

Panel of the NZ Federation of Graduate Women, 3. 10. 2009
Melenaite Taumoeofolau - Women Issues in Tonga

DRAFT ONLY

There are many issues one could talk about relating to women in Tonga, but I would like to make some contributions to an understanding of two questions regarding women in Tonga: 1. whether violence is an issue of women in Tonga and 2. whether women in Tonga should be treated as equal to men. A recent answer of the Tongan government to 1. is that women are cherished and respected, and to two, they think that in Tonga it is the men rather than the women who should be liberated and need to be rescued. In my view, this is next to utter nonsense. Another common view is that such questions are asked by people and nations who do not understand enough about the Tongan indigenous culture, to see that in fact women have a superior status to men and that Tongan culture is a culture of *'ofa* (love) in which violence is only functional in bringing about certain culturally desirable behaviour, such as *talangofua* (obedience) and *faka'apa'apa* (respect). In my view, this may have a grain of truth, but it is often an argument that is used to perpetuate the ill-treatment of women in Tongan society. I must admit at the outset that things are complex and require some real soul-searching research if we are to establish anything resembling the truth – or truths.

I would like to contemplate briefly some aspects of the cultural context with the aim of providing some enlightenment to the two questions above. A Tongan woman is the product of a particular way of being – the Tongan way of being in the world. A close look at the Tongan woman shows that she is often the product of her *vā* – lit. the space between two points - relationships with other people. From an early age, she has clear culturally defined *vā* with her blood relations that are culturally observed. Let me discuss the nature of some of these *vā*.

Her *vā* with her *tamai* - father: She discovers quite young that her father is the most important person in her family. At a young age she learns that she cannot touch her father's head in the way she can touch her mother's head. She comes to realise that she cannot eat her father's leftover food no matter how hungry she is. If she does, she may develop some terrible affliction as a consequence. She cannot wear his clothes and she cannot sit on his bed. In discovering these, she is learning the meaning of the word *tapu*, a key concept in the Tongan experience. (This word, of course, entered the English language as "taboo" - probably because of its great cultural significance, and because it lacked an exact English translation.) Pretty soon, too, she begins to see that her *tamai* or father is the decision maker in the family. His *pule* or control is very strongly exercised. At the same time he is *pule* (in control), everyone else in the family must *fakaongoongo*, that is, have the attitude of waiting and listening for instructions. He can exercise corporal punishment as a way of disciplining her and her siblings. This is *ako`i* (teaching) and *o`i* (moulding). Not using corporal punishment could be to Tongans a sign of weakness. It may be a sign of *'ofa vale* (foolish love) or *vaivai kovi* (bad weakness) or *ta`e tokanga* (being uncaring) to his children. It is a sign that his children are *ngaahikovi`i* (reared badly or spoiled). They are left to *fa`iteliha* (please themselves) with the result that parents cannot *pule`i* (control) them. So soon she comes to regard *taa`i* (hitting) as not pleasant, perhaps, but necessary and perfectly desirable to *ako`i* or *o`i* (teach/mould) children. In fact, it is very idiomatic in the Tongan language to say "*Tuku ia na`u taa`i koe*. Stop that or I'll hit you." It becomes the way to make children *talangofua* or habitually obedient, one of the most valued principles of child-rearing.

Her vā with her tuonga'ange or brother. There are certain things she cannot say in front of him, and vice versa. For instance, in his presence she cannot kapekape (say sex-related words) or refer to anything that may suggest anything to do with sex. And no one will kapekape either when both of them are present. People are particularly careful what they say when they know or suspect that brothers and sisters (or parallel cross-sex cousins) are present. The phrase feuluulufi e nofó means brothers and sisters (or people with similar kinship connections) are present. At such times, vulgar language, lewd jokes, and so on are strictly tapu.

She cannot hang up such items of clothing as panties and bras in his line of vision. She cannot dress in thin, see-through material when he is around. The two of them are in a *vā* of faka'apa'apa (respect) or tapu (prohibition). They tend to avoid each other, and later, when she is a little older, he will, if possible, sleep in a different house from her, and he will not, as far as it is possible for him to do so, enter the room where she is or sit next to her.

She finds that her brother can sometimes give her certain orders relating to matters of her reputation and honour as a female. Her honour is his honour, and the family honour, and in this light, he owns her in a way, and is responsible for her protection. Sometimes he is not able to speak to her directly regarding the opposite sex, so he tells their mother to tell her how he feels. So her brother is very protective towards her, with the result that he can be quite authoritarian. However, in some matters she can actually "boss" him around e.g. in doing domestic chores or during family gatherings. In general, while she is very fond of him, she does not feel quite at ease in his presence on account of their *vā* tapu.

Her vā with her fa'ē – mother. From an early age, she finds that her *fa'ē* very strongly "listens to" or fakaongoongo to her father, who tauhi the family. The word tauhi means to keep or maintain or preserve, but literally it means to be ready to fight for. So perhaps the authority or pule of the Tongan tamai (father) rests primarily on his role as loyal defender, the one who fights for the family. She notices that her *fa'ē* gives her tamai the best food in the house, and she always defers to his authority and judgement in all important family matters, or at least she is expected to. His sexual domination over her is very apparent. She finds that her *fa'ē* spoils her brother rotten. By the time he is 15 the mother has lost him to his peers. He even adopts a kind of authoritarian attitude towards her, and to some extent, she fakaongoongo to him (waits for his instructions). She (mother) desperately loves both men, but she almost fears both of them - her husband and her son.

But as far as the attitude of the mother towards her, she is extremely strict. One of the most important duties of the Tongan fa'ē (mother) is to keep her daughters chaste and pure for their wedding day. If they turn out not to be, she is the one who is largely blamed and disgraced by society. So she instils in her daughter the values of anganofa, a word used of women only to mean habitually staying at home, submissive, dutiful, and not inclined to rebel. She soon learns that women, as opposed to men, should be more mamalu or molumalu. These words are defined in the dictionary as solemn, impressive, majestic, imposing, stately, and dignified. Literally, they mean shady or full of shade. Women, more than men, are supposed to cast a lot of shade. This can only be achieved by their being relatively stationary and calm, without moving too much, without running about, and without appearing too enthusiastic. Related to this *molumalu* value is the concept of mālie, which beautiful, enjoyable, as with *faiva* or dance. When this word is reduplicated, we have the word māmālie, which means slow and gentle. So there is a relationship between what is slow and gentle (māmālie) and what is beautiful and enjoyable (mālie). A Tongan dance is mālie (enjoyable) when it is māmālie (slow and gentle). In general, then, mālie and molumalu are both related to slowness and gentleness. People who have more

physical bulk are more naturally molumalu (dignified) because then they have more "shade". Perhaps this is why traditionally, Tongans do not find slimness of build very attractive - there's not enough to give shade. The point here is that there is a Tongan cultural concept that is instilled in women from a young age that Woman is beautiful and dignified only when she is passive, reserved, not active, not vocal, not rebellious, etc.

Vā with her *Fa'ētangata* – mother's brother. She finds that he is also called her fa`iteliha`anga (person with whom she can do as she pleases). Ever since she was a small girl she can remember he used to come to her house and babysit her and do various chores around her `api or home. He is very indulgent towards her. He brings food regularly, such as a bunch of ripe bananas, a basket of mangoes, or a couple of big yams. On special occasions he will bring a pig or a cow. In discovering these things, she learns what it means to be his `ilamutu (male's sister's child). Just because she is his `ilamutu, she is entitled to fa`iteliha or please herself with him. By virtue of the fact that her mother is the sister of this man, she is culturally superior to him, his wife and his children. In the occasion of her death, her mother's brother and his children will become liongi in the funeral. Being liongi means they will be marked in the funeral by certain symbolic acts and forms of dressing as the people who are inferior to you.

Her vā with her *Mehekitanga* – father's sister

She finds out pretty early that her **mehekitanga** has some control over her. At the very least, she is like a consultant to her father. The father's sister will need to approve major family decisions involving life-crisis events such as births, deaths, marriages, and family celebrations. As the fakafotu (female's brother's child), she along with her father and, to some extent, her mother) is culturally inferior to her and to her children. The mehekitanga and her children will become fahu in her funeral, which means they will be marked by certain symbolic acts and forms of dressing as the people who are superior to her. She learns that her mehekitanga (father's sister) possesses some kind of mystical power over her and her siblings. The mehekitanga is able to mana`i her, that is, put a curse on her. Her curse is said to be able to make her sterile, or make birth difficult for her, or make her ill or even die.

Discussion

Even this very brief explanation of culturally defined **vā** shows that a Tongan woman may be different personas at once. She can be a *toufefine* (sister of male), *mehekitanga* (father's sister), *fa`ē* (mother), *ōfefine* (word for daughter of male), *ilamutu* (male's sister's child) or a **mali** (wife), and these will all have different expectations of **vā** with other kin. The brief exposition above indicates that roles are clearly carved into the cultural pathways of the people. It shows that male and female essentially are not equal – cannot ever be equal in the traditional set-up.

Clearly, the **tuonga'ane-toufefine** vā is basic. The **mehekitanga-tamai** vā is merely another name, an extension of the former, and is introduced once the sister bears children. Violence between these pairs is strictly tapu – it is unspeakable. Violence initiated by children towards their father, and by extension, towards their mother is strictly tapu.

It is often felt that these traditional privileges of women "make up" for the inequality between men and women in spheres such as employment and land ownership. The **mehekitanga** has mystical powers that play a role in running the family affairs. Sisters are generally protected and provided for by brothers. I believe that these roles are not as strictly observed today as in the past. In fact, it is doubtful that they are even known in some families that have migrated overseas and have been absent from Tonga for longer periods.

On the 17 September this year, the Tongan Legislative Assembly considered ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It voted 18 to 1, with 4 abstentions to **not** ratify CEDAW. They gave the reason that "to ratify CEDAW would cut across our cultural and social heritage that makes up the Tongan way of life. It would require the creation of fundamental changes for every Tongan citizen to a way of life and social organisation that has sustained Tonga to date. The Legislative Assembly could not in good conscience force those fundamental changes upon the Tongan people." Then they had the nerve to say "In any event the majority of the Tongan people, much like the majority of the Legislative Assembly on this resolution to reject ratification of CEDAW, would not accept such fundamental changes... Then this - "In the Tongan social structure women outrank their male relatives. Women are respected and cherished."

The Tonga National Centre for Women and Children (TNCWC) has lashed out bitterly: "Tell the 202 women who have sought refuge at our centre from abuse that they are cherished. Tell all the women who are too scared to leave their abusive husbands because they have no access to land or financial support that they are cherished. Clearly our social systems aren't working."

I believe that something of a partial answer may lie in the role of *fa'ē* – mother and *mali* - wife. As *fa'ē*, and as wife, the same woman lacks the privileges and protection offered by her brothers. Mothers have a low rank in the family – corresponding to the rank of the *fa'ētangata* (lit. male mother, mother's brother). As the sexual partner of the *tamai*, she is inferior even to her children. There is a saying *Tama tu'u he fa'ē* – child stands on the mother. She is the outsider marrying into this family. In Tonga a male child is the *tamai's foha* – lit. tuber. The son is an extension of the father, not the mother, who simply receives his seed and allows the baby to grow inside of her. Also, the mother is the mehekitanga's *matāpule* – she is only a spokesperson with *fatongia* - duties to perform. She is paradigmatically parallel to the *tu'a* (commoners) in the national scale. Futa Helu claims that there are two quite separate moralities of the *hou'eiki* (chiefly classes) and the *tu'a* (commoners). The moralities of *hou'eiki* include *taki* - leadership, *to'a* - bravery, *fa'iteliha* - independence, initiative, while the *tu'a* moralities are *fatongia* - serve, *mateaki* – loyalty unto death, *fakatōkilalo* – humility, *lototō* – sacrifice. I would add that these also apply to *fa'ē* and *tamai*, or husband and wife. Sexually, the double standard is even more pronounced in husband and wife. The husband is aggressive and dominant, whereas the wife is passive and submissive. It is as the latter that the Tongan woman can be battered. The framework of cultural *vā* allows it and does not prohibit it.

I believe this is the reason why women need to be protected. The traditional framework does not protect the wife/mother persona. The word *tā* in Tongan is quite liberally used because it is culturally normal, especially with regard to children. It is not understood as abuse at all. Wife-beating, verbal and emotional abuse, are all too easy when the indigenous culture allows for a dual morality. The double standard has been further refined to include cultural shaming if a man is seen to wash the dishes or hang out the clothes or change the baby's nappy, etc. A sub-culture has developed based on a concept of male hegemony in the home. In this sub-culture, he sees his family as his kingdom, his wife as his loyal servant, and his children as his obedient subjects. It becomes very difficult to stop or prevent because its existence is rooted in the whole cultural network of *vā*. But as far as CEDAW is concerned, there is perhaps a thin ray of hope – the government spokesperson says "Rather than ratify CEDAW with reservation and thereby compromise Tonga's long family, cultural and social history, *Tonga would instead address specific areas of concern for women* and continue to cherish and respect their unique place in our society." (my emphasis)

* * *