

HELIAKI: THE SYMBOLIC DEPICTION OF LIFE AND LIVING IN TONGA

AFUHA'AMANGO AND ONGO'ALUPE TAUMOEPEAU

*Uisa e huelo Kamo e la'a
'O folatefua he fala 'o Ata
Lea e tangata'i he Vai ko Puna
Matapa 'o Nakau He kolofonua*

*Mahiki e maama 'i Matangimalie
Mata mahina 'i he 'otu palanite
Niu Saele 'i 'Aositelelia
'Univesiti he 'otu matiketika
'Univesiti he 'otu matiketika*

*(Oh the Ray flickering, the sun beckons
Thus calls the assembly at the Fala 'o Ata
(the sandy beach at Kolovai village)
The man of Vai ko Puna speaks
The Gate of Nakau, the fortress*

*The light ascended in Matangimalie
Viewing the moonrise amongst other planets
New South Wales, in Australia
Amongst the scholars of the university)¹*

Editor's Note: Queen Salote Tupou III of Tonga (1900-1965) was not only a beloved monarch but a gifted and celebrated composer and poet of over one hundred songs, lullabies, laments, and dances. The poetry of the late Queen Salote discussed here is from the memory of the authors, who, like many Tongans, are intimately acquainted with the oral tradition and can quote long pieces from memory. However, published sources of Queen Salote's works can be found in the footnote below for comparison.²

1. "Hiva 'o 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata." *Heliaki*, or indirect expression, is used in this composition. The song was composed in the late 1990s by Rev. Dr 'Ahio (now the president of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, a chief too, and the head of the Ha'a Ngata). 'Ahio composed this song to celebrate Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata, who had at the time almost completed his second MA degree in international relations at Bonn University, Australia. The Prince is now the current king of Tonga. It is very important here that in the Tongan tradition, a commoner cannot compose a *ta'anga* or song to praise the royalties. It has to be a chief. The knowledge of the history, important places to the royalties, and royal connections to others are with the chiefs only.

2. See *Salote Tupou Queen of Tonga III, Songs & Poems of Queen Salote*, translated by Melenaite Taumoeofolau, edited by Elizabeth Wood-Ellem (Nuku'alofa: Vava'u Press, 2004) and Adrienne Kaeppler, *Poetry in Motion: Studies of Tongan Dance* (Nuku'alofa: Vava'u Press and EWC PIDP, 1993).

INTRODUCTION

Heliaki, a prominent feature of most Tongan literary compositions, is more than mere metaphorical allusion and evasiveness; it is the figurative code for the Tongan natural propensity for indirectness, their espousal of societal mores of self-effacement and subjugation to their superiors, and their obvious scorn for self-assertion and forwardness. Indirectness typifies relationships in Tonga between the rulers and the ruled, between elders and their juniors, and between people of authority and those they lead. It contributes to the perpetuation of the hierarchical society and scoffs at directness as self-aggrandizement and disdain. *Heliaki*, therefore, at its basis, is considered the symbolic depiction of life and living in Tonga.

HELIAKI IN ITS NASCENCY

Unbeknownst to all, the birth of the first Tu‘i Tonga (TT, King of Tonga), ‘Aho‘eitu, was instantaneously coupled with the birth of the rhetorical *heliaki*, the archetypal depiction of how Tongans related to their king, whose personage was deified and revered as having descended from Tangaloa, God of the Skies. The sacredness of this celestial personage preempted any direct reference to his exalted being. Mere mortals, obeying mandates of society, could not look at his countenance, nor touch him, nor address him directly. Any contact with this demigod mandatorily had to be done through intermediaries, the Falefa clan, or specially designated spokesmen for the kings who descended together with ‘Aho‘eitu from the heavens. Thus began the priming of evasiveness and indirectness as the underpinnings binding all facets of Tonga’s social interactions and relationships throughout the ages. As denoted in the late Queen Salote Tupou III’s *lakalaka* composition,³ “Takafalu” (Behind Royalty):

Ne kamata ‘ia ‘Aho‘eitú (It began with ‘Aho‘eitu)
Afe he tuliki Fonuamotú (Turning at the bend to Fonuamotu)
Tú‘u mo e tapa ‘i ‘Ahaú (Conjoining the edge at ‘Ahau)
Piliote ‘i Pangai e fa‘ú (At Pangai, halting all designs)

3. *Lakalaka* is a choreographed poem performed by rows of dancers whose choreographed movements accompany the sung lyrics of the poem.

Some of the most vivid examples of *heliaki* as embodiment of

the relationship between royalty and their subjects are lucidly illustrated in the stories of Momo, 10th Tu'i Tonga, and his son and successor, Tu'i Tātui, 11th Tui Tonga. Legends tell of a request from Momo to a wealthy man of great wisdom, substance, and influence, Lo'au, Tu'i Ha'amea (King of Ha'amea), presumably a foreigner, for a *konga pulopula* (piece of yam seedling) to propagate. In reply, Lo'au stated, "*Kuo fena e ta'ú. Ke i mula e ta'ú.*" ("The harvest is sprouted. The harvest is premature.") Then came Momo's proverbial pronouncement, "*Fena pe ka ko Nua.*" ("Although sprouted, it is Nua.") In this sense, Nua as a heliaki refers indirectly to the young girl, who has "sprouted" (i.e, already been with child) as being still "fresh" and attractive. Language of the yam cycle is used as a heliaki to refer to the delicacy of a young woman's fertility.

This legendary exchange between Momo and Lo'au embodies the quintessence of the heliaki, the coding of language to avoid directness and effrontery. That is, while Momo superficially appeared to be asking for a piece of seedling, he was in truth seeking a consort from the daughters of Lo'au. Lo'au's reply also is typical of Tongans' self-denigration and humility before their monarch. When stating, "The harvest has sprouted. The harvest is premature," Lo'au was not simply clothing the facts in figurative language, that his eldest daughter had already "sprouted" (having previously given birth to a child) and that his younger daughter was still too young; he was, in addition, symbolically denying that any daughters of his were worthy of His Majesty.

Momo's epiphanic retort, "Although sprouted, it is Nua," attests to his great wisdom as a leader who apparently prized the value of the potential relationship with Nua more than any concern for his own pride or self-gratification. This was poignant, especially because in Tongan society women's virginity was highly prized and one of the most sought-after virtues in a potential wife. It could be deduced from this story that Momo's quest for Nua was a strategic move to create an alliance with one of the most powerful men in the kingdom so as to strengthen his sovereignty. In addition, he undoubtedly desired royal scions who would inherit their grandfather's prowess, wisdom, and valor, which indeed came to fruition when Nua gave birth to his son. Tu'i Tātui, the 11th

Tu'i Tonga, was extolled throughout the ages for his extraordinary achievements, such as can still be witnessed to this day in the Ha'amonga 'a Maui trilithon, Tonga's Stonehenge.⁴

Traditionally, marriages in Tonga, especially among royalty and nobility, were designed to form unions that would add the greatest possible value in terms of power, position, and wealth, thus emboldening the social status of those involved. In the case of Tu'i Tātui, it is said his kinsfolk, when presenting anything before him, would do so seated on the ground a distance away with burdens on their shoulders; they would then inch forward in their sitting positions with their backs to the king, denoting their respect and deference to their monarch. This practice of keeping distance, not addressing royal personages directly, showed submission and acquiescence and would become encoded as heliaki when their stories were recounted through the arts.

HELIAKI EMBLAZONED IN TONGAN FOLKLORE

A classic example of how heliaki is emblazoned in Tongan folklore is the story of how the shell of the mythical Sangone, a turtle reputedly of divine origin belonging to the royal family, was finally recovered after having disappeared for decades. In brief, oral history tells that Sangone was stolen by Samoans, who killed the turtle, ate it, and buried the shell at the bottom of a Samoan mountain range. This incident was witnessed by a young man, Lāfai, who was cursed by the perpetrators to remain dwarfish until the shell of Sangone was discovered. Lāfai, who became known as Lāfaipana (Lāfai the Dwarf), thus remained small in stature yet surpassed all his compatriots in years. It so happened, however, that Fasi'apule, half-brother of Tu'i Tātui, was sent on a quest to find what had happened to Sangone. This he accomplished through what became known in Tongan oral traditions as the “Kisu Kava mei Ha'amoā” (Kava Riddles from Samoa). Fasi'apule, well-versed in Tongan heliaki, asked of the bewildered Samoans several items that no one could tell except for the ancient Lāfaipana, who had kept the secret of Sangone's demise to himself for fear of death. Each of Fasi'apule's riddles shown below is a classic example of heliaki in daily use:

4. The Ha'amonga 'a Maui is a large stone trilithon similarly consisting of three large coral slabs in a post-lintel style of construction. The Ha'amonga 'a Maui is a significant site of cultural heritage in relation to the ancient Tu'i Tonga.

Fūfū mo kokohu (dust rising from clapping cupped hands): scraped kava stem left long in the attic that emits dust when retrieved.

Kau pōngia 'i vao (bunch fainting in the bush): an over-ripe bunch of plantains still hanging on the plant in the bush.

Lou tāngia mo kokī (leaf that saps and screeches): young shoots of the taro leaves that sap and make a screeching sound when picked.

Kapakau tatangi (singing wings): a young, wild chicken whose wings whistle when fluttering.

Ngulungulu mo tokoto (growling while at rest): a giant pig that can no longer walk and just lies around waiting for its turn to be of use.

What is of even greater significance than the ingenuity exhibited in the coding of the language, however, is the depth of meaning and value infused in the allusions. *Kava teletele* (scraped kava stem), for instance, is usually what the nobility would present at kava ceremonies. This is emblematic of the reciprocal relationships expected between the nobility and their people, between king and subjects, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and so on. Of similar value also is the symbolism involved in the references made to food items in this context, for it is mostly through food Tongans display their respect and generosity. Expatriates often are baffled by the magnanimity, or as some would say, profligacy, but when Tongans make food presentations, the consideration is not for what is needed. Instead, the size of the presentation is symbolic of the love, respect, and high regard the givers have for those receiving. Hence, the taro leaves, chicken, and plantain in Fasi'apule's heliaki could not be fully appreciated without full knowledge and understanding of the cultural values and relational underpinnings couched in these otherwise very plain and common words.

ASCENSION OF THE QUEEN OF HELIAKI

Her Majesty, the late Queen Salote Tupou III, stands unrivaled to this day as the Master of the Art of Heliaki. Her compositions are distinguished by the depth and breadth of her knowledge and understanding of Tongan history, culture, and traditions and how ingeniously she interweaved these into the compacted heliaki rhetoric of her compositions. In her classic *lakalaka* (Tonga's grand

performance and part of the world's recognized intangible cultural heritage), a composition re-enacting the story of Sangone, she ostensibly begged Lāfai as follows:

Lāfai Pana ē pe'i mohe a (Oh, Lāfai Pana, rest in peace)
Ka e tuku mai ā si'ota faiva (Gift me our trades, the arts)
Keu lau folahaka he 'ahó ni (I will today talk choreography and perform)
Ke me'ite ai e mu'a taloni (To entertain those at the throne)

This purported request by her late Majesty for the “gift of the arts” was her indirect way of signifying the confidence that she could then assume the role of “Master of the Heliaki,” a title presumably attributed to Lāfaipana, the dwarf featured in the story of Sangone. In the friendly repartee between Fasi'apule and Lāfai recounted earlier, it appeared Lāfai won the heliaki contest. It is said that in response to Fasi'apule's requests, Lāfai demanded a *pununga ke fakamāfana ai 'a 'ene lupe* (a nest where his pigeon could be warmed), as that would be his last night alive. Once Sangone's shell was uncovered, he would die. Fasi'apule and his retinue, thinking Lāfai needed a warm bed for the night, presented him with a bed of mats and a huge roll of tapa cloth as covering. Lāfai snickered inwardly as what he was asking for was a young lady for him to sleep with as that night would be his last. Thus, Lāfai won.

Nonetheless, according to oral traditions, Sangone's shell was retrieved and Lāfai was buried where Sangone's shell had been hidden for years. Sangone's shell was gathered up and wrapped in a finely woven *kie* (Samoan fine mat), which is still kept at the royal palace to this day and referred to simply as *Hau 'o Momo* (Momo's Tribute). This was simply one of the many gifts Fasi'apule and his entourage brought back from Samoa as peace offerings for the death of Sangone.

Unlike Lāfai, however, whose use of heliaki seemed restricted to poetry and stylized oratory, her late Majesty delved into the art of choreography and performance as well. As a *punake* (poet, choreographer, and musician rolled into one), her use of heliaki was pronounced. She insisted the text, choreography, and music always be harmoniously fused to create the exhilarating impact Tongans proudly refer to as *tau e langi* (that reaches the sky). Her late Majesty was famed

for her insistence on the mellifluous blending of the lyrics with the melody and the choreography. Indeed, she would not commission any of her compositions to be performed unless she was pleased that the lyrics, melody, and choreography had been seamlessly integrated. Hereunder are presented a few short examples of the masterful use of heliaki by her late Majesty.

In a special lullaby composed for Princess Fusipala Tauki‘onetuku, daughter of the late Prince Tu‘ipelehake, the late queen declared:

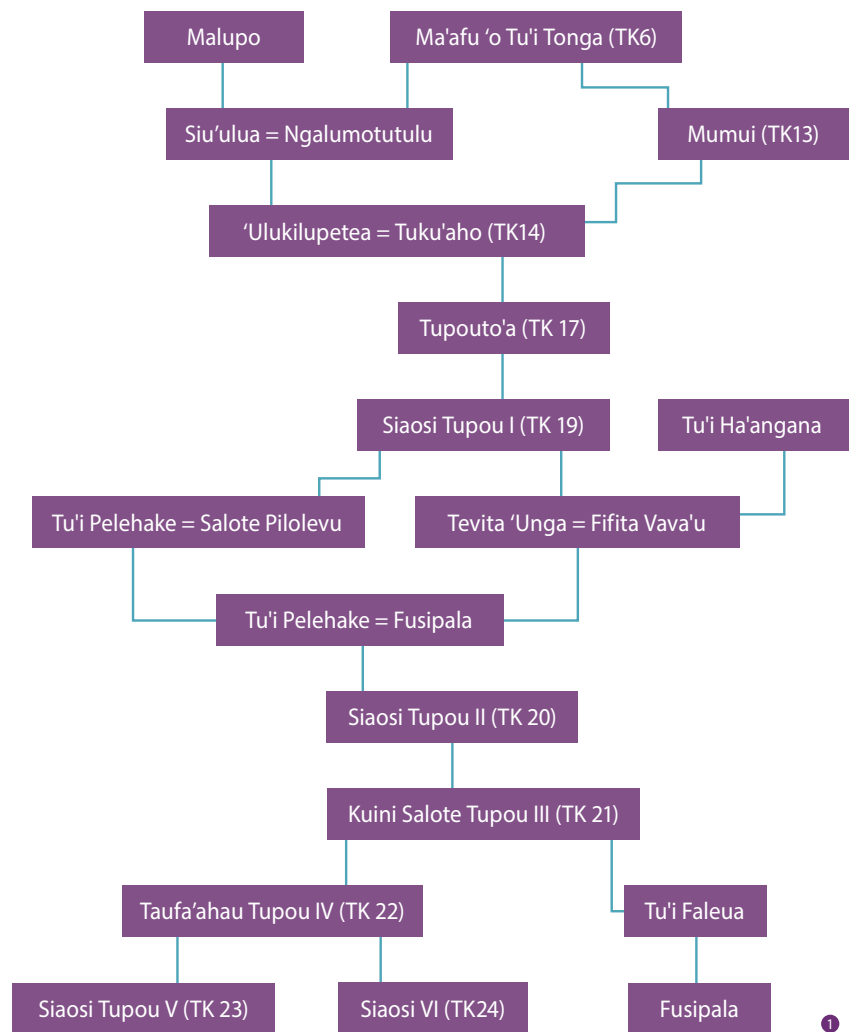
Va’inga he ‘ulu toa ‘o Lea’aetohi (Frolicking among the pine trees at Lea’aetohi)

‘Eva lotu Hā’ano mo e Vao Falahola (Traversing central Ha’ano and the grove of red pandanus)

Fēfē si’i maile hako ‘ihe Halatoa (What of the maile blooming at Halatoa [pine- flanked road])

In these lines, the late queen adroitly uses heliaki to trace the royal pedigree of Princess Fusipala. That she “frolics among the pine trees at Lea’aetohi” is indication she is a lady of Lea’aetohi, the estate opposite the royal palace at Pangai, Ha’apai. That she is descended from Tu‘i Ha’angana (King of the Ha’angana clan), Paramount Chief of Hā’ano, is made evident in the statement “traversing central Hā’ano and the grove of small fragrant red pandanus.” However, the following discussion is centered on the third line, “What of the maile blooming at Halatoa (pine-flanked road),” an indirect reference to ‘Uiha, residence of ‘Malupō’, Paramount Chief of ‘Uiha and an ancestor of Princess Fusipala. This ancestral line is outlined in Figure ①.

As depicted, Fusipala’s relationship to Malupō spans eleven generations and involves nine kings of the Tu‘i Kanokupolu line, many nobles, and various other chiefs and prominent figures. This crucial part of Tonga’s history is artfully wrapped in a single line of heliaki that the late queen had unequivocally intended for the instruction and learning of her people.

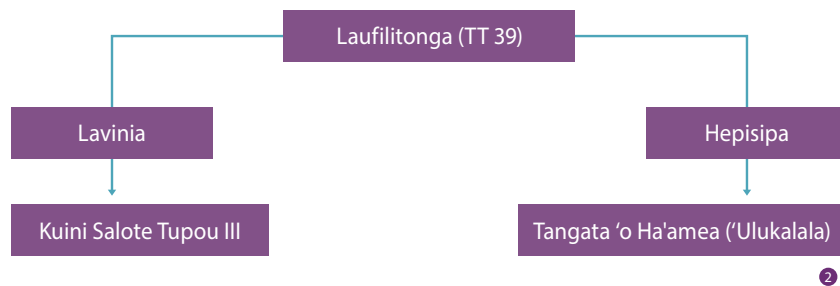


Her late Majesty’s desire to instruct all, both Tongans and expatriates, of Tonga’s history, relationships, and cultural heritage was again made explicit in her lamentations at the passing of ‘Ulukālala Ha’amea, as follows:

Ha’amea ē teu lea (Alas, Ha’amea, I will speak)
Ke mā’u ha ‘ilo ‘a e solá (That the stranger may take heed)
Mo e to’utupu ‘o e kuongá (And Tonga’s young perceive)
He’eta fetaulaki he tapá (How at the edge we meet)

① Genealogy of Fusipala as a descendant of Malupō, Paramount Chief of ‘Uiha.

The “edge” referenced above by her late Majesty is Laufiletonga, the thirty-ninth and last of the Tu‘i Tonga royal line. Her late Majesty and ‘Ulukalala Ha‘amea both descended from two daughters of Laufiletonga, as shown in Figure ②:



Later in this same lamentation, her extreme dexterity at encapsulating history and delineating relationships in heliaki is vividly displayed in the following lines:

Ta afe atu ‘i ‘Uiha (Let us turn to ‘Uiha)

Veimapu mo Faime‘alava (Veimapu and Faime‘alava)

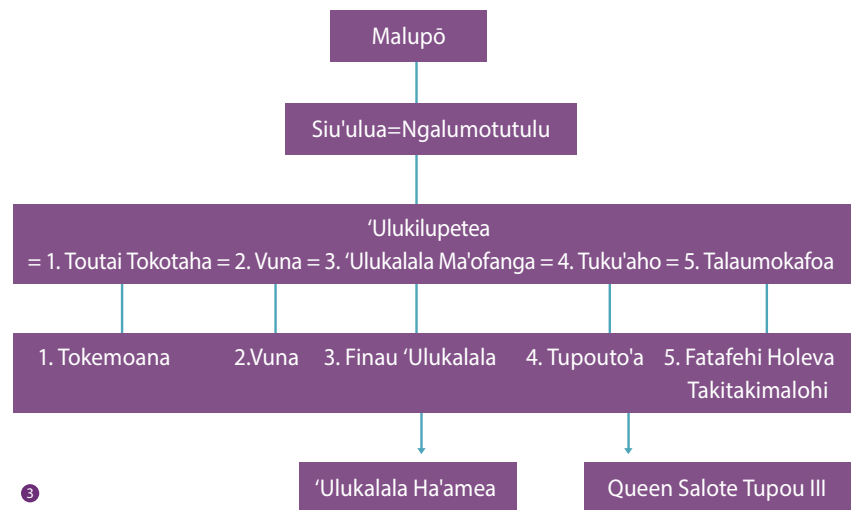
Ke ke mu‘omu‘a ki he Tou‘a (You will lead to the Tou‘a [Seat of the Kava mixers])

Kau muimui ki he Olovaha (I will follow to the “Olovaha” [Royal Seat of the Honored Guest])

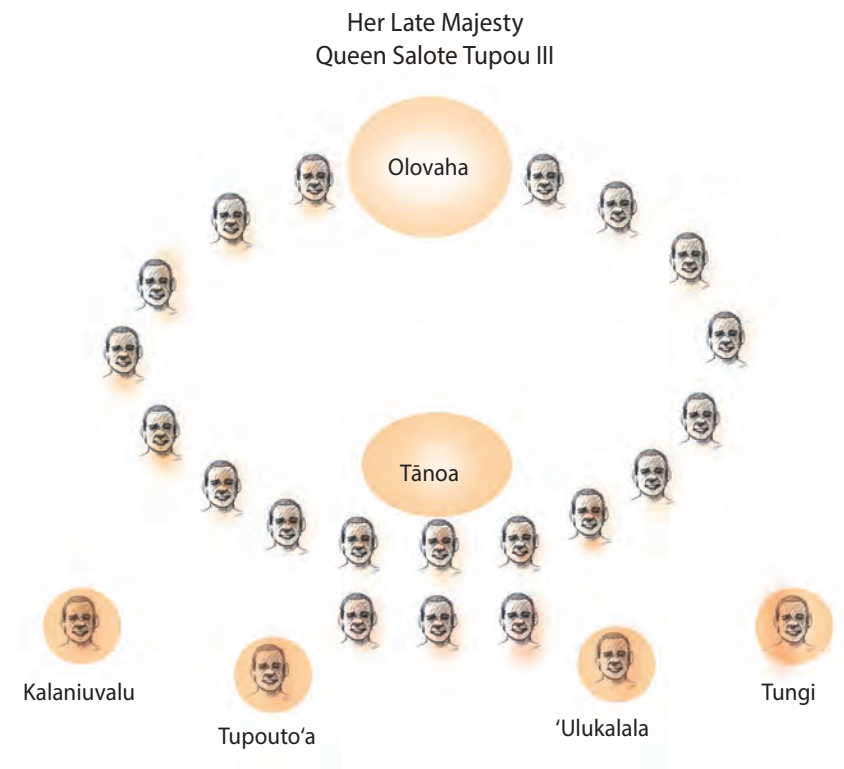
Far from being whimsical, the late queen’s entreaty that they “turn on the shores of ‘Uiha” seems a deliberate strategy to divulge how she and ‘Ulukalala relate to each other in terms of their ‘Uiha origin. Both are descendants of ‘Ulukilupetea, granddaughter of Malupō, Paramount Chief of ‘Uiha. The story of ‘Ulukilupetea, nicknamed “Keteni Tabua” (Ivory Womb), is one of the most distinctive in Tonga’s history because ‘Ulukilupetea had given birth to five different royal personages, planting seeds in all three royal lineages and bequeathing a legacy unmatched in recorded history. However, an entire book could be written on that story alone or typically on any few lines of heliaki by the late Queen Salote Tupou III, because in each line is embedded a cornucopia of history, tales, filial relationships and propriety, and instructions in matters of protocol, customs, traditions, and culture.

② How the late Queen Salote III meets Tangata o Ha‘amea at the “Edge.”

As portrayed in Figure ③, ‘Ulukalala is the descendant of an elder sibling to the one from which the late queen was descended. Hence, he will “lead,” but he’ll head straight to his seat beyond the Tou‘a (Seat of the Kava Mixers) while the queen will “follow” because she is descended from a younger sibling. However, since she is the highest sovereign being, she will head directly to the Olovaha (Royal Seat of the Honored Guest). Figure ④ is a depiction of where the late queen would be seated at the head or Olovaha as Royal Guest of Honor and where ‘Ulukalala would be positioned beyond the Tou‘a. Quite shrewdly, the late queen exhibited both acuity and subtlety in these brief lines of heliaki, briefly acknowledging ‘Ulukalala’s seniority in their ‘Uiha connection, but then immediately asserting her own superiority because ultimately all submit to the queen.



③ Her Majesty, the late Queen Salote's, and 'Ulukalala's origin in 'Uiha.



While heliaki is manifested in references to chiefly garlands, landmarks, royal residences, and so forth, something of even greater significance is worth mentioning at this point. One of the renowned *punake* in Tonga, the late Ma‘umatāpule, asserted heliaki evoked deep patriotism and a sense of pride, especially during occasions of *fetau* (oratorical ripostes). At such times, every *punake* traditionally contested his superiority, until her late Majesty emerged; then, all conceded she was “Master of the Heliaki” because of the extent of her knowledge and understanding and the depth of her passion for Tonga, its history, and its cultural heritage.⁵

HELIAKI AS DEPICTION OF THE NEW MORAL CODES

Following the advent of Christianity in Tonga, according to a renowned *punake*, the late Semisi ‘Iongi, heliaki was used to depict the new dress and moral codes, especially for women, promulgated by the missionaries and enforced by the Tongan government under its newly developed constitution. The creation of a *ta‘anga* (literary

5. M. Matapule, interviewed by V.A. Taumopeau, 3 August 1989.

4 Depiction of Royal Kava Circle.

composition) then became likened to the dressing of a woman. The body needed to be fully clothed, with covering from neck to ankles, leaving the beholder to wonder, to yearn, and to conjecture as to what lay beneath. Any embellishment needed to be of the right mix and proportion. Mere ostentation without depth was scorned as gaudiness. Care was taken that language and diction be fragrant and non-repellent, like scented oil, the daily emollient for young Tongan ladies. Ornamental overlays, like the *ta'ovala* (mat worn around the waist as outer skirt), were crucial to add depth and to avoid being readily exposed. The ultimate aim was to clothe a woman with dignity and respect, rendering her highly desirable yet almost inaccessible. Similarly, heliaki was used to produce the same effects, tantalizing yet challenging, with meaning so deeply entrenched it would require real effort to unravel all of the inherent nuances. Like nudity for women, compositions that lay bare the facts are traditionally despised as not worthy of public observance.⁶

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, heliaki came naturally to the Tongan because it was part and parcel of his cultural molding. Indirectness was his cultural inheritance, bequeathed to him by generations of his forbearers since antiquity. Evasiveness was key for maintaining social equilibrium and integrity. To be direct was to become an outcast, an alien in his homeland. To state one's worth bluntly, though honestly, was impudent, and to assume equality with others of higher rank was to commit personal affront. Humility, contrastingly, is publicly demonstrated through self-denial and self-debasement in acknowledgement of the superior rank of others more highly placed in society. Heliaki, then, was the conduit through which Tongans could express themselves appropriately, implicitly exposing their deeply held feelings and beliefs without the risk of insolence and social suicide.

6. S'longi, interviewed by V.A. Taumoepeau, 23 June 1984.

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