

# The Poetics of Exile: Love and Death in Tongan Poetry

*'Okusitino Mahina*

In this essay, the formal, substantial and functional relationships between exile as a universal contradictory human experience and Tongan poetry as a form of social activity will be critically examined. Of special interest will be the spatio-temporal underpinnings common to both exile and Tongan poetry. Attention will be given to the time-space relationships within and between exile and Tongan poetry, where form and content are transformed in the process. The transformation of form and content pertaining to exile and Tongan poetry will be generally explored within the ontological and epistemological dimensions of *ta* and *va*, Tongan for “time” and “space”, as well as the broader relationships between politics and aesthetics, defined as forms of investigation of power and beauty (Mahina 2002a: 5-9). A specific form of exile will be investigated within a particular literary genre in Tongan poetry known as *hiva kakala*, love poetry (Mahina 2003a: 97-106). Specifically, this unique kind of exile will be enquired into in terms of love and death as a common literary theme in Tongan love poetry.

## *1. Exile as ta-va, “time-space” transformation*

As a universal conflicting human condition, exile takes place in varying temporal degrees and under a variety of spatial circumstances. Recognizing the temporal and spatial variations, many forms of exile tend to share a lot in common. However, it is suffice to say that different types of exile differ from one another in terms of form and

content. Philosophically speaking, *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space” are the abstraction of the form and content of things in reality (see Adam 1990, 1995; Anderson 1962; Baker 1979; Mahina 2002a, 2003b, 2003c amongst others). Conversely, the form and content of real things are themselves the concrete manifestations of *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space”. Form and content, like *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space”, are inseparable entities, providing the necessary conditions for the existence of exile.

This brings us to the issues of ontology and epistemology, the context in which exile can be understood in meaningful ways. Ontologically, *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space” are the common medium in which all things are, in a single level of reality. On the epistemological level, however, *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space” are social constructs, which involves their relative arrangement within and across cultures (see, for example, Harvey 1990; Mahina 2002a). In epistemological terms, exile is formally and substantially connected with conflicts arising from the irreconcilability in the social organization of *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space” within and across identities and localities. These conflicts exist in the form of a spatio-temporal transformation, where self is, in formal and substantial terms, variously transformed from a state of autonomy to a situation of tyranny.

Exile is commonly, albeit problematically, viewed as the enforced separation between self and place. While this view partially integrates person and *va*, “space”, it systematically leaves *ta*, “time” unaccounted for (see Ouditt 2002). The degree of severity of exile and the extent to which it takes place are measured by both its form and content. Exile may occur on the more personal level as a form of loneliness, where self is temporally and spatially separated from others (see Curr 1981). In the case of Tongan *hiva kakala*, the poet is twice exiled in actual love and symbolic death, where the *ta-va* “time-space” separation between lovers in life is symbolically transformed to their being “one” in death. But being “one” in death is itself a form of symbolic exile, involving the prevention of lovers from actually realizing love in life. The same applies to poverty, an expression of exile formally depriving people from the basic necessities of life. As an extreme type, political exile involves both temporal and spatial separation of self through transformation from a state of freedom to a condition of oppression.

## 2. Poetry as *ta-va*, “time-space” transformation

Generally speaking, poetry can be understood in the broader context of art. In general, art can be defined as a form of spatio-temporal transformation, which concerns the intensification of *ta* “time” and reconstitution of *va* “space” (Mahina 2003a: 97-106, 2003b, 2003c). Language is the content of poetry as a work of art or literature. The form in which language by way of its content is symmetrically reorganized is its temporal dimension. In short, this is rhythm. Both harmony and beauty are dependent on the degree of symmetry relating to the intensification of *ta* “time” and rearrangement of *va* “space”, as is the distinction between good and bad works art or literature. By transforming chaos to order, poetry undergoes a symmetrical re-arrangement of the ordinary language, the outcome of which creates harmony and beauty.

As a social construct or means of human communication, language is derived from sound, the medium in which it is created. Like language, the artforms of poetry and music make use of sound as their common medium. Unlike language and poetry, music has the medium of sound as also its content. However, symbols, merely as pointers to actual events or things in reality, are the common content of language and poetry (see Mahina 1999; 2003a). In a strict aesthetic sense, the immediate content of poetry is language, which involves the pattering of sound into meaningful, communicative symbols. Sound, in the case of language, is structured into patterns, which are, in turn, given commonly shared meanings. These meaningful patterns are, thus, treated as symbols, the sum total of which constitutes a common system of social communication. Judging by the degree of rhythm involved, it can be argued that language is itself a work of art. By the same token, one can say that both language and poetry are word-music or, for that matter, word-painting, demarcated by the relative degrees of spatio-temporal transformation associated with them (see Anderson et al [eds] 1982).

It can be asserted that poetry is a special kind of language, which is differentiated from the ordinary language by way of form and content. By extension, poetry is a language within a language, often spoken and understood, as in the case of Tonga, by a privileged few such as orators,

poets and traditionalists. In this respect, it is like learning a new language. The whole spatio-temporal transformation engendered, marking a movement from the prosaic to the poetic, involves a linguistic shift in rhythm, syntax and semantics (see Mahina 1999), i.e., a transition from the ordinary to the “divine” or chaos to order. In broad terms, this runs parallel to the manner in which language is spatio-temporally arranged within and across cultures. As a means of social construction, language as an instrument of human communication varies from one culture to another in terms of form, content and meaning (Mahina 2003a, 2003b, 2003c).

As a specific artistic or literary genre, poetry deals with a wide range of themes or subject matters. Not only does poetry, with a sense of sustained symmetry, inquire into the nature of such subject matters, its discovery of their very own independent way of working becomes a source of objectivity, harmony and beauty. These subject matters, which, by way of tradition, tend to vary across ages and cultures, amount to what is taken as the content, i.e., substantial or spatial component, of poetry. Some notable subject matters may include love, death and exile. But poetry, in critiquing exile, reveals social oppression, allowing for political emancipation, a movement from tyranny to autonomy. By implication, the greatest poetry is always heretical, especially when it aesthetically but systematically reveals the flaw of the poetry of consolation and of the uncritical thinking it transcends (see Anderson et al [eds] 1982). Similarly, one can further define poetry as a form of investigation of beauty, with an effect of the therapeutic kind (Mahina 2002b, 2003a, 2003b).

### 3. Ta'anga “*Place of beating*”: *Tongan poetry*

There are two main divisions of Tongan art, i.e., material and performance arts (see Mahina 1999, 2002a: 5-9). Under material arts, collectively known in Tonga as *tufunga*, there are a number of genres such as *tufunga lalava* “line-space sculpture”, *tufunga tamaka* “stone sculpture” and *tufunga langafale* “architecture” amongst many others. On the other hand, performance arts are, in Tonga, commonly referred to as *faiva*. Included in this division are, amidst many others, such artforms as *hiva* “music”, *haka* “dance” and *ta'anga* “poetry”. Both major divisions of

Tongan art, *tufunga* and *faiva*, material and performance arts, as are their many highly-specialized sub-divisions, are underpinned mainly by a strong sense of *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space”. As a matter of fact, both terms *tufunga* and *faiva* generally mean *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space”, specifically signifying their form and content.

The spatio-temporal underpinnings of Tongan art are evident in the case of *ta’anga*, Tongan for poetry. In dealing with both *ta* and *va*, “time” and “space”, the Tongan case reveals that art is four-dimensional rather than three-dimensional, something that is quite commonplace in the existing literature on the subject. This is reminiscent of the problematic treatment of exile merely as the enforced separation of person from place, without any reference to time. However, the Tongan word *ta’anga* stands for poetry, and it literally means “place of beating”. This place is none other than language, i.e., the designated space for “beating” time. In a way, this uniquely Tongan way of aesthetic thinking provides us with a solid philosophical basis for the development of a general *ta-va*, “time-space” theory of poetry (see Mahina 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Accordingly, poetry can be defined as the symmetrical “beating” of the common language, transforming it at the same time by means of creating harmony and beauty.

As a form of exchange, the “beating” of language takes place in both symbolic and actual ways. The “beating” of language is mediated by *heliaki*, the mode of saying one thing yet meaning another (see Helu 1999; Kaepler 1993; Mahina 2003a: 97-106). The effective handling of this mode of linguistic “indirectness”, which involves the interchange of symbols in terms of the associative and qualitative links between actual objects, is a mark of good poetry. Opposite to *heliaki* is *hualela*, a form of “directness” that renders poetry as bad works of art and literature (see Mahina 1999, 2003a, 2003b). As a mode of operation, *heliaki* generates an exchange of existing symbols based on the qualities of the corresponding objects, thereby creating a different kind of language. This special language is itself *ta’anga* “poetry”, which is a “divine” means of communication, marked by the intensification of *ta* “time” and reorganization of *va* “space”.

The modus operandi of *heliaki* is clearly seen in the poem by Peni Latu discussed below (see Mahina 1999, 2003a). The appropriation of dream, considered a world where there are no relations of cause and

effect, is used as a symbol for the sense of total loss actually brought upon the poet by his relentless love. Such a feeling of complete loss, i.e., of being exiled, in real love is made even worse and further symbolized by what the poet saw in his dream. In this dream, he cast his priceless bread upon the water in the hope that, according to the bible, it would come back to him in a few days. Rather than bringing some luck with it, his most precious bread instead drifted away and never came back. The characteristics pertaining to myth, especially as a world without any logical consequence, and those associated with the non-fulfillment of the biblical promise are exchanged with the poet's real sense of utter hopelessness or powerlessness caused by the depth of his uncompromising love.

#### 4. Hiva kakala “*Song of (sweet-scent) flowers*”: *Tongan love poetry*

Tongan poetry has a number of genres, one of which is called *hiva kakala*, literally meaning “song of (sweet-scent) flowers”, Tongan love poetry (see Helu 1999; Kaeppler 1993; Mahina 2003a). The genre *hiva kakala* grew out of its earlier form known as *lausipi*, literally “speaking in poetry”, which was spoken-poetry rather than sung-poetry. As an earlier form of poetry, *lausipi* was simply recited, mainly in exchange of poems between the wooer and the wooed, often performed in the context of formal *kava* drinking. On the other hand, *hiva kakala*, as sung-poetry, is infused with some Christian missionary influence, especially when it is structured in a hymn-like format, made up of several verses and a chorus.

The use of the term “sweet-smelling flowers” is symbolic of the beauty of love and of sex. The basic aesthetic theme of *hiva kakala* is love, which is, in its ultimate physical sense, the union between lovers. In Tongan *hiva kakala*, death is paradoxically equal to love yet different from it. When the poet alludes to death, he qualitatively and associatively utilizes it as a metaphor for love. Herein, the poet is doubly exiled, symbolically and actually enslaved in the respective realms of death and love. The dialectical exchange between these two realms—love and death—where actual love is rhythmically transformed to symbolic death, formally liberates the poet from strife giving self and place a sense of unity (see Mahina 1999, 2002b).

The formal, substantial and functional relationships between exile and poetry can be illustrated in the following *hiva kakala* entitled “*Hina E*”, which can be roughly translated as “My Dear Hina”. This is a love song, and was composed around 1955 by the late Peni Latu (1912-1967), one of the notable contemporary poets of *hiva kakala* and religious songs. Like all *hiva kakala*, the theme of this song is actual love, symbolically taken to be synonymous with death (see Mahina 2003a: 97-106). Love and death, like exile, are actual states of affairs, which are complementary and opposed in nature. Love, death and exile are underpinned by a multiplicity of physical, psychological and social tensions. In this poem, the poet is in exile, both in actual love and in symbolic death. Translated by the author, the poem is as follows:

“*Hina E!*”

“My Dear Hina!”

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1. <i>Te u talanoa ke mou mea'i</i><br/> <i>Misi na'e ha hoku 'atamai</i><br/> <i>Si'ete ma he fukahi vai</i><br/> <i>Kuo tekina pea talu ai</i></p>                | <p>1. I shall tell you so that all may know<br/> Of the dream that appeared in my mind<br/> <i>My most precious bread cast upon the water</i><br/> <i>Drifting further afar and into oblivion</i></p> |
| <p>2. <i>Sameloki ki he 'aho 'o e pekia</i><br/> <i>Te u lava noa 'a hono talia</i><br/> <i>Mate ni kuo me'a va'inga</i><br/> <i>He mamahi noa ngutu 'o fui'va</i></p> | <p>2. Shamrock, for the day I die<br/> With effortless haste, I shall accept<br/> Death has been of no consequence<br/> Unstoppable, not even by a singing <i>fui'va</i></p>                          |
| <p>3. <i>Angi a matangi fakasaute</i><br/> <i>One 'avea si'eku pele</i><br/> <i>Mo'oni a lau 'a e punake</i><br/> <i>Lava a toka ka ko e tue</i></p>                   | <p>3. The winds blow from the southerly<br/> Taking away with it my dear beloved<br/> <i>But true is the saying of the poet</i><br/> <i>Easier defeated than to be laughed at</i></p>                 |
| <p>4. <i>Muka 'o e 'ofa me'a fakahe</i><br/> <i>'Inasi 'eku 'ofa mamae</i><br/> <i>Toki tala 'e he tisaipale</i><br/> <i>No'o e 'ofa ka ko e mate</i></p>              | <p>4. The bud of love is disoriented<br/> As rightful dues for my guarded love<br/> Only to be told by the disciple<br/> <i>A lover's girdle is none other than death</i></p>                         |
| <p>5. <i>Taumaia ko ha fika lau</i><br/> <i>Ke u feinga'i ke hoatatau</i><br/> <i>Me'apango 'ene tu'u maumau</i><br/> <i>Loto leva ke u si'i to he tau</i></p>         | <p>5. If only they were real numbers<br/> So that I can match them in pairs<br/> Pity, though, they stand in disarray<br/> <i>Deciding now, I would rather fall in battle</i></p>                     |

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 6. <i>Vale e loto ni pea mo e manatu</i><br><i>Ki si'ota hua ne fakapapau</i><br>Nofo a koe fo'ifa tapu<br><i>He ko e vaka ni 'e foa peau</i> | 6. My heart aches foolishly with memories<br>Of our special relationship once vowed<br><i>Bidding farewell, dear sacred pandanus fruit</i><br>My ship now sails forth into the deep sea,<br>breaking into the waves |
|---|---|

*Tau:*

Chorus:

Hina e, ke ke ma'anuu'anu  
 Ke ta talave ka u foki au  
 'O ha 'i he fisi 'o e peau  
 Vale e loto ni 'i he 'ofa atu

*My dear Hina, may you please gently surface*  
*So we can converse for I must return*  
*To be lost amidst the spray of breaking waves*  
*As my heart is madly in love with you*

The ongoing interplay of love and death runs as a thread constantly connecting all the stanzas, including the chorus, giving the piece a unified sense of continuity of form and theme. The poet, Peni Latu, does this by means of his deployment of linguistic images, nuances and symbols, all of which lie in close proximity to love and death. Totally wrapped up in love, the poet sees no way out of this rather unforgiving yet ever-present reality other than death. His reference to the mythical Hina, the Polynesian Cinderella, is an allusion to his lover, most probably his wife 'Amelia Vaimoana. She was a daughter of high chief Lomu of ancient origin from Neiafu on the island of Vava'u in the northern part of Tonga, whom Latu married, when served there as a medical doctor. In the mid-50s, his wife left with their children for the southern island of Tongatapu for their education, leaving Latu in Vava'u, who joined them many years later.

In verse 1, the poet begins by re-telling a story of his own exile in actual love, where he is poetically transformed into exile in symbolic death, which he witnessed in his dream. Dream is itself a form of *ta-va*, "time-space" transformation, involving a shift from a state of consciousness to one of unconsciousness, thereby creating a world of pure possibilities, with the whole transformative process therapeutic or hypnotic in effect. In dreaming, the poet saw that he cast his bread upon the water, thinking that it would come back to him, as the biblical assurance goes, but rather it never came back (Ecclesiastes 11: 1). In both real and symbolic terms, bread is a source of life, and to be deprived of this resource can surely be a source of death. The same imagery of death continues in verse 2, where even if there is hope,



symbolized by the Shamrock, the poet is unhindered in the pursuit of his true love which conquers all barriers, including death. The poet is even more determined when repeatedly told otherwise, as does the tireless *fuiiva*, a Tongan native bird renowned for singing beautifully endlessly.

In verse 3, there is a hint that his lover is moved by some power beyond his control from her usual residence to a place in the south of Tonga, symbolized by the freely though emotionless blowing southerly wind. Even with this sense of inevitability and powerlessness, the poet takes heed of the poetic saying that he is more than determined to die in battle than to be alive and laughed at. This means that death is the single way of resolving his powerlessness over this inevitable situation. Continued in verse 4, the feeling of complete disorientation experienced by the poet, now completely overwhelmed by his relentless love, reminds him of what Christ's disciple Paul said that a lover's girdle is like death (Acts 21: 11-13), something befitting his own hopeless situation. Again, the poet resolves this situation by readily accepting death as his rightful due for his unstoppable love.

The poet, in verse 5, continues to be in a state of disorientation, desperation and helplessness, wishing that he is in command of the elusive situation, as in the case of counting real numbers, which can be concretely arranged in odd and even numerical pairs. Given the fact that the situation is above and beyond his control, the poet prefers that he would rather die in the battlefield than to be alive and full of misery. In verse 6, the poet is unable to withstand the heavy burden of his aching heart, which is full of sweet memories of the intimacy of their relationships as lovers. By bidding farewell to his most beloved, symbolized by the sacred pandanus fruit, the poet metaphorically (re)presents it as the summit of his undying love. In doing so, the poet is determined to journey into the unknown. As such, he is allegorized by a ship sailing into the deep ocean, openly exposed to all kinds of dangers brought about by the elements.

In the chorus, the poet saw himself as a master fisherman in a *no'o'anga* "shark-noosing" expedition in which he poetically encounters Hina, the Polynesian Cinderella, symbolic of his lover, in romantic of ways. In the traditional Tongan highly-developed practice of shark-noosing, sharks are collectively addressed as Hina. This ancient

practice is conducted with specialized skills in the form of ceremonial courting, where the master fishermen symbolically court the sharks as if they are their real lovers. In the course of carrying it out, the sea is showered with beautiful garlands and waistbands made of sweet-smelling flowers, with the fishermen calling out for Hina in the form of love poetry. In this regard, shark-noosing can also be considered an artform. However, the poet, like seeing himself in a dream, imagined himself to be in a shark-noosing situation, where he makes one last plea by requesting a favor of Hina. In doing so, the poet asks that Hina graciously and gracefully presents herself in her natural beauty by surfacing so that they can converse one last time. Whether Hina accepts his request or not, the poet is already determined in his mind in choosing death over life, because he is madly in love with his real lover, symbolized by Hina.

#### *Conclusion*

Like all *hiva kakala*, the theme of this particular love song by Peni Latu is actual love. Like all love songs, this specific *hiva kakala* takes actual love to be somehow equal to real death, although taken, in this case, symbolically. Such an exchange between love and death—involving the exchange of the qualitative and associative links between them—is made on the basis that the separation between lovers themselves are constrained by some inevitable obstacles. This is of the same order as the separation between death and life, or, for that matter, the whole socio-psychological effect of death as unwelcome yet inevitable fact of life. In effect, love and death can be, in the context of *hiva kakala*, considered a form of exile, where the poet is temporally and spatially separated by means of love from realizing it in its true physical sense and death as the absence of life. In the case of death, it is the realization of its opposite tendency, life, in its organic, social and emotional sense. In this composition, the poet constantly deals with the same theme of real loss, hopelessness and inevitability throughout the verses, as well as the chorus. Herein, actual love and symbolic death are formally portrayed in terms of a continuity of effective imagery. This remarkable work in *heliaki* is a mark of a great work of art and literature.

*Acknowledgements*

In the course of the production of this essay, particularly the research involved, I am truly indebted to many organizations and individuals. On the organizational level, I must acknowledge the University of Auckland, especially UARC, and the Pacific Arts Committee of Creative NZ, for their financial assistance, which gave me the necessary time and space to conduct research on Tongan poetry. On that note, I must also thank members of many of the *kava* clubs in Tonga, New Zealand and Australia, who freely and sincerely gave their knowledge on the subject of Tongan poetry during endless nights of *talanoa* or “telling memorable stories”. Special thanks go to four of the seven children of Peni Latu, for all the *talanoa* over the years about the work of their exceptionally talented father. To the late Paluki Langi, who, like his father, was a composer of secular and religious songs. To Sela, who gave me invaluable information about his father’s work and life history. To Semisi, who, like his father, is a medical doctor and an established musician. To Sela Na’a, who is now the principal of Queen Salote College in Tonga—’*Oku ou fakamalo atu mo e loto hounga’ia*. Last but not least, I must also thank three of my children, Mele Ha’amoā, Kolokesa Uafa and ’Aisea Nau Matthew, for reading and commenting on an earlier draft.

REFERENCES

- Adam, B., 1990. *Time and Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press.  
 —1995. *Timewatch: the social analysis of time*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Anderson, J., C. Graham and K. Lycos (eds), 1982. *Art and Reality: John Anderson on literature and aesthetics*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.
- Baker, A. J., 1979. *Anderson’s Social Philosophy: The Social Thought & Political Life of Professor John Anderson*, Sydney and Melbourne: Angus & Robertson Publishers.
- Curr, A., 1981. *Writers in exile: the identity of home in modern literature*, Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press.

- Harvey, D., 1996. *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Helu, 'I. F., 1999. *Critical Essays: Cultural Perspectives from the South Seas*. Canberra: The Journal of Pacific History.
- Kaeppler, A. L., 1993. *Poetry in Motion: Studies in Tongan Dance*, Tonga: Vava'u Press; Honolulu: East-West Center's Pacific Islands Development Program.
- Mahina, 'O., 1999. Theory and Practice in Anthropology: Pacific Anthropology and Pacific Islanders. *Social Analysis: Journal of social and cultural practice*, 43(2): 41-69.
- 2002a. *Tufunga lalava*: the Tongan art of lineal and spatial intersection, in S. Rees (ed), *Filipe Tohi: Genealogy of lines: Hohoko e tohitohi*, New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
- 2002b. 'Atamai, fakakaukau and vale: 'Mind', 'thinking' and 'mental illness' in Tonga. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 9(2): 133-38.
- 2003a. Psychoanalysis and Tongan poetry: reflections on 'the song of flowers'. *Literature and Aesthetics*, 13(1): 97-106.
- 2003b. Art as *ta-va*, "time-space" transformation. Paper presented to the VII International Symposium of the Pacific Arts Association, Christchurch, New Zealand, 23-26 June 2003.
- 2003c. Towards a general *ta-va*, "time-space" theory of nature, mind and society. Paper presented to the Tongan History Association Conference, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 8-11 July 2003.
- Ouditt, S., 2002. *Displaced persons: Conditions of exile in European culture*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate.