

OF DAFFODILS AND HEILALA: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN PACIFIC LITERATURE*

*Konai Helu-Thaman***

**you tell me that you want
to give me your *kakala*
i haven't the courage to keep it**

I wish to thank the conference organisers for inviting me to share some of my thoughts and feelings about writing in general and my own writing in particular. For over twenty years my creative writing has helped me remain sane and able to attend to those things that women who are mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, partners, lovers, teachers, writers, managers, and many "others" generally must attend to. My writing is my soul and saviour, my escape, and talking about it is similar to exposing oneself; so I apologise at the outset if I say something that might offend. (This last sentence is characteristically uttered by a Tongan speaker who is about to address a gathering).

I received the education of a Tongan woman, not that of an American or Australian. My early education, almost entirely in the Tongan language, provided me with the knowledge, skills and values of my culture. Later, through school and university, I learned about the cultures of New Zealand, and through marriage, the cultures of the United States. This new knowledge and new understanding were different from my own, but I have acquired them mainly from working at a regional university in the South Pacific. They have combined to shape me, my view of myself and my view of worlds of people and places that I encounter from time to time. At one level I belong to my *kainga*, a very large extended kin group scattered around the globe;

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** Professor of Pacific Education and Culture, and Head of the School of Humanities, the University of the South Pacific, Fiji.

they live in Tonga, Tahiti, Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, United Kingdom, mainland USA, Europe, South America, Japan, South East Asia and of course here in Hawaii. At another level, I belong to Oceania in the sense that Albert Wendt was trying to depict in his classical essay *A New Oceania*. Through my writing, I have become a part of a global *kainga* of readers and writers, many of whom are here today.

For me, reading and writing in a foreign language has not always been easy or enjoyable. At school, I regarded them as chores like collecting firewood or scraping coconuts. I hated being forced to read the poems and plays which we had to study for examinations. Worst of all was being forced to write in a foreign language, English. An English teacher once implored me to read more in order to improve my English marks. I decided, however, that the only way to improve my English was to see more films, a solution that neither my English teacher nor my mother approved of.

At school it seemed that my teachers were not interested in what I knew, but rather what I didn't know. Their task was to transmit knowledge - their knowledge - so that I could pass the many examinations I had to sit. Their knowledge and understanding were meant to educate us children, to change us and make us more like them: European, civilised and "educated". Our school curriculum was similar to that of New Zealand, which I later learned was modelled on that of English schools. We had to study English literature, the only literature deemed worthy of study.

When I returned from New Zealand to teach at my old school, I found that I was required to teach basically the same curriculum I had studied as a student. Consequently, I was faced with teaching something which had not meant much to me, and, in the case of English literature, something I actually disliked. I did, however, understand the students' difficulties with the set texts which we had to study. I tried translating some popular Tongan songs into English and making up my own verse about themes which I thought might interest them. Tongan poetry is full of imagery and symbolism. I

used to teach them these concepts before proceeding to Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron. I attended night classes in creative writing at the newly-formed U.S.P. Centre at the old Vaiola Hospital site because I wanted to learn more about writing. At school, I had always thought that in order to be a writer, one had to be male, white and dead. The Director of the USP Centre, who conducted creative writing classes, a Ms. Blundell, encouraged me and made me feel that what I was doing for the students was important. However, in 1972 I left Tonga to travel with my husband to his home in California.

At the University of California at Santa Barbara where we lived for two years, I continued to write, mainly as a hobby, but also because I wanted to write about my experiences in the USA. Listening to occasional readings by university students and reading modern American poetry further encouraged me as I discovered that poetry did not necessarily have to rhyme and poets could be black and still alive. A chance reading of the *Pacific Islands Monthly* magazine and the publication in it of my poem *YOU, the choice of my parents* further encouraged me.

When I joined the staff of the University of the South Pacific in 1974, I was already a fan of Albert Wendt (although I had not read a lot of his writing). I wanted to be part of the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (SPCAS) which he and others such as Professor Ron Crocombe and his wife Marjorie, a Cook Islander, Howard Van Trease and others had started after the first Pacific Festival of Arts in Suva, Fiji in 1972. The movement was aimed at encouraging Pacific islanders to write their own stories and histories - to create their own literatures.

The publication by the SPCAS of my first collection, *YOU, the choice of my parents*¹, in 1974 made me feel great. Other collections from Fiji, Western Samoa, Solomon Islands and New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) followed. I found myself becoming a part of a new wave of

¹ Thaman, K. (1974) *YOU, the choice of my parents*. MANA Publications, Suva.

Pacific writing that had as its major source of inspiration people such as Wendt and Crocombe and the topical issues of the times, such as independence movements and post colonial agendas. The U.S.P. was important in that it was an environment where we were allowed to flourish, have time to write and opportunities to speak our minds without fear of public scrutiny and censorship. It was, I believe, a golden age of Pacific writing.

Since 1974, I have continued to write, mainly to keep myself sane, but also to provide possible teaching materials for schools in the region. The South Pacific Creative Arts Society has continued to publish and reprint my works as well as many by other writers. I have not sought to be published outside the region, mainly because I write primarily for myself, but also because I want my books to be easily accessible to people in the region, particularly school students and teachers. I do not get any royalty for their sales, as the money is used to subsidise the publication of books which the Society feels need to be published, but for which there is not such a high demand.

Many people who started out writing in the 70s have stopped. Some say that they were discouraged by the somewhat negative reviews of their works; others say that they were too busy doing other things or have gone into politics. In my case, I have not allowed negative reviews and comments about Pacific literature in general and my own writing in particular, to bother me. I think this is because I do not depend on a few 'experts' to make a writer out of me, nor do I need to publish poetry in order to enhance my professional status. I am not suggesting here that anyone can write something which should be published without critical considerations. I do believe, however, that we in the Pacific ought to devise our own ways and means of judging and evaluating the worthwhileness of Pacific writing, a body of literature that is culturally rooted, meaningful and relevant for our particular contexts. We need also to help others respect and understand the contexts of Pacific literature if they are going to teach and/or talk meaningfully about it.

Sometimes when I read reviews of books by Pacific authors I am struck by the obvious lack of understanding of the work in relation to the context in which it is written. For example, to view Wendt's *Ola* from a western feminist perspective is acceptable insofar as anyone can read the novel and make a personal judgement about it. But there is a need also, in my view, for *Ola* to be considered in the context of Samoan (and Pacific) culture and society, past and present, especially in relation to Samoan notions of gender, human relations, identity and even sexuality. These have not, as far as I know, been applied by those who have written about *Ola* and the same may be said about most reviews of works by Pacific authors that I have read. Whoever does this will have to be someone with an adequate understanding not only of English literary traditions but also of Pacific cultures and languages. Unfortunately, what exists in our region is a small group of 'experts' who set themselves up as gatekeepers of 'literature' and, through their reviews and writing, make or break those who write. There are also some teachers who claim that Pacific literature is not substantial or good enough to be taught in schools and universities. Perhaps it is only a question of ridiculing that which we do not understand; but such views do have some impact on those who may wish to start or continue writing.

The usual considerations of marketability and costs of publishing are common reasons for publishers not wanting to take on projects in Pacific island countries. Apart from these, I believe that one of the major reasons for the lack of interest in, and the devaluing of existing Pacific literature, both in the Pacific and outside, has been the failure of most literary critics, teachers and other researchers, most of whom are not from the Pacific region, to understand the cultural contexts of Pacific writing and Pacific writers. In order for people to claim to be critics of Pacific literature, they must understand Pacific cultures in order to better appreciate Pacific writing and writers. Let me further illustrate the importance of context by reference to my own writing.

As a school student, I never fully appreciated the significance of Wordsworth's *Daffodils* until, many years later, I visited London for the first time and went with some friends to Kew Gardens. There, in

front of my very own eyes, was "a sea of golden daffodils". I quietly said the poem to myself, a different poem this time because I moved closer to imagining what the poet must have felt when he wrote the poem. I remembered this occasion when I was asked to write a poem to be used in the launching of our university's project on adult literacy. My poem was called *Heilala* (Thaman, 1993:11).

heilala
we've waited far too long
for you to move within us
give us strength to see the scars
of those who went before us

when long ago you came
a stranger kept apart
by distance too remote
for us to win and guard
at times your face seemed close
arriving unannounced
we knew we had no choice
but to load the raft and start

we left for many places
we entered eyes still closed
yet we could feel the fragrance
a power touching those
who craved instead to ride the waves
towards the blowholes not the shore
then prayed to maui for his mana
to mend their broken oars

...
for we cannot let illiteracy
again keep us apart
mortgage our identity
or even sell our pride
we do not want to suffer pain

privately we know deep inside
we've only ourselves to blame

In order to fully appreciate this poem one would need to know what *heilala* is, and understand its significance to the Tongan culture. As a flower with a cultural status and mythology, it provides the cultural context in which the poem is fashioned. Reading it without understanding this context would be to miss a significant part of the meaning of the poem, as I had done when I memorised *Daffodils*.

For the Tongan reader, *Heilala* would immediately evoke a sense of importance or value since *heilala* is Tonga's sacred flower and occupies the apex of the hierarchy of all *kakala*. The poem, about the importance of literacy and education, particularly for women, has references to place names and natural features which in themselves have significant cultural meaning.

Pacific cultures in general and Tongan culture in particular, are central to my writing. Many of the themes I use are derived from contemporary issues and problems which I feel strongly about. For example, the migratory nature of Pacific Island populations both past and present, and its possible consequences is addressed in *Working Relative* (Thaman, 1974:3).

i always expect too much
from people i know
but how can you remain calm and unaffected
when your husband is sleeping
at the back of my friend's car
every night
tomorrow he will pass the same road
but will not notice it
daily he makes his trips
on an endless freeway
groping for treasured bills
to build you that *fale palangi*

Other themes include education, modernisation and development and their consequences upon Pacific peoples and places. As one with an academic background in the social sciences and education, I cannot help but comment on the social and other changes which are occurring in Tonga in particular and in the Pacific region in general.

I also draw from Pacific environments when I write. For example, plants which have cultural value for Pacific societies are commonly referred to. Plants are integral parts of our cultures where they form part of our belief systems. Every plant with a name is useful for something, whether it be for medicine, ornaments, food, clothing or its spiritual importance. Thanks to modernisation, including formal education, many people nowadays (who are about 40 years old or younger) know very little about the names and the uses of much of their countries' flora and fauna which feature in their *ta'anga* (poetry and songs).

Kakala, Tongan for fragrant, culturally important plants and plant products is the title of my latest collection of poems. Made into garlands and used to scent special oils, *kakala* (or *salusalu* in Fiji; *lei* or *hei* in many parts of Polynesia and *te bau* in Kiribati), is a symbol of love and respect, and, almost always is meant to be given away (*luva*) to people whom we love and respect. Many *kakala* plants are rapidly becoming endangered because they are being cut down to make way for foreign, often commercially-oriented, plants or export crops. What is happening to them is symbolic of what is happening to important aspects of our cultures, particularly their collective wisdom and values. Plants, and *kakala* in particular, are part of our natural and cultural world, one which I look towards and often retreat to in order to think and feel freely about many things.

why do you weep *langakali*
is it because they lied to you
or is it because they did not tell you
the whole story
you see
the four winds did send me away

to bathe in the stormclouds
a commoner with no soul
i journeyed in the grey hair
of the sky
but i heard the song of the sea
made my heart strong
that i could still find a place

.....

langakali

no longer do i see your face
adorn our roads and roaming grooms
or perfume the evening sea breeze
broken beer bottles
greet the incoming tides
and gravetalk is no more
for the unblinking eyes of plastic flowers
stare away visitors from *pulotu*
home of our warriors and conversationalists
pray give me now a fast canoe
that i may join
the fish of the ocean
and together we will weep
for the works of the night

(Thaman, 1981:13)

The lyricism of Tongan poetry has also influenced my writing. For example, all my poems are meant to be read aloud. Orality is a common feature of Tongan poetry where every poem was ultimately meant to be chanted, sung, or performed. When I am in Tonga watching a dance performance I am often reminded that Europeans did not discover poetry!

Another aspect of Tongan poetry that I use is *heliaki* - the use of natural features as symbolic referents of persons and personal traits, and various other cultural and social phenomena. The reader (or

spectator in the case of dance) is left to interpret the meaning contained in *heliaki*, hence the need for a reader to have an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of the writing with which they are involved.

The use of *fakatangi* or lament is also a feature of my writing. *Fakatangi* is commonly used in Tongan poetry to convey feelings of sadness and loss. Flowers feature widely in *fakatangi* as do birds, the sky, the ocean and all that is in it. In *Langakali* for example, the flower is implored to listen to the *fakatangi* of the persona, sharing with her the concerns and feelings she has for contemporary problems facing the country, many of which are associated with modern development.

In *YOU, the choice of my parents*, perhaps my most popular poem, *fakatangi* and *heliaki* are both utilised, as are natural and cultural features characteristic of Tongan as well as other Pacific societies. Its appeal seems to be universal, perhaps because it is largely a poem about the ever present conflict between the personal and the social. Although the persona may be from any social class, arranged marriages are more common among members of the aristocracy, where in ancient times, women were used to initiate or cement important alliances between two clans or tribes.

Women were, and continue to be, considered by some people, mainly men, as important only because they are the bearers of male inheritors and leaders. In many parts of Polynesia, for example, blood relations take precedence over relations through marriage, and the 'wife' was and is never really regarded as a member of her husband's extended family in the same way as her children are. Tapa cloth and fine mats are common features of Tongan ceremonial attire; they form the major part of *koloa* (traditional wealth) and are frequently exchanged during ceremonies associated with marriages as well as funerals. Modern education and western material goods, considered important ingredient in a recipe for improved social status, are valued by many, including those with marriageable daughters. In the poem, the bride, for reasons left to the reader to discern, looks forward to

the day when she is 'freed' from the bonds of conformity to male-determined rules. The willow trees (common along the inner lagoon of Tongatapu) remind her that real freedom comes with death when, in Tonga, (it was believed) the soul goes to rest in *pulotu* (paradise) where there are no conflicts and contradictions.

you come clad in your fine mats and *tapa* cloth
your brown skin bursting with fresh perfumed oil
and your eyes shining like stars in a clear night
you, the choice of my parents

you will bring them wealth and fame
with your western-type education
and second-hand car
but you do not know me my prince
save that i am first born
and have known no other man

i fit your plans and schemes for the future
but you cannot see the real me
my face is masked with pretence and obedience
and my smiles tell you that i care
i have no other choice

.....
i love as a mere act of duty
my soul is far away
clinging to that familiar ironwood tree
that herald strangers
to the land of my ancestors
i will bear you a son
to prolong your family tree
and fill the gaps in your genealogy
but when my duties are fulfilled
my spirit will return to the land of my birth

where you will find me no more
except for the weeping willows along the shore

{Thaman, 1974:13}

In another poem, *Letter to the Colonel* (Thaman, 1993:18), a poem about the Fiji coup, the significance of the event is alluded to through the reference to *kava*, an important Pacific ceremonial drink. The coup is seen in the context of modernisation of Fijian culture and the racism which the country has inherited as a result of European colonialism. *Kava*, to most Pacific peoples, signifies the ties between the people and their *vanua/ fonua/whenua/ples*, Pacific concepts that have been inadequately equated with 'land'. In Fiji, *vanua* is more than land. It is the Fijian worldview, ethos, and cosmos, all living and non-living things wrapped in one. A Fijian friend of mine once said that to understand the *vanua* is to understand everything about Fijian culture. In a *kava* ceremony, the link between the people and their *vanua* is symbolised by the woven sinnet tied at one end to the *tanoa* (kava bowl), with white cowrie shells (*buli vula*) tied to the other end. This is extended towards the guest of honour until such time when all titled persons or honoured guests had partaken of the *kava* or *yaqona* ceremony.

sir some people are sad
because of your words
and action
that is why i bring to you
this cup of *kava*
from a neighbour's soil

it contains the tears
of workers, farmers and miners
fisherfolk who go down
to the depths of their adopted seas
for food
many have lost their jobs
robbed of opportunities

to make a profit
here take it anyway
symbol of suffering and sorrow
of women
in the fields
in garment factories
at home
where children cry out
their fears and frustrations
take it sir, it is yours

you see sir
this cup is full
of hope
when you drink it you
will know your victory
like the *kava* it comes
from the roots
of people's hopes in the land
their collective confidence
will lift you up
their new-found pride
will bloom around you
while they wait-
for their duty-bound son
to bury his weapons
and liberate their souls

and by the way sir
i hope that as you drink this
you will remember
that when the dawn breaks
no one can shut out
the light

Finally, in *Kakala* there are short, *haiku*-like forms. These are NOT derived from *haiku* but from an ancient form of Tongan poetry, that

typically contained short 'lines' meant to be repeated through chanting. It was an experiment in trying to marry Tongan and modern aspects of literature. Here are a few, from *Wishful Thinking* (Thaman, 1993:73):

you tell me that you want
to give me your *kakala*
i haven't the courage to keep it

your house full of fragrance
of *uci* and *makosoi*
i enter only temporarily

you and i separated
by all the sea space
when will i see you again

on my desk
i keep a writing pad
for my wishful thinking

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