

## ***Foki kihe tupu'anga***

*Talaloto and Autoethnographic Reflections of Navigation back to the Homeland*

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**ABSTRACT** Today I find myself back in the homeland, in the physical, back where my ancestors once walked and talked. In this essay, I unfold stories of migration to highlight the fluid and dynamic nature of such processes evidently shaped by our *vā/va'/veitapui*, that is, the relations with/within/between people and place(s). I utilize the Tongan approach *talaloto*, an intimate and sacred practice, to share and interpret my thoughts and feelings about what inspired and empowered me to return to Tonga. *Talaloto* allows me to reflect on and interpret the histories and struggles that have been meaningful in my journey. **KEYWORDS** Migration; *Talaloto*; *Vā/va'/veitapui*; Sacred relational space; Relational connection

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Autoethnography is a critical qualitative approach that privileges stories and storytelling.<sup>1</sup> It is an approach that seeks to (re)present in the form of writing, and interpret the critical reflections and thoughts that are useful and relevant not only to me, but also to my family and community. This essay contains my interpretations of reflective thoughts; through “rigorous self-reflection—typically referred to as reflexivity,”<sup>2</sup> I draw on them to (re)present and (re)construct understanding, engagement, and henceforth, action. As affirmed by indigenous and non-indigenous scholars, self-reflection (or reflexivity) is necessary because it interprets how we have engaged not only in the thinking but also in the doing. When we write our self-reflections linked to our engagements with indigenous knowledge that also include research methodologies, we should not write from or “at a distance, instead [we] have to show the blisters on our hands.”<sup>3</sup> Although Graham Smith, Te Kawehau Hoskins, and Alison Jones use the aforementioned statement to refer to the context of Kaupapa Māori research in Aotearoa (New Zealand), the message is useful for other indigenous scholars too. Similarly, Sereana Naepi reminds us to write about our critical engagement with indigenous theoretical constructs not only within academia, but also within

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our communities.<sup>4</sup> Getting our “hands dirty in the struggle”<sup>5</sup> is symbolic of the challenges of applying indigenous research knowledge and frameworks in praxis within our own communities. I share my *ngaahi talanoa* (stories) to highlight how I have engaged and utilized my *fatongia* (obligation and responsibility) back in the homeland—for Tonga and its people.

When doing autoethnography and writing about the “self,” Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones postulate that they “often call on memory and hindsight to reflect on past experiences.”<sup>6</sup> For Jennifer L. Erdely, in her account of taking part in voodoo tours in New Orleans, “autoethnography is a practice that permits movement between memories.”<sup>7</sup> Memories are not only constructs within our minds, but are also living sources like the stories/tales by which individuals are evoked and inspired to rely on the past—that is, their histories—for meaning making and guidance. Memories elicit experiences and stories that help shape our present and future. One of the earliest memories I have about the impact of migration and navigation on my *kāinga* (extended family) was linked to our struggles in New Zealand). “*Kapau na’a tau nofo pe i Tonga, he ikai tau fu’u faingata’a’ia i he fonua ni* (If only we had stayed back in Tonga, we wouldn’t be struggling so much in this country),” my mother would often say to us. Her comment highlighted the idealized misconceptions that govern some migrants’ thoughts—that the “new” land would be filled with opportunities within an arm’s reach. However, my parents’ struggle to put food on the table, pay the utilities, and support their children’s education was a reminder that in every place you travel to, there are unexpected challenges. For my parents, the challenge of providing for the family solicited an appreciation of life back on the South Pacific Islands.

For Tongan people, the *kāinga* and *to’utangata* (layers of generations) relate to sociocultural networks that encompass collectivist societies’ values, beliefs, and practices.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the *kāinga* symbolizes *to’utangata* and histories that shape Tongan society. *Foki ki he tupu’anga* is the title of this essay, and it seeks to emphasize the very reasons why we—my wife (‘Elenoa), my son (Daniel), and I—migrated back to my parents’ homeland in the South Pacific Islands, specifically the Kingdom of Tonga. It portrays descriptions of intimate memories and moments in “my life/our lives” that questioned the significance of returning to a place where my *to’utangata* departed from because the opportunities at the time were minimal and had not served the needs of their growing *kāinga*. “Why go back, there is not a lot there,” a few of my *kāinga* said to me with great dismay. My response was pervaded by mixed emotions, “Right, this is

my opportunity to serve our people,” and “Am I really doing the right thing?” But before I detail my reasons for going back to Tonga, I should unfold and foreground the Tongan ideas and concepts that are the foundation for the cultural analysis.

### **TO'UTANGATA TONGA: A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT**

C. Maxwell Churchward defined *to'utangata* as a notion linked to “generation of human beings, or of men as distinguished from women, persons of about the same age.”<sup>9</sup> *To'utangata Tonga* is a cultural construct based on time, space, and history. It is an appropriate construct because at the epistemological level, the experiences of generations of Tongan people are grounded in cultural values and beliefs that are relevant to their lived realities in Tonga and the wider diaspora of New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. This essay draws on my grounded experiences to highlight the past, the present, and the future. For my *to'utangata* before me, their insistence to migrate was based on their desire to provide for and to ensure their *kāinga* was looked after. The labor-intensive workforce during the mid-1970s in the South Pacific encouraged my grandfather and his sons to migrate to Niue in order to fill the carpentry trade skills desired at the time. As a result, my father discontinued his schooling ambitions, took his wife, and followed his father and brothers. This was not uncommon at the time and many families from the South Pacific Islands emigrated from the sacred lands to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.<sup>10</sup>

### **TALALOTO: A SACRED PRACTICE AND PROCESS**

Tongan language, like any other language, contains concepts about the real world.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, knowing and comprehending an entire language involves a particular and unique worldview. To conjure the strength to write this piece, I turned to and utilized Tongan concepts and language.<sup>12</sup> To understand a group of people—their culture, values, beliefs, thoughts, and mentality—studying the relevant language highlights and opens up ideas, meanings, and interpretations of that group's realities and worldviews.<sup>13</sup> *Talaloto* is a practice related to *talanoa* (telling stories and relating experiences).<sup>14</sup> As an intransitive verb, *tala-loto* is an active verb that does not require a direct object to follow.<sup>15</sup> This means that *to talaloto*, the emphasis is more on the “how” or the process related to the action. Traditionally, *to talaloto* has always been understood by Tongans from a religious perspective, and its meaning is constructed within a religious or spiritual context. *To talaloto* is to relate one's religious experience, like giving a personal testimony about a spiritual experience one has encountered/lived as a way to

connect, inspire, and empower change in others. For Tongans, the concept of *talaloto* is symbolic of an oral tradition and cultural undertaking commonly found in the *fale lotu* (church or place of worship). When one partakes in *talaloto*, one engages in an intimate exercise whereby one connects with a sacred spirit. Mefi Naufahu proposes that:

The talaloto consecrated the whole congregation with an extra form of spiritual energy from above that helps to “fakakoloa pe fakaivia” (enrich or empower) and “fakamāfana” (to give warmth) to the gathering. The talaloto is a time of “fola koloa” (laying of inner wealth before you) and “fola’osi” (laying everything you’ve got before you). I have experienced and felt the “mafana” (warmth) of talaloto when one of the proficient “matu’a” (elders) has facilitated this practice. It is a time when members of the congregation express gratitude to their God for the wonders and blessings He has done in their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Naufahu highlights various reasons why *talaloto* is a useful approach for understanding intimate rationales at the spiritual level of engagement. Naufahu also articulates *talaloto* as a research methodology within his doctoral project in New Zealand.<sup>17</sup> In this essay, I want to state that *talaloto* is an approach used not only within religious settings, but variations of it have also been employed outside of religious contexts. For instance, I have seen a version of *talaloto* utilized amongst peers during a volleyball training session. However, it was only between certain players who were likeminded and not all were convinced of its relevance at the training session. Consequently, the volleyball players who had engaged in *talaloto* during the training session were mocked by their peers. I have also observed the use of *talaloto* during a social gathering—teachers shared their innermost feelings about their personal frustrations within the profession and made links to their belief in God as a source of inspiration and a way to deal with their struggles.

At eight years of age, my family and I immigrated to New Zealand from Niue. It was at the ‘Onehunga parish, located in central Auckland, that I first witnessed the use of *talaloto* as a way to share one’s testimony or “spiritual walk” in front of others in the congregation. Elders who engaged in *loloto* (in-depth) testimonies were able to beautifully and intimately craft and weave their words. Oral tradition cultures utilized oral wisdom and competency as a rite of passage from youth to maturity.<sup>18</sup> For many people, *to talaloto* became a religious ritual wherein individuals were judged on getting up and “being seen” *to talaloto* in the *fale lotu* as opposed to their testimonies and how they felt about their God. I was thirteen when I first developed the confidence to get up in front of the church and share my personal thoughts. And even then, I did not feel a spiritual

connection with a higher being. Instead, I stood up mainly because I did not want to put my parents to shame in front of the congregation.

#### **VĀ/VA'/VEITAPUI: RELATIONAL SPACE, RELATIONAL CONNECTION**

Although the practice of *talaloto* varies between groups of Tongan people, its effectiveness can be understood through to the *vā/va'/veitapui* (relational connections) with/between people and places. Many Pacific academics have provided insights into the conceptualizations and implementation of *vā/va'* mainly linked to a relational space or relational connections within research and academia.<sup>19</sup> The Tongan term *veitapui* is defined by Churchward as the act of cousins of the opposite sex “keep[ing] away from each other.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the limited definition by Churchward, Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka’uta provides a more descriptive account of *veitapui* as being a “sacred space [linked to] a life philosophy of living in harmony and balance.”<sup>21</sup> According to Hufanga ‘Okusitino Māhina, as cited by Koya-Vaka’uta, central to *veitapui* is the “spiritual connectedness and relationship with the divine, the ancestors and family, the wider community and the natural environment.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, *talaloto* is a Tongan cultural practice wherein an individual attempts to imbue a sacred connection and relationship that is all-encompassing of the people and things that are meaningful in their life—with a divine or higher being, members of their *kāinga*, people in Tongan society, and the *fonua* (land, place).

#### **IF IT’S MEANT TO BE, IT WILL BE**

Talking to God and spending time with Him has always been a rewarding engagement for me.<sup>23</sup> Though humans have disappointed me many times in the past, my divine God continues to be loving and faithful. However, not everyone feels this way. As I build my trust and *veitapui* with a divine being, I am called to respond to the sacred space and relations with other people.<sup>24</sup> In Tonga, the brother–sister relationship and *tapu* (prohibition) is more obvious than it is in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, though some may argue that it is no longer as strong in Tongan society as it used to be.<sup>25</sup> As Christians, ‘Elenoa, Daniel, and I had prayed for months asking for the divine being to intervene and to show us if the move to Tonga was meant to be. So for three months, from June to August 2014, I was frantically looking for signs and some divine intervention. *If it’s meant to be, it will be*, I kept saying to myself. In July, I was hospitalized and given blood transfusions to replace the large amounts of blood lost as result of a dental cleaning at our neighborhood clinic. Having three artificial valves in my heart requires me to be on warfarin (blood thinner

medication) for the rest of my life. Because of the warfarin, what was meant to be a simple dental cleaning for a majority of people, was not the same in my case. Although the dentist had taken the appropriate precautions, the procedure did not take place as expected. The three days in hospital was quite tough.

#### **RETURNING TO THE HOMELAND: FATONGIA, SERVICE, (RE)CONNECTION**

In September 2014, we emigrated from New Zealand and headed east to the last remaining kingdom in the South Pacific region—Tonga. For ‘Elenoa, this was a return to her home, to where she was born and raised. For Daniel, this was an opportunity to embrace and immerse himself in the language and culture. However, I was born in Niue—another island in the South Pacific that is under New Zealand’s administration—and I was predominantly raised in Auckland. Despite having visited Tonga in 2012 for two weeks, the move to Tonga in 2014 seemed to be quite different. And I felt different. I felt as though I was fulfilling my *fatongia* to my grandparents who were no longer with us. When I got off the plane, I felt a real sense of belonging—as though I was meant to be on the land, a consecrated land, and as though I was about to finally (re)trace my ancestors’ footsteps. My return to the sacred *fonua*/land/geographic space was filled with elation and sadness. Although my *kāinga* in New Zealand had reservations about us coming over, when they saw and heard about the work that I was doing in Tonga, they were proud. Erdely states that “we carry our pasts through memories” and that “the memories of the past can be painful and difficult to negotiate while living in the present.”<sup>26</sup> While I carry out my service in Tonga, I am sometimes saddened, particularly when I drive past my grandparents’ village home in Ma’ufanga because it reminds me of them. When I feel like the work that I am doing is useful, I feel glad to be in Tonga. But on days when I feel frustrated, stressed, and undervalued, I return to God and ask for His renewed strength and guidance.

#### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

I close this essay not with a traditional “conclusion.” Instead, I close with “comments” because the nature of migration and navigation shifts and is dynamic. As such, I close with a poem to inspire and empower the next generation of Tongan young people born and raised in the diaspora who intend to *foki kihe tupu’anga* (return to the homeland).

#### ***Foki kihe tupu’anga (The Call to Return Home)***

Aotearoa, New Zealand

the adopted land of my ancestors

navigation to a place filled with opportunities  
a place filled with hopes and dreams for our *kāinga*  
there is no room for bitterness in the returning  
migration is and has always been for our betterment  
*foki kihe tupu'anga*, return home  
obligation infused with responsibility  
*tala hoku loto*, reveal the *veitapui*  
of a consecrated and spiritual, yet fluid, space  
the sacred connections like a grandparent to a grandchild  
of spirit, love, forgiveness, and compassion  
as deep and as unfathomable as the *moana* (ocean)  
i hear the call to return  
*foki kihe tupu'anga*, return home  
faint voices at a distance  
longing to reunite once more  
at last the voices draw nearer  
gaining momentum and volume  
in unison my ancestors' voices say  
*foki kihe tupu'anga*, return home  
i have since returned to our sacred ancestral land  
returned to reclaim and reconnect  
weaving memories for my own son and future *to'utangata*  
to capture and cultivate  
the overflowing hopes, dreams, and aspirations  
*foki kihe tupu'anga*, return home ■

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#### NOTES

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