These values are quite complex and intertwined that they can be used loosely in Tongan conversations. These are further discussed in the following sections in no particular order of importance.

- i. **Faka'apa'apa (Respect).** Faka'apa'apa is showing mutual respect amongst family and kin members. It is often loosely translated in English as 'respect' but it is more than respect as understood within a Western context. It is an unwritten social contract, that all Tongans aspire and adhere to in various degrees and contexts, where respect begins with a shared understanding in a relational social contract between two people. Respect is demonstrated through behaviour, speech, dress code, and meeting cultural and familial obligations (Johansson-Fua et al., 2007). Respect is also shown for those of higher social and political status to oneself and people become more guarded and deliberate "in the presence of royalty, nobles, high commissioners, politicians or religious leaders" (Keller & Swaney, 1998, p. 29). There is respect between different members of the family such as brothers and sisters, who should not sleep in the same room, or children not to eat their father's leftover food, or even to swear at each other. Faka'apa'apa is a combination of



Christian and Tongan moralities and is expected to be practised everyday (Cowling, 2005).

- ii. *Tauhivā (Good Relationships)*.** Tauhivā is good balance of behaviour between Tongan people which means that, within the society, they help each other (fetokoni'aki), co-operate through working with/for each other (fengāue'aki), have a concern for or connect to each other (felave'aki), help without being asked (fekapokapoaki), are neighbourly to one another (fetu'akoi'aki), help through mutual sharing (fe'utungaki), are eager to do things for each other (fevehi'aki), and respect or honour one another (feveitokai'aki or toka'i) (Churchward, 1959). This crucial human quality helps to establish peace and harmony within the Tongan society. Good Tongan citizens show good relationships (tauhivā) in their daily lives; those who do not show these qualities are not very popular within their families and communities. The exchange of gifts as in obligations (fai fatongia) is a means of tauhivā, showing fetokoni'aki and feveitokai'aki amongst themselves.
- iii. *Lototō (Humility)*.** Lototō, also means generosity (nima homo), modesty (faka'aki'akimui) or being subservient (mo'ulaloa). Tongans show their humility by not boasting or showing what they are capable of in front of other people, especially those of higher rank (Taufe'ulungaki, 2003). Lototō also means humble (anga-fakatōkilalo), meek (anga-vaivai), and to act humbly (fakamā'ulalo). It also is closely related to obedience (talangofua). Humility, where it means “willing, ready (in mind), eager” (Churchward, 1959, p. 305) is the willingness, eagerness, or mental readiness of someone to do something. People of lower ranks in the social order should obey and show humility to those of higher ranks. Those of the younger generations should obey and show humility and generosity to those of the older generations. Children should obey their parents, wives, their husbands, and church members, their leaders. Lototō (humility) as in anga fakatōkilalo encourages loyalty and commitment (mamahi'ime'a) which strengthens the Tongan culture. Sometimes humility is a very confusing element of Tongan culture.
- iv. *Mamahi'ime'a (Loyalty and Commitment)*.** Mamahi'ime'a can also mean obedience (talangofua). It is defined by Churchward (1959) as “submissive or habitually obedient” (p. 448). It is the loyalty and commitment towards all the obligations (fatongia) to the family, church, and society/country that help Tongan people keep their good relationships (tauhi vā) with all the members of their kāinga (families). When Tongans enact mamahi'ime'a, it means that they do their utmost to fulfil their obligations to their family, church, and country (fāmili, siasi, and fonua).
- v. *'Ofa mo 'Oua 'e Fakamā (Love and not to be Shameful)*.** 'Ofa mo 'Oua 'e Fakamā (Love and not to be Shameful) drives these four golden pillars of faka'apa'apa (respect), tauhivā (good relationship), lototō (humility), and

mamahi'ime'a (loyalty). 'Ofa is used for all forms of human love, including Christian love, and is very important. This resonates with a well-known verse from the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:13: There are three things that last: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is LOVE. ('Aua! Ka 'oku tolonga pē 'a Tui, 'a 'Amanaki, 'a 'Ofa; 'a e tolu ni pē: pea ko honau tu'ukimu'a ko 'OFA). The greatest commandment in Christian teaching is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Te ke 'ofa ki ho 'Otua 'aki ho loto, laumālie mo ho 'atamai kotoa). And "You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself" (Te ke 'ofa ki ho kāinga 'o hangē ko ho'o 'ofa kiate koe) (Mathew 22: 38-39). Having 'ofa at the centre of nofo 'a kāinga is an expectation which enables tauhivā between themselves through faka'ap'apa, lototō and mamahi'ime'a (Kalavite & Uele, 2023). 'Ofa maintains good reputation (ngali lelei) and avoids shame and loss of face (fakamā). Shame is not taken lightly by Tongans. When someone is seriously shamed or caught or even suspected of doing something bad, s/he is considered socially unacceptable and endures untold measures of self-imposed personal agony. In extreme cases, people have been driven to suicide (Keller & Swaney, 1998); therefore, Tongans hold strongly to 'Ofa and they avoid being shamed as the basic precept of their Christian belief which guides and bonds Tongan society together.

#### **IV. Religious Belief (Tui Fakalotu)**

Another important feature in the lives of Tongans is their religious beliefs (tui fakalotu). Tonga is a Christian country with 98% of the population belonging to a Christian church (Department of Statistics, 2021). The connection to Christianity is illustrated in the Tongan flag, which is red with a bold red cross on a white rectangle in the upper left-hand corner. The red background stands for the blood of Jesus Christ, the red cross represents the Christian religion and white stands for purity (Guile, 2005). This concept of God has strengthened Tongan beliefs about love, joy, peace, and the guiding principles of life. The Tongan Christian belief is that God is the source of all good things and God blesses those who truly believe in him and live the Christian faith. Tongans also believe that God has the power to protect and empower people and that every blessing is from God who rewards those who believe and follow his teachings. Tongan people are free to express their religious beliefs in different forms as they belong to many churches. The main churches are Roman Catholic, Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, Free Church of Tonga, Church of Tonga, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, Tokaikolo Fellowship, Gospel Churches and the Baha'i Faith (Howard, 2004; Suren, 2004; Wood & Wood Ellem, 1977).

#### **V. Education (Ako)**

Tonga is a small island nation with limited resources. Formal education represents an agent of development through the transmission of knowledge, job skills, cultural norms, and values. Tongan people strive very hard to give their people good education which is reflected in the 98.5% literacy rate of Tonga's population—one of the highest in the world (Tonga Department of Statistics, 2021). Tonga, at one time, had the most PhD (Doctor of

Philosophy) holders per capita in the world (Ewins, 1998). Tonga is rapidly becoming part of the global village and education develops skills necessary for Tongans to participate in the wider world affairs and benefit the country (Tonga Ministry of Education, 2020). Every good habit is believed to be learnt from school and, when someone behaves badly, they are frowned upon which provokes the saying, ‘what’s the use of going to school’ (‘ko e hā ē ‘aonga e ō ‘o ako’). Tongans view formal educational success as not only providing better job opportunities and economic success but also as a way of strengthening the development of the moral and cultural values that underpin the Tongan society. They also believe that well-informed and educated people are fundamental to the society’s overall health and well-being.

Tongan people, through their language and culture, create meaning and structure reality. They develop ways of knowing, categorize and process information, and respect rules and regulations that govern their behaviours. They construct institutions and their characteristics, and transform abstract notions into concrete living worlds (Taufe‘ulungaki, 2000). Thus, Tongan language and culture, which are transmitted through education and supported by religious beliefs of love and good service to others, resonate with the country’s motto “Ko e ‘Otua mo Tonga ko hoku tofi’a” (God and Tonga are my inheritance).

**Tongan Identity**  
**Sai pē Si’i Tonga Siueli e Pasifiki**  
**(Dear Tonga Excels, Jewel of the Pacific)**  
***Late Queen Sālote Composition***

“Sai pe si’i Tonga Siueli e Pasifiki” (Dear Tonga excels, jewel of the Pacific) is the last line of the late Queen Sālote Tupou III’s song *Siueli e Pasifiki (Jewel of the Pacific)*. This composition is where the late Queen Sālote “praises Fiji, Tahiti, Sāmoa, and Hawai’i, but finds that Tonga is still the best or ‘Jewel of the Pacific” (Tuku‘aho, Taumoefolau, Kaeppler & Wood-Ellem, 2004. p. 194; Velt, 2000. p. 78). This line becomes a famous saying when Tongan migrants struggle in their host countries. Then the saying “sai pe si’i Tonga Siueli e Pasifiki” is sometimes uttered, meaning that *there is no place like Tonga, the Jewel of the Pacific*. This saying foregrounds the importance and uniqueness of Tonga as a country with its physical and cultural richness that makes Tonga the most beautiful country like no other in the Pacific.

Tongan identity is generally defined as those who look Tongan, have the genetic makeup inherited from Tongan parents or ancestors, speak the Tongan language, think Tongan, and do things in the Tongan way (Morton Lee, 2003). Ideally, this construction of Tongan identity has all the three aspects of: genetic inheritance, speaking the Tongan language, and practicing Tongan culture. This definition is problematic and contentious as there are some people who are physically Tongan with Tongan genetic inheritance but

cannot speak Tongan or do not practice the culture. There are some who are not of Tongan descent but can speak fluent Tonga and practice Tongan culture (Taumoefolau, 2006). My definition of Tongan identity is someone who claims their Tonganness with any one of these three aspects of identity markers.

Figure 3 below is an example from our own family. This is a recent photo of our sons and their wives, Sailosi and Orenda Orita, Halatoaongo and Faimanifo Susana with our grandchildren Lorenzo Matisse Chanel, Janaya Telesia, Loata Tuli, Sesilia 'Ana, Kensi Tamara, and lasinta Vikatolia.

### Figure 3

*Kalavite Family Photo - 2023 New Year's Day (Kalavite, 2023)*

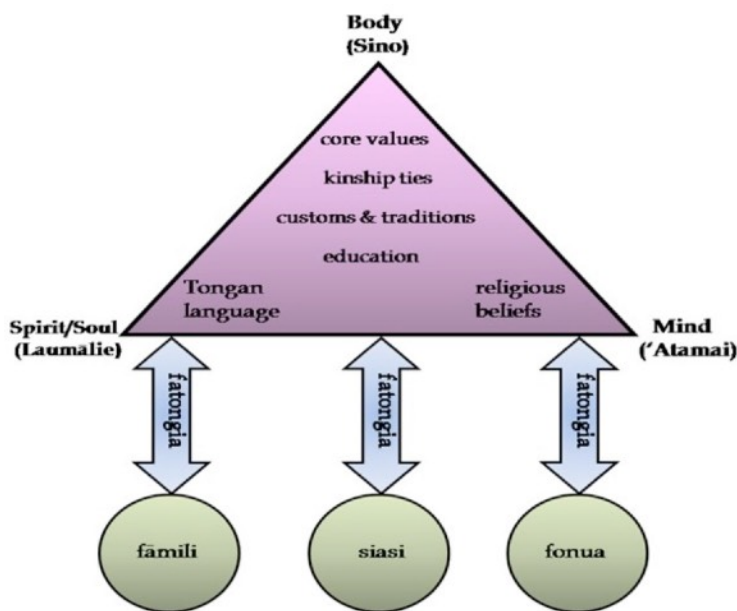
*From left to right: Faimanifo, Sesilia, Halatoaongo, Janaya, Lorenzo, lasinta, Loata, Sailosi, Kensi, and Orita*



Absent from this photo are my husband and I (parents and grandparents) who are of Tongan heritage, speak fluent Tongan, and strongly practice Tongan culture. My sons are of Tongan heritage, speak Tongan language fluently, and practice Tongan culture. Their wives, our daughters-in-law, are of Samoan heritage, practice Tongan culture, and cannot speak the Tongan language fluently. Our grandchildren, who are of Tongan heritage, practice Tongan culture, and cannot speak the Tongan language fluently. For me, if asked who are of Tongan identity in these members of my family in this photo, I would say, “all of them!” because each of them has one, two, or all the three identity markers of being Tongan.

Figure 4 below summarises an individual cultural reality that develops Tongan identity which influences one’s own life and the lives of others, in the homeland (loto-Tonga) and the diaspora (tu’a-Tonga).

**Figure 4**  
*Tongan Personal Cultural Reality (Kalavite, 2010)*



The Tongan identity development in Figure 4 is a representation of three linked/integrated dimensions of the physical body of (sino), spirit/soul (laumālie) and mind (‘atamai). Embedded in a Tongan person’s body, mind, and spirit are Tongan language and culture (core values, kinship ties, customs and traditions), education, and religious beliefs. A Tongan person is connected to the society through his/her fāmili (family), siasi (church) and fonua (land and people) by committing to their fatongia (obligations). This is what really identifies a person as Tongan.

The Tongans in the diaspora have multiple identities and live within multiple realities because their identities are moulded by their environments and their exposure to the members of the society (Bell & Matthewman, 2004). Their positions are determined by how they cope with the global, physical, social, economic and political changes that influence their lives (Buckland, 1997). They move from the collective understandings of being Tongan to individual interpretations of knowing themselves within their own environments which creates their own unique identities that are distinctively different from other people (Kalavite, 2010). The dilemma in this situation is that Tongan people’s lives, which are based on a collective foundation, are trying to cope in a western context that is based on individual values (Māhina, 2008). Many Tongan people have identity crises because they are a minority group in the society in which they live (Mila, 2005). There are also Tongans with mixed ethnicities who struggle to speak and practice Tongan language and culture. This has

allowed for the emergence of new cultural traditions which are often debated in terms of cultural authenticity. This alternately contributes to changes in Tongan language and culture (Kalavite, 2010). Thus, it is extremely important to understand both Tongan and other environments and their relationships in the identity development of Tongan people in the diaspora.

## **Sustainability of Tongan Language and Culture in Aotearoa NZ** **Tākanga ‘a Tongiaki** **(Companionship of a Fleet of Canoes Called Tongiaki)** ***Tongan Proverbial Saying***

Tākanga ‘a Tongiaki is a fleet of Tongan small canoes for the purpose of helping one another in the sea. Metaphorically, this is when people help each other in good times and bad. I liken tongiaki in this context to Tongans and non-Tongans in Tonga and the diaspora, who help one another to sustain Tongan language and culture. I, one of the Tongiaki in this fleet, realized three important issues that Tongan people struggled with in Aotearoa NZ and that have had an impact on their abilities to sustain Tongan language and culture.

First, Tongan knowledge and perceptions of Tongan culture in Aotearoa NZ are still the same as that of the motherland; however, the practices of customs and tradition have adapted to Aotearoa NZ environment. The huge difference is the commodification of cultural practices which encourages competition when conducting cultural obligations (*fai fatongia/fua kavenga*) within families and communities, when some people are looking for status, fame and power. The aggrandizement of cultural celebrations, alongside technological accessibility, has allowed international involvement of the wider families and communities which means more pressure to spend financially and give more time for these events (Kalavite, 2010; Ketu‘u, 2014). Big, expensive weddings, birthdays, and funerals are sometimes beyond the means of some Tongans which leads to financial hardships, deteriorates kinship ties, changes customs and traditions, and prolongs emotional stress and excitement. This makes it hard for those involved to move on quickly with their lives, and sometimes that results in poor health and wellbeing, and struggles to keep up with the rest of Aotearoa NZ. These issues resonate with Tongan families in Australia, and the USA (Morton Lee, 2007; Niumeitolu, 2008).

Secondly, there are tensions and confusions in younger generations on the conflicts between the Tongan collective lifestyle and Pālangi individual lifestyle (Hoogland & Kalavite, 2005). The Tongan core values and behaviours of *fetokoni‘aki*, *faka‘apa‘apa*, *tauhiivā*, *lototō*, *mamahi‘ime‘a* and *‘ofa* can be confusing for Tongan youth in the diaspora because these values can both be a support and a constraint in people’s lives when they have too much or too little commitment to these core values. Tongan people, therefore, need to find the balance as it is crucial to stay within the limit of what they can do so as not to jeopardise and constrain their abilities to be successful. Intergenerational conflicts sometimes occur in

Tongan families when conservative parents do not understand their younger families who are versatile in both Tongan and western lifestyles. Younger generations are taught to be more critical, know their rights, learn about sex, which is totally different from that of the Tongan cultural values of respect, good relationships, humility, and loyalty (Kalavite, 2010).

Thirdly, is the decline in the use of Tongan language as more and more younger Tongans are unable to speak in Tongan or use proper Tongan language (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). This problem is a result of a combination of many factors such as families not speaking in Tongan at home due to parents not having enough time with their children or, it could be that parents just prefer not to speak the language at all (Taumoefolau, 2006). For many Tongan and other Pacific families living in Aotearoa NZ, the acquisition of the English language is believed by parents to link well with academic knowledge and success in schooling (Ministry of Education, 2007). Sometimes, schools do not offer to teach Tongan so students do not have that opportunity. Other times, Tongan students just do not study the Tongan language in schools that offer the Tongan language. One strong factor is the increase in mixed marriages of Tongans in Aotearoa NZ so the households use English as a medium of communication (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Another very important factor is when families choose not to be involved in Tongan cultural groups such as churches and community groups. The Tongan gatherings are where most of Tongan language and culture are practiced and spoken so they miss out on the opportunities to learn Tongan language and culture in these situations (Paea, 2015).

Finally, Indigenous languages and cultures, including the Tongan language, are avenues of hope for the world's future; hence, the world is currently committing to sustaining Indigeneity at all fronts (UNESCO, 2023). Although the Tongan people still operate strongly on an extended family kinship ties platform, the global social and cultural influences have changed much of Tongan culture both in loto-Tonga and tu'a-Tonga. This is a major concern for everyone; therefore, a lot of work has been done in Aotearoa NZ to sustain Tongan language and culture.

In the following sections, I discuss the sustainability measures for the survival of Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa NZ by exploring the contributions made by different groups in Aotearoa NZ, the motherland, and around the world.

### **1. Sustaining Tongan Language and Culture by Tongan People in NZ**

It is evident that Tongan people in Aotearoa NZ are proud of their Tongan heritage, so they are trying to live comfortably as Tongans by speaking in Tongan and practicing their Tongan culture. Their priorities are their families (fāмили), church (siasi), and country (fonua) which are the spaces where Tongan language and culture are practised and maintained (Kalavite, 2012). Most Tongan people are knowledgeable about the importance of their own language and culture. They take pride and aspire to sustain and transmit it to the next generations (Fa'avae, 2016; Ta'ai, 2015). With the promotion of the Tongan Language Week Celebration in Aotearoa NZ, most Tongans are now taking opportunities to speak Tongan at

home, in Tongan churches, Tongan communities, and even in the education sector (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2023). These are opportunities where older generations support younger generations to understand some of the cultural confusions and tensions between the Western and Tongan cultures. Some Tongan people in NZ are working hard in their personal, professional, and social engagements to sustain Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa NZ.

## **2. Sustaining Tongan Language and Culture by Non-Tongan People in NZ**

Sustaining Tongan language and culture by non-Tongan people in Aotearoa NZ is largely done through government policies and incentives in the country, especially the Ministry of Pacific Peoples (Ministry of Pacific Peoples website, 2023). At the national level, there are Pacific and Tongan Members of Parliament (MP) such as Hon. Carmel Sepuloni, Jenny Salesa, and 'Anahila Kanongata'a-Suisuiki, who work for the benefit of Pacific peoples including the Tongans. NZ government ministries are the source of information, programs, and funding to support the Tongan people. For example, the Ministry of Pacific Peoples (MPP) developed the NZ Pacific Languages Strategies 2022-2032 (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2022) that include Tongan programs and funding incentives, such as Tongan language weeks (2023), Tongan radio programs, scholarships, and so on. The Ministry of Education provides opportunities for the teaching of Tongan language in early childhood, high schools, and tertiary education, and also provides scholarships for Tongan students. The Ministry of Social Development also has funding available for Tongan people. At the local level the city councils support Tongan community groups through funding, events, scholarships, and local information to promote their language and culture. This support from government agencies at national and local levels is significant in sustaining Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa, NZ.

## **3. Support from the Motherland and Global Communities**

There is no direct support from the motherland towards sustaining Tongan language and culture in Aotearoa NZ but there is some indirect support gained by the strong ties between Tongan people in NZ and their families in Tonga and around the world. These strong ties help families in Aotearoa NZ to maintain Tongan language and culture. The link between Tongan people in NZ and their families in Tonga and worldwide are through improved information and communication technology, where people can communicate in both verbal and written Tongan language. It is understood that there is an increasing value in the connection between Tongan people around the world in sustaining Tongan language and culture but there is no formal support from the motherland to the diaspora.

Globally, the United Nations (UN) promotes the sustainability of Indigenous languages and cultures by stating that it is crucial to ensure the protection of the cultural identity and dignity of Indigenous peoples and safeguard their traditional heritage. There are huge initiatives through programs and funding on this front from the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2023) that benefits the Tongan people.



For the purpose of this talanoa (talk) in fofola e fala ka e alea e kāinga, I, one of the Tongiaki, am proposing an Indigenous understanding and theorisation as a way forward to strengthen the sustainability of Tongan language and culture in Tonga and the diaspora, which I discuss in the following sections.

**Tongan Language and Culture across Tā (Time) and Vā (Space)  
through the Metaphors of Fakatoukatea, Fetokoni'aki and Fakapotopoto  
“Tu'u e Lā mo e Poupou”  
(The Sail is Up and So is Its Support)  
*Tongan Proverbial Saying***

Tu'u e lā mo e poupou (The sail is up and so is its support) refers to when a given task is performed to a standard that is over and above what is required (Māhina, 2004). I liken this proverb to the notion that there is support that sustains the current sail of Tongan language and culture. The strength of this support is derived from the Indigenous intergenerational relational rhythm theorisation of time and space (tā and vā). This begins by understanding that Tongan people organise time (tā) and space (vā) differently from other cultures which can affect their social relationships (Ka'ili, 2008). Differences between physical and social environments means that Tongans find themselves in a different tā-vā (time-space) relationship that is naturally structured individually rather than collectively (Kalavite, 2017). Tongan people in Aotearoa NZ are at a different space, which is Aotearoa NZ, and not Tonga or anywhere else. They are also in a different time, twenty first century, and not an earlier period in history so they organise time and space differently from that of their host country. It is clear that the differences between these two cultures affect Tongans in Aotearoa NZ so there is a need for flexibility within Tongan and non-Tongan cultural relationships in terms of tā (time) and vā (space) to release social tensions and consequently enhance people's success in life. Engaging in tauhivā creates harmonious relationships that provoke more positive feelings which enable success in life (Kalavite, 2017). Success in maintaining Tongan language and culture are embodied in three Tongan relationship metaphors of; fakatoukatea (skillful in every way), mo'ui fetokoni'aki (supportive livelihood) and mo'ui fakapotopoto (sustainable livelihood).

Metaphors are employed as figurative language that inspires in-depth thinking and discussion. Tongan metaphors inspire creative yet critical tā-vā theorising that seeks to unfold knowing-seeing-feeling-doing-being-becoming Tongan in other lands. Metaphors also highlight layered and nuanced meanings that are useful in one's search for possibilities in the diaspora. In the next sections, I articulate the metaphors of Fakatoukatea, Mo'ui fetokoni'aki and Mo'ui fakapotopoto in relation to the process of maintaining Tongan language and culture.

- **Metaphor of Fakatoukatea (Skilful in Every Way)**

Fakatoukatea as in skilful in every way in this context, refers to Tongans who robustly belong to two or more cultures, such as Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Western, and others, which means they are bicultural or multicultural. It also means “when two people or things are compatible in every way” (Māhina, 2004, p. 57). It is the multiplicity of skills and knowledge across the Tongan and Western contexts (Mafile’o, 2005). Multiplicity stimulate, challenge, and increase the range of possibilities and responses to enhance the intellectual endeavours (Stiehm, 1994). While Tongans aspire to retain their Tongan language and culture, they have to understand their multicultural situations in NZ to really be able to flourish and be successful in life. Those who are fakatoukatea have harmoniously positioned themselves within the interface (tā and vā) of the Tongan and western culture where they are “Ala i sia ala i kolonga”<sup>5</sup> as they move fluidly within the interface of all cultures using the best of every worlds. Tongans who appear to be able to move fluidly between cultures find it easier to commit to whatever they do, and are successful (Kalavite, 2010). This is a proposed way forward for Tongans to be versatile, flexible and do things efficiently in Aotearoa NZ in their endeavour to sustain Tongan language and culture.

- **Metaphor of Mo’ui Fetokoni’aki (Supportive Livelihood)**

Mo’ui Fetokoni’aki is supportive livelihood, the overarching core value for Tongans. It is through mo’ui fetokoni’aki that Tongans are taking their fāmili, siasi and fonua with them throughout their journeys in life. It is the strength and core of the Tongan culture, the basic asset to enhance Tongan people’s achievement in life. Fetokoni’aki amongst fāmili and kāinga in teamwork can help them to achieve. It is essential in developing a more nurturing, reflective and people-oriented learning and working environment (Kalavite, 2020). This is where the fāmili, kāinga, church, communities, and country understand the individual needs and challenges that Tongan people have in their daily lives. There is a call for both Tongans and non-Tongans in Aotearoa NZ, the motherland, and the diaspora, to work together to sustain Tongan language and culture.

- **Metaphor of Mo’ui Fakapotopoto (Sustainable Livelihood)**

Mo’ui fakapotopoto is sustainable livelihood with a life that is worthwhile and being able to use the existing resources wisely for the sake of the future. It encompasses a spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual capabilities to be multi-talented with a range of skills, wide understanding of the environment. The underlying practice in mo’ui fakapotopoto is a strong belief in maintaining good relationships and fulfilling cultural obligations (Johansson-Fua et al., 2007). Mo’ui fakapotopoto is similar to the concept of ‘topono’ which means to feel satisfied and contented with whatever one has and whatever one can give. This is a call for all Tongan people in the motherland

(loto-Tonga) and the diaspora (tu'a-Tonga) to mo'ui fakapotopoto in the process of sustaining Tongan language and culture.

These metaphors suggest that, to sustain Tongan language and culture, all the people of Tonga worldwide need to feel at peace with what they can give in terms of money and other material wealth to their fāmili, siasi and fonua. They should neither be embarrassed with what they can give, nor compete with each other because this can exhaust their resources and cause financial trouble. It is also advisable for all the Tongan people to recognise the trends of globalisation and improved information communication technology, so they are able to decide the limits of their involvement with the wider kavenga fakafāmili (family obligations), kavenga fakasiasi (church obligations) and kavenga fakafonua (country obligations). This could enable them to cope with their own living conditions in Aotearoa NZ. These metaphors also show that there are specific boundaries or tā-vā time-space limits on relationships within Tongan physical and social environments which enable them to have better resources to stay healthy in sino, laumālie and 'atamai to sustain Tongan language and culture. There is a call for sensitivity and flexibility through fakatoukatea, fetokoni'aki fakapotopoto, amongst Tongans and non-Tongans in Aotearoa NZ, the motherland, and around the world, to add value to sustaining and preserving Tongan language and culture for the next generation. These metaphors need to be embodied in practical strategies which can strengthen government policies in the motherland, that could provide support for maintaining Tongan language and culture in the diaspora. The Tongan people, need to be fakatoukatea, mo'ui fetokoni'aki and mo'ui fakapotopoto by being visible and skilfully working together in a sustainable way to preserve our own Tongan language and culture everywhere as depicted in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5**

*Conference Presentation at NZALT 2022 (Kalavite, 2023)*



Figure 5 shows one of my conference presentations at the NZ Association of Language Teachers (NZALT) in 2022: *Language and Academic Achievement in Higher Education*. NZALT is a non-profit organisation run by language teachers, educators, and researchers in Aotearoa NZ to support their work in education. Since the Tongan language is taught at all levels of formal education in NZ, many Tongan language teachers are members of this association. I was invited to present on the teaching of Tongan language and culture at the University of Otago, Dunedin, NZ. Sharing my experience at the university is a portrayal of these metaphors of fakatoukatea, mou'i fetokoni'aki and mo'ui fakapotopoto in sustaining our Tongan language and culture. I am fakatoukatea in both Tongan and Western culture, attending the conference to share my knowledge showed my mo'ui fetokoni'aki and mo'ui fakapotopoto to sustain the Tongan language in Aotearoa NZ. Opportunities like this to sustain and pass on our Tongan language and culture can happen anywhere, anytime. Whenever there is a chance, it is important to embrace it and contribute to this very important endeavour.

**Conclusion**  
**Leveleva ē Malanga ka e Tau Atu**  
**(My Speech has Come to an End. May it Reach You)**  
***Tongan Proverbial Saying***

“Leveleva ē malanga kae tau atu” (“My speech has come to an end. May it reach you”) is my Indigenous Tongan salutation of an expression of hope that my message has been properly communicated to you. Being an Indigenous Tongan, it is significant to end off this way with so much humility in sharing my knowledge and experience as one of the Tongiaki. I sincerely hope that my contribution might support all other Tongiaki around the world. It is understood that sustaining Tongan language and culture is a big challenge both in the motherland and the diaspora. This is because of globalisation in migration, gradual monetization of economies, and technological advancement where Western influence of tā mo e vā (time and space) of reality has infiltrated people’s lives. It is also understood that change is a universal law and that changes in the world also influence language and culture. But there is some very good work being done in this area by both Tongans and non-Tongans in Aotearoa NZ and around the world.

It is significant for Tongans everywhere to understand the challenges of wide generation gaps and the imperative to be fakatoukatea and fetokoni’aki fakapotopoto in their tā-vā time-space relationships amongst themselves. This could create and maintain harmonious relationships to enable practical strategies in sustaining Tongan language and culture worldwide. Older Tongans need to realise the specific, crucial needs of younger Tongans in their relationships so that older generations do not jeopardise younger generations’ success in life. Some of these crucial needs are time, space, finance, and other resources to enable them to speak the Tongan language and live the Tongan culture, in ways that are meaningful to them.

It is also important for the motherland to support the sustainability of Tongan language and culture in the diaspora for they (diaspora) can be powerful movers in international affairs. They are capable of doing mighty work to make Tonga be still Tonga (ke kei Tonga pē ‘a Tonga) if they get the support of the motherland to sustain Tongan language and culture. There is a need for practical strategies to engage those in the motherland (loto-Tonga) and the diaspora (tu’a-Tonga) in their ventures to sustain Tongan language and culture worldwide. There should be more research in this area, and Tongan people need to learn from other countries that are also struggling to sustain and revive their own languages and cultures like Māori people of Aotearoa NZ and native Hawaiians.

Peace and harmony in any society implies that, through understanding of our natural, social, economic and political environments, together with an appreciation of our multicultural richness, we, as human beings, can tolerate the challenges and develop an empathy for the world and our place in it. There is still space for all the Tongan people

worldwide to work together to sustain Tongan language and culture from extinction. Turning to our own Indigenous knowledge system for theorisation is an important consideration. Nevertheless, the hard question for all the tongiaki like me, who are passionate in this area, is whether we are doing enough to sustain our Tongan language and culture? *“Leveleva e malanga ka e tau atu”*.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Mana: Supernatural power or influence or attendant circumstances (Churchward, 1959, p. 330).
- <sup>2</sup> Fahu: usually the father's eldest sister or her children who are the highest rank at funerals, weddings, and birthdays to receive the best koloa (mats and bark-cloth) and highest cuts of meat; the fahu sits at a special and highest place during the ceremony and may also be given the right to decide on the distribution of presents and food.
- <sup>3</sup> Fa'ēhuki is usually the maternal relatives, usually one of mother's brother, who accompany and serve the bride, groom, the birthday person during the wedding or birthday ceremony or to carry the deceased to his or her grave during a funeral ceremony. They are lower in rank to the married couples, the birthday person or the deceased, and they are meant to serve those concerned during the ceremonies. Fa'ēhuki literally means that the grooms, brides and birthday people sit on their laps during the ceremony. Some people put their feet on the fa'ēhuki's laps to symbolize the idea of them being lower in rank to the bride, groom or the birthday person.
- <sup>4</sup> Liongi is usually the maternal relatives of the deceased. They are the mother's families, and they are lower in rank and are meant to serve anyone during the funerals. They wore the biggest, raggiest and ugliest ta'ovala (waist mats) to show their lowest rank. Their usual place is the cooking areas where they cook to cater for the people attending the funerals.
- <sup>5</sup> A Tongan proverb: 'Oku 'uhinga ki ha taha 'oku fakatou poto ha ngāue 'e ua 'i he taimi pē 'e taha – It means when a person is capable of doing two related tasks, at the same time.