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***Alofa fai tamāmanu*, giving yourself wholeheartedly: Education that matters to Tokelau people in Aotearoa NZ**

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Keywords

Wholeheartedly; equity; resettlement scheme; compassion; inclusiveness

Introduction

As an Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa NZ) realm nation, Tokelau people are part of the diverse Pasifika fabric that represents Pacific immigrants in this settler-colonial nation. Despite Tokelau's contentious geo-political history and climate vulnerability in Te Moananui-ā-Kiwa, this paper briefly provides some of my inspirations and motivations as a Tokelau educator and researcher located in Porirua, Wellington. The *talatalanoa* descriptions I share are linked to what it means to “*Alofa fai tamāmanu*”, giving one's self wholeheartedly in the education of Tokelau communities.

A whakapapa journey: Storying my origins

Tui e te ata kua kakau, e laga kita ko te fanau, aue te alofa te faigata

Tui, oh supreme being, God, we must wake up because of our children—Oh our endless love for our children causes so much pain.

This Tokelau proverb highlights *fakamoemoenga* (hopes, dreams, and aspirations) of Tokelau people and their *alofa* (love) for their children. Echoed in the words “*auē, te alofa te faigata*” – Oh, our endless love for our children causes so much pain, indicates the deep connection that exists between *matua* (parents) and *kau kaiga* (the immediate family members), and *pui kaiga* (including grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, of many generations), that is typical of *faka-Tokelau* (way of life) (Office of Tokelau, 1986).

My name is Lealofi Kupa. My parents are the late Ata and Lisone Kupa, who came from the atoll of Fakaofu, Tokelau, with strong bloodline also to the atolls of Nukunonu and Atafu. My mother's family through her mother, the late Sipaia has close ancestry to Mangarongaro, or more commonly known as Penrhyn in the Cook Islands. Also, on my mother's side through her father, the late Fuli Fati, we have close ancestry to the island of Nanumea, in Tuvalu. My father's parents Litia and Sione Kupa,



both come from Fakaofu, in Tokelau. I am the youngest of eight siblings. However, my parents also helped to raise many *whangai* children over the years through cultural adoption and care. Of my siblings I am the only child who was born here in Aotearoa NZ. My parents came over as part of the Tokelau Resettlement scheme in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We settled in Taupō and were a part of a closeknit Tokelau community at the time. Other Pacific families went and lived in Tokoroa, a forestry town in the Waikato region. Further to this, the government had set up the forestry industry and needed to fill their labour force. Pacific people came in flux as immigrants and they occupied much of the labour force in the 1960s and 1970s (Anae, 2020). My father was one of them. We lived in Taupō for eight years before moving to Porirua to be closer to where the rest of my family lived. So we have been living in Porirua ever since.

I trained to become a teacher back in 1991, and I grew up in an education system that felt very *palagi* (European) and Eurocentric. What we learnt, how we learnt, and even our teachers were *palagi*. It was easier for teachers to call me “Lee” instead of Lealofi or Low-fee (Lofi). At first, I would look around to see who they were calling, then realising it was meant for me. It was not until I had reached Teachers College many years later that I realised, actually, my name holds meaning. I was named after an important woman, Lealofi Setefano, wife of the late Reverend Leite Setefano who provided pastoral care for our family while we were living in Taupō as new immigrants. However, growing up and hearing teachers shorten my name to Lee or Low-fee, I went through schooling thinking, “Oh yeah, no that's cool, that's fine.” But when I left school and became a teacher myself, I thought, actually it is not fine. It really does do something to one's sense of self-worth, their *mana* (integrity), their sense of belonging and the identity they imposed on me.

Talatalanoa method in practice

Tokelau epistemologies are based on our oral traditions and histories. Our bodies of knowledge are storied and told orally, through our stories, practices, ceremonies, dance, song and art (Huntsman & Hooper, 1996). *Talatalanoa* is defined through *Gagana Tokelau* (Tokelau language) as, to discuss or talk (Office of Tokelau Affairs [OFTA], 1986). It is linked to the practice of *talanoa* which has been defined in research literature by Pacific scholars (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006). In my paper, I implement *talatalanoa* as an ongoing conversation, in a similar manner to how Fa'avae and Fonua (2020) apply *talatalanoa* conversations in higher education contexts. My *talatalanoa* in this paper sits alongside other papers in this volume of the *Waikato Journal of Education*, an ongoing conversation with my Pacific colleagues, Tereapii Solomon, Ioane Aleke-Fa'avae and David Fa'avae.

Tokelau: An Aotearoa NZ realm nation

Tokelau has four main coral atolls—Fakaofu, Nukunonu, Atafu and Olohega—with a total land area of 12 square kilometres. However, Olohega although rightfully belonging to the people of Tokelau has been under the USA administration for over 100 years. Access to Olohega is forbidden by American authorities. Regardless of this, the people of Tokelau still consider Olohega as one of their own (Office of Tokelau Affairs (OFTA), 1991).

In terms of location in Oceania, it is 500 kilometres north of Samoa and is home to around 1,500 people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade [MFAT], n.d.). Tokelau is part of the “Realm of New Zealand and its people are New Zealand citizens” (MFAT, n.d.). MFAT (n.d.) describes Tokelau as a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand, with its own political institutions, judicial system, public services and full control of its budget. The Titular (purely formal position or title without authority) Head of Government—the *Ulu-o-Tokelau*—is rotated annually between the *Faipule* (leader) of each atoll. The General Fono (national legislative body) meets three times per year and is made up of elected representatives from each atoll (MFAT, n.d.).

Based on ethnic specific census data, Tokelau people were at 6,822 in 2006. Seven years later in 2013, the population was at 7,173. Five years later in 2018, the Tokelau population grew to 8,676 in Aotearoa NZ (Stats NZ, n.d.) and about half of them live in the Wellington region. A large proportion of that group live in Porirua. Based on age, the majority of Tokelau's youthful population is between 0–14 years of age. This indicates the constant growth of a very youthful Tokelau ethnic population. Despite the steady growth in population, the Tokelau ethnic group only makes up 2.27% of the total Pacific Peoples population at 381,642 (see 2018 census data, Stats NZ, n.d.). The needs of Tokelau people may not always appear apparent in education and schools, given its size relative to other Pasifika ethnicities in Aotearoa NZ. Ensuring the Ministry of Education (MoE), schools, school leaders and teachers are aware of the existence of Tokelau children and their communities across the nation will always be a deep concern of mine.

Navigating Pasifika education: My sense of purpose

As a former ECE educator for over 27 years, I have often been asked by colleagues, “Why are you doing that? We don't get paid for doing that stuff. That's not your job.” That “stuff” being, for instance, collecting food from our local Salvation Army foodbank, or collecting shoes and clothing from local second-hand shops and delivering these to children and families in need. Some things I would do during work hours, but mostly outside of work hours. I think about my sense of purpose and “*Alofa fai tamāmanu*” comes to mind. Since I was a young child it has always been my understanding that giving is more important than receiving. Giving yourself wholeheartedly is my purpose; something other Tokelau people value too. This kind of *ako* or education, schooling and learning matters to Tokelau people, whether they are in Aotearoa NZ or back in the homeland.

My family, they are close to my heart. Biologically I do not have children of my own; however, as my parents did, and as my grandparents have also done, I have *whangai* children, 12 of my nephews and nieces to be exact. All these children belong to my siblings, but as part of our Tokelau way of life, they are also my children. Currently I only have one child (26 years old) that still lives with me. My eldest child is now 32 years old, and the youngest is nine years of age. Most of my children are now married and caring for their own family's children and families. Nonetheless, to them I am and will always be “Mum”, and to their children I am “Mama Lofi”, an expression of endearment used for grandmother. I guess in terms of what drives me, I want all of my children and *mokopuna* (grandchildren) to have better experiences than what my parents and I had in terms of the hardships we faced. I want them to be able to hold on to the cultural and life values that I was fortunate enough to be introduced to and be immersed in it growing up here in Aotearoa NZ. And those values include *fakaaloalo* (respect), *va fealoaki* (relationships), *fakahoa lelei* (sharing and distribution, and equity and fairness), *māopopo* (unity and inclusiveness), *alofa* (love and compassion), *loto mauialo* (humility), and of course *alofa fai tamāmanu*, which literally means love for the baby chick.



Alofa fai tamāmanu is based on the metaphor of a baby chick *tamāmanu* (as pictured here) and its *mātua* (parents who fly out to sea every morning in search of tiny fish to feed the baby chick. On their return the *mātua* may bring tiny fish and collect bits and pieces of debris washed up on shore to strengthen its nest.

The chick is carefully tended to, it is kept warm and well nourished and protected from the elements until it is able to look after itself. When it is strong enough it will find a mate and eventually start its own family. The reality is that there are instances when the *mātua* does not return, either because it got

caught in a storm at sea or eaten by predators. Unaware, the baby chick will continue to wait, with the expectation that its *mātua* will soon return. After a day or two and there is still no sign of the *mātua*, the baby chick has been abandoned and left to the mercy of predators or the extreme weather if it is unprotected, and so their chances of survival are often very slim.

Unless of course you have grown up in Tokelau where the children take on the role as *matua tauhi* (surrogate *mātua*). In these circumstances, when a baby chick is found because it has fallen from a tree the day after a storm, or perhaps it's own *mātua* is no longer there to care for it, then if found, it is the children that may collect the baby chick and attempt to first of all either return it to its nest with the hope that its *mātua* may return. Or in cases where a chick is unlikely to reunite with its *mātua*, then the children will take it back to the village and feed and nurture it until it is old enough to feed and care for itself until it eventually flies away.

In Tokelau, the concept of *alofa fai tamāmanu* is also applied to people, those facing hardships and difficult times, either due to the loss of loved ones, sickness or poor health, and unemployment. This way of caring for another is typical of the *faka-Tokelau* way of life where everyone collectively helps to look after the health and wellbeing of each other. *Alofa fai tamāmanu* looks beyond age, gender, physical ability, titles or socio-economic status. It recognises and upholds the integrity of all. Based on this understanding, I want my children to know that they have just as much right to have a voice, to have a say than any other person, regardless of which Island they come from or culture they belong. Tokelau people might appear small in numbers in relation to other Pasifika ethnicities in Aotearoa NZ, and we are a declining population, but actually our voices matter, our names matter, and our children matter.

My background is in ECE. But anything to do with education is how I enact my sense of giving from the heart. It is a responsibility I hold very close to my heart. I am now doing my EdD at Victoria University of Wellington, focusing on the ECE education of Tokelau and Pasifika children. I also work for the Ministry for Pacific People (MPP) in the Research and Evaluation team. Part of my role at MPP was at one point to contact any Tokelau people that might have been involved during the Dawn Raids in the 1970s. Both my parents have since passed on, and I have no recollection of them sharing any stories about the Dawn Raids. I did, however, have a *talanoa* with a Tokelau man who used to be a police officer at the time of the Dawn Raids and was based in Auckland. He shared his trauma of having to go into specific homes and demand to see Pasifika peoples' documents. He shared how he felt torn because of what was done to Pasifika people at the time and his obligation as a police officer. He felt really torn between wanting to help people, yet he couldn't. I really felt for him.

I am currently in the process of writing up my EdD thesis. My thesis explores navigating a way forward for our Tokelau/Pasifika children within the ECE settings. The thesis also stories the journey from the distant homeland to here and those responsibilities in the agreement that was made between New Zealand and Tokelau. Looking also at the resettlement scheme, an agreement that was made in terms of better housing, better education, better opportunities for Tokelau people in Aotearoa NZ. Currently, Tokelau people are living in large extended families, within overcrowded housing conditions. We have low participation rates in ECE (Pene et al., 2009). At the same time, *Gagana Tokelau* is noted as an endangered language (Tokalau, 2020; UNESCO, 2011). Yet Tokelau is known globally for their climate change efforts and Aotearoa NZ is supporting them back in the homeland. So in terms of Aotearoa NZ's responsibility, I often question the level of commitment given towards really supporting Tokelau and its people as a realm nation. The Aotearoa NZ government is trying, but there really needs to be a little bit more in terms of recognising not only the potential damage of the political and economic relationship but the significance of Tokelau's dependence and reliance on our peoples' migration and movement and the impacts on the homeland and future generations.

Being "New Zealand-born" (NZ-born) can be quite a challenge. Sometimes, people in Pasifika communities see the NZ-born generation as a challenge. My concern, and it will always be a concern, is when I hear my own community and Pasifika people say things like, "Oh, those NZ-born, they don't understand." But when I went back to Tokelau for a couple of years and worked in the village, there were instances where I felt I spoke better Tokelau than some of the locals and understood more about

our old practices. This made me think back to my parents and all that they had shared with me. It made me appreciate my parents, grandparents and the community and family-related activities they immersed us in in Aotearoa NZ. So those sorts of assumptions made about being NZ-born carry negative connotations. That is something that needs to be addressed as a community, a conversation that needs to be had. I am concerned about my children being stigmatised as being NZ-born, equally as being multi-ethnic. I feel like I have sowed the seeds planted by my parents, allowing us to embrace our culture and language. We love it and we are very proud of our identities.

My children and I are of mixed Pasifika ethnicities. I think it is beautiful that we are able to have such diversity. I think Pasifika or Pacific people no longer look the same as they once did during the 1960s and 1970s. I would love for our children to take every opportunity to actively engage in events of their mixed heritages. It is so important in terms of identity affirmation for my children that they have those inter-connections between their mixed cultural and ethnic identities.

Making sense of Tokelau knowledge as an Aotearoa NZ-born Tokelau: My community

Tokelau knowledge and language are to be shared with our next generation. This is my why. It saddens me because there are certain ECE centres, schools and secondary schools that do not genuinely appreciate our families and the things that matter to them. For the children to know themselves, to be proud of their Tokelau heritage, they need to see, hear and feel such tangible and non-tangible experiences throughout their educational journey. They need to feel connected. This is what every other Pacific parent would want for their children. As an educator, I want our children to achieve. I want Tokelau children to know that they have a place within our education system, one that acknowledges them, embraces them, that sees and hears them, and to provide safe spaces and opportunities for all children and not just the larger more obvious student population. For children that are less fortunate, from broken homes, who may not be as confident, our ECE centres, schools and tertiary institutions are obligated to serve them. We need educators that are able to connect with children who live on the margins. On the other hand, we also need educators who are well resourced and also supported within the education system. I would love to see an Aotearoa NZ that truly nurtures the *mana* (integrity) of all our children, families, communities, educators and each other.

During Covid-19, we turned to our cultural practices. The *inati* system, a traditional cultural practice in Tokelau, “that governs the sharing of food and communal resources” (Kupa, 2009, p. 157). The *inati* system highlights the critical importance of working collectively, of the men doing the communal fishing, going out, gathering fish not just for their own households, but for everyone's households and everyone taking part in that responsibility, matters to the community. Remaining resilient, being able to sustain some of the trauma not just of today, but historically. It is a unique way of being, helping us connect and stay true to our identity, especially to our values namely, *alofa fai tamamanu*. As reflected in the nuances of the above proverb, the words, “*ae te alofa te faigata*”—oh the love for our children causes so much pain, *inati* ensures that children remain central to this process. I am proud of our collective response to the Covid-19 challenges in our Porirua-based Tokelau community. For instance, last month the government rolled out an initiative, providing household Covid pack resources throughout the regions. Our community leaders utilised the *inati* practice to distribute these resources given to us. As a result, we held a community *inati*, in modern day context. We got a list of all the families within our community ensuring that each household indeed received their share of these Covid packs.

And in terms of *maopopo* (unity and inclusion) and *fakahoa lelei* (sharing and distribution), some of our young people went around during Covid-19 lockdowns, offered support to families that were struggling or who did not have access to the household resources, and food parcels given by the government. Families without young people in their households were given priority by those young

people who were offering support. Some also offered support with IT, ensuring that they were able to connect online. This helped families who had young children and needed to connect online for schooling, or access to church services, or for the elderly, or for those just wanting to connect with their children and grandchildren. Not having access to face-to-face interaction with other Tokelau people was challenging, but our young people were able to offer themselves—knowledge, time, love, skills. Covid-19 and coming out of lockdown has also given our community and families a whole new life appreciation of each other.

Conclusion

Giving yourself wholeheartedly is what education is all about for me. As a Tokelau ECE educator and researcher, in response to the questions that have been asked of me over the years regarding why I do the things I do, my answer is this, why wouldn't I? As highlighted within the *inati* system, everyone has a role to play to ensure that the health and wellbeing of all our children is upheld and met with *fakaaloalo* (respect) through *maopopo* (unity and inclusion), *lima lelei* (equity and fairness), *va fealoaki* (relationships) and *alofa* (love and compassion). However, when one truly understands the concept of *alofa fai tamamanu* (caring for the baby chick), a simple act, such as the correct pronunciation of a child's name, could mean the difference between a child successfully engaging in education or not. We must wake up, for the love of our children.

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