

KO E FAKALĀNGILĀNGI: The Eulogistic Function of the Tongan Poet¹

by Eric B. Shumway

Visitors to the Tongan Islands have long noted the beauty and power of the Tongan performing arts, *faiva faka-Tonga*. Especially in recent years, hundreds of outsiders (*kau muli*) have enlarged the audiences at Tongan national festivals and have been overwhelmed by the spectacle of energy, precision, indeed the artistic sophistication of their dances: the *mā'ulu'ulu* the *tafi*, the *kailao*, the *me'etu'upaki*, the *sōkē*, and the majestic *lakalaka*. What few foreigners realize, and what has not yet been adequately elucidated by serious students of Tongan language and culture, is that Tongan *faiva* is more than high entertainment. Besides fulfilling a psychic need or giving therapeutic emotional release to performer and spectator through musical harmony and rhythmical movement, Tongan *faiva* is a ritual reinforcement of the fundamental values that bind the Tongan society together.² These values are the worshipful regard for the Royal House (*Fale 'Alo*) of King Tupou IV, the maintenance of the sovereign prerogatives of the nobility (*hou'eiki*), the love of country and church more than self, and the insistence that Tonga is the best of all possible worlds.

¹ Research by the author was conducted during four different excursions to Tonga, beginning in 1974. The major informants who have contributed to the contents of this paper are Semisi 'Iongi, Nau Saimone, Peni Tutu'ila Malupō, Malukava, and the Honorable Ve'ehala. These are five of the most renowned contemporary poets in Tonga today. I am also indebted to Alamoti Taumoepeau, chief of the Tongan village at the Polynesian Cultural Center, Laie, Hawaii.

² Tongan *faiva* as used in this discussion refers simply to the Tongan performing arts which include mainly poetry, music, and dancing. Separated generally in Western culture, these arts in Tonga are symbolically interwoven into highly sophisticated forms. So far the most careful studies of Tongan *faiva* have been those of Adrienne Kaeppler. Her research, however, has focused primarily on Tongan dance. See her "Preservation and Evolution of Form and Function in Two Types of Tongan Dance," *Polynesian Cultural History* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 1967), pp. 503-536; "Folklore as Expressed in the Dance in Tonga," *Journal of American Folklore*, 80 (December, 1967), 160-168; "The Aesthetics of Tongan Dance," *Ethnomusicology*, 15 (May, 1971), 175-185.

³ Actually the word "poet" is a narrow English translation of the Tongan word *pu-nake*. Many Tongans fail to make the distinction between a *pu-nake* and a *pulotu*. *Pulotu* means composer or creator. A *pulotu fa'u* is a composer of poems or *ta'anga* which, according to the nature of Tongan *faiva*, will inevitably be put to music. A *pulotu hiva* is a creator of melodies and a *pulotu haka* is a creator of dance, a choreographer. When a single person can excel in all three of these creative activities, he achieves the distinction of *pu-nake*. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I use the term "poet" to signify *pu-nake*.

If Tongan *faiva* is essentially socially didactic, then a principal function of the poet³ is to preserve and restate the most urgent social and political imperatives of both past and present. His role is analogous to that of the *matāpule* (chief's spokesman) in the *kava* ceremony and in a general way to that of the *faifekau* (minister) in the church. The poet has a special tribal mission. He composes not so much out of an inner struggle or private vision, which inspires so much of Western literature, as out of a sense of public duty and a desire for personal acclaim within that duty.

The primary responsibility of the poet is to aggrandize and glorify the *Tu'i Kanokupolu*, the Royal Family, and the *hou'eiki* (nobility) of the kingdom. This responsibility has not been arbitrarily imposed by the aristocracy, but rather has grown naturally out of centuries of the people's veneration for the ancient royal houses of Tonga. The eulogistic tradition among the poets no doubt derives partly from the ancient king worship of the Tongan people. As the head of the original royal dynasty, the *Tu'i Tonga* was both King and high priest, and therefore the object of devotion. Being descended from the god, Tangaloa, he was the supreme spiritual as well as temporal power in the land. The most intense worshipful feelings were directed toward him in the form of songs and dances and religious ceremonies.

With the demise of the *Tu'i Tonga* and the *Tu'i Ha'a Takalaua* dynasties and the rise of the present dynasty of the *Tu'i Kanokupolu*, there was a transfer of devotion to the new universal monarch, George Tupou I (r. 1845-1893). The new king, who became a Christian, succeeded in uniting the kingdom under his leadership, winning the allegiance of the people for himself and for Christianity. He espoused a political course that kept Tonga for Tongans, freed the commoners from bondage to the chiefs, established a constitution, and guaranteed plantation land for every adult male in the kingdom.⁴

Thus, for these social blessings, as well as for his royal birth, King George Tupou I and his descendants have been the objects of intense praise. There is an insistence even yet among the Tongan people that it was through divine intervention that the Kingdom of Tonga was established and has remained to this day free and safe, the only autonomous Polynesian state. To miss this collective testimony of the Tongan people is to miss the active principle of their patriotic feeling which resounds in their poetry and music.

Perhaps the best known modern poem among Tongans, which epitomizes the Tongan regard for royalty, is Nau Saimone's *Ko 'Ene*

⁴ For an account of Tongan history, see Sione **Lātūkefu's** book *Church and State in Tonga* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974).

'Afio mo e Kaha'u 'o Tonga (Her Majesty and the Future of Tonga):⁵

- 1 *Pupunga lose teunga e tafengavai 'o taimi,*
Cluster of roses decorating the stream of time,
- 2 *Tauhia he ta'au 'o e 'ofa fakapalovitenisi.*
Nurtured in the wake of providential love.
- 3 *Polepole ai pe motu 'oku lau 'e he himi,*
On this proud land, praised by the hymn,
- 4 *Kei toka e monū ki he palataisi 'o e Pasifiki.*
Sweet fortune still rests--the paradise of the Pacific.
- 5 *Tu'unga'anga ia 'ete hūmataviki,*
This is the substance of my worshipful praise,
- 6 *He ko e laukau'anga 'o Ha'a Tongafisi.*
The source of all beauty for the *Ha'a Tongafisi*.
- 7 *Malimali loto ai pē fine fine 'o e Halapaini,*
The woman of Halapaini continually smiles in her heart,
- 8 *Tafe sino'ivai e kalonikali e 'otu feleniti.*
In her flows deep the history and culture of the Friendly Islands.
- 9 *Kuo fihī e kakala he tofi'a siueli,*
Fragrant abundance, enshrining this jeweled estate,
- 10 *Taufā 'ene ngangatu fakamo'oni'i 'o e palomesi.*
Is wafted abroad, an emblem of the covenant.
- 11 *'Oku fotu 'o hangē ko e takanga (sola sisitemi),*
It now appears as a mighty solar system,
- 12 *Pe ngaahi huelo e maama lahi e 'univeesi;*
Or the rays of the universe's largest light.
- 13 *'Oku 'ikai malava hano fakatataua*
No apt comparison can capture
- 14 *'A e koloa fungani 'a Tonga ma'a e kaha'u na.*
The crowning treasure of Tonga's future.
- 15 *Pea mo'oni e lau 'a e 'ipiseli 'a Paula:*
How true Paul's words in his epistle:

⁵ Nau Saimone is a farmer-poet living in the village of Ha'alalo on Tongatapu. This is the first appearance of his poem in print, by his permission. My translation is by design more literal than poetic.

16 He 'ikai fakamāvae 'a e 'ofa pea mo ki taua.

We will never be separated from God's love.

Refrain:

17 Tué tué tué tué ki he la'ā tupu'a,

Hail, hail, hail, hail to the eternal sun, (i.e. the Queen)

18 Tué tué tué tué ki he huelo koula.

Hail, hail, hail, hail to the golden beam. (i.e. the Royal Family)

19 Kai 'utungaki ai pe me'avale e fonua,

For even the lowliest people of the land eat freely

20 Hakailangitau 'o 'ikai tukua.

They dance in an ecstasy which ceases never.

The most visible poetic quality of Nau's poem is its hyperbole, which strikes the Western mind in much the same way a Tongan feast does, sumptuous yet overwrought. To the Tongan mind, the excess of emotion is not only excusable but desirable, because the poem is meant to be rapturous flight, not a reasoned statement. The poet does not mind that his rose cluster in line 1 suddenly becomes a constellation of stars or the solar system in line 11. He finally decides Tonga's future glory is too great for comparison.

The profusion of Tonganized English words throughout the poem (at least twelve) is partially explained by this tone of lavish praise. Tongan poets usually disdain the use of English words in their compositions, except those that have long been assimilated into their language, such as *taimi* (time), and *palataisi* (paradise). But Nau has pulled out all stops. He hopes that foreign words such as providential (2), chronicle (8), jewel (9), and promise (10) will evoke a freshness and power for his already gilded altar of praise.

Composed and put to music for Queen Salote (r. 1918-1965) in 1964, Nau's poem includes all the basic social doctrines which for Tongans will insure stability and peace for their country. Line 1 gives the poem a cosmic setting and a serious tone. Since direct address of royalty is forbidden in Tongan poetry, the poet addresses a cluster of roses which alludes to the Royal Family. This symbolistic technique is known as *heliaki*, hiding one's specific meaning in references to natural objects and places. Nau, who for some takes too many liberties with poetic convention, actually violates this principle in the title. Many poets would have entitled the poem, "*Pupunga Lose*" (Cluster of Roses).

In line 2 the poet establishes the divine sanction for the rule of Queen Salote and her children. God has blessed Tonga through the

Royal Family. Lines 3 and 4 remind us that Tonga is a choice land above all other lands of the Pacific. Lines 5 and 6 state precisely the fundamental impetus for Tongan creative arts, namely, gratitude for the Royalty. The *Ha'a Tongafisi*, or the tribe of *Tongafisi*, alludes to the poets and orators of the kingdom. Presiding over the cluster of roses, the paradise of the Pacific, and the *Ha'a Tongajisi* is the “woman of *Halapaini*” (woman of the road of Pines)⁶ or Queen Salote herself.

Stanza two of Nau's eulogy repeats the tone of the first, addressing the glories of Tonga's past and future. The covenant mentioned in line 10 is King George Tupou I's promise to free all Tongans from the bondage of the chiefs, which came to pass in 1862. The allusion also embraces the famous scene in Tongan history where, in an assembly of chiefs and cabinet members, King Tupou raised toward heaven a Bible and a handful of soil and “gave” his kingdom to the guidance and protection of God. From this event comes the national slogan, “God and Tonga are my heritage.” Finally, in the refrain Nau attempts to capture the unrestrained *māfana* or warmth that informs the highest artistic moment in Tongan *faiva*, when all elements of a performance come together into a gestalt of feeling known as “*kuo tau e langi*” (the singing has hit the mark).

Since so much of Tongan poetry is adulation, one may wonder if it ever sinks into sentimentality and clichéd ornamentation, even for Tongans. The answer is yes. Cliches are always a danger within a fixed poetic convention. The better poets avoid this danger by clever *heliaki* which keeps the spectators guessing about the meaning of a work. Or they may borrow non-Tongan phrases and melodies to augment the traditional ones. One of the most interesting poetic techniques which gives life and energy to Tongan poetry is known as *fetau* or repartee between competing poets. There is always in Tongan *faiva* a fierce but friendly rivalry between poets, who specialize, among other things, in throwing covert insults at one another. This delights the crowd and, in the Tongan mind, heaps greatness upon the presiding chief. Thus, *fetau* is an important part of good eulogy.

From time immemorial, competition has been essential to the best in artistic creativity. Anciently the *pō sipi* (night recitation) was the battleground for poets and others who would engage in impromptu, poetic verbal combat. This spirit of competition has infiltrated nearly all aspects of *faiva*, even the *ta'anga* (poems) of the grand *lakalaka* dances.⁷

⁶ The palace grounds are surrounded by stately seventy foot pine trees.

⁷ The *lakalaka* is the grandest of the Tongan performing arts. Made up of several long rows of perhaps 150 dancers, the *lakalaka* (meaning literally “to stride back and forth”) is one of the few truly indigenous Tongan dances. A single *lakalaka* may have as many as ten verses of poetry with a different melody for each verse.

The late Queen Salote, who more than anyone else has nurtured Tongan *faiva* over the last fifty years, fostered this competition by inviting dozens of villages to bring various performances to public festivals as well as her own private family celebrations. It was not uncommon on these occasions to see three large troops of singers and dancers performing simultaneously on the north, west, and south lawns of the palace grounds. Here the poets studied each others works, especially the poetry, and composed their jibes and rebuttals for the next festival. The Queen would occasionally reward a certain poet with money or a "title." It was to the great poet Malukava that she gave what might be called the laureateship. In his *lakalaka* performed at the Centennial Celebration of the Tongan Constitution (1975), Malukava says in one line that "with lock and key" he has put away all other poets. It is still true that under his direction the *lakalaka* from Mu'a concludes every major Tongan festival. Semisi 'Iongi argues that the first duty of the poet is to "look, act, talk, and walk" like a poet. No matter how careless, naive, or obscure he might be, he must "perform to get people to feel he is better than all other poets."⁸

It is important to note again that poetic repartee among the poets is intended to bring them personal acclaim only by their exalting the presiding chiefly dignitary, usually the monarch. In this sense, the *fetau* of a composition, especially of a *lakalaka*, is analogous to the *tālanga* in the *kava* ceremony. The *tālanga*, a warm debate among chiefs' spokesmen or *kau matāpule*, is usually provoked by a concern for ceremonial protocol. But it also serves to show off the oratorical powers of the *matāpule* whose speech very frequently follows the format of a *ta'anga* (*lakalaka* poem). The format begins with the *fakataputapu* (formal recognition of all dignitaries present), then proceeds to the *kaveinga* (particular subject or theme), then the *fetau* (verbal "blast" against rivals), and finally the *tatau* (the conclusion). It is precisely in the controversy and heated debate that the *lāngilāngi*, or the glory of the paramount chief, is established whether directly or by innuendo.

To illustrate how *fetau* gives spice to a poem as well as exalts a chiefly personage, one need go no further than two celebrated rivals in Tonga's recent past--Fineasi Malukava from Mu'a and Fakatava from Leimātu'a, Vava'u. Malukava was considered by many to be the supreme poet of the kingdom, living on the estate of the high chief Tungī Mailefihi. Fakatava, talented and egocentric, wanted to depose the laureate from Mu'a. According to an account by Alamoti Taumoepeau who knew Malukava intimately, Fakatava came into favor with King

⁸ Mr. 'Iongi is a vast repository of information about Tongan language and culture. Well into his eighties, he is still an active member of the Tongan Traditions Committee.

Tupou II around 1912 because of a magnificent *lakalaka* he composed and performed with a large group of dancers from 'Eua. So deeply moved by this performance, the King bestowed upon the poet the little island of Kalau just off the southern end of 'Eua island. Since land seemed to be a more tangible reward than just a name, Fakatava assumed that the King's gift gave him the privilege to challenge or *tālanga* with Malukava. Shortly thereafter, Vaea, a chief of the Ha'a Havea clan, invited Fakatava to prepare a *lakalaka* for the citizens of Houma to perform. With characteristic audacity or *fie lahi*, Fakatava composed the *fetau* of his lyrics as follows:

- 1 *Sīlongo 'a e 'Otu Tongatapu,*
Silence all of Tongatapu,
- 2 *'Oua e ngū, 'Oua e vātau.*
Neither groan nor wrangle among yourselves.
- 3 *'Oku kei tu'u 'a e motu ko Kalau,*
The island of Kalau still stands,
- 4 *Ko e fai'anga 'o e fakatalutalu.*
The only performing ground for things traditional.

Could the long deserted, tiny island of Kalau, through the energy and talent of Fakatava, now challenge the authority of Mu'a, capital seat of ancient Tonga, repository of Tongan culture, abode of the divine kings, the *Tu'i Tonga*, and the home of Tuku'aho, the inventor of the modern *lakalaka*? Incredible! When the rumors of Fakatava's bid for glory spread to Malukava, the Mu'a poet was irritated by such conceit. He quickly dispatched a spy to scout the Houma practices and write down the *ta'anga*. The rumors were true. Malukava responded to Fakatava's presumption in a famous *fetau*:

- 1 *Ne u tupu Tonga pea u pēhē*
As a Tongan I grew up knowing
- 2 *'Oku 'ikai lau 'a e kakala vale,*
That common flowers are never mentioned,
- 3 *'A e maile mo e siale.*
The maile bush and the gardenia.
- 4 *Pea kuo mahino hota founa,*
Our assigned places are perfectly clear,
- 5 *He ka ta folau 'i he vaka,*
When we sail in the double canoe,

6 'E 'o'oku 'a e fakalakepa,
Mine is high on the upper deck,

7 'E 'o'ou 'a e tākota fā.
Yours is low on the tākota fā.

Malukava's *fetau* is devastating because he pulls rank on Fakatava, not his own, but that of his patron, Tungī. Vaea, Fakatava's patron, being descended from a very recent stock of new chiefs, is ceremonially speaking far inferior to Tungī; Tungī is the direct descendant of the *Tu'i Ha'a Takalaua*, the head of one of the three royal Tongan dynasties. Thus Malukava reaffirms in this repartee with Fakatava a fundamental principle of Tongan social and political stability--rank and caste. Fakatava comes off as a radical and irreverent upstart simply because he had the misfortune of writing from Houma, Vaea's estate. It is his rank not his merit that is challenged.

Line 1 in Malukava's *fetau* is a sneer at Fakatava's home in Vava'u. Fakatava is a foreigner to Tongatapu, the "real" Tonga. Otherwise he would have known that a true poet will never presume (lines 2 and 3) to consider the *maile* and the gardenia as equal to the flowers of rank used to gild the names (in poems) and the bodies (in costumes) of royalty.⁹ That is, while the *maile* and gardenia might be appropriate for Vaea, they are much too lowly and common for Tungī. By the same token, Fakatava can never talk to Malukava as an equal.

Malukava pursues the theme of established rank in line 4 to the end of the *fetau*, shifting his setting from the garden to the ocean. If he and Fakatava were ever to sail together with their patrons, clearly Malukava would be high and dry with Tungī on the highly decorated and comfortable upper deck; Fakatava would be down wiping salt spray off his face, sitting on the rough platform (*tākoto fā*) connecting the two hulls of the double canoe.

Besides the elaborate themes of praise in Tongan poetry, which are heightened by clever *heliaki* and scintillating *fetau*, perhaps the most powerful reminders of the importance of rank and the people's obligation to cherish their aristocracy lie in the opening *fakatapu* and the closing *tatau* of most *lakalaka* poetry. The *fakatapu* is a stylized acknowledgment of the principal dignitaries on any given occasion. In the *fakatapu* that precedes an oration, the order in which recognition is given signals the rank of each person mentioned. In the *fakatapu* of a poem, which is not as lengthy or detailed as that of an oration, rather than calling the chief by his title, the poet normally recognizes his clan or *ha'a*: "*Tapu mo*

⁹ All Tongan flowers or *kakala* have assigned rank in the Tongan poetic convention. Those appropriate for reference to royalty are the *heilala*, the *mohokoi*, the *nukonuka*, and the *tetefa*.

e *Ha'a Mohefo*" (acknowledging the *Mohefo* clan). Usually he refers to the monarch symbolically as does Peni Tutu'ila in the opening lines of three typical *fakatapu*: "*Te u fakatapu mo e la'ā*" (I will respectfully acknowledge the sun); "*Ke tulou mo e lupe he taua*" (I bow to the dove in the tower); "*Tuku atu e fakatapu 'o Pangai*" (Put forth reverence to Pangai).¹⁰

Not only is the *fakatapu* the poetic recognition of rank, it is also a formal request to perform with abandon and immunity from punishment in case of an accidental breach of protocol. Peni Tutu'ila's well known *fakatapu* comes to mind:

- 1 *Ke tulou mo e lupe he taua*
I bow to the dove in the tower
- 2 *Mo e laione 'i Mala'e Kula.*
And the lion in *Mala'e Kula*.
- 3 *Ka hala ha lea ko u hūfanga*
If ever a word is wrong, I take refuge
- 4 *He kolosi he 'akau fakalava.*
In the holy cross.¹¹

Following the *fakatapu*, the poet embarks on his *kaveinga* or theme which may require several verses to amplify. The concluding verses, or *tatau*, normally contain not merely a farewell statement and the adulation of one's own village, but also a covenant and promise that the poet, representing the people, is ever ready to perpetuate his sacred obligation to his country and his king. He returns to his village or island to await some future command for him to return and perform. Hardship means nothing, only the satisfaction of knowing he has pleased the royal house and the nobility. For the poet has been imbued with the ancestral wisdom that "*Oka lōlōfia ki he tu'i, ko 'ene tonu ia 'a e fonua.*" (When the king is pleased, there is order in the land.) The *tatau* from a *lakalaka* composed by Alamoti Taumoepeau illustrates this concept and promise:

- 1 *Te u ngata hē ka u foki au*
I will stop here and return (home)
- 2 *Ki hoto fātongia fakatalutalu,*
To my immemorial responsibility;

¹⁰ *Pangai* is wherever the king presides at a *kava* circle. Specifically, it is the large field by the palace in Nuku'alofa where all national ceremonial functions occur.

¹¹ The "*lupe he taua*" is perhaps the most frequent symbolic reference to Queen Salote in Tongan poetry. The *Mala'e Kula* is the royal cemetery in Nuku'alofa. A large sculpted lion watches over the grave of George Tupou I. Importantly, the poet will invoke the cross and remind everyone that, after all, Christian charity is superior to cultural ceremony.

3 *Ko e fai 'anga 'ete laukau*

The source of my deepest pride

4 *'A e fakaongoongo mo e talifekau.*

Is awaiting instructions and receiving commands.

Thus ends the ritual reaffirmation of the Tongan society's basic traditional values. Typically, this reaffirmation comes at the moment of "*kuo tau e langi*"; and the *faiva* concludes with all the performers standing, as they began, at attention with their hand across the chest.

Much is yet to be said about the Tongan poet and his craft. The tensions of change, which are everywhere apparent in Tonga today, are no doubt influencing his subject matter and his style. There are already signs that he may be becoming a social critic or will design his compositions more and more to fit the tastes of foreign audiences. Nevertheless it is highly unlikely that he will ever forget his first responsibility or *fātongia*. And it is precisely the exercise of his responsibility that helps constrain any radical tendency to rebel against the existing order of society. Whatever else he is privately, as a poet he is the social conscience of the past, reminding the people of their heritage and their implacable duty to sustain and enrich that heritage.

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