

TĀVANI: INTERTWINING TĀ AND VĀ IN TONGAN REALITY AND PHILOLOGY

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Selected Tenets of the Tā-Vā Theory of Reality

THE TĀ-VĀ THEORY OF REALITY is philosophically all encompassing in addressing both the ontology and the epistemology of reality. The tā-vā theory maintains that, ontologically, *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) are the common medium of all things in reality and that, epistemologically, tā and vā are socioculturally arranged in different ways across various societies. In other words, all things in reality consist of time and space, and time and space are reshaped by people according to their various cultures. The tā-vā theory also proposes that tā and vā are the abstract dimensions of *fuo* (form) and *uho* (content) and that fuo and uho are the concrete dimensions of tā and vā (Māhina 2010, 169) (Fig. 1).

Furthermore, tā and vā, like fuo and uho, are inseparable in reality. Lastly, all things in nature, mind, and society stand in constant relation of exchange, giving rise to conflict or order (Fig. 2).

These selected tenets of the tā-vā theory of reality provide deep insights into the integral connection between Tongan reality and Tongan philology.

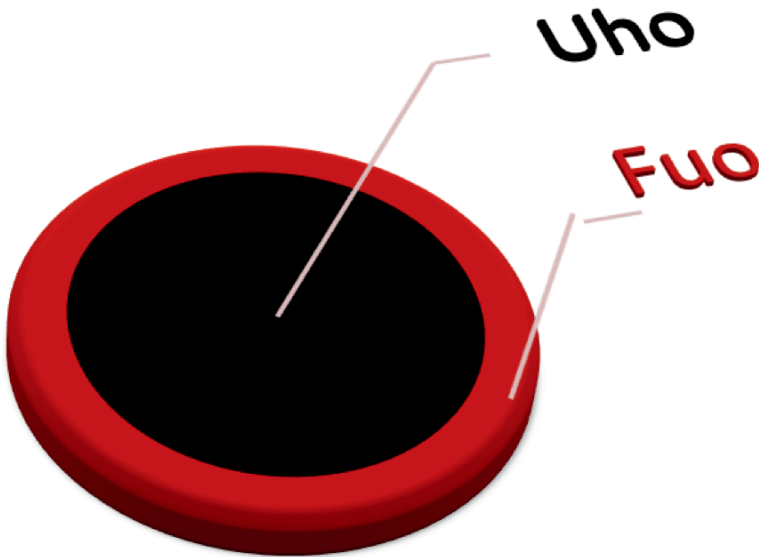


FIGURE 1. Fuo or Tā and Uho or Vā.

Kamata‘anga: Tempo Marking the Beginning Space

During my initiation—conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD dissertation—into cultural anthropology, I came to realize the way Tongan terms signify the intertwining nature of tā and vā in Tongan reality. In the Tongan language, *tāvani* is one of the words for intertwine. Tāvani is a compound word from the terms tā and vā.¹ During my doctoral fieldwork, I began an ambitious task of searching and documenting all Tongan terms, phrases, and proverbs with the root stem tā or vā (Ka‘ili 2008: 237–47). I diligently kept a meticulous record of tā and vā words in a notebook. Every time, I heard, read, or recalled a Tongan term, phrase, or proverb with the root stem tā or vā, I wrote it down. After months of collecting and analyzing these terms, I noticed that other Tongan terms that had no apparent root stem of tā or vā also pointed to the intertwining of time and space—that is, the tāvani of time and space through the tā (tempo marking) of vā. For example, the Tongan word *nofo‘anga* (seating place or space) signifies the tempo marking (through the act of *nofo*, “sitting”) of a *‘anga* (place or space), and the Tongan term *hūfanga* (place of sanctuary) points to the temporal marking (through the act of *hū*, “entering”) of a *fanga* (place or space). The tā–vā linguistic structure of *nofo‘anga* and *hūfanga* is quite common in the Tongan language. There are

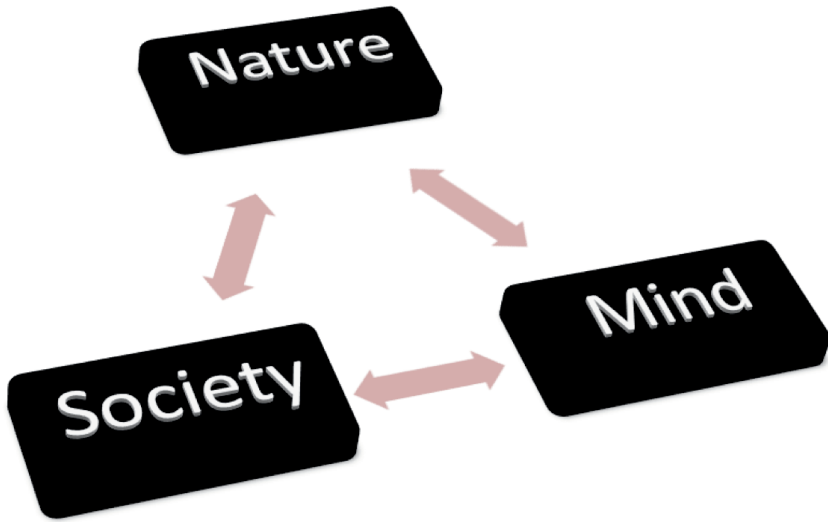


FIGURE 2. Nature, Mind, and Society.

thousands of words with this linguistic structure in the Tongan language, as well as other *Moana* (Polynesian) languages. The structure consists of a verb (*tā*) and a noun (*vā*), such as *-'anga*, *-nga*, *-langa*, and *-fanga* (Churchward 1953).² From a *tā-vā* theory perspective, the verb (action) is a reference to *tā* or *fuo* and the noun is a pointer to *vā* or *uho* (Figs. 3–5).

This *tā-vā* philological structure also underpins many of the words with the root stem *tā*. For instance, *tāpōpao* (carving a canoe) is literally the temporal demarcation (*tā*, carving) of wood (*vā*, space) through the *tufunga* (aesthetic process) of carving a canoe, and *tānafa* (beating a drum) is the rhythmic marking (*tā*, beating) of sound (*vā*, space) through the artistic process of producing beats. This structure points not only to *tā* and *vā* but also to the *tāvani* nature of time and space in Tonga, as well as in *Moana* or Oceania.

Tā Loto: Tempo Marking the Middle Space

Marking Time and Locating Space

The *tāvani* nature of spatiality and temporality is also evident in the temporal marking and spatial locating of past, present, and future in *Moana* cultures (Fig. 6).

Native Hawaiian historian Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa explains that in the Hawaiian language, the past is *ka wā mamua* (the time in front or before)

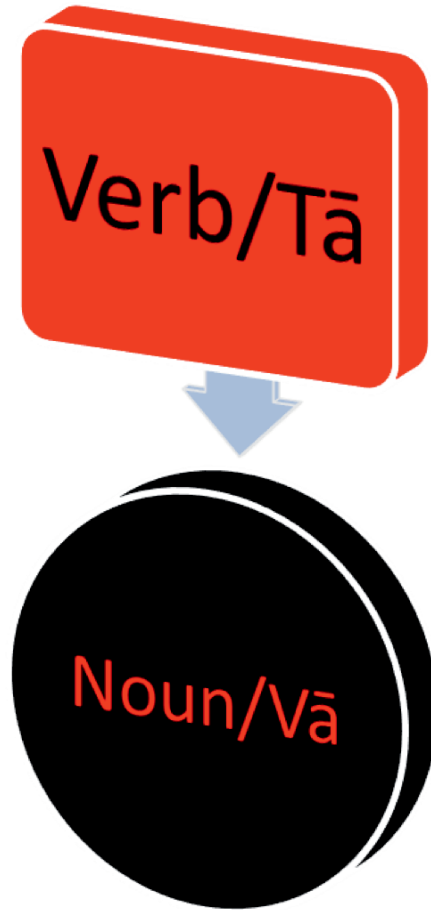


FIGURE 3. **Moana Linguistic Structure.**

and the future is *ka wā mahope* (the time that comes after or behind) (Kame‘eleihiwa 1992, 22; Trask 2000, 260).³ The tāvani nature of spatiotemporality is expressed in the way that time (before and after) is located or marked in space (front and behind). In other words, time and space are inseparable in Hawaiian reality. As mentioned earlier, the idea that tā and vā are inseparable is supported by tenets of the tā-vā theory of reality (Māhina 2010, 169). Kame‘eleihiwa argues that Hawaiians spatially locate the past as the time in front and the future as the time that comes behind (1992: 22–23). She explains that “Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking

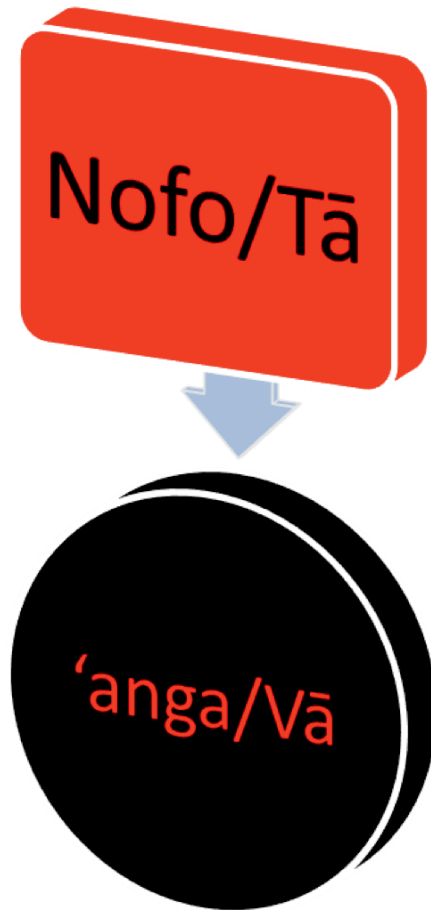


FIGURE 4. **Nofo'anga: A Tā-Vā Linguistic Structure.**

historical answers for present-day dilemmas” (Kame‘eleihiwa 1992: 22–23). She maintains that “such an orientation is to the Hawaiian an eminently practical one, for the future is always unknown, whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge. It also bestows upon us [Hawaiians] a natural propensity for the study of history” (Kame‘eleihiwa 1992: 22–23). This tā-vā orientation is found in all Moana cultures. Moana people spatially locate or mark the past in front and ahead of them and the future behind, following after (Hau‘ofa 2000). Renowned Oceanian anthropologist and writer Epeli Hau‘ofa (2000) argues that this cultural arrangement of time-space helps Oceanians retain memories of the past and awareness of its presence.

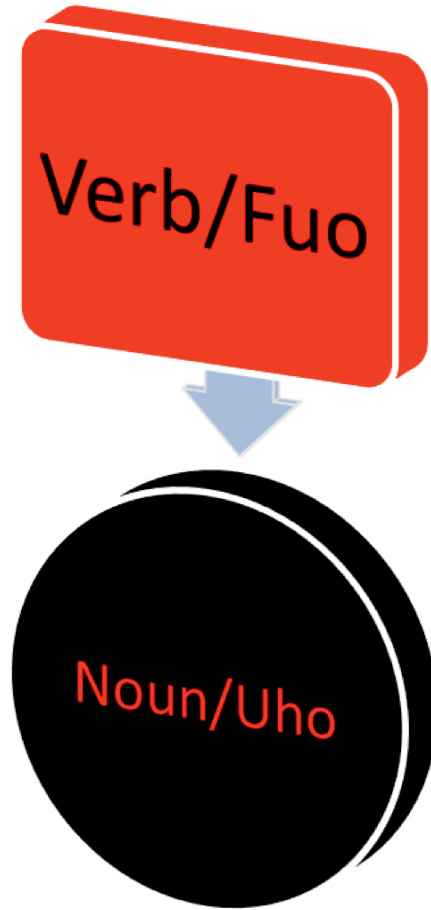


FIGURE 5. **Nofo'anga: A Fuo-Uho Linguistic Structure.**

He points out that “in the Fijian and Tongan languages, the terms for past are *gauna i liu* and *kuonga mu'a*, respectively—*gauna* and *kuonga* meaning ‘time’ or ‘age’ or ‘era,’ and *liu* and *mu'a* meaning ‘front’ or ‘ahead’” (Hau'ofa 2008, 66). It is interesting to note the tāvani nature of spatiality and temporality in combining temporal terms (*gauna* and *kuonga*) and spatial terms (*liu* and *mu'a*) in the indigenous words for past. Hau'ofa explains the cultural logic for this time-space orientation:

That the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps us [Oceanians] retain our memories and be aware of its presence.

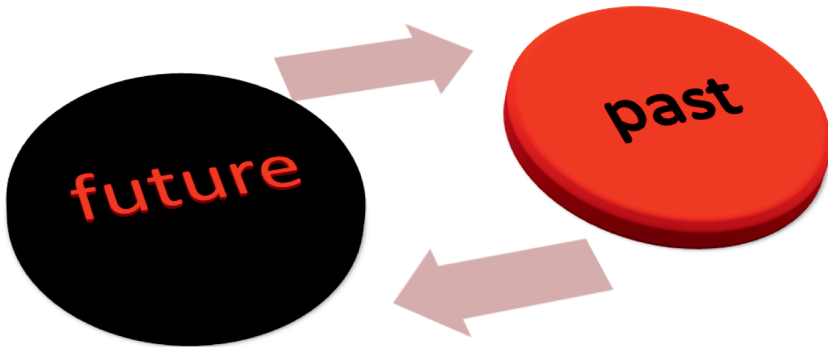


FIGURE 6. **Future or Behind and Past or Front.**

What is behind us cannot be seen and is liable to be forgotten readily. What is ahead of us cannot be forgotten so readily or ignored, for it is in front of our minds' eyes, always reminding us of its presence. Since the past is alive in us, the dead are alive—we are our history (2008, 67).

Similar to Kame'eiehiwa and Hau'ofa, noted historian–anthropologist *Hūfanga* 'Okusitino Māhina,⁴ explains that Moana or Oceanian “people are thought to walk forward into the past and walk backward into the future, both taking place in the present, where the past and future are constantly mediated in the ever-transforming present. The past has stood the test of time and space, and it must therefore be placed in front of people as a guidance in the present, and because the future has yet to happen, it must be placed to the back of or behind people in the present, where both past and future are symmetrically negotiated in the process” (2010, 170).

Again, the intertwining of time and space is clearly evident in the spatialization of time through the marking of past and future (time) in front and behind (space).

Mu 'a, Loto, and Mui: Former, Present, and Latter

In the Tongan language, past is *kuonga mu 'a* (time in the front, time before, and former), present is *kuonga lolotonga* (time in the middle or center),⁵ and future is *kuonga mui* (time in the back, time after, latter, and later). These terms signify time (before, now, and after), as well as space (front, center, and back). They are tempo–spatial terms. *Mu 'a* points to both before (time) and front (space), *loto* is a reference to both now (time) and center (space), and *mui* signifies both after (time) and back or behind (space). From a *tā-vā* theory perspective, the *tā* is temporally marked in the front, middle, and back *vā* (Fig. 7).

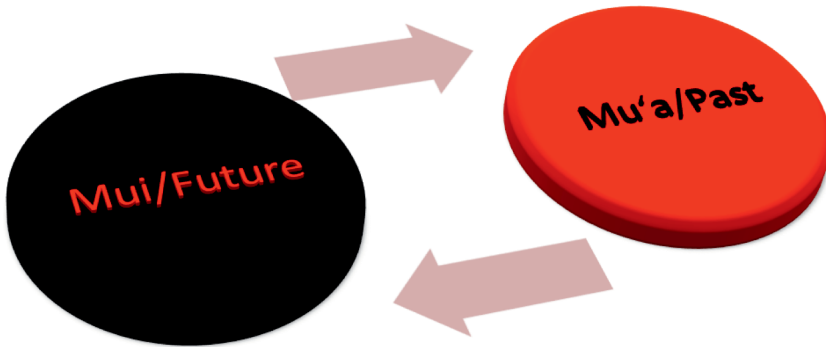


FIGURE 7. **Mui and Mu'a.**

Mu'a and mui, as spatiotemporal terms, also form names and words such as *vaimu'a* or *vaimui* (early rain or late rain), *lihamu'a* or *lihamui* (early nit or late nit),⁶ *sina'e ki mu'a* or *sina'e ki mui* (sina'e before or sina'e after), and *tōmu'a* or *tōmui* (to arrive before or early and after or late). The prefix *tō-* in *tōmu'a* and *tōmui* appears to be a variant of *tā* (O. Māhina, pers. comm., September 10, 2003).⁷ Again, these terms point to the *tāvani* of time-space. Mui also provides spatiotemporal references to terms such as *mui* (young; not ripe or mature) and *finemui* (young woman or maiden). In contrast, *motu'a* is a temporal reference to senior, elder, or older and a spatial reference to someone who is located in *mu'a* (Bennardo 1999; Fig. 8). In Tongan mythology, Maui Motu'a (Maui the Elder) is a title for the senior member of the Maui clan. He is also considered the *'ulumotu'a* (senior head and patriarch) of the Maui lineage.

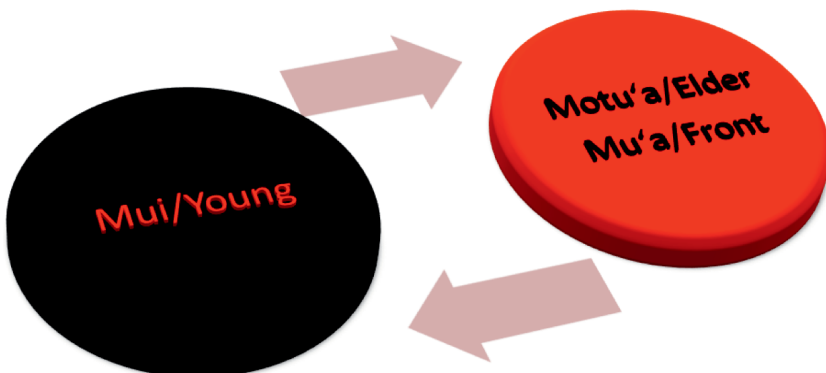


FIGURE 8. **Mui and Motu'a.**

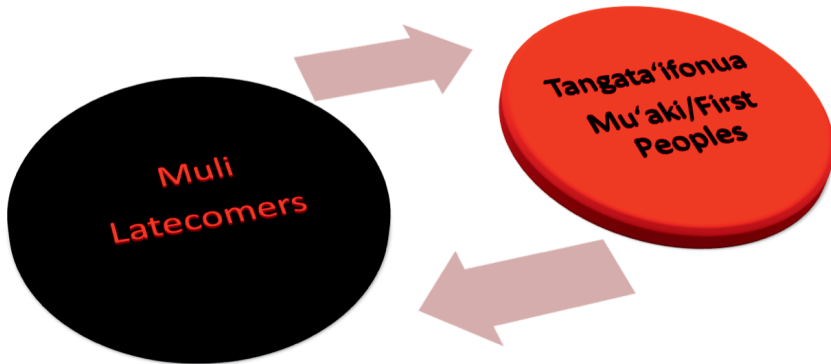


FIGURE 9. **Muli and Tangata'ifonua, Mu'aki.**

Muli,⁸ a variant of *mui*, is a reference to the back or to a foreigner. *Muli*, from a time perspective, probably signifies people who are latecomers or recent arrivals. In contrast, *tangata'ifonua*, indigenous people, is a temporal reference to first settlers, first peoples, and original inhabitants and a spatial reference to people who are located in front (Fig. 9). *Tangata'ifonua* or *fefine'ifonua* (indigenous male or indigenous female) is also known as a *mu'aki* (a first, to be the first, or to lead the way). *Mu'aki* is based on the Tongan root word *mu'a* (front, past, earlier, fore, or first). By examining *tangata'ifonua* and *muli* within the *tā-vā* theory, we gain deeper insights into their time-space dimensions. In addition, we can infer that *motu'a-mui* and *tangata'ifonua-muli* signify the *tāvani* of time and space in Tongan reality.

This spatiotemporal unity also appears in the term *tu'a*. In a spatial sense, *tu'a* means back, outside, external, exterior, etc. In a temporal sense, it signifies the time that comes behind (after or future). This temporal sense is evident in Tongan terms such as *tu'anaki* (to anticipate the future with hope); *tu'amelie* or *fakatu'amelie* (to anticipate or hope for good things in the future); *tu'atamaki* or *fakatu'atamaki* (to think of the future with apprehension or to anticipate bad things); *fakatetu'a*, *fakatu'a*, or *fakatu'otu'a* (to look to the future with hope or apprehension); *Tu'apulehulu* (Thursday, the day after *Pulehulu*, Wednesday); *uike ki tu'a* (the following week); and *māhina ki tu'a* (the following month). The term *tu'a* points to the tempo marking of *tā* in the back *vā*. *Tu'a* is also the term for commoners. In a spatial sense, it probably means an outsider—a person outside (space) the chiefly inner circle. In a temporal sense, it probably refers to a person who came after (latecomers or recent settlers) or a person who was born *i he tu'a* (after) the eldest sibling (one with the high status). This *tā-vā* analysis provides additional insights into the social

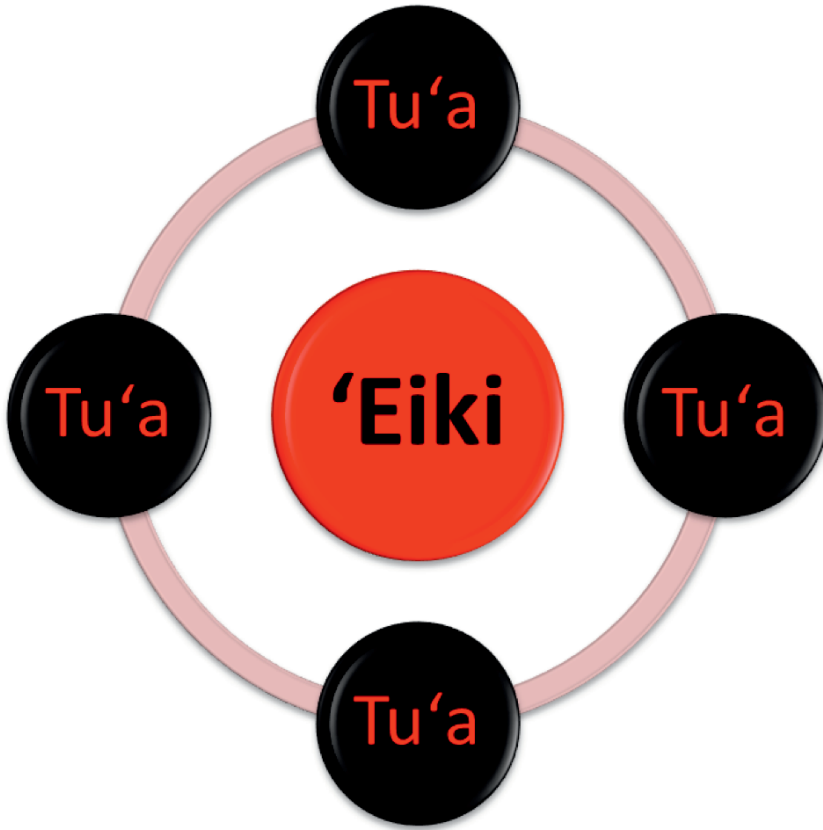


FIGURE 10. 'Eiki and Tu'a: Inner Space and Outer Space.

categories of *'eiki* and *tu'a* (chief and commoners). If *tu'a* refers to a late-comer or younger sibling, then *'eiki* must be a reference to the first settler or first born (senior). This meaning of *'eiki* appears to be the case. Tongan linguist Melenaite Taumoefolau (1996) argues that *'eiki* (*'ariki*, *ali'i*, and *ari'i*) originally meant first born, senior, and original ancestor. In Tongan mythology, Tangaloa 'Eiki is the first born of the Tangaloa clan. He is also considered the *'ulumotu'a* of the Tangaloa lineage and the one with the most *'eiki* status. In a spatial sense, the *'eiki* are located in the inner circles of power and the *tu'a* are placed in the outside and on the margin of power (Fig. 10). In a spatial sense, it places *'eiki* in front and the *tu'a* behind (Fig. 11). In Tongan, *tu'a tatau* is a reference to the space outside (*tu'a*) of the divider (*tatau*) that separates *tu'a* and *'eiki*. *Loto tatau* is a reference to the

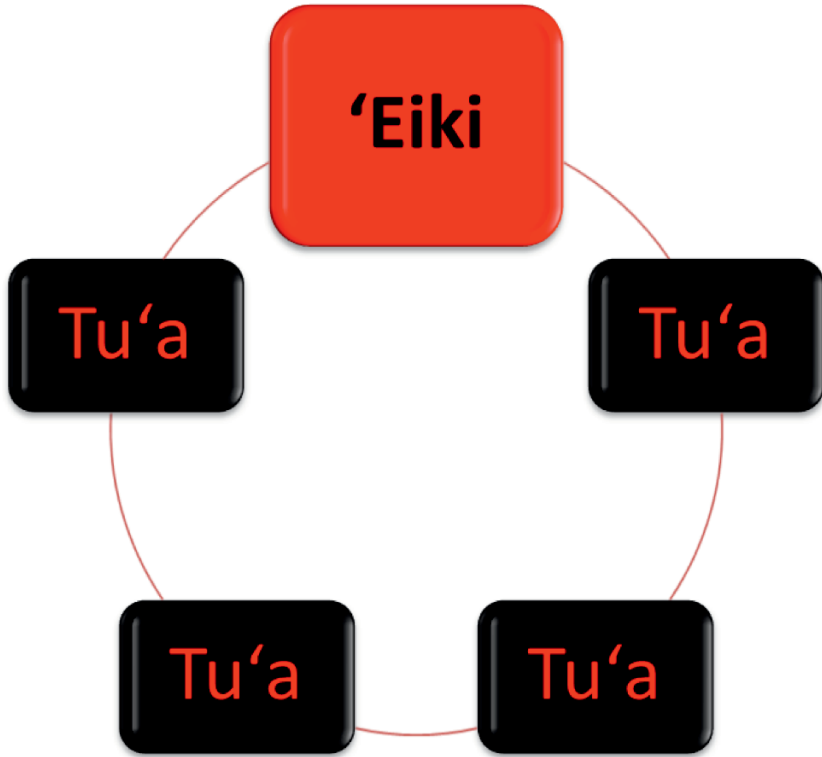


FIGURE 11. 'Eiki and Tu'a: Front Space and Back Space.

space loto the divider that separates 'eiki from tu'a (commoners or outsiders), and tu'a tatau points to the space outside of the place of power. The English translation of 'eiki as chiefs and tu'a as commoners masks the true tā-vā dimension of 'eiki and tu'a.

This spatiotemporal reference is not unique to Tongans. We find similar references in the English prefixes fore-, ante-, or pre- (front or earlier time); mid- (middle time); and post- or hind- (behind, back, or time after). These linguistic references point to both time and space. Fore-, ante-, or pre- means both front (space) and earlier time; mid- signifies both middle (space) and a midpoint of time; and post- or hind- refers to behind (space) and time after. Hau'ofa points out that the English phrase "let us pay tribute to those who have gone before us" locates the past as ahead and the future as behind (2008, 67). Again, these linguistic references, both in Tongan and in English, point to the tāvani nature of time and space in reality.



FIGURE 12. **Vā: Interval of Space and Time.**

Other terms that point to the intertwine nature of tā-vā are *mata* (eye, face) and *iku* (end, tail). Even though *mata* (front space) and *iku* (end space) are points in space, they are also used to reference time in terms such as *kamata* or *kamata'anga* (start or begin) and *iku* or *iku'anga* (end). This is also the case with root words such as *'ulu* (head) and *mui* (back)—points in space—that appear in words like *'uluaki* (first) and *muimui* (last) to reference time. The highest ranking male in a Tonga kin is known as the *'ulumotu'a* (senior head). He is the eldest senior.

Vā: A Space Between and An Interval of Time

Vā refers to space and an interval of time (space of time). Most scholarly writings on vā focus exclusively on its spatial dimension without addressing the temporal dimension of vā. In a temporal sense, *vaha* (a space in time), *vahavaha* (space it out in time), and *vaha'a* (a space in time or an interval of time) all point to time (Fig. 12). Again, these words point to the tāvani of time and space in Tongan reality and philology.

Ranking Time and Space

In Tonga, the cultural rule for assigning rank applies to both space and time. In a spatial context, *mu'a* (front) is ranked higher than *mui* (back) and *loto* (center or middle) is ranked higher than *mui* and *tu'a* (outside). In terms of time, *mu'a* (past or time before) is ranked higher than *mui* and *tu'a* (future or time after). *'Eiki* are also ranked higher than *tu'a*. Chiefs are referred to as *mu'a* or *mu'omu'a* (ahead)⁹ (Gifford 1929: 109, 120). Elders or seniors (*mu'a*, *mātu'a*, *motu'a*, and *'ulumotu'a*) are ranked higher than adults and *mui* (youths) (Fig. 13).

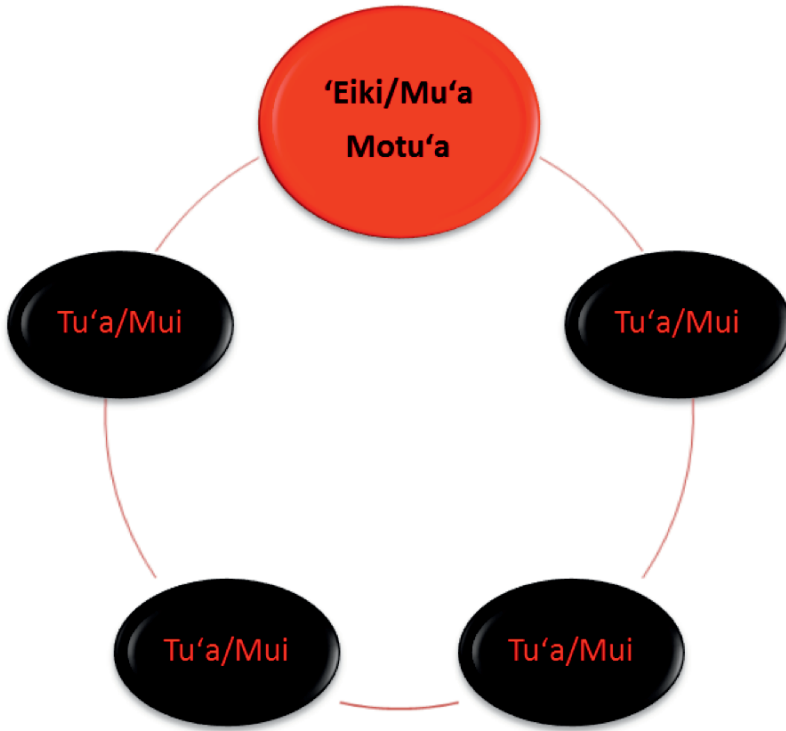


FIGURE 13. Space: 'Eiki, Mu'a, or Motu'a and Tu'a or Mui.

In temporal contexts, mu'a (the past) is privileged over *lolotonga* (the present) and mui (the future), because mu'a is the repository of valuable ancestral knowledge. This is the reason why mu'a (elders, seniors, and chiefs) are ranked higher than mui and tu'a (latecomers). Within the family, 'ulumotu'a (the eldest male sibling) and *fahu* (the eldest female sibling) are selected as the leaders of the *kāinga* (kin). Tongans deem the eldest male and female as the most fit to lead the kin because of their possession of ancestral knowledge. Likewise, mu'a (indigenous peoples or original settlers) are treated with high regard in relations to muli (later settlers or newcomers) because of their profound ancestral knowledge.

In social spaces, front-and-center and front-and-corner positions are considered to be the highest and most prestigious spatial locations. This is exemplified in the *vāhenga* (front and center) position of a lakalaka performance. The *vāhenga* is considered by Tongans to be the highest and most prestigious position in a lakalaka performance, and it is often occupied by a member



FIGURE 14. Princess Pilolevu Tuita, Vāhenga, at the Lakalaka Dance for the King Tupou IV’s 70th Birthday. (Source:<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/5c/Lakalaka.jpg/513px-Lakalaka.jpg>).

of the chiefly class (Kaeppler 1993: 35–38; Fig. 14). Other positions within the lakalaka dance, such as *taofi vāhenga* and *mālie taha*, are also front-and-center positions. Lastly, the position *fakapotu* in the lakalaka performance is a front-and-corner position. All of these positions within the lakalaka performance are deemed high-ranking places and are often occupied by chiefs or people of status.

This cultural rule also plays out in *taumafa kava* (royal kava ceremonies). In a kava ceremony, the *olovaha* (front-and-center position) is the space of honor and rank. The location of the *olovaha* is also called the *taumu ‘a* (front of the boat or prow), and the location of the *tou ‘a* (kava mixer) is referred to as the *taumuli* (rear or back of the boat or stern). The two sides of the kava ceremony are known as the *‘alofi* (the rowers) (Fig. 15). Fundamentally, the spatiotemporal arrangement of the *kalia* (double-hulled canoe) is replicated in the kava ceremony (‘Okusitino Māhina, pers. comm., 2008). In other words, the kava ceremony is a *kalia* on land.

Tā Tuku: Tempo Marking the End Space

This paper provides evidence to support the tāvani of tā-vā in reality and in Tongan philology. The intertwine of tā-vā is linguistically signified by the Tongan word tāvani—a word that is formed from the terms tā, vā, and *ni* (tā-vā-ni). The general tā-vā theory of reality argues that *tā* (time) and *vā*



FIGURE 15. King George Tupou V Sitting in the Olovaha Position in the Coronation Kava Ceremony (July 30, 2008). (Source: <http://www.daylife.com/photo/04aL6GseZocMK>)

(space) are inseparable in reality (Māhina 2010). This intertwining of *tā-vā* is reflected in several terms in the Tongan language. For example, words such as *mu‘a* (front and past or before), *loto* (middle, center, or interior and present or now), *mui* (back or behind and latter, future, or afterward), and *tu‘a* (outside and after or future) are references to time and to space. This linguistic reference is not unique to Tongans. We find similar references in the English prefixes *fore-*, *ante-*, or *pre-*; *mid-*; and *post-* or *hind-*. This paper argues that these linguistic terms all point to the *tāvani* of time and space in reality. In addition, these terms indicate that space is critical for making sense of time and time is vital for understanding space. The unity of *tā-vā* in Tongan reality and philology are also evident in the application of the same cultural rule to both time and space. For instance, the rule of status applies to both space and time. In Tongan, *mu‘a* is given more status and respectability than *mui*, and *loto* holds more privileges and chiefness over *tu‘a* (outside and later or after). This finding provides deeper insights into why Tongans call commoners *tu‘a* and chiefs *mu‘a* and why front-and-center positions, such as

vāhenga and olovaha, are venerated over-and-above positions located in the *‘otu mui* (back or rear).

NOTES

1. Tāvani is made up of three words: tā (time), vā (space), and ni (here). Tāvani literally means to beat (tempo mark) the space right here (O. Māhina, pers. comm., November 5, 2002).
2. Churchward (1953) refers to the noun as “noun-producing suffix,” because the suffix (-‘anga, -nga, -langa, or -fanga) transforms the word into a noun.
3. *Wā* is a Hawaiian reference to time, as well as to space (Pukui and Elbert 1986, 375).
4. Hūfanga (Refuge, Sanctuary) is a chiefly title from the village of Ma‘ofanga in Tonga-tapu. It was bestowed upon Māhina by high chief Fakafanua in recognition of the way in which Māhina’s scholarly works act as a refuge or a sanctuary for Tongans.
5. Lolotonga is a partial reduplication of loto, a spatial reference to center, middle, interior, or inside. Lolotonga is also based on *loloto*. This may be an indication that there are different levels of the present. One is loto (inner present), and another is loloto (inner-core present).
6. Vaimu‘a or Vaimui and Lihamu‘a or Lihamui are names of Tongan months in the ancient Tongan calendar that was based on *‘ufi* (yam) cultivation. It was probably created by the Hawaiian-Tongan high chief Lo‘au.
7. Similar variants appear in words such as *ta‘u* (generation) and *to‘u* and in *fanua* (land) and *fonua*.
8. Muli is a variant of mui (i.e., both taumuli and taumui refer to the stern of a boat).
9. Mu‘omu‘a is a reduplication of mu‘a.

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