

## (Re)turning to *loto*, igniting *mālie* and *māfana*: Tongan *maau* and *faiva* as expressed rhythmic entanglement

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*To charm the loto is a (re)turn to our Indigenous Pacific knowings and becomings. Such a return is heart-warming and a fascination with spiritual reverence. Calling forth mālie and māfana, the potent spiritual energies that ignite the loto, laumālie and 'atamai (soul, spirit and mind), I appreciate and embrace the call to (re)turn to our ways. As cultural sources, maau (poetry) and faiva (dance) permit ways in which Tongan knowledges are expressed, mediated and shared. I foreground mālie and māfana as coupled spirits expressed as (re)presentations of rhythmic entanglement which are portrayed and unpacked through Tongan maau and faiva. Igniting mālie and māfana affirms the Indigenising of practice in the postcolonial Moana that evokes rhythmic sensibilities, grounded in the ways Tongan and other indigenous Pacific communities exist and connect materially and spiritually across their worlds.*

*Keywords: Pacific Studies; poetry; mālie; māfana; rhythmic entanglement; Moana*

### AN INSPIRATION: IN INTELLECTUAL ADVENTUROUSNESS

A calling is an action that activates not only our hearing but also other forms of sensibilities. Academia does not always value such sensibilities. The call to position the prefix (re), in brackets, as well as the utilisation of and references to *Lea faka-Tonga* (Tongan language) in this paper is a purposeful and symbolic call for resistance, a kind of disobedience which challenges academic writing norms and epistemes that privilege dominant Western thought and writing (Fa'avae, 2021; McDowall & Ramos, 2017). In light of the global pandemic, on top of existing climate challenges and the societal ills linked to racial and gender discrimination, engaging in the (re) is a timely act to look back to go forward and think anew of possibilities for Indigenous Pacific peoples in the diaspora. (Re)thinking our forms of (re)presentations, through language and cultural practices is a creatively inspiring adventure (Fehoko, 2015).

*The beating heart echoes, rhythm  
The aching soul whines, rhythm  
Waves crashing and relentless, rhythm  
Weaving binding tension and entangled, rhythm*

Within the poem are utterances that echoes a type of rhythmic (re)citation felt across inter-disciplinary spaces. The poem embodies a motivation for intellectual adventure beyond the boundaries of the academe and into the world familiar to *Moana* and Pacific Indigenous scholars. Intellectual adventurousness to me is synonymous with

creativity and inspiration, a desire to navigate into uncharted terrains “beyond” and into the unknown. Such navigation “beyond” is symbolic of *tala*’s (story’s) place and function in relation to *noa* (an unknown, nothing-ness, something). Tecun et al. (2018) refers to *noa* as “a state of balance, a condition of equilibrium, or calibration between relationships” (p. 160). Like the *vahanoa* (the open sea, expansive space) (see Ka’ili, 2017), the poem echoes a type of intellectualising that privileges deep (*lōloto*) thinking from within—*loto* (soul) and *laumālie* (spirit). The late great Teresia Teaiwa (2011) unfolded deep learning as being likened to an emergence from the fundamental basis of learning linked to a qualitative change in a person’s view of reality. For Teresia, learning is a deeply intimate experience that requires an appreciation of depth-work (*lōloto*) into the *loto*.

Tongan scholar, the late Futa Helu, established a critical site at the ‘Atenisi Institute in which he weaved together the synergies between Tongan and Western thought and philosophies (classical traditions linked to Greek and Roman knowledge). The late ‘Epeli Hau’ofa’s (1994) positioning of *Moana* and Sea of Islands as constructs that move theoretical framing beyond Western understanding that the ocean itself is a source and connector of people, ideas, cultures, artefacts, and languages. Hūfanga ‘Okusitino Māhina (2010), a student of Futa Helu, was instrumental in the development of *tā-vāism*, a theory of reality grounded in the depths of the *moana* and symbolic of time and space theorisations. Similarly, Siosiua Lafitani, another Tongan scholar influenced by his predecessors, continues to also push beyond the boundaries of philosophical speculation, beginning and focusing theorisations and philosophising from Tongan worldviews using Tongan concepts and approaches. Helu, Hau’ofa, Māhina, and Lafitani are believed to be *Moana/Oceanic/Tongan* thought leaders who are not only adventurous but also have a willingness to go beyond and push academic, cultural and philosophical traditions beyond Western thought. They continue to *fakaivia*—inspire and empower many Tongan/*Moana*/Pacific educators and scholars in the region. We draw inspiration from their sense of intellectual adventurousness by bringing together Tongan language and ideas to make sense and articulate (re)presentations of dominant Western notions and framings of poetry and dance through *mālie* and *māfana*. The deep musing of ways to honour *Lea faka-Tonga* (Tongan language) yet connect with the lived realities of generations of Tongan people in the diaspora has allowed for introspection, reflection and contemplation that go beyond my own subjectivities. A deep musing that honours our multiple connections and inter-connections with others or matters—living and non-living—in the world. This kind of mattering is rhythmic, poetic, *mālie* (uplifting and inspiring) and *māfana* (heartfelt).

The Māori literary scholar, Alice Te Punga Somerville (2020) in a recent keynote where she examined Fijian lawyer and poet Pio Manoa’s essay alongside work by other Pacific poets during the mid-70s, articulated the criticality of Manoa’s work in portraying the deep inter-connections between ideologies, ideas and practices within people and small island nations in the *Moana*. Te Punga Somerville emphasised the significance of moving beyond just providing a commentary on sources to processes that involve introspection, interrogation, reflection and contemplation. I often rely on Helu (2012) and his work for inspiration and to ground my interrogation, reflection and contemplation of Tongan poetry and dance (see also Helu, 2011). At the same time, I turn to Indigenous, Pacific studies, and postcolonial scholars like Helu (2011), Teaiwa (2011) and Ka’ili (2017) for guidance on how to appropriately position and re-present Tongan knowledges within the field. Indigenous scholar and writer of the

Cree people from Canada, Shawn Wilson (2001) argues that Indigenous (re)searchers “need to move beyond [just providing] an Indigenous perspective” (p. 175), rather a move to think, frame, and even express from or through an Indigenous paradigm.

The Māori philosopher Carl Mika (2017) places the human self as being deeply connected and inseparable from the materiality of the world. He articulates that, from an Indigenous worlded viewpoint, “if there is an incongruent logic at all, it is the one that emerges as a clash between the tendency of dominant western thought [and traditions] to iron out varying truths and the Indigenous insistence that those contradictions are truthful.” (p. 49). This means that, Indigenous peoples may not have a problem with the “simultaneous separateness/togetherness of all things” (p. 49). The problem would be in the ways dominant Western thought and traditions attempt to dismiss and banish that kind of thinking as being illogical.

### **RHYTHMIC ENTANGLEMENT WITHIN THE *VĀ*: SENSE-MAKING MEANING-MAKING**

Making sense of “rhythm” is juxtaposed with the meaning making of “entanglement”. They both provide a sense of opposition and disharmony, particularly when it comes to understanding our “inter-connections” (*vā*) within the world. Although entanglement can sometimes emit a complicated feeling of disharmony and the compromising of relationships, it does offer philosophical speculation that positions time and space as constructs of meaning-making and sense-making. Disharmony in relation to entanglement, therefore, is but one layer to theorise connections or inter-connections within a holism approach to making meaning of the world. Through the metaphysics of time and space, *tā-vā* takes a form of Tongan framing of the world which prioritises speculation as deeply rooted and grounded in one’s presence in the world. Hūfanga ‘Okusitino Māhina (2010), Telesia Kalavite (2019), as well as Tevita Ka’ili (2017) are but a handful of Tongan theorists who have deliberately invested time and energy in the development and depth-work required to unpack and articulate the rhythms of *tā-vā* that are indispensable of time and space conceptualisation and practice across various disciplines, such as anthropology, education, art, Pacific studies and architecture (see Ka’ili, 2017).

In the figurative sense, rhythmic entanglement is a space of negotiation and connection within *vā* (relational space) and is expressed within the *loto*. Conceptually, rhythmic entanglement is an idea that embraces and captures the ways in which *mālie* and *māfana* find their form and take shape within the *vā* and through shared sources—the proximity between poetry and dance, for instance. Furthermore, I articulate rhythmic entanglement within Tongan *maau* (poetry) and *faiva* (dance) because within the *vā* they awaken and *fakaivia* into consciousness as states of inspiration, empowerment, joy and elation.

Rhythmic entanglement can seemingly portray (re)presentations of struggle and complication. However, it can also relate to cooperating relationships or situations through intense contemplation, and extensive and in-depth negotiations. Such entanglements are symbolic of the unfolding of *noa*, when the temporal and spiritual worlds inter-connect, seeking for some kind of harmonious relations (Māhina, 2010; Tecun et al., 2018)—a sense and condition of seeking equilibrium within the *vā* space of inter-relations. The performance becomes the observed and the negotiations of such symbolic knowledges begin to take shape through *mālie* and *māfana*. Tongan

theorist and education (re)researcher, Linitā Manu'atu (2000) unfolds *mālie*'s many forms. She begins with the way in which *mālie* is expressed as *hangamālie* (spirit in focus), *māmālie* (spirit in movement), *fe'ungamālie* (spirit of sufficiency), *langimālie* (spirit of healthy living), *maaumālie* (spirit of orderliness), *tu'umālie* (spirit of wealth and abundance), and *napangapangamālie* (the spirit of connectedness) (Manu'atu, 2000; 2017).

“*Tuli ke ma'u hono ngaahi mālie moe māfana*” is how Tongan scholar and educator, Linitā Manu'atu (2014) inspire Tongan scholars to draw from the wisdom of *mālie* and embrace Tongan language and culture. For me as an early career academic, I build on Manu'atu's conceptualisation of *mālie* as a life force or spirit that can also be descriptively defined as the “energising and uplifting of spirits to a positive state of connectedness and enlightenment” (see Fa'avae, 2016, p. 14). *Māfana* is often associated with *mālie* and can be expressed as inwardly warm feelings that are intimately connected to the energising and uplifting of spirits which are both embodied within one's *loto* (soul, heart).

### **TU'U-FONU, NOFO-FONU, AND MOANA BEINGS AND BECOMINGS**

Tongan scholar Teena Brown Pulu (2002) used *turangawaewae* and *tu'ungava'e* as Māori and Tongan terms to describe a “place to stand” (p. 14). Their figurative meaning is linked to one's sense of grounding, connection and belonging. For some Tongan academics who find their grounding as settlers in other *whenua* Indigenous to peoples from that particular land, being open to exploring notions like *tu'ungava'e* in connection with *fonua* (land) can provide nuanced understanding of belonging, being and becoming in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Manu'atu (2005) articulates two inter-related concepts: *tu'ufonua* (being indigenous) and *nofofonua* (residing as a settler in another land/county). Hau'ofa (1994) positioned “Oceania” as the ever-expanding and overarching construct that connected Pacific people to others and the world. For Hau'ofa (1994), the *Moana* (Oceania, ocean) reference became the critical tool or frame in which to overturn the hegemonic views that confine and restrict appropriate understandings of the “Moana being” as (re)representative of our lived realities.

Hau'ofa (1994) claims, for Pacific people to truly break away from colonial influences, recognising their potential is necessary. Postcolonial scholar Edward Said (1978) warns us, a complete wholesale rejection of Western knowledge and scholarship is unhelpful. At the same time, Tongan linguist, Melenaite Taumoeofau (2011) argues for the significance of injecting Indigenous Pacific languages, knowledges and worldviews when unpacking and decolonising Western constructs and ideals in the *Moana*. Central to the decolonisation process is the mastering of the “coloniser's language and our own [Pacific]” (Taumoeofau, 2011, p. 70). Recognising our potential, as advocated by Hau'ofa (1994), can be achieved when Pacific language and Indigenous knowledges are utilised in the interrogation of *Moana* “beings” and observed performances.

Pacific regional scholar of Tongan heritage, Seu'ula Johansson Fua (2016), argues for a “relational, hybrid and dialogic approach to creating a third space for the Oceanic (re)researcher to work within” (p. 35). Her use of *motutapu* (sacred island) as sites and spaces of rest, rejuvenation and protection for travellers during their arduous navigation, is symbolic of Oceanic (re)researchers' sense of being and becoming as local and global activators of change and transformation. Fundamental to Johansson

Fua's (2016) claim, guided by her mentor 'Ana Maui Taufe'ulungaki (2001), is the need for Oceanic (re)searchers to "dig deeper to understand cultural values, belief systems and philosophies that underpin Pacific systems and structures, to always ask questions such as: whose knowledge? Whose cognitive and philosophical theories? Whose (re)search paradigms, whose methodologies, techniques and procedures?" (p. 8). They encourage *Moana*/Tongan scholars to do the *lōloto* and in-depth interrogation of the ways in which Indigenous Tongan knowledge systems and realities can make sense of global agendas.

### **MAAU: POETRY AS FELT RECITATIONS**

Helu's work has always provided in-depth appreciation of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. Helu (2012) categorises Tongan poetry chronologically into ancient and modern. Ancient Tongan poetry is referred to as a *fakatangi*, a "chanted short ballad" (Helu, 2012, p. 48). Modern poetry however, consists of five forms—the *sipi* (a wooing madrigal recited by the suitor to his beloved or vice versa), the dance *lakalaka*, the *hiva kakala* (love lyric), the dance *ma'ulu'ulu*, and the *langi* (a composition to accompany a solo dance or *tau'olunga*). A key point articulated by Helu (2012) is that both ancient and modern poetry (various forms) are performed through song, chants or dances.

Soyini Madison's (1999) articulation of theory and performativity as a "coupling" process acknowledges the strong inter-connection between knowledge as theoretical worldviews together with performativity. In other words, knowing and doing are not independent of each other, rather their coupling grounds their close links and that to fully embrace a *maau*, understanding the language used is just as important as in the recitation or the way in which the poem is read out and performed to others.

Articulated further by Soyini Madison (199):

The theory that gets in my head and sticks—the good parts or the parts relevant to what I must become and do in my life—performs. That this theory performs me is an existential fact. That I choose to perform it is my craft. I perform theory through time, through (un)consciousness, nervousness, and effort. This theory/performance coupling is not an easy assignment. Performance thrills me, theory does not. I would surely lose myself without performance, but I cannot live well without theory. (p. 109)

Although my *maau* below is written in *Lea faka-Tonga*, it is not conceptualised to be performed as a song, chant, or dance—at least not in the way that Helu (2012) has alluded us to. The intention of my *maau* is to captivate *mālie* and *māfana*'s charm and presence when seeking to *fakaivia*—ignite Tonga ways of sense-making meaning-making.

Holo pe ho'o mou me'a  
Pea fakatulou atu  
Kae 'atā mo au  
Ke fai ha talatalanoa  
Fekauaki moe mālie  
Moe mahu'inga 'o e māfana  
Mātanga 'o e maau moe faivá

Laumālie ē

Ma'u ai hoto ivi  
Fakakoloa he monū  
Tu'umālie ma'u pē  
Fofola 'a e ngaahi talā  
Ako e mo 'ene faingamālie  
Ngāue'aki 'a e poto moe 'ilo

Loloto 'a e Laumālie  
Loto to'a  
Loto fiemālie  
Loto māfana  
Loto fakapotopoto  
Faka'inasi ma'u pē ia  
He 'oku fe'ungamālie ma'u pe  
'A e ivi 'o e loto moe laumālie

My *maau* visibilises a meaningful pattern and a rhythmic beat that makes sense to me and connects with the ways I feel inspired and fuelled—through *mālie* and *māfana*—and my embodied (re)presentations of meaning-making and sense-making in the world. Its performative functions can be felt, expressed and translated through recitation and performance. The *maau* above captures and portrays my valuing of the spiritual realm as being a significant aspect of my “being” and “becoming” in the *Moana*. It foregrounds Tongan language and culture expressed through writing and performance through recitation and living (performing, doing) the cultural ideals in my social relations and sense of inter-connections within the *Moana*. For instance, living in a large *kāinga* (extended family) and being part of a Tongan church congregation provides me contexts and situations to exercise and employ *mālie* and *māfana*. Moreover, the *maau* centres the *loto* (soul, heart) as the site that enables the negotiations and sense making to take place. It is the *loto* that allows for the unpacking of the complications yet compromising aspects of the rhythmic entanglement between the knowing and the doing, mediated through one’s ontological becoming in the world.

#### **FAIVA: DANCE AS OBSERVED AND FELT PERFORMATIVITY**

Many *Faiva*, as cultural dance, is the performance of Tongan language and culture including poetry. *Faiva* is a way in which the body expresses and makes sense of knowledge and learning. The observed and felt performances are rhythmic, negotiated through the *vā*, expressed through *mālie* and *māfana* as emotive conditions and spirit (*laumālie*). The rhythmic ambience or feeling when reciting a poem excites the *loto* (soul or heart) to a state of *māfana*, allowing one to bask in joy and experience feelings of warmth felt within that activates embodied meaning-making through dance, actions and performance. As articulated by Futa Helu, the forms of physical and bodily expression can conjure emotions that appear divine-like in characteristic and behaviour (see Helu, 2011). Almost as though through *maau* (poetry) and *faiva* (dance), our human state is allowed to connect with spiritualities that are not always observable nor evident to the human knowing. Helu expressed well such an experience by articulating the eminence of Tongan dance and its purpose, which is to “enhance[e] natural virtues . . . That is the whole aim of dance. It’s to make a human being divine in appearance” (Helu, 2011, n.p.).

Post-colonisation has somewhat diluted the majority of the pre-colonial dance and songs in the *moana*. This has impacted the visibility, presence and accessibility of ancient forms of dance, chants, poems and songs. Although some are still evident in Pacific diasporic communities, the language and descriptions have somewhat evolved and reflect the contexts, names and actions appropriate to today's society. It is also apparent the ways in which gender binary notions like male/female, man/woman and gender diversity have become entangled by societal norms. Although Helu's (2011) description of *maau* and *faiva* as enabling the male/female/human to become divine in appearance, today's society positions gender fluidity as a construct shaped by diverse contexts, groupings and social designations that are not bounded only by biology and sex. *Maau* and *faiva* enables fluid performativities and practices that *fakaivaia* (inspire and empower) people, their *loto* (heart, soul), and *fakakaukau* (thoughts).

On youtube is a video posted in 2010 of the late Futa Helu's *fakamalele 'o e tapu*, the cultural practice of lifting all restrictions imposed after his death and burial (see Bender & Beller, 2003; Lātū, 2010). The video highlights the *lali* (wooden drum) placed on top of mats, symbolic of the *fakamalele* practice and its function to advise the village of the *tapu* lifting, enabling family and kin members to engage in singing and dancing. One of the reviewers of the article also highlighted this and the significance of cultural sacrilege and processes associated with the spiritual realm, the world of the unseen, and the world of the seen.



**Figure 1. Photo taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16Tq27s4HfA>.**

*Faiva* as dance is intimately connected with felt performativity. Helu (2011, 2012) highlight the metaphysics of the seen and the unseen worlds as being deeply connected and the symbolic relevance of time and space constructions. With reference to the *fakamalele 'o e tapu* linked to the late Futa Helu's passing, I am always intrigued with the event because, although funerals are often practiced by Tongans in more conservative ways where families are left to grieve, echoing loss and despair, on that particular lifting however, some alumni of the 'Atenisi Institute paid tribute to their leader by singing "Hala kuo papa", an old yet popular poem and song composed by the late Queen Salote. From the very beginning when the singing started, the lyrics became alive, manifested and embodied through the performance. Listening and receiving the poem through song ignited *mālie* and *māfana* within the *loto*,

particularly when Tongan senior scholar Siosua Fonuakihehama Lafitani and Helu's daughter also performed the *tulāfale* and *tau'olunga*, highlighting an appreciation of life as not ending after death, but enduring beyond and into the spiritual world (see Figure 1). Their performance captured celebratory engagement of their mentor and father whose legacy is felt and valued by them and many others. Such a performance within a primarily sad event like a funeral is symbolic of the rhythmic entanglement within the *vā* which is often negotiated by the *loto*, *laumālie*, and *'atamai*. Such a performance is embodied, observed and felt.

## CONCLUSION

The (re)turn to (re)orient from and through the *loto* utilising *Lea faka-Tonga* continues to be an inspiring adventure. The potentiality of Indigenous Pacific concepts and practices meaningfully (re)positions the mattering of culturally grounded perspectives that are often ignored or marginalised in dominant Western contexts. *Mālie* and *māfana* are regularly captured and portrayed through cultural sources and performativities like the *maau* and *faiva*. *Mālie* and *māfana* are rooted, mediated and made sense of within and through the *loto* (soul), *laumālie* (spirit), and *'atamai* (mind). Embracing and expressing *Lea faka-Tonga* through poetry and *faiva* have highlighted rhythmic entanglement as a necessary meaning making process within the *vā* space of inter-connections.

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