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*Nemesis, Speaking, and Tauhi Vaha'a:  
Interdisciplinarity and the Truth of  
"Mental Illness" in Vava'u, Tonga*

*Michael Poltorak*

One of the more positive aspects of our existence in Oceania is that truth is flexible and negotiable, despite attempts by some of us to impose political, religious, and other forms of absolutism. Versions of truth may be accepted for particular purposes and moments, only to be reversed when circumstances demand other versions.

EPELI HAU'OFA, "EPILOGUE: PASTS TO REMEMBER"

Epeleli Hau'ofa's aside begs the question, "Positive for whom?" In this article, I ethnographically examine Oceanic resistance to absolutism in the guise of psychiatric positivism. I argue that a flexibility of truth is positive for those suffering from "mental illness." In Vava'u, Tonga—one part of the island group that Hau'ofa disguised as Tiko—"mental illness" is a questionable and contentious attribute. The occasional association of this attribute with inappropriate truthfulness is exemplified in Manu, the central character in Hau'ofa's classic of Pacific literature, *Tales of the Tikongs* (1994). Emblazoned on the back of Manu's shirt is the adage, "Religion and Education Destroy Original Wisdom." Even "the only teller of big truths in [Tiko]" has to be a little eccentric to speak such a truth in Tonga (Hau'ofa 1994, 7). The valuing of religion and education, coupled with the skillful tending of international relationships generated by a four-thousand-year-old monarchy, has been key to Tonga's engagement and influence in both the Pacific region and the wider world. The very fact that we can read *Tales of the Tikongs* is evidence of this. Hau'ofa, a self-avowed "peasant," is the son of Tongan missionaries and possesses a PhD in anthropology. It is little recognized, though, that Hau'ofa based the

character of Manu on a popular eccentric in Nuku‘alofa (Hau‘ofa, pers comm 2006). When standing for Parliament in 1980, this man received so many “dead” fourth-place votes (only three candidates were to be elected) that he beat several very well established candidates. He shared his remarkable propensity for inappropriate truthfulness and freedom of criticism with an eccentric from Vava‘u, who, for the sake of confidentiality, and in the style of Hau‘ofa’s comedic use of Tongan names, I have given the pseudonym ‘AhiOhio. Its meaning of “whirlwind” or “waterspout” captures the mild distress and then social reflexivity that often followed in his wake—reminiscent, perhaps, of the strength of unification and mutual help that follow the destructive cyclones that periodically hit the islands. (The most recent and most destructive in living memory, known as Cyclone Waka, hit Vava‘u on New Year’s Day in 2001.)

As the focus for much theorizing on the causes of unusual behavior in his island group, ‘AhiOhio is the ideal locus to examine an engagement with the scientific positivism of psychiatry that is peculiar to people of Vava‘u. Before introducing ‘AhiOhio and looking in more depth at the responses to and theories about his behavior, I outline the importance and relevance of engaging with a range of disciplinary, epistemological, linguistic, and policy concerns current in the Pacific region. In the manner of a whirlwind, I wish to impel them against each other for the purposes of addressing an issue of increasing concern in Tonga and in the Tonga diaspora. To do so, I take Manu’s shirt as posing a fundamental question that must be answered: On the issue of mental illness, what is the “original wisdom” Manu refers to, and how does it relate to the modernizing influences of religion and education?

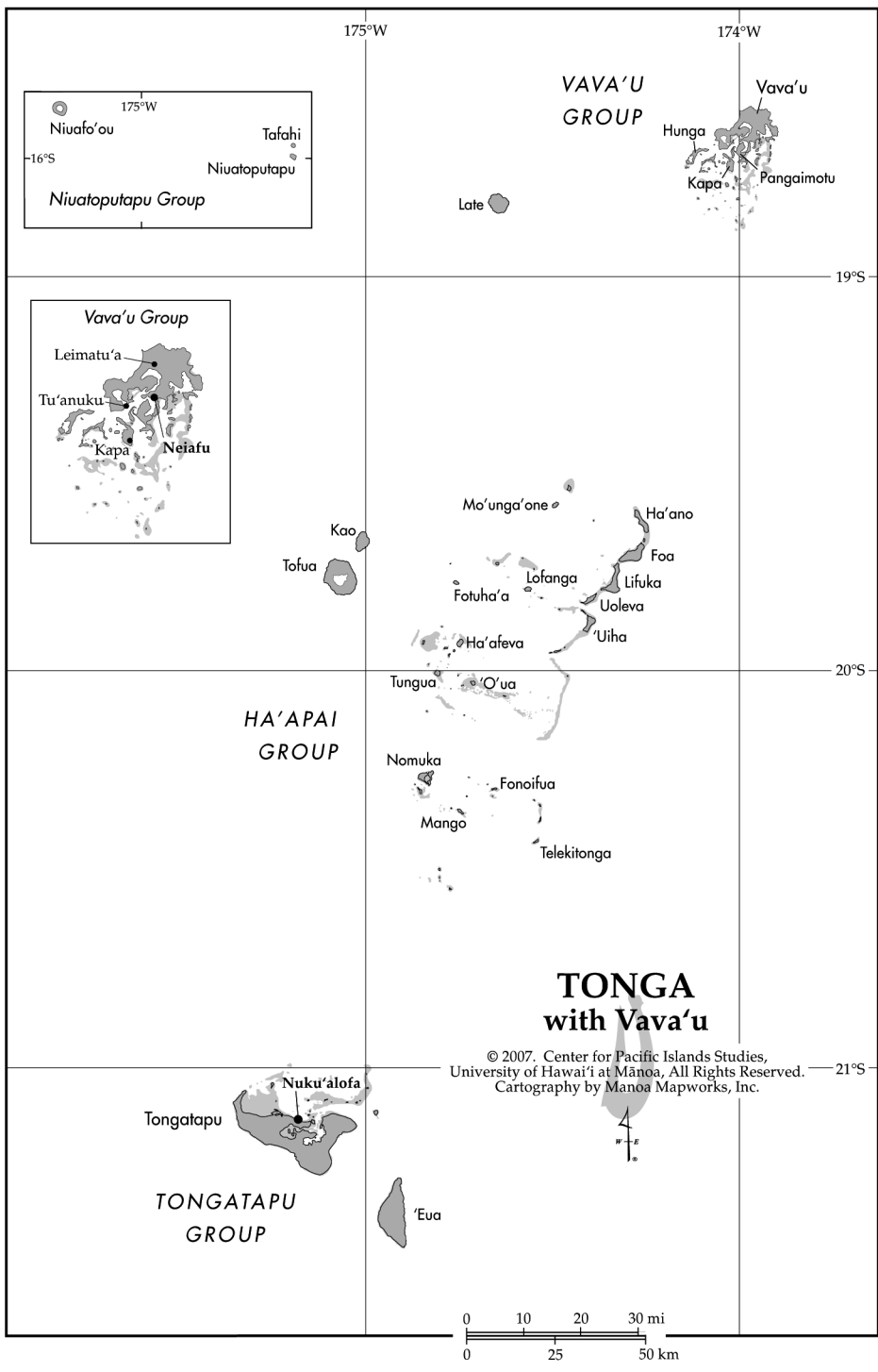
The centrality of language ideologies to both frame and answer this question has a useful, practical precedent in Sitiveni Halapua’s use of Tongan ideas of *talanoa* (talking without concealment) to broker peace in a Fijian context (Halapua 2003; see also Mausio 2003), and to encourage political reform in Tonga through a process of consultations run by the National Committee for Political Reform. It also follows research in linguistic anthropology that draws considerably from work within the Pacific (Duranti 1997a, 1997b; Brenneis and Myers 1984; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). However, exclusive attention to particular disciplinary concerns can often inadvertently signal a lack of local utility. Thus, as a medical anthropologist, in this article I attempt an interdisciplinary brokering on the issue of mental illness, which I feel is more profitably

addressed by remaining “thin” in relation to disciplinary debates while embracing the “thickness” of ethnography and the dilemmas of Tongan scholarly engagement with non-Tongan epistemological and linguistic framings—an ideological and interdisciplinary conflict resolution of sorts (Marcus 1998). I turn first to the issue of contemporary psychiatric modernization on Tongatapu, the main island of the Kingdom of Tonga.

## PSYCHIATRIC MODERNIZATION

As the only psychiatrist in Tonga, Dr Mapa Puloka has attempted, through radio and television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and lecture courses at 'Atenisi University, to revolutionize public knowledge of mental illness. Part of a project to encourage earlier diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric disorders is to remove the stigma from behavior that, depending on the particular case, local healers and laypeople most commonly attribute to the influence of *tēvolo* (ghosts or spirits that possess almost all the faculties of the living), punishment for past wrongdoing, sin, or physical injury (Poltorak 2002). Dr Puloka's extensive translating of psychiatric explanations and coining of hybrid psychiatric Tongan terms have democratized biomedical knowledge to a degree unprecedented in Tongan history (see Puloka 1998, 1999). The audience's laughter at many of his presentations belies the profoundly critical, novel, and surprising implications of his conceptualizations both for the lives of mentally ill individuals in Tonga and for the ways people understand themselves. In 2004, psychiatric services and the reach of the Mental Health Act 1992 were limited to Tongatapu. In 'Ahiohio's home island group, Vava'u, a day's ferry ride to the north of Tongatapu (see map 1), people deal with, tolerate, theorize, laugh at, endure, and enjoy “mental illness” in many ways that challenge the positivism underlying psychiatry. The lack of interest in scientific explanations of mental illness on the part of the people of Vava'u is borne out by statistics. This island group, with a population of approximately sixteen thousand people, rarely sends more than two individuals a year for treatment at the country's only dedicated psychiatric unit, on Tongatapu.

To my knowledge, most people in Vava'u, even those recognized as well educated, continue to use pejorative colloquial terms to describe people with manifest “mental illness” and rarely define them using the terms that appear in the Mental Health Act 1992, which the Tonga Ministry of Health deems more appropriate and Dr Puloka encourages. Families in



MAP I

Vava'u try to avoid bringing their relatives to the attention of the hospital. Typically, admission for unusual behavior only occurs in the final instance, when the police or town officer is called to deal with an individual causing extreme public nuisance. This contrasts with the situation in Tonga-tapu, where people voluntarily bring their relatives in for psychiatric treatment. Though by and large people in Vava'u have not had access to Dr Puloka's television broadcasts, they have been able to read his articles in local newspapers and to hear him on the radio. People travel enough around the islands by plane and ferry to have heard of his treatment. With rare exceptions, the people of Vava'u manage to deal with and explain most incidences of "mental illness" without resorting to processes of institutionalization, essentialization, or overt stigmatization. Research has shown that the absence of stigma is associated with a better prognosis for schizophrenia, arguably the defining condition in modern psychiatric practice (Hopper 1991; Jenkins and Barrett 2004). Revealing this challenge and understanding the basis of an association between the absence or better prognosis for mental illness and lack of confidence in psychiatric categories is key to engaging with the work of key authors and institutions concerned with mental illness of Tongans in Tonga and overseas.

#### MENTAL ILLNESS AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

A growing transnational Tongan community is increasingly falling under the influence of local and regional mental health policies. The needs and interests of local and regional policy makers require an interdisciplinary approach. In Tonga, Dr Puloka has sought a model of mental illness that would help evaluate the need for and extent of a mental health service in Vava'u. In New Zealand, where a large percentage of the Tongan diaspora live, health policy makers are concerned with understanding and dealing with the disproportionately low presentation of Tongans to mental health services (in relation to other Pacific Islanders); the Tongan population represents 15 percent of all Pacific ethnic groups in New Zealand, but only 11 percent of Pacific clients of mental health services (NZMH 2005, 20). Previously formulated Māori (Te Whare Tapa Wha) and Samoan (Fonofale) models of mental illness point up the need to elucidate Tongan models of mental illness (Durie 1994; NZMH 1997), as well as to provide appropriate processes for Tongans dealing with mental health services. In the Western Pacific region, the World Health Organization has recognized the financial impossibility of countries providing primary

health care to all. There is a potential for an increased and valued role of traditional healers in primary health care. Understanding how traditional healers treat mental illness and the efficacy of their treatment is thus part of examining the feasibility of this wider initiative (Williams 1993).

A landmark publication titled *World Mental Health: Problems and Priorities in Low-Income Countries* examines the growing mental health burden in the developing world and lays out an agenda for research that prioritizes focused ethnographic studies and interdisciplinarity (Desjarlais and others 1995). Through providing “descriptive maps of local problems, perspectives, social realities and resources,” these approaches would facilitate more cost effective and culturally sensitive epidemiological and intervention studies. Fundamentally, the most successful interventions are those that are community based and build on “local institutions, traditions and values” (Desjarlais and others 1995, 281).

Edvard Hviding has drawn interdisciplinarity into the realm of creativity and an inclusive approach that would not take intervention as a given (2003). As Hviding put it: “Approaching the diversity of Pacific worlds from an appreciation of human creativity requires an interdisciplinary inclusiveness that extends beyond academic disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences into local worldviews and indigenous epistemologies, taking these on board as partners in dialogue and collaboration toward a plurality of knowledges” (2003, 43). His work echoes calls for Pacific anthropology to engage in epistemological dialogue (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001); to be accessible to Pacific Islanders (Hereniko 2000); and to direct research to some positive purpose (Smith 1999). Linda Tuiwai Smith’s emphasis on utility is part of a larger project to establish indigenous methodologies as central to research. “Cultural protocols, values, and behaviour” would then become a part of a methodology based on reciprocity and leading to culturally sensitive, linguistically accessible dissemination (Smith 1999, 15).

On a Pacific regional level, the need for such research is pressing, with accessibility extended not only to Pacific Islanders in general but also to policy makers and medical practitioners in particular. The categories in Donald H Rubenstein and Geoffrey White’s comprehensive 1983 bibliography of culture and mental health in the Pacific (including alcohol use, drug use, ethnopsychiatry, law and psychiatry, mental illness, mental health services, social change, suicide, and violence) affirm the degree to which the Pacific as a whole is experiencing social changes similar to those in other developing countries, which in turn have effects on mental

health. However, the framing of regional concerns in terms of generalized issues common to all can obscure the very particular and local contexts in which mental illness is experienced and addressed. In her wide-ranging review of the literature on the mental health of Pacific Islanders in New Zealand, Melani Anae argued for more ethnic-group-specific qualitative research (1997). Broaching the political issues of identity, ethnicity, and health, Anae drew attention to a flawed, generalized definition of mental illness, set by the state and institutions rather than by Pacific Islanders. The homogenizing definitions that inform policy deny the real heterogeneity of Pacific Island ethnic groups.

### STUDIES OF MENTAL ILLNESS OF TONGANS

The following review of the main sources of information on Tongan mental health affirms Anae's position but also qualifies it. Only recently have anthropologists begun to acknowledge the regional heterogeneity of Tongan society (Evans 2001; Francis 2003), or the agency implicit in the day-to-day constitution of many diverse Tongan socialities (Young Leslie 1999). Heather Young Leslie's examination of the instrumentality of Ha'a-pai mothers' everyday practice in dealing with their children's health is exemplary in this regard (1999). It accounts for the heterogeneity so often denied in more structural accounts of Tongan sociality. The tendency of Tongans to homogenize and reify their own culture in diasporic contexts relates to the social utility of doing so. (I examine this more closely in a later section on the socially constitutive act of speaking.) It also follows the somewhat restricted diasporic contexts, languages, and scholarly debates in which Tongans are allowed to represent valued aspects of cultural practice. It is hardly surprising, then, that most researchers working within a positivist framework have sought to make more generalized statements about Tongan mental health.

H B M Murphy and Bridget M Taumoepeau examined psychiatric morbidity in Tonga in terms of enduring debates of the connection between mental illness and traditionality (1980). Cautious in their conclusions, they suggested that more data of a more "refined character" would be required to claim without doubt that in 1980 Tongans had below-average rates of "3 broad categories of psychosis: the schizophrenias, the affective psychoses, and the chronic organic psychoses" (Murphy and Taumoepeau 1980, 480). They outlined a number of potential social mechanisms that, in a Tongan (rather than an Australian) context, would lessen the impact



of these disorders. For sufferers of schizophrenias, communality and the existence of clear models of action for individuals prevented further exacerbation of symptoms. The wide range of emotional support from many sources, rather than from several key ones (as is more common in Australia), was also protective for individuals with affective psychoses in Tonga. For chronic or insidious organic psychoses, Murphy and Taumoepeau argued that Australian individualism imposed greater demands than Tongan communalism.

Twenty years later, the social mechanisms associated with traditionalism were found to be much less salient in urban Tongatapu and in New Zealand. Siale Foliaki attributed the worsening mental health status associated with migration and social disintegration of Tongans in New Zealand to “domestic violence, barriers to access to medical services and educational achievement,” as well as “high unemployment, low income, poor housing, overcrowding, abortion, and family fragmentation” (1998, 51). While rates of mental illness among Tongans in New Zealand are low compared with other groups there, they are high compared with mental health status in Tonga. However, Geoff Bridgman and Roine Lealaialotu have suggested that this difference is unlikely to persist, as Pacific Islanders increasingly bear the brunt of socioeconomic deprivation; thus they have recommended changes under the categories of “Mental Health Promotion and Prevention,” the “Sustenance and Development of Pacific Island Culture,” “Social and Economic Development,” and “Research into Pacific Island Mental Health” (Bridgman and Lealaialotu 1996, 5–6).

The correlations detailed by Foliaki and by Murphy and Taumoepeau are, of course, statistical. They do not explain the occurrence of mental illness in particular individuals. An examination of more qualitative work on mental illness in Tonga is interesting for the contrast it reveals as to the confidence researchers have in objective scientific categories for describing and defining Tongan experience of mental illness. Both Futa Helu and W G Jilek drew attention to case studies, thus showing sensitivity to the particularizing style of much local theorizing of mental illness in Tonga (Helu 1999; Jilek 1988). To my knowledge, only Helu has recounted a case of “spirit possession,” defined as acute psychosis, which he witnessed during a fund-raising tour in Vava‘u with a performing group from ‘Atenisi University. Helu’s core thesis—that these “mental illnesses” are “manifestations of emotional conflict between basic drives and urges and a rigid social environment” (1999, 37)—is often quoted and forms one of the

dominant interpretations of “spirit possession” in Tonga. In contrast, Jilek, a transcultural psychiatrist by training, has resisted translation of Tongan cultural concepts, claiming, “Tongan emic disease classification cannot be simply translated into medical nomenclature” (1988, 173).

‘Okusitino Mahina has argued for realist and generalizing translations of Tongan concepts of mind, thinking, and mental illness (2002). Setting them in the context of a Tongan theory of *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) suggests a different arrangement from that in Western, capitalist, democratic cultures. The aim of incorporating *tā* and *vā* would be that “a general ta-va theory could be developed, so that we can better understand the complexity surrounding nature, mind and society” (Mahina 2002, 303). In Mahina’s treatment, it seems that it is Tongan realist philosophy, albeit rendered in English, that is being inclusive of or equal to a Western understanding, rather than the reverse, as implied by Hviding’s encouragement (2003). Like Helu, Mahina has established this implicit hierarchy or equality by emphasizing independent, critical, and scholarly argument over the academic need to cite widely. Unlike Helu, though, Mahina has criticized attempts to modernize terms for mental illness on seeming moralistic grounds, arguing that the former Tongan terms are “more befitting and *objective* as descriptions of mental illness than the [modern terms]” (Mahina 2002, 305).

Helu’s and Mahina’s realist (read objectivist) claims contrast dramatically with Hau‘ofa’s flexibility of truth. The issues of generalizability, incommensurability, and translatability implied by these authors cry out for more empirical examples. Time and space are fundamental, not only to a realist Tongan philosophy, but also to process and the diversity of responses to “mental illness” in different places and times. To that end, I now introduce Vava‘u, as a place that people in Tonga distinguish from other places.

## VAVA‘U

The banter and talk that distinguish originally independent Vava‘u from the other island groups that make up the Tongan archipelago provide a first hint of why modernist psychiatric claims might be resisted in this island group. Warwick Anderson has noted that “the language of western medicine, with its claims to universalism and modernity, has always used, as it still does, the vocabulary of empire” (1998, 529). People all over the one hundred and fifty islands in Tonga make reference to a par-

ticular aesthetic of relatedness and interaction in Vava'u. This is reflected in a complimentary sense in the nickname for Vava'u, *Fatafatamafana* (which means warmhearted), and, in a slightly pejorative sense, the term *kaimumu'a* (derived from *kaimu'a*, meaning self-confident or self-possessed). Regarding the nickname, many people in Tonga have commented to me that in Vava'u there is more emotive enthusiasm (*māfana*) invested in the family and community than elsewhere in the country. The word *kaimumu'a*, on the other hand, hints at a presumptuousness in speaking and interaction that people on Tongatapu may find inappropriate or odd. The joking association between "Vava'u Lahi" (Great Vava'u) and "Bilitania Lahi" (Great Britain) draws less on Tonga's protectorate status between 1900 and 1971 than on Vava'u's feeling of greatness and desire not to lose face. Taken together with a sense of pride and importance on the part of the people of Vava'u, the implications of the two designations—*kaimumu'a* and *Fatafatamafana*—are extremely important. First, following Bronislaw Malinowski (1935) and Raymond Firth (1975), these examples support local recognition of language as a "mode of action," and as constitutive of social relations. Second, they suggest a particularly Vavauan emphasis on the link between language and emotionality.

The socially constitutive role of language in particular has received a lot of attention in the Pacific. Roger M Keesing's comment on the reconciliation between broadly interactionist and structural approaches to social and political talk is a good starting point: "Talk at once expresses and publicly iterates structures of power and constitutes them, at once reproduces existing constellations of political relationships and transforms them" (1990, 496).

Context is key to understanding the power of language to change experience. As Niko Besnier has noted: "Investigations of the role of affect in language cannot proceed without a fine-grained ethnographic inquiry into language use in context. Questions that must be addressed include: Who uses which affective tools, for what purpose, in what context, and what role does affect play in the linguistic representation of symbolic processes (eg, emotion management)? A linguistic approach to affect thus needs to problematize context and contextualization" (1990, 437).

I would like to open up to ethnographic, linguistic, and emotive scrutiny the use in Vava'u of terms that are regarded by Dr Puloka as both offensive and pejorative. Following Hviding's call for interdisciplinarity and Hereniko's for accessibility, there is also a need to open such analysis to Vavauan epistemological scrutiny, perhaps what Besnier means by prob-

lematizing contextualization. Terms or phrases like “affect” or “the linguistic constitution of reality” have little ethnographic purchase in the abstract and are almost impossible to translate into Tongan.

A good example of an event that had measurable empirical results and affirms local recognition of the affect and effect of speaking was the election of William Harris as people’s representative for Vava’u in early 1999. This was evidence to many in Tongatapu that people from Vava’u are eccentric voters. Why would they vote for a candidate from the Church of the Latter-day Saints who had only recently returned to Vava’u, having spent a long time overseas? Within Vava’u itself, however, Harris was widely recognized as having won because of his eloquence and because, it was claimed, he talked to everybody on the island group. Friends contrasted him with other candidates from more established churches who prominently gave money at many annual church collections but were not elected. Through speaking to “everybody,” Harris built relationships that led to almost two thousand three hundred people voting for him, four hundred more than voted for the more established lawyer, Samiu Kuita Vaipulu. Harris’s speaking to people in person constituted relationships that had an influence beyond the power of speaking manifested in popular ideas of seduction by word (*fakatauhele*). (Sadly, he died of cancer a little less than a year after taking up his position.)

This instance is perhaps the best empirically validated example of the local recognition of the relationship in Vava’u between the intentionality of speaking and a Vavauan aesthetic and experience of relatedness. This can be conceptualized as the inextricability in Vava’u of speaking and *tauhi vaha’a*. As a value, *tauhi vaha’a* relates to the importance of “maintaining harmony of the ‘space’ between oneself and others” derived from *tauhi* (nurturing), *vā* (space between), and *ha’a* (lineage) (Thaman 1988, 120).

Halapua’s use of the connection between speaking and the constitution of relationship for conflict resolution, mentioned earlier, draws on and follows a wider recognition evident in, for example, Young Leslie’s focus on appropriate social relations (in Tongan terms, *vā lelei*) as central to Tongan notions of health (1999, 2002); Samiuela Toa Finau’s attention to *tauhi vā* in examining strategies to strengthen marriages and family life (1979); and Helen Morton’s scrutiny of *vā* in childhood development (1996). The Samoan expression, “*Ia teu le va*” (which Albert Wendt translated as “cherish, nurse, care for the va, the relationships” [1999, 402]) shares many similarities (see also Lilomaiva-Doktor 2004). Allesandro

Duranti's use of this value extended from explanations of the actions of *matai* (Samoan chiefs) in *fono* (meetings) to "make the relationship beautiful" to a more reflexive awareness of its utility in understanding his own actions as a researcher: "We used it when we tried to convince ourselves that we should or should not do something, trying to come to terms with the tension between our latent beliefs and ideologies and the ethics of a profession that values empathy (or at least neutrality) over confrontation" (Duranti 1997b, 343). Similarly, Bradd Shore used it to argue for a particularly Samoan notion of person: "Lacking any epistemological bias that would lead them to focus on 'things in themselves' or the essential qualities of experience, Samoans instead focus on things in their relationships, and the contextual grounding of experience" (Shore 1982, 136).

Duranti's reference to empathy (the need for which presupposes a lack of assumed relationship in Vavauan terms) and the typical translation of *vā*, as "relationship" (which has the connotation of a "thing in itself," outside of context) reflect a latent ideology of the nature and representation of relationship, which, in the light of Vavauan experience, is epistemologically insensitive.

#### FROM RELATIONSHIP TO RELATEDNESS

A good friend from Kapa in Vava'u was the first person to impress on me the importance of *tauhi vaha'a* to Tongan life, when he described it as one of the four most important *kavekoula* (values) of Tonga, along with *faka'apa'apa*, *toka'i*, and *fetokoni'aki*. I have chosen just one translation for each of these, based on C Maxwell Churchward's *Tongan Dictionary* (1959), to give a sense of their possible meanings: *faka'apa'apa* (to show deference or respect or courtesy), *toka'i* (to consider the feelings or judgment of), and *fetokoni'aki* (to help one another). The original use of these four values to assert an authentic Tongan-ness can most probably be attributed to Queen Sālote (Wood-Ellem 1999). Tēvita O Ka'ili had clearly drawn out the transnational nature and effects of *tauhi vaha'a* in formal cultural events "such as marriages, funerals, christenings, birthdays, and misinale (church offering celebrations)" that involve "reciprocal exchange of economic and social goods" (2005, 92). But he reported that it is also evident in everyday practices such "sharing foods, offering one's home . . . and sharing resources," not only with the extended family but also with "friends, schoolmates, coworkers . . . fellow church member . . . [and] across generations"; in all these activities *tauhi vaha'a* is manifested

in acts that “sustain harmonious social relations with kin and kin-like members” (Ka‘ili 2005, 92).

*Tauhi vaha'a* is a central value of Tongan social existence, similar in emphasis to values of other Pacific Island peoples. I am taken by its conceptual power and the degree to which it indicates the importance of the experience of relatedness, as a term that can be used “in opposition to, or alongside kinship in order to signal an openness to indigenous idioms of being related rather than a reliance on pre-given definitions” (Carsten 2000, 4). I think “relatedness” is a better translation for the pan-Pacific concept *vā*, closer to experience than “space between” or “relationship.” As Wendt has argued: “Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things” (1999, 402). These meanings consolidate nicely in the term “relatedness,” which I take to refer to the degree of relationship, where relationship is assumed and may or may not refer to a relationship described in kin terms. And while *vaha'a* has a figurative meaning of relationship, there seems little use or awareness of an abstract Tongan term for relationship that is not specific to particular kin terms or group-affirmed membership. Nor did the Tongan friends I consulted recognize *vaha'a* or *vā* (a noun meaning the distance between, distance apart; figuratively, attitude, feeling, relationship, toward each other [Churchward 1959, 528]) as a term that could stand alone. In my experience, people tended to translate the English term *relationship* as the Tongan term for neighbor, friend, or fellow household member. Relationship, in Euroamerican terms, is assumed by virtue of one’s mutual participation in group activities. Thus *tauhi vaha'a* as concept (rather than as value) refers to the *evocation* and *intensification* of relatedness. In other words, when people carry out acts of *tauhi vaha'a*, they both evoke and increase the experiences that constitute relatedness.

## SPEAKING AND *TAUHI VAHA'A*

*Kai pē lea* (speech becomes food):

Good speech makes people contented and at peace with each other. This saying was used of a man who did not get a portion of the food distribution from a chief, but the chief spoke to him and that was enough to satisfy him.

EDGAR TU'INUKUAFE, *A Simplified Dictionary of Modern Tongan*

The act of speaking is not the only or the main way in which relatedness is evoked and intensified, but it always plays a role. As Ka‘ili pointed out, many Tongans stress the material manifestations of *tauhi vaha‘a* in their acts of giving and their ability to *kole* (request) items and assistance from relatives (2005). However, in all such events some act of speaking is always present, and on occasion, as pointed out in the above proverb, speaking may be a replacement for material aid. The inextricable link between *tauhi vaha‘a* and speaking is fundamental to a Vavauan epistemology and is key to dealing with the political nature of local interpretation.

The use of language on Vava‘u contrasts markedly with that of positivist social and medical sciences. As Albert Robillard has argued, such disciplines “proceed from the assumption that language stands in a positive correspondence relationship with an external world of language independent objects” (1992, 11). For the scientists, language is relatively neutral; it simply references an objective outside world. Further, Robillard stated, “social science, one which takes itself as exempt from the constitution by the social order of its language, is not only reifying, maintaining, advancing the social order contained in discourse, but also fails to conceptualize social life, its object, as a practical achievement” (1992, 11). This idea is key to appreciating the enduring dilemma of representing “mental illness” and its relation to Vavauan sociality within a broadly positivist framework. Vavauan lack of confidence in and avoidance of the term “mental illness” reflects a sociality that more often than not contributes to a positive “mental health” prognosis.

To the degree that people in Vava‘u recognize the inextricability of speaking and *tauhi vaha‘a*, they do not fail to appreciate this connection. But are they rejecting linguistic positivism from a position of a postmodern appreciation of discourse? Michael Taussig’s 1987 book *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* is often taken as an exemplar of postmodern ethnography. His subject “is not the truth of being but the social being of truth, not whether facts are real but what the politics of their interpretation and representation are” (Taussig 1987, xiii). A switch from a concern with truth to the social life of claims of truth, I argue, is more in line with the way that people in Vava‘u engage with “truth” on the issue of “mental illness.”

The many implications of postmodernism are not lost on Tonga-born scholars negotiating the dilemmas of representing the Tongan world to a non-Tongan audience. To give two counterposing examples, while Konai

Helu Thaman has recognized the utility of the postmodern approach, 'Okusitino Mahina has rejected it out of hand. Thaman was attracted to the stance because of her dislike for the “western-dominated, monocultural, and assimilationist” view she was taught while attending university in the 1960s: “I wanted to be able to name and represent my thoughts and feelings, to speak for myself, and to create my own version of history,” having learned “that in order to be modern and successful at university I had to hang my cultural orientation and identification on the trees at Albert Park and forget who I was for a while” (Thaman 2003, 11). However, Thaman argued, postmodernism does not hold all the answers; its ahistorical representation of social life tends to deny the fact of “long, authentic” Oceanic cultural histories (2003, 12). For Mahina, postmodernism does not hold *any* of the answers. He has rejected wholesale “the anti-realist and relativist tendencies underpinning postmodernism and poststructuralist thought,” on the basis that this approach deals with people symbolically, with no relation to the reality they are living (Mahina pers comm 2001; Mahina 2004). As a development of cultural relativity, which Dan Sperber has described as a “kind of cognitive apartheid” (1985, 62), much postmodern theorizing implies a denial of the reality of indigenous interpretation in anything other than its own terms. This is the very theoretical antithesis of Mahina’s philosophical project, which seeks to make a Tongan-inspired time/space formulation applicable outside of Tonga.

Keeping in mind Thaman’s positive view of postmodernism and Mahina’s negative take on it, and with a sensitivity to speaking and *tauhi vaha'a*, I now finally turn to 'Ahiohio. The previous discussion on speaking and *tauhi vaha'a* underlines the need for sensitivity when attributing “mental illness” to others. 'Ahiohio is one of the few people in Vava'u I can write about in such an open way. There is little I can reveal about his personal history that is not already common knowledge in most of Vava'u. This makes him unusual compared to most people who suffer from “mental illness,” but his case is central as an example of how people in Vava'u come to theorize the unusual behavior he manifests in relation to their own relatives and concerns.

#### 'AHIOHIO AND THE BIBLE

Ti Pilo Simini—“a weedy little man who smokes continuously”—smoked two pages of the Bible by mistake and begged forgiveness (Hau'ofa 1994,



35). ‘Ahiohio, according to accounts I heard, smoked them on purpose and carried on regardless. The stories about this original cause of his eccentric behavior affirm the idea that “mental illness” may be caused by a serious offense against the Church. ‘Ahiohio’s situation seems the very exemplification of *mala’ia*, a concept that refers to “misfortune as the result or Nemesis of wrongdoing” (Churchward 1959, 323), typically related to acts committed against the representatives or precepts of Tongan Christianity. Yet most people in Vava‘u, while telling me the story, also distanced themselves from these explanations. For example, while sitting under a tree one evening with a group of neighbors, a woman named Sela, who is very familiar with ‘Ahiohio, explained:

People say his condition is the result of a dare he carried out with two other boys when at high school. Since then the other two have died. The first dare involved them all eating roast lizard. Then ‘Ahiohio challenged them to smoke cigarettes rolled in pages of the Bible. This is the biggest *tapu*. You can’t even get food on your Bible. Most people believe that his illness and the early deaths of his companions are the results of this dare at school.

In another account from a friend, one of the three boys died soon after the event. A second boy went to a minister and confessed, but occasionally he still behaves quite strangely.

By introducing the story with the phrase “People say,” Sela was able to tell a good tale, distance herself from the implied slander, and also suggest there were perhaps other explanations she was party to. The idea that mental illness (in psychiatric terms) or the associated behaviors (in Vavauan terms) may be the result of nemesis, or punishment for past wrongdoing, is pre-Christian and is continuous with the idea of transgression of a *tapu*. William Mariner translated *mala’ia* as bad luck (1981, 439). Either he was not aware of other meanings of the term, or the process of missionization led to what had previously been regarded as bad luck being attributed to divine punishment. The dedication of the Kingdom of Tonga to God by King Tupou I, carried out at an area called Pouono, in Neiafu, Vava‘u, in 1845, is often used to explain the origin and process whereby nature became a vehicle for the punishment or revelation of crimes against God or the Church. (Some six years earlier, the first written law of Tonga, the Vava‘u Code, was promulgated in the same place.)

Biblical references to the sins of the father being visited on their chil-

dren and grandchildren up to the fourth generation are quoted by Tongans in support of this hypothesis. Tongans still ask doctors to remove organs such as the liver—popularly regarded as the seat of love—on the death of an individual, to interrupt this generational transmission of sickness. Sharks may attack those who have committed an offense. The tragic death of a recently arrived Peace Corps volunteer in February 2006 after a shark bit off her leg while she was swimming in deep water near Tuʻanuku, Vavaʻu, was highly unusual, as fatal shark attacks are uncommon. It is likely to have brought to the fore discussions on the distinction between non-Tongans and Tongans and the degree to which they are subject to divine punishment.

The two cases of shark attack I was most familiar with, one of which was almost fatal, were attributed, at least officially, to a mixture of stupidity and getting the shark angry. One long-term expatriate resident was bitten when he kept the fish he had speared on his person rather than trailing them behind him. The other case was of a well-known young man from Vavaʻu who, while escorting several tourists watching whales, spotted a small shark approaching them and promptly jumped in the water, either to distract or attack the shark, while the tourists made their escape. Some said he overdid it and the shark reciprocated with a bite. Had it not been for the quick organization of the expatriate diving community, he would certainly have died.

Despite these well-known cases, the prevalence of the idea that sharks will attack those who commit grave offenses against the Church prompts many men going spearfishing at night to pray to God to forgive their sins before they enter the water. The most definitive spoken stories of actual shark attacks as punishment tend to be about events distanced in time and social space from the speaker. For example, Sela's mother had told her about an event that occurred in Longomapu in 1965. Sela was careful not to mention any names:

A man took wood from the church boathouse on the beach to light a fire. The priest had been very angry about people doing this and had told them not to. The man and his friends lit a fire before going off to fish. Very soon after the man entered the water, a shark came up and bit his right arm. The sea went red with blood. His two friends, who were also diving at the same time, were not touched at all. When they got him back to land, he was already dead. The shark had bitten the same arm that he had used to take the wood from the shed. Everyone goes fishing knowing that if they do something wrong they

will be bitten by a shark. Do something bad to the minister or to the Church, something will happen. The man had taken wood off the shed before, but hadn't confessed when the minister got angry about it.

Events come to be told definitively only over the passage of time, through the continual telling and retelling of stories. Ambiguities are forgotten as the stories take on lives of their own and individuals tell them for their own purposes. A complex play of factors keeps punishment for past wrongdoing as a definitive explanation for events in other places and times but only a potential one for events in the present. Those close to the individual tell different stories, not just because they share in the shame but also because they know more about the individual in question. Competing narratives about the original cause of 'AhiOhio's sickness that must have circulated at the time of the onset of his sickness were probably forgotten as family members became reconciled to the implied slander or could no longer influence stories being told outside of their social networks.

#### *TĒVOLO* AND MENTAL ILLNESS

As is the case with many people who exhibit unusual or out-of-character behavior, it is likely that 'AhiOhio's early behavior would have been attributed to the influence of or interaction with *tēvolo*. Much research on this particular aspect of Tongan experience has glossed *tēvolo* as "spirit" or "ghost" rather than "devil" (the common Tongan-to-English translation), and the resulting behavior as "spirit possession" (Gordon 1996; McGrath 2003). While useful in cross-cultural comparison and theorizing in terms of socio-structural considerations, these glosses all neglect the powerful implications on individual lives of attributions of *tēvolo* involvement that come about as a result of the meanings and ideas that coagulate around the notion of *tēvolo*. An attribution of *tēvolo* interaction (rarely in Vava'u is the *tēvolo* conceptualized as entering the person) locates the agency for unusual acts outside of the person affected. The social effect of treatment, other than removing the stigma from behavior that could be attributed to less salutary causes, is to galvanize the family in common action around the patient. A *tēvolo* is conceptualized as having all the capacities of a living person, living between heaven and earth, outside of a Tonga constituted in Christianity and, as a result, free of social responsibilities. By contrast this idea confirms the importance

of a Vavauan personhood constituted in intersubjectivity and relatedness (Poltorak 2002). Because most *tēvolo* are concrete, named individuals, translations of the term are more accurate in their adjectival form, “devilish” and “spirited.” Many but not all *tēvolo* are young men who have died in dramatic circumstances. The existence of *tēvolo* also serves to affirm the enduring connections and relatedness of individuals with dead relatives. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in treatments that involve examining and cleaning the bones of deceased relatives to ensure that they are suffering no discomfort that would in turn be manifested in pains and illness of living relatives in similar bodily locations (Young Leslie 1999, 221; Bloomfield 2002).

If 'Ahiohio's family had been able to persuade him or pin him down for treatment, a local healer would have squeezed plant extracts into his eyes, nose, and mouth (and possibly ears) to break his sensory engagement with named *tēvolo*. After many decades, however, 'Ahiohio's household members no longer consider *tēvolo* involvement to be a possible explanation for his behavior. *Mala'ia* is unlikely to have been the default explanation for 'Ahiohio's family. Nor is it likely for other extended families. The real or imagined ridicule or gossip initiated or suggested by family members' verbalized attribution of *mala'ia* would severely influence their experience of relatedness with fellow villages and associates. To imagine that others are gossiping behind your back is bad enough; to have it confirmed by someone within the family can be a serious blow to the confidence in interaction that is so vital to wider and satisfying social relations.

'Ahiohio supposedly smoked a page of the Bible approximately forty-five years ago. But if they live in Vava'u, people still take care to distance themselves from that explanation of his condition. To introduce him more sensitively, I recall an event that reminded people of the uniqueness of both Vava'u and 'Ahiohio. People in Vava'u have come to know 'Ahiohio less in terms of definitive categories than through interacting with him personally and hearing about his escapades.

### THE LAKALAKA

In early 1998, Princess Pilolevu and her husband, Baron Tuita, who was then governor of Vava'u, requested that the people of Vava'u prepare a *lakalaka* for the celebration of the king's eightieth birthday in Nuku'alofa in July (Kaepler 1999, 54). A *lakalaka* is a Tongan standing dance, typ-

ically performed at important royal occasions, which may take up to twenty-five minutes. It involves large numbers of women on one side and men on the other, singing and making hand movements in accordance with its twelve or so verses (see Kaeppler 1993). In part to outdo all the other groups who danced for the king that day, the *lakalaka* that the people from Vava'u performed had as a surprise introduction the presentation of five hundred six-pound tins of corned beef from under the skirts of the participants. A six-pound tin of corned beef is considered a valuable (*koloa*)—six pounds is the largest size possible—and is also emblematic of the extreme generosity and happiness of the second largest village in Vava'u, Leimatu'a, whose people made up a large percentage of the dancers on this occasion. Leimatu'a is famous for an event involving such a tin that had occurred many years before. After a shortage of corned beef, some was finally delivered to the village. A local man, in great enthusiasm, promptly took one of the six-pound cans and beat it with a stick until corned beef covered the road, while he loudly castigated it for having been away for so long. Since then, the term *pāuni ono* (six pound) has been used metaphorically to refer to Leimatu'a.

'Ahiohio's occasional overexuberance, and his tendency to dance and do cartwheels during a *lakalaka* without wearing underwear, led to concerns among the organizers of the *lakalaka* of the potential shame if he was to do so in front of the king and all the visiting dignitaries. His often eccentric behavior was accepted and tolerated in Vava'u, but the international arena of Tongatapu was a different matter. The police were asked—some say by the princess—to find 'Ahiohio and prevent him from going down to Nuku'alofa on the interisland ferry, the 'Olovaha. Somehow he heard of this plan and cleverly hid himself in a box of kava on board the ferry. The police searched for him but to no avail.

On a stopover at Ha'apai, as one version of his exploits has it, 'Ahiohio jubilantly climbed the mast of the 'Olovaha, lifted his *tupenu* (a male skirt), thus exposing his genitals, and shouted to an astonished and amused local crowd, "Ha'apai, this is Vava'u." Testicles, especially when swollen, are a powerful source of humor in Vava'u. I have lost count of the number of times that on hearing me introduce my research on Tongan medicine, my kava drinking companions would make immediate reference to the friend I arrived with having already been operated on. There was no need for them to say for what. Hydroceles, accumulations of watery fluid around the testicles, are a relatively common complaint in the humid archipelago.

The chief justice, who was in charge of the *lakalaka*, gave instructions to simply leave 'Ahiohio alone, reflecting a tolerance that he had demonstrated with similar individuals appearing before him in court for disturbing the peace. Someone explained the situation to 'Ahiohio and he did not cause any problems, which suggests that on this occasion he recognized the importance of *tauhi vaha'a* to his fellow Vavauans, in exchange perhaps for a recognition of his relatedness to the royal family. He was well looked after at the king's palace during his stay, reflecting a royal concern with "mental illness" that can be traced back to the early 1800s and compared to the warrior king Finau 'Ulukālala's concern with the case of Tootawi, an individual who shared many of 'Ahiohio's characteristics and quite possibly the same main village of residence (Mariner 1981; Poltorak 2002, 255). People joked that if 'Ahiohio danced, "Tō 'a Vava'u Lahi" (Vava'u would fall in the estimation of others).

People talk about 'Ahiohio with humor and familiarity. There are many stories of similar exploits. Even people who have been slighted by him regard him with affection. His uniqueness, which is often remarked on, lies in part in his expert knowledge of genealogies of the islands, on occasion up to six generations, and in part in his occasional inappropriate truthfulness. Many people remember his ability to put people in their place when they claimed an ancestry not borne out by 'Ahiohio's knowledge. One woman, Tupou, explained how he used this knowledge to great effect by alluding to illegitimate relationships in the past, surreptitiously critiquing claims of *'eiki* (chiefly) blood and reminding people of the appropriate place to sit when drinking kava in formal settings. 'Ahiohio is a pedant who tells people what they are supposed to do. In the realm of appropriate social behavior he is an absolutist. When ill he seems rarely concerned with the mutuality of *tauhi vaha'a* to his fellow Vavauans, other than to evoke and intensify an imaginary relatedness to the royal family—a trait that a relative suggested was the result of his being the youngest in the family of successful brothers. This relative argued: "His problem lies in his dreaming of something he can't get. He is always planning big things. Because he was the youngest in the household he was entitled to nothing. When he is sick he will say the same thing, 'I will buy a truck, build a boat, make a garden.' He overestimates himself. He says he was meant to be king and that all his relatives are big chiefs." When he does take *tauhi vaha'a* seriously, one does not usually hear about it, partly because this is expected social behavior and partly because when not ill, he typically stays within the confines of his village.

Tupou affirmed the validity of ‘Ahiohio’s claims for others’ genealogical connections (but not his own), despite the occasional inappropriateness of his mentioning them. Surprisingly, as a headmistress of a local school who had been educated overseas and who was probably familiar with a host of medical terms for mental illness, she chose to switch from English to Tongan and refer to him as “one of the most unique *fakasesele* in Vava‘u.”

#### FAKASESELE: INSULT OR TERM OF ENDEARMENT?

What was Tupou communicating if, following Malinowski (1923, 307), a statement cannot be “detached from the situation in which it has been uttered”? What is the act of *tauhi vaha‘a* implied by her choice to describe ‘Ahiohio as “one of the most unique *fakasesele*”? What did she mean, and how does her use of the term affect our understanding of what *fakasesele* means? Churchward identified *fakasesele* as an intransitive verb and translated it as “to act in a silly or eccentric manner” (1959, 97). *Fakasesele* and *vale* (foolish, silly, ignorant, unskilled, incapable, incompetent [Churchward 1959, 533]) are terms of considerable antiquity. Both *sesele* (translated as eccentric or odd), and *vale* (translated as mad, insane, crazy, delirious, also ignorant) appear in Mariner’s dictionary, reflecting Tongan language use at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Mariner 1981). In my experience, terms of more recent origin describing unusual behavior, such as *masoli* (chipped) and *masisi* (cracked), were less commonly used than *fakatafa* (to lie on one side; to have a list) and *taimi vave* (quick time). Most popular and contentious—resulting in several angry letters for inappropriate use to the editor of the *Tongan Chronicle*, and prompted by the antics of a small pentecostal group speaking in tongues on the seafront in Nuku‘alofa—were the terms *siasi* (literally, “church,” but meaning “crazy”) and *siasi lahi* (literally, “big church,” but meaning “really crazy”).

There are also many terms that have fallen out of use. For example, as one health officer explained, *faha* (adjective meaning mad, insane, or noun meaning insane person, lunatic, idiot) would not be understood by most high school students in Tonga today. Browsing through Churchward’s dictionary reveals a host of other terms that seem no longer to be in common use, such as *‘atamai sesele* (like *‘atamai vale*, but milder); *‘atamai vale* (dull and more or less stupid, doltish); and *mahaki sesele* (to suffer from mental disease or insanity, to be insane). Some terms have a risqué

quality and serve a humorous function in everyday banter. One example is *vale kailesi* (utterly stupid, mad; literally, “so silly as to eat papaya”), which is doubly funny when used euphemistically for the untranslatably funny and rude saying, *Vale kai ta'e* (So silly as to eat dung).

Dictionary translations, other than serving a modernist ideology of language, do not communicate the fondness that Tupou has for 'Ahiohio. They do, however, give a sense of why Tupou might have chosen the term *fakasesele* rather than an English term or a more “appropriate” biomedical term. Was she actually being more objective by using the Tongan term, as Mahina would argue? *Fakasesele* suggests behavior rather than condition. By saying he is the “most unique *fakasesele*,” Tupou implied a degree of permanence not typically communicated in Tongan. In Tongan, most words that are primarily verbs can also be used as nouns. For example, the term *fefine faito'o* can be translated as woman healer and woman who heals. Both identity and action are communicated. Translating *fakasesele* as a noun implies objectivity, thereby to a degree supporting Mahina's claim. Translating it as a verb implies more subjectivity, in the sense that a behavioral description is likely to be more partial. Is it this partiality that Dr Puloka objects to when he requests that the use of such term be stopped? Yet in the context of our conversation, Tupou's use of the term seemed neither offensive nor pejorative. She genuinely admired the man, despite having been slighted by him on occasion. Was her use of the term *fakasesele* ironic? Perhaps she assumed I knew she liked him; she spoke in the company of friends. Also, depending on context and familiarity, to insult someone jokingly more often than not suggests closeness.

Most people have experienced teasing and discipline in Vava'u in the spectrum from the obviously loving teasing of children to the more ambiguous, often violent, disciplining that Helen Morton has described for Tongatapu (1996). The framing of physical discipline in terms of a spoken ideology of *'ofa*, or love (see Kavaliku 1977), and its experience within extended families, complicates easy conclusions as to its detrimental effects. That said, severe teasing and physical discipline is increasingly being challenged, particularly within the diaspora.

While I cannot generalize for everyone's experience, within many family settings, teasing by using terms such as *mata'i ngeli* (monkey face) and *'uli'uli* (blackie) is experienced as signs of love. Morton's less benign view of the use of insulting terms for Tongatapu (1996), emphasizing the social control element, suggests a difference in the quality of relationships in a Vavauan context and perhaps a greater seriousness in Tongatapu in the



use of language as a referential rather than as socially constitutive practice. I was struck by how use of the term *fakasesele* had the potential to accentuate closeness and familiarity when used in banter in Vava'u, but was regarded as unambiguously insulting in a Tongatapan context. For instance, my fieldnotes describe one occasion when this friendly teasing arose while I was drinking kava at a friend's house in Vava'u:

About halfway through the evening, a drunk man winds up at the house, sits outside for a time, and then comes in and sits down with us. He has a long white scar on his left cheek and is carrying a small axe. People ask me jokingly if there are many such people where I come from. I joke, "Lots," as I think momentarily of parts of London on a Friday night. Everyone laughs. The man sitting next to me says that not only is the guy drunk but he is also *fakasesele*. Several times during the evening he is teasingly referred to as being *fakasesele*. We drink two large buckets of kava, starting at eight in the evening or so, and finish at midnight when all the kava runs out.

Despite being described as *fakasesele*, the man was still included in the proceedings. Admittedly, he was also so inebriated that he was little able to disagree. The term *fakasesele* can be used in a light, humorous way. On several occasions, I heard it used to describe individuals whose behavior was mildly eccentric, but by no means comparable to 'Ahiohio's. Another example, however, illustrates objection to the use of the term.

In December 1999, the annual Miss Vava'u competition took place in the main center, Neiafu. (It had been postponed from May because of the death of the king's brother. In Tonga, mourning for members of the royal family is national and entertainment events may be postponed for up to six months.) A large number of contestants took part in a series of judged events. One of the final tests was to answer a question in front of the eager and easily amused audience. The contestant from Leimatu'a was asked a question about the *māfana* (an emotion of communitarian enthusiasm) of Leimatu'a villagers. People often speak about Leimatu'a as the village in Vava'u where *māfana* is most celebrated. People from Leimatu'a have a reputation for being uniquely eccentric and for doing everything to extremes. The contestant replied passionately:

Ko e kakai 'oku 'ikai ke nau tokanga ki honau kita. Ko e kakai Leimatu'a ko e kakai 'oku mo'ui tau'atāina pea 'oku tala leva ia ko e fakasesele pē vale. 'Oku 'ikai ke mau fakasesele pe vale. 'Oku mau mo'ui fiefia, pea 'oku 'ikai te mau tokanga taafataha pe kia kimautolu, pea 'oku mau tau'atāina (They are people who do not focus on themselves. Leimatu'a people are people who live

freely, yet people call them *fakasesele* or *vale*. We are not *fakasesele* or *vale*. We live happily and we do not focus on ourselves and we are especially free).

Her response seemed an overreaction to what appeared to be an innocently phrased question. Did mentioning the *māfana* of the people of Leimatu'a in that context, by someone patently not from Leimatu'a, imply a subtle jibe? That the contestant felt it necessary to speak so openly, in such a public setting, of the *luma* (ridicule) some people express toward those in Leimatu'a emphasizes the sensitivity to the use of such terms. It is not possible to claim impartiality when one uses terms such as *fakasesele* or *vale* in reference to people in the plural. For the Leimatu'a contestant, the use of *fakasesele* as a general attribute of Leimatu'a was inappropriate. She objected to the implied objectivity; it did not reflect the truth of Leimatu'a existence. For her, perhaps, the use of the term in this context was not a reflection of friendly banter but more representative of a failure to *tauhi vaha'a* on the part of those people still labeling Leimatu'a in these terms. This contrasts with the use of the term in the particular by Tupou in reference to 'Ahiohio, in which case it seemed more of an endearment.

#### STIGMA: NEGOTIABILITY, CONTESTABILITY, AND TEMPORALITY

The objectivity or subjectivity of the term *fakasesele* seems to depend highly on context. What seems most important, as revealed in the protest by the girl from Leimatu'a, is the term's negotiability and contestability. Its very partiality of use allows disagreement. It also does not imply a permanent state. So one can be *fakasesele* (or even "the most unique *fakasesele*") one month or year, but not necessarily the next. The negotiability and impermanence of the term *fakasesele* are mirrored in the many explanations for 'Ahiohio's behavior later in life. (The story of his smoking a page of the Bible is inadequate by itself; besides, that is old news and common knowledge.) In local discussion, particularly in his village, the precipitating factors (in psychiatric terms), because they are much more immediate to people's experience, take precedence over what in 'Ahiohio's case is the predisposing factor. For example, 'Ahiohio's nephew spoke at length about the temporality of his sickness and how the household and other institutions deal with it:

No one else in his extended family is that way. When the town officer was angry with his inappropriate behavior, the police would take him to prison.

After a day he was better. Whenever they put him in prison, his illness goes away. People get angry when he swears but at the same time they understand. He was sick more often when he was younger, then usually every year, often in April. Once he had a little argument with me. I told him to have more respect and stop swearing. He started crying and replied he did not know why he was like that. I told him to go to bed. He did and was fine in the morning. If you can control his sleeping, he doesn't get ill. Lately, he is no longer ill every year in April. Sometimes he has no problems for two years. Now he gets ill at any time, and it is usually very short. Last time he was sick in 1998 in June. Two years before he was sick in September 1996. I know because whenever he is sick, he pays me a visit.

'Ahiohio's nephew's comments are illustrative of wider, generalizable aspects of "mental illness" in Vava'u. Extended family members are much more concerned with dealing with the individual than with theorizing about the original cause. Town officers are often the barometers of acceptance in most villages. It is they who typically request help from the hospital or the prison. As their "anger" thresholds are set quite high—they often are on good terms with most people in the village—most eccentric behavior is tolerated. Most people in Vava'u are tolerant and subscribe to the view that one should not anger people in such states; one should just humor them. On occasion, 'Ahiohio was beaten up or got into fights because his truthfulness was just too insulting. Prison sometimes offers him protection.

When 'Ahiohio said to his nephew that he did not know why he was like that, it implied a lack of insight on his part. One possible reason for his being beaten up is that, in general, people in Vava'u do not deny insight to anybody. A Vavauan notion of personhood is both extremely inclusive and humanist. All peculiar behavior can be spoken about as the result of "faking it" for an ulterior motive. *Fievaleloi* (to desire to be thought ignorant or unskilled [*vale*] when one is not really so) and *poto* (to be clever) were terms I often heard to describe local eccentrics. *Fievaleloi* was also used to describe stroke patients who were unable to interact properly with their family. The previous periodicity of 'Ahiohio's sickness affirms the one commonality in people's talking about eccentrics, that their behavior is *fakataimi* (temporary or periodic). I knew of only one individual who was seriously mentally ill all the time, and he was rarely in public view. The periodicity of eccentric behavior over the April period is most commonly referred to as *laumea 'a e ta'u*. This phrase describes change in color of yam leaves (suggesting harvesting is required), as well as the time

when this occurs, and the yearly manifestation of unusual behavior among those most prone. The association with a regular natural cycle, in contrast with a shark attack, does not imply nemesis, or punishment for past wrongdoing.

April signals the end of the summer in Tonga. The weather becomes drier, cooler, and less humid. Humpback whales typically arrive in May to spend three to four months mating and bearing their young, conceived the previous year. On land, there is a busy social calendar. The annual conference of the Wesleyan church typically occurs at the end of April or beginning of May and is followed by *fakame*, a church celebration focused around plays acted by children. April and May are months filled with many responsibilities aside from the work of harvesting yams. However, the association that people make to explain strange behavior at this time is a natural rather than a social one. And as in Fiji, where a condition called *matikuru* (literally, “low water in the morning”) is associated with tidal changes (Price and Karim 1978), in Tonga there seems to be a lack of elaboration on the association between browning of yam leaves and human behavior. But this lack of elaboration reinforces assertions of *laumea 'a e ta'u* as a powerful interpretative influence in supporting the idea of eccentric behavior as *fakataimi* (temporary or periodic). The story of 'Ahiohio smoking a page of the Bible suggests a definite cause, yet most people see him as ill only when he is in a “manic” state; when at home “depressed” (in psychiatric terms), he is well.

The possibility of many different proximal explanations and an overall sense of periodicity and impermanence are affirmed by a medical pluralism in which conditions are defined in terms of the current healer (McGrath 1999). These all imply a future possibility of different behavior. No eccentric in Vava'u self-identifies as “mentally ill” or learns a role of being “mentally ill” such as might follow from institutionalization in a non-Tongan context. Even the most stigmatizing and absolutist of explanations—nemesis or punishment for past wrongdoing—can be addressed directly, through pleading forgiveness from the minister, and indirectly, through creative explaining on the part of extended family members. Previously unusual behavior is readily forgotten and forgiven as an individual returns to a valued role. The many possible explanations for eccentric behavior, because of *tauhi vaha'a*, are usually non-stigmatizing. Not controlling his sleep, his wife's making him angry, and *laumea 'a e ta'u* were only three of the explanations I heard for 'Ahiohio's behavior. Of the other eccentrics I learned about whose unusual behavior had been far too

enduring to suggest the involvement of *tēvolo*, too much study, too much time alone, the death of a sibling or partner, and being kicked by a horse were all explanations people found eminently preferable to punishment for past wrongdoing. None of these imply the person is to blame. One can imagine only rare occasions, perhaps in a heated argument or when someone gets drunk, when a family would have to hear a stigmatizing explanation implying blame of the family or individual.

#### CONCLUSION: TRUTH AND THE REJECTION OF POSITIVISM

A health officer friend of mine in Vava'u, originally from Tongatapu, felt that all these explanations were excuses for the essential truth: 'Ahiohio had a diagnosable, treatable condition, which the health officer hypothesized was bipolar disorder. Like Tupou, this man was fond of 'Ahiohio, but his diagnosis communicated distance and a concern about the appropriateness of 'Ahiohio's behavior. A psychiatric diagnosis implies a kind of permanence not communicated by the term *fakasesele*. It also suggests (by association with the other source of valued claims of objectivity, the Bible) punishment for past wrongdoing. People avoid having a family member treated by the psychiatrist or by the hospital because of the potential for *luma* (ridicule). Once a person is treated at the hospital, another possible explanation for their behavior enters public circulation. Being treated at the hospital, because of all the social networks that coalesce there and the increased visibility, acts as a social catalyst to broadcast news about the unfortunate person—usually in the worst possible light, because for people to have been brought there, they must have been behaving quite outrageously. Many hospital workers are not from Vava'u and may not share in the implied shame. Whether or not the family believes that the cause is nemesis does not matter; the very fact that some others might believe that and might talk about it affects the social confidence of individuals in the family. The thought that others are potentially hypothesizing about what offense a relative or ancestor may have committed against the Church is enough for family members to keep their relative hidden as long as possible. To return to Taussig, it is the social being of truth rather than the truth itself that is of most concern to family members of the sick person. A biomedical diagnosis can be less easily contested than the term *fakasesele*, for the terms of its designation lie outside the knowledge of most people in Vava'u. It is therefore ironic that Dr Puloka rejects the term *fakasesele*, when its negotiability and partiality of

use makes it less stigmatizing than the current implications of biomedically coined terms. To Dr Puloka's credit, his educational campaign to communicate the bio-psycho-social model of mental illness does not discount the spiritual. However, as long as people imagine the possibility of others attributing punishment for past wrongdoing or having the desire to use it to ridicule, they will still prefer to avoid or delay seeking hospital assistance.

Hau'ofa's comment on truth in Oceania raises the question: Can there be an essential truth to 'Ahiohio's condition? In Vava'u, it seems there cannot, without a denial of the "original wisdom" in Hau'ofa's quote: the effect of truth on relatedness. Positivist explanations deny people's experience of relatedness with those who are said to be "mentally ill" and the intentional individuality attributed to all. The claim to impartiality or objectivity and a concomitant faith in the exclusively referential power of words implies alienation and lack of involvement. It disregards relatedness as principle and experience and thus implies a kind of disengagement from local values as these are to be found in the everyday life of the household, the extended family, the Christian congregation, and, more generally, in life as it is lived in Vava'u as distinct from Tongatapu. The flexibility and negotiability of truth that Hau'ofa wrote about is founded on the experiential truth of relatedness. Versions of truth are evaluated and negotiated on the basis of their effect on relatedness in particular contexts. For this reason, people tend not to have confidence or interest in generalizing arguments. What "mental illness" is, or how it is conceived "culturally"—questions exemplified in Anthony J Marsella and Geoffrey M White's edited volume *Cultural Conceptions of Mental Health and Therapy* (1982)—are difficult to answer in Vava'u. As the response by the Miss Vava'u contestant from Leimatu'a suggested, the implied generalization can only reflect a lack of knowledge and sensitivity. Epidemiologically inclined researchers might question the representativeness of 'Ahiohio's case in making general statements about mental illness in Vava'u. It is, however, epistemologically sensitive and indicative of a Vavauan focus on theorizing in terms of particular cases, of which 'Ahiohio is the most well known. Locating the diversity of knowledge of mental illness in the acts of *tauhi vaha'a* of particular people in relation to particular cases avoids abstracting descriptive terms from the social ramifications of their use. It is key to recognizing that attributions of mental illness can never be impartial in Vavauan terms, nor can they be inconsequential in both medical and local prognoses. Policy makers must take this into consider-

ation if they are to address the social effects and potential stigma resulting from their policies and interventions.

\* \* \*

THIS PAPER IS DEDICATED TO 'AHIOHIO, *its inspiration and subject. Though sadly he died in 2004, people still speak about his escapades as if he were still alive. Most of the ethnographic material presented here is based on my first stay in Vava'u, from 1998 to 2000. Elsewhere I have thanked the many people in Vava'u, Tongatapu, and the United Kingdom, whose love and support made my original research possible (Poltorak 2002). The interdisciplinary framing of this paper follows the considerable feedback, comments, and advice I received during a four-month consultative visit during 2004–2005 to Manila (Philippines), Melbourne (Australia), Auckland and Wellington (New Zealand), Nuku'alofa and Neiafu (Tonga), and Honolulu (Hawai'i). At most of these locations I presented a paper that detailed several case studies and some of the theoretical and epistemological dilemmas of representing mental illness in Vava'u. Mental illness, when framed in biomedical terms, is a topic of great sensitivity in Vava'u. Focusing on the well-known and celebrated individual 'Ahiobio was one way to avoid writing in the particular about other cases that I was asked not to identify or enquire about. It is framed in terms that I hope will encourage interdisciplinary and epistemological dialogue to address an issue of increasing concern in Tonga and of the Tongan diaspora. A further publication will address policy makers and the wider context of psychiatry on Tongatapu more directly. My particular thanks go to Wang Xiangdong (Regional Advisor in Mental Health and Control of Substance Abuse, World Health Organization, Manila), Helen Morton, Elisabeth Wood-Ellem, Steve Francis, Uani Havea, David Chaplow (New Zealand Director of Mental Health), Teresia Teaiwa, Jennifer Shennan, Geoff Bridgman, Cris Shore, 'Okusitino Mahina, Siale Foliaki, Elaine Howard, Siosiane Bloomfield, Siale Akau'ola, Mapa Puloka, Heather Young Leslie, Ty Tengan, Vilsoni Hereniko, Epeli Hau'ofa, and Vincanne Adams. For comments on a draft version of this paper, I am grateful to Christina Toren. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers for extremely useful comments. The UK Economic and Social Research Council funded my original research and a postdoctoral award that allowed me to carry out the consultative visit. Any errors of interpretation or omission are my own.*

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*Abstract*

The people of Vava‘u, Tonga, manage to deal with most incidences of “mental illness” without resorting to institutionalization or overt stigmatization. The terms used to describe unusual behavior, though pejorative in the eyes of psychiatrist Dr Mapa Puloka, are contestable and negotiable. Through the creative use of a multiplicity of explanations, people have influence over the potential stigma to suffering relatives. People’s sensitivity to attributions of “mental illness” is born of Vavauan use of language to *taubi vaha‘a* (evoke and intensify relatedness). This socially constitutive use of language contrasts with the referential language in much of the social science and medical literature that informs mental health policy. Revealing its origin in the experience of *vā* (relatedness) is key to creating an interdisciplinary space to discuss the late presentation of Tongans to mental health services in Tonga and New Zealand. This paper answers the widely recognized need for more qualitative, epistemologically sensitive, and interdisciplinary work on Tongan experience of mental illness through focusing on the particular case of an eccentric in Vava‘u known as ‘Ahiohio. As this man shares remarkable similarities with Manu (Eveli Hau‘ofa’s subversive mouthpiece of anti-absolutism), the responses to and theories of ‘Ahiohio’s behavior enable discussion on the contrast and effects of Vavauan and, more broadly, medical and positivist ideas of truth.

**KEYWORDS:** mental illness, Tonga, indigenous psychiatry, language ideologies, Pacific epistemologies, relatedness, modernity