


Tauhi Vā, A Tongan Artistic Tradition Continues in Academic Research

A Book Review of Tēvita O. Ka'ili's Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations (2017)

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Article abstract

I have purposefully used a narrative approach in my review of Ka'ili's (2017) *Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations* to support my meaning making as a Tongan academic and Pasifika researcher. I considered elements of the text that worked well for me as an early career researcher and that are accessible to Tongan and non-Tongan academics alike. The Oceanian artistic traditions of time (tā) and space (vā) promoted in this book offer a continuation of ancient oral traditions into the contemporary realm of academic literature. In essence, Ka'ili's book brings significant understandings of the tā-vā theory into interdisciplinary research spaces and across the global landscape of Pasifika research and academic practice. This is evidenced in the more than 60 Pasifika authors' citations of Ka'ili's book, to date. My recommendation of this book draws upon these facets: the accessibility of the text, the elements of the text, and the global reach of the text.

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**TAUHI VĀ, A TONGAN ARTISTIC TRADITION CONTINUES
IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH:
A BOOK REVIEW OF TĒVITA O. KA‘ILI’S
*MARKING INDIGENEITY: THE TONGAN ART OF
SOCIOSPATIAL RELATIONS* (2017)**

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Ruth (Lute) Faleolo, daughter of pastors ‘Ahoia ‘Ilaiū (from Mu‘a and Pukotala) and Falakika Lose ‘Ilaiū (from Houma and Ha‘alalo), is a New Zealand-born Tongan. She teaches in Australia and is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at La Trobe University. Her research considers Pasifika mobilities, collective agencies, and multi-sited cultivation of cultural heritage.

Abstract: I have purposefully used a narrative approach in my review of Ka‘ili’s (2017) *Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations* to support my meaning making as a Tongan academic and Pasifika researcher. I considered elements of the text that worked well for me as an early career researcher and that are accessible to Tongan and non-Tongan academics alike. The Oceanian artistic traditions of time (tā) and space (vā) promoted in this book offer a continuation of ancient oral traditions into the contemporary realm of academic literature. In essence, Ka‘ili’s book brings significant understandings of the tā-vā theory into interdisciplinary research spaces and across the global landscape of Pasifika research and academic practice. This is evidenced in the more than 60 Pasifika authors’ citations of Ka‘ili’s book, to date. My recommendation of this book draws upon these facets: the accessibility of the text, the elements of the text, and the global reach of the text.

Keywords: moana concepts; Oceanian/Pasifika scholar/scholarship; Pasifika research; tā-vā theory; Tongan academic

I first discovered Ka'ili's book *Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations* through my PhD supervisor, Professor Paul Memmott¹, who, at the time (2017), was the Director of the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre (AERC), University of Queensland. Being an expert in Indigenous research within Australia, he was also attuned to anything that would significantly support my study of Pasifika trans-Tasman migration. I was very grateful to receive his notification about Ka'ili's publication. I immediately ordered the book, and still remember the thrill of opening my copy. I appreciated the artistry and cover design—a ngatu (tapa cloth) beige coloured book jacket, with kupesi (design) across the borders. I was excited that a Tongan academic's research was published and in book form. "We need more of this!" I thought to myself, as this book's release happened at such a crucial time for me. I had begun the task of writing my thesis, still hoping for Pasifika literature that discussed our methodological approaches. This was the answer to my prayer.

Embracing Ancient Philosophies

I believe there are many more academics, Tongan or non-Tongan, who would love to embrace our ancient philosophies more deeply in their own research practice, but they are not always accessible to all (Kalavite, 2019a). It is important to note that much of what Ka'ili discusses speaks to Oceanian scholars who, more often than not, already have an innate and/or cultivated version of concepts such as tā and vā from intergenerational teachings under the tutelage of familial and communal elders (Enari & Faleolo 2020; Fa'avae et al. 2022a; Fehoko 2015). He also uses very distinct academic language, supported by rich ethnographic examples, that clearly articulates much of the artistry in the tā-vā theory. Consequently, Ka'ili's scholarship and discourse is transparent and accessible; however, our conceptual meanings as Indigenous people can still be misunderstood. Such misconceptions of Indigenous knowledges can occur due to the deeply rooted Western lens used in mainstream academia (see Fa'avae et al. 2022b, and Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al. 2024, for elaborations on this debate). This is unfortunate, but inevitable. There is cogent evidence of a spectrum of standpoints on the text; from Western-centric to more Indigenous views (see Clery 2020, Eräsaari 2019, and Kalavite 2019a, for varied reviews). I would encourage all who are interested in understanding Tongan traditions more deeply to consider our ways of making meaning, and to embrace these ancient philosophies by travelling beyond the realm of mind and thought, to further into the heart—for the heart is where our understandings live.

Ka'ili's book is important because it represents knowledge drawn from a circle of Oceanian scholars, including experts on Moana knowledge, and insights drawn from their very rich discussions that have occurred across various contexts (Tonga and tu'a

Tonga²), and over many years. Ka'ili introduces us to this inner circle of understanding, and offers the reader a written form of our oral traditions. He demonstrates how these ancient philosophies are still core to familiar daily cultural practices, which should also encompass academic spaces (see Faleolo et al. 2024, and Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al. 2024, for further illustrations of how Tongan academics' cultural practices embrace Indigeneity and ancient traditions in academia). For myself and other Pasifika researchers, who tend to work outside of the deeper study of philosophy, Ka'ili's book brings us closer to the heart of our Indigeneity as Oceanian scholars. He writes to ignite our desire to maintain and nurture social and cultural knowledge-sharing practices in our research work, for and with our people, in ways that are meaningful.

Within the book are fascinating black and white images, tables, charts, and ethnographic excerpts. Upliftingly, I read my mother tongue *lea faka-Tonga* (I am sure this would have brought a tear to our ancestors). As a Tongan academic, growing up in *tu'a Tonga*, I was especially intrigued to read more about the *tā-vā* theory (Māhina, 2004). This is a theory that I had initially heard about from my sister, Dr. Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei³, during the early 2000s, and is something we had discussed in relation to our prior knowledge of *tauhi vā*⁴; a familiar concept taught to us by our mother, Rev. Falakika Lose 'Ilaiū (Faleolo, 2023). While Charmaine used this philosophy in her architectural practice and research ('Ilaiū, 2009), I had remained on the periphery of this *tā-vā* theory scholarship. While reading Ka'ili's book, I revisited these theoretical discussions embracing them creatively in my natural *tā* and *vā* with the research work at hand.

Elements of the Text

Ka'ili presents his ideas across seven chapters. The first two chapters address the conflicts he identifies in the multiplicity of *tā-vā* in his research context of Tongans living in Maui (Hawai'i, United States). Ka'ili lays out the conceptual underpinnings of the *vā* theory by making links to other Oceanian cultural understandings that are similar, as well as by evaluating scholarly contributions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous works relating to *tā* and *vā*. His review of available literature about *tā* and *vā*, considers a collation of writings that largely focus on the nurturing of sociocultural relationships (*vā*), but which require further conceptualisation and application of *tā*. Neglecting *tā* from our scholarly dialogue is addressed by Ka'ili in Chapter Three. Here, he acknowledges the *tufunga*, or architect, of the *tā-vā* theory, Hūfanga Dr. 'Okusitino Māhina. Māhina's theory claims that time markers, of symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns, give rise to an artistry of harmony and disharmony (Māhina, 2008). These time markers, expressed as harmonious and disharmonious sociospatial relations, are key aspects of the *tā-vā* theory. These are clearly illustrated in Ka'ili's methodological and philosophical

approach to research with fellow Tongans in Maui. The way Tongan knowledge and understandings (statistics, narratives, and images) were collected, analysed, and presented, demonstrates how respectful and culturally responsive research should be carried out. Social spaces were carefully prepared and nurtured by Ka'ili, and he embraced principles of conceptualizing and maintaining relations through *vā* and *tā*. Chapters Four to Seven present his creative methodological journeying, ethnographic findings, and data analysis drawn from his previous research with Tongans in Maui (Ka'ili 2005; 2008).

Global Reach of the Text

As a social scientist, who studies our Pasifika peoples' mobilities, reading about ways to apply *tā-vā* principles to my study of trans-Tasman migration opened up a world of wonderment for me. The realization that our Tongan people's knowledge was going to unleash a generation of scholars and researchers into re-imagined territories of exploring their own terminology and conceptions beyond a Western framework, encouraged me to dig deeper into my research findings and to really listen to the voices of the people whose narratives I had collected.

Now, six years on, I can see how Ka'ili's book has inspired many Pasifika scholars. His book is frequently cited within Oceania and across global contexts (Fa'avae et al. 2022c; Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al. 2024; Fehoko et al. 2022; Kalavite 2019b). In particular, Kalavite (2019a), in her review of Ka'ili's book, points to the "effective and meaningful" (p. 357) way that words and proverbs are used to unpack Tongan knowledge and concepts for Tongans and non-Tongans alike. Fa'avae et al. (2022c) is an example of both Tongan and non-Tongan researchers working across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, collaboratively promoting the maintenance of *vā* and *vā māfana* (relational warmth) in research using online dialogue. Fa'avae et al. (2022c) developed the method of e-talanoa⁵ using the inspired talanoa-*vā*⁶ approach, and suggest that "the values of respect, reciprocity, humility, love, care, and generosity [are] identified as important elements within e-talanoa" (p. 397), being an extended form of sociocultural connection with Pasifika online. Similarly, Fehoko et al. (2022) express how, as Tongans using the digital *vā*,⁷ they have collaboratively refined understandings of the significance of *tā* and *vā*, within a global pandemic context. They promote Ka'ili's assertions about *tauhi vā*, illustrating the practice of sociospatial maintenance and reinforcement during lockdowns. In addition to this, Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al. (2024) innovatively present their understandings as Australian-based researchers navigating the intersecting dynamics of their Christian faith and Tongan cultural identities, while decolonizing the academic spaces in which they practice. They promote key aspects of *tā-vā* that underpin their sense making as Tongan women and

their experiences of decolonization as academics. They suggest that the Tongan Way (anga faka-Tonga) is a collocation of customary practices based on the key fundamental values that Ka'ili's book highlights, including tauhi vā. These examples show how Ka'ili's book has heralded those before him and welcomed those who have followed. In essence, his book has brought significant understandings of the tā-vā theory into interdisciplinary research spaces, across the global landscape of Pasifika research and academic practice. This is especially evident in the more than 60 Pasifika authors' citations (out of a total of 119 citations, to date) of Ka'ili's book.

Tātuku: Concluding Thoughts

Ka'ili's developmental work within the realms of tā-vā theory has been significant. Hūfanga Dr. 'Okusitino Māhina, in the foreword of the book, describes Ka'ili's effective integration of both analytical and anthropological concepts and practices that use qualities of Tongan art:

Dr. Ka'ili's unique vision of the mediation of social conflicts as an art is duly inspired in new ways by Tongan artistic and literary concepts and practices. . . tufunga fonua (social engineering), a material art form that is concerned primarily with the reconciliation of social tensions at the interface of human-environmental relationships. . . Dr. Ka'ili is a leading proponent of the tā-vā theory of reality, which is based on the Tongan sense of time and space. He interweaves the subject matter of his investigation—migration—with a number of theoretical strands in which the tā-vā theory of reality plays a pivotal role. From a tā-vā, theoretical perspective, Dr. Ka'ili demonstrates the historical fact that migration is a human concept and practice that takes place both in tā and vā. (Ka'ili, 2017, foreword by Māhina, p. xii).

Ka'ili has succeeded in extending the Oceanian traditions of time (tā) and space (vā), drawn from our oral traditions into academic literature. I celebrate this modern-day embrace of ancient Tongan philosophies in the contemporary (tā) realm of global (vā) research. As a Tongan academic, and early career researcher, I highly recommend this text as an important reference for those undertaking research with Tongans, whether in Tonga or tu'a Tonga.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Faleolo (2020, pp. 6, 84, 111, Figure 5.14).

² Tu'a Tonga is the Tongan concept meaning places/spaces/Tongan communities/settings outside of Tonga islands—Tongan diaspora.

³ Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, (personal communication during 2003-2004) spoke with me, at our family home in Ōtara (Aotearoa New Zealand) alongside our father Rev. 'Ahoia 'Ilaiū, about the tā-vā theory that she had been introduced to at the series of University of Auckland talanoa, inspired by Prof. 'Okusitino Māhina and other scholars at the time.

⁴ Tauhi vā (or tauhi vaha'a) as defined by Ka'ili (2017) means “the art of creating and maintaining beautiful sociospatial relations (vā) through the mutual performance of social duties (fatongia)” (p. 159).

⁵ E-talanoa is the extension of talanoa (storying and narratives, ongoing dialogue following our Tongan/Pasifika Indigenous protocols of respectful communication) onto online forums, see also Faleolo (2020; 2023).

⁶ Talanoa-Vā approach is the combination of talanoa and vā notions as an application of cultural protocols and knowledge. This approach and Pasifika framework has been discussed by several Pasifika scholars, see also Fa'avae (2022b) and Faleolo (2023).

⁷ Digital Vā is the online spaces that connect our Pasifika peoples virtually and socioculturally, see also Enari and Matapo (2020). The online forums were promoted as a way of maintaining sociospatial relations particularly during the pandemic but has further developed post-COVID-19 through the upskilling of Pasifika networks online during lockdowns and enforced social restrictions (2020-2022).