

## Talanoa he vā māfana: An indigenous Tongan approach to leadership

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### Abstract

Based on a study of Tongan leadership practices in the New Zealand Public Service, a question was asked as to what could be an appropriate approach to exploring leadership from a Tongan perspective. This paper discusses *talanoa he vā māfana* as a concept useful in developing an approach upon which to explore the ideas of leadership that are exercised by Kakai Tonga (Tongan people) across given contexts. Drawing upon Tongan language and culture, *talanoa he vā māfana* is unpacked through three different ways or forms of *talanoa* – *talanoa mo e loto* (talking from the heart and soul), *pō talanoa* (peaceful dialogue), and *talatalanoa* (ongoing dialogue). *Talanoa he vā māfana* extends beyond the existing *talanoa* research approach, enabling conversations that engage with and embrace the loto, heart and soul of the people. It also provides a Tongan perspective on, and new insights into qualities of meaningful leadership within non-indigenous organisations.

**Keywords:** Talanoa, Vā, Māfana, Tongan leadership, New Zealand Public Service

## Introduction

Many of the studies in the prolific literature of leadership in governance and management present a highly universal approach. For example, leadership practices in most government organisations, as in the New Zealand Public Service (NZPS), is based on Max Weber's notion that organisational relationships are controlled by rules and authorities ('t Hart and Uhr, 2008). There is a dearth of knowledge from studies of specific groups for their ideas and wisdom on leadership in the organisation (Den Hartog and Dickson, 2012). This implies an exploration of the specific knowledge of conceptualising, ways of thinking, and practices linked to leadership wisdom. The merit of such specific knowledge raises the significance of grounded contexts, values, beliefs, and cultural ways of being and doing in understanding leadership, together with its conceptual, spiritual, political, economic and social underpinnings. Pacific and Māori scholars highlight the centrality of ancestral knowledge and its significance in decolonising dominant Western frames of conceptualising leadership practices within organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand (Finau et al., 2022; Henry and Wolfram, 2018; Paea, 2009, 2015; Ruwhiu and Elkin, 2016; Sanga, 2005).

*Kakai Tonga* (Tongan people) who work for the NZPS comprise one of such groups among Pacific people in Aotearoa New Zealand who have been approached for their ideas in leadership and relationship formation in the workplace. A Tongan focus of this study is important for maximising the productivity of people, enriching and producing indigenous knowledges of leadership, developing the diversity, the potential and the skills of the Tongan migrants and their contribution to the NZPS (Paea, 2015). Focusing on Tongan people who reside in the diaspora also enables the exploration of these groups, as discussing examples of a leadership approach that can highlight the specificities in the ways diverse Pacific communities in Aotearoa New Zealand operationalise cultural practices and leadership development in *whenua* (land) away from their ancestral homelands in the moana (ocean, Oceania). On another level, such a study can contribute to the ways in which the participation of marginalised groups such as Pacific and Māori peoples in NZPS senior positions can be strengthened and increased.

Based on the lead author's doctoral study of Tongan people's perceptions and experiences of their leadership practices in the NZPS (Paea, 2015), her intention was to develop a meaningful approach to explore leadership from a Tongan worldview. The approach also sought to make sense of the *talamoa* (talk or verbal dialogue and conversation) data, and to unpack the spiritual and cultural meanings that were talked about and articulated by the Tongan leaders. In this collaborative paper, we unpack some of the original thinking by the lead author, drawing also from our collective wisdom and in-depth understanding and analysis of the specific knowledge pertaining to Tongan language and cultural practices, the dictum of the Kingdom of Tonga, and our collective lived experiences. The richness of leadership research and discourse from a Tongan lens, delves into the knowledge of the *loto*, heart and soul of a Tongan and its associated sense-makings. Put simply, the knowledge and application of leadership from a Tongan perspective is inseparable from the wisdoms of the heart and soul. The Tongan terms and concepts are used and written in italics for ease of reference.

The emphasis on *loto* is useful to rethink the way we understand and practice leadership in the public service organisations and sectors. Framing leadership this way challenges the dominant approach that leadership is not about ruling people with codifying resources, such as job descriptions and contracts to control their spirits, actions, and ways of thinking in the organisation (Sinclair, 2007). Instead, leadership in the public service should harness establishing and maintaining good relationships among people through mutual trust and respect that can motivate them to collaborate more towards achieving shared goals (Clark et al., 2014). Creating a positive work environment for workers must involve

looking after, and taking care of people's *loto*, connecting with the heart and soul in a deep spiritual manner that can help them express their deeply-held belief systems and experience in support of social transformation and change. In return, through reciprocal trust, workers provide leaders with the inspiration and results needed. This can be achieved through the process of *tauhi vā māfana*, which requires some deep thinking and analysis from within the *loto*.

Aotearoa New Zealand as a settler-colonial nation continues to carry colonial legacies that privilege dominant Eurocentric practices and systems (MacDonald and Kidman, 2022). Because of this, *Kakai Tonga* have *taui* responsibilities in Aotearoa New Zealand and to Tonga's political history in which it was under Britain's protection before gaining independence in 1970. Through *talanoa*, *Kakai Tonga* also carry and possess certain kinds of connections and relations that shape leadership, power struggle, oppression, and understandings of Indigeneity that are *mana*-enhancing (inspiring, empowering) (Fa'avae et al., 2021). This means that, although *Kakai Tonga* have ancestral ties with Māori as people of the *moana*, being mindful and considerate of colonisation's impact on *tangata whenua* in Aotearoa New Zealand, and its legacies of oppression, can critically inform Tongan framings of leadership centred on *vā māfana* (deep relational connection centred on *ʻofa* – love, generosity, and care).

The *talanoa* centred on *vā māfana* is *loto*-driven and *mana*-enhancing. Our socio-relational positioning as indigenous or indigeneity in relation to Tonga – as Indigenous Tongan – is purposeful in this paper and serves a critical function, that is, to remind us to care for, and consider the implications of, our *moana* connections and histories we share and socio-political spaces we occupy with Māori and other ethnic groups (Fa'avae et al., 2021). Also our creative desire to re-connect meaningfully in Aotearoa New Zealand with Tongan knowledge, concepts, and approaches that are deemed of little value in public service organisations and sectors (Paea, 2015).

Using the concept of *talanoa he vā māfana* as an indigenous Tongan approach for understanding Tongan leadership is an appreciation of depth-work into the *loto*. For *Kakai Tonga*, the *loto* is where the soul as a spiritual space resonates. In Te Reo Māori, *ngakau* is the term for heart, whereas in *lea faka-Tonga* (Tongan language), *ngākau* refers to the gut. The common phrase “trust your gut instinct” implies an emotional yet instinctual connection that resonates in one's body and mind at the same time. *Talanoa he vā māfana* shares and carries similar resonances in the mind-body togetherness.

The approach we take in this paper is to reflect on the possibilities and strengths of *talanoa he vā māfana* in support of Tongan leadership in a Western context. As a concept, *Talanoa he vā māfana* draws upon Tongan language and culture in order to provide deep insights into meanings which cultivate the human spirit of a Tongan person. Unless the challenge is concerned and connected with *Kakai Tonga's loto*, solutions to their problems cannot be fully articulated and resolved. Hence the adage's relevance to our lives, *Koloa ki he ngaahi ta'au 'o e mo'ui 'a e Tonga 'oku fufuu honau loto*, meaning “the answers to the life problems of *Kakai Tonga* are being hidden within their *loto*”. Extending *talanoa he vā māfana* beyond the existing *talanoa* approach and research discourses of engaging through conversations, to engaging with the *loto* is a timely and creative act of innovating Tongan and Pacific people's response to COVID-19, in addition to the challenges of climate crisis.

## Who are the *Kakai Tonga* in New Zealand?

The migration of *Kakai Tonga* from the Kingdom of Tonga to Aotearoa New Zealand is ongoing, and has been taking place for more than fifty years. In the 1960s, *Kakai Tonga* who were fit for work left the Kingdom in response to the call for unskilled labourers, working in the factories for employment and economic reasons (Taumoeofolau, 2015). At present, *Kakai Tonga* are the third largest Pacific group

in Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). Among the Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Kakai Tonga* was the fastest growing Pacific ethnic group between 1986 and 2003. In 2018, there were over eighty thousand people who identified as Tongan, an equivalent of about 1.7% of the total population, while the Pacific peoples make up 8% of the total population of Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2021). Most importantly is the valuable contribution that Pacific peoples, *Kakai Tonga* included, offer to Aotearoa New Zealand society, its social fabric and economy. Even though *Kakai Tonga* are indigenous to their *fonua* (homeland), they carry across and retain their language and cultural practices as ways to lead, inspire, and inform their next generation, who have now settled in the land of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The social construction of *Kakai Tonga* identity is said to be both spiritual and cultural (Manu'atu, 2003; Morton, 1996). The spiritual element of *Kakai Tonga* identity is referred to as *loto'i Tonga* (courageous heart and soul of a Tongan person), and the cultural element is known as *Tangata'i fonua Tonga* (equivalent to Tangatawhenua, Te Reo Māori). The *loto*, heart and soul is considered as the “seat of authority” in a Tongan’s personhood. A person’s *loto* holds the authority and dictates his/her/their minds and actions. *Kakai Tonga ko e kakai 'oku 'i ai honau loto*, which means that “*Kakai Tonga*, have the heart to determine, create change, continue loving, fulfilling responsibilities, and persevering beyond expectations in spite of the circumstances they face.”

The philosophy of *loto* emphasised in this paper is aligned to the deep meaning underpinning *Tonga mo'unga ki he loto* (Tongans’ mountains in the heart), a Tongan proverb which means that a Tongan person’s might and strength lies in one’s heart. Alongside *Mate ma'a Tonga* (to die for Tonga), another Tongan phrase bestowed by Tonga’s first monarch Siaosi Tupou I who united its people across the Tonga archipelago. Both phrases signify and symbolise the values of *loto'i Tonga*. They also emphasise Tongan notions of leadership, sacrifice, and servitude – linked to the unique strengths and capabilities of *Kakai Tonga* and the relevance of spiritual courage which resonates within their *loto'i Tonga*

*Kakai Tonga* connect spiritually with their worlds in thinking, compassion, and action (Paea, 2015). The spiritual connection takes place in the *loto*. While the spiritual relationship is internal, it can be exhibited on their bodies and in their ways of being and doing. These movements, thoughts, behaviours, and rhythms of the *loto* can be enriching and fortuitous as well as unfortunate, wrong and sad. Māhina (2010) and Ka'ili (2017) propose *tā-vā* (time-space) as a theoretical frame for conceptualising notions and constructions of reality. Through *tā-vā*, as described by Māhina (2010) and Ka'ili (2017), spiritual connections within the *vā* space are calibrated and recalibrated by considerations of *tā* markers – that of time, context, and beat, including rhythms. The *loto* houses such rhythmic considerations of spiritual connections.

Suffice to say, *ko e ngaahi maafihunga 'a e loto*, the ways and movements of feelings and sensibilities in the heart and soul are the direction of life. “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (International Bible Society, 1984: 350). This is why Tongan people’s *loto* are very crucial to be looked after and safeguarded. *Loto* is where their spiritual qualities and sources of life are being kept for resilience and guidance. It directs their actions and the way they present themselves to others. The

concept of *loto* also reflects *fakalaumālie* (spirituality) and *māfana* (spiritual quality of the heart), both illuminate the strong spiritual roots of Tongan people.

Tongan spiritual beliefs are drawn from both Tongan traditional culture and from the Tongan Christian heritage. Christianity was not indigenous to Tonga but was brought into the country by foreign missionaries in the 1820s (Ahio, 2007). When King George of the Kingdom of Tonga accepted Christianity, he brought the whole nation under the influence of Christianity. Since then, Christianity has become a major influence of the Tongan culture and it plays a key role in shaping the worldviews and ways of life of the people of Tonga. In other words, the *loto* is central to talking about and understanding of Tongan knowledge, and relationship formation including leadership, being led, and qualities of leading. The *loto* also underpin all other cultural, social, economic, and political relationships.

Indigenous Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand also believe that the qualities and characteristics of leadership can be located within the interrelationships between humanity and spirituality (Henry and Wolfgramm, 2018; Ruwhiu and Elkin, 2016). As beneficiaries of the whenua of Aotearoa New Zealand, and being exposed to Te Reo Māori and understandings of Te Ao Māori and the spirit of Mātauranga Māori, the *loto* for *Kakai Tonga* has become a spiritual vehicle for the sense-making of spiritual reverence, and a locus for the meanings of power, motivation, love, and guidance.

### Explaining key terminologies

From a Tongan lens, *talanoa* is a verb that means to talk, talking, to dialogue, to tell, storying, to converse. As a noun, *talanoa* refers to stories, dialogue, conversation, tales, or simply the talk. The concept *vā* has many forms and meanings. *Vā* is used here to refer to the social space, feelings, attitudes or relationship between and among people. *Vā* is also evident in the term *vaha'angatae*, which literally refers to the space between the *ngatae* trees that were once used to mark the boundaries of people's land allotments. It refers here to relational boundaries among people, which defines relationship by value of *faka'apa'apa'i* (respecting) those social boundaries. *Faka'apa'apa* is shaped by concepts of *'ilo* (knowing your *vā* with others) and *poto* (knowing how to look after those *vā* through *fua fatongia* – fulfilling responsibilities). *Vā lelei* refers to good relationship, *vākovi* is the opposite – bad relationships – while *vātamaki* refers to a relationship that turns sour and can cause *vāmama'o*, keeping a distanced relationship with one another.

*Māfana* is a spiritual quality of the *loto*, heart and soul which moves and uplifts Tongans from within to permit *mālie*, the excitement received by people as an outcome of impactful work. According to Manu'atu (2009: 178) “*māfana* moves Tongan people to act, to change, to collectively pursue a motive”. The term *vā māfana* refers to warm relationship or relationship which is spiritually driven by *'ofa* (love, care, trust, and respect) for one another. When *Kakai Tonga* encounter one another in *talanoa be vā māfana*, their *talanoa* provide a lot of insights into their *loto* embodying their ways of thinking, forming, and practising relationship.

*Mālie* refers to an exciting, uplifting, and inspiring experience of the *loto*. *Mālie* is a “spirit that enlivens the hearts of people and permeates and enriches their whole world – the social, cultural, economic, political, and physical. As a spirit, *mālie* can be experienced in the *loto*, heart” (Manu‘atu, 2016: 17).

### Why talanoa he vā māfana as an approach?

Through *talanoa* in spirit of *vā māfana*, we have been able to see the unseen, reach the unreached, listen to unheard voices, and practice *talanoa* in a way that is culturally inclusive to our *loto*, heart and soul through knowledge, experience and ways of life as *Kakai Tonga*. The term *māfana* embodies the *loto*, heart and soul that satisfies with a return to our indigenous Pacific knowings and becomings (Fa‘avae et al., 2021), a heart-warming return to the spiritual formation of being Tongan. Realities about Tongan leadership are negotiated and experienced in *talanoa he vā māfana*, or when one’s *māfana* is orally shared with one another through *vā lelei* (good relationship). When *māfana* of *‘ofa* (love), *tui ‘Otua* (spiritual faith) and *loto‘i Tonga* (courageous heart and soul of a Tongan person) are in place in the *loto*, it allows *Kakai Tonga* to *fakakaukau lelei* (think wisely), *fefalala‘aki* (trust one another), *fe‘ofa‘aki* (compassionate for one another) and *talanoa lelei* (talk wisely) about themselves in relation to others. Within this space of *vā māfana*, it gives direction to listeners on how to respectfully think about relating back their *māfana* to others through *talanoa* (Paea, 2015). *Kakai Tonga* are thus able to feel and experience the *mālie* (excitement or success) of *talanoa he vā māfana* through their love, trust and respect for others.

The work of Manu‘atu (2003, 2016) and the late Sitiveni Halapua (2000, 2007) have contributed to our understanding of the important connection between *talanoa*, *vā* and *māfana*, enlightening the spiritual meaning behind *talanoa* practices. Manu‘atu (2000), probably the first Tongan who introduced the concept of *māfana* in the academic field and it has been developed as crucial spiritual aspect of effective *talanoa* and *vā* relationships (Fa‘avae, 2021; Manu‘atu, 2009; 2016; Paea, 2015; ). Halapua’s paper ‘*Talanoa – talking from the heart*’ (Halapua, 2007) reveals *talanoa* as a spiritual dialogic approach for unpacking the hidden reality within the *loto* as signified by the word ‘heart’. He argues that people would be happy to *talanoa* from the heart when they know their ideas and contributions are respected, trusted and experienced by people within the *talanoa* context. Anae (2019) and Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) also advocate the central role of empathy and relational ethics in enabling effective and authentic *talanoa*, or what Vaioleti (2006: 21) refers to as “*mo‘oni* (pure, real, authentic)”.

*Talanoa* reveals more *mo‘oni* when it is practiced dynamically and collaboratively as a relational way of life rather than being linear and rigid (Vaioleti, 2006). *Mo‘oni* reflects the notion of *māfana* and *Kakai Tonga* cannot freely share the *mo‘oni* from their *loto* unless they trust the *vā* within the *talanoa* context they are in. *Vā* here refers to synergy of emotions, knowing and experiences that allow researchers and participants to challenge and exercise power respectfully for better understanding of the topic (Vaioleti, 2014). Being in that good *vā* also encourages people to *talanoa* openly about their deeply held issues, so that solutions can be shared and addressed to better reflect the lived realities (Fa‘avae et al., 2016).

Meaning making and knowledge sharing through *talanoa vā* or *talanoa* relationship can provide *Kakai Tonga* and/or Pacific people with the freedom to be involved, and to construct inclusive *vā* with under-represented groups (Fa‘avae et al., 2021; Faleolo, 2021) and with any indigenous ethnicities on

important issues affecting their lives (Vunidilo, 2022). The terms ‘freedom’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘indigenous ethnicities’ represent the concept of *māfana* connecting the *vā* of *Kakai Tonga* and/or Pacific people through the interaction of *talanoa* in their minds, hearts, spirits and actions (Manu‘atu, 2009). Such *talanoa vā* can stay in the minds and hearts for a long time (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012), as people are energised and moved by spirit of *māfana* in their *loto*.

While the recognition of *vā* and *māfana* in the field of *talanoa* research was first highlighted nearly two decades ago, the originality of *talanoa he vā māfana* has yet to be documented, particularly in the context of organisational leadership research (Paea, 2015). Most studies that have highlighted spiritual and ethical aspects of *talanoa* are limited to the purposes, focus, and the context in which they were used. In addition, they are not deeply grounded in explorations of the positive influences of *māfana*, or of the warm sensibilities of the *loto*. Incorporating *talanoa* with *vā māfana* illuminates another way of conceptualising and utilising *talanoa* in the academic field. Significantly, this paper provides a Tongan perspective and new insights into the qualities of meaningful leadership from the *loto* that should be considered and applied by supervisors and managers of *Kakai Tonga* in the NZPS on how best to understand and support their leadership potential in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad.

### **Talanoa he vā māfana, a Tongan framing of understanding leadership**

*Talanoa he vā māfana* takes a relational-spiritual ontology that assumes the existence of multiple experiences through warm relationships that are influenced by the *māfana* that people hold in their *loto*, heart and soul. It is about talking in a spirit that connects the *loto* and reinforces the intimacy that inspires *Kakai Tonga* to contribute, become involved, share responsibilities, perform beyond expectation, and value the collectives over the individuals. This way of being explains the spiritual and cultural identities of *Kakai Tonga*.

Being *loto ma‘u* (firm hearted) in faith and love means that *Kakai Tonga* can stay strong in times of adversity. When the *loto* is clear and firm, people experience happiness and closeness to one another. In a way, *vā lelei* (good relationship) stirs people to relate with each other in love and open ways that can influence one another’s thinking and actions towards mutual accomplishments.

Philosophically, *talanoa he vā māfana* argues that truths about leadership can flow through *vā māfana* (warm relationship) in a given *talanoa* context as people talk about their deeply-held beliefs and experiences of leading, leadership or being led. Arguably, the nature of multiple views and experiences about Tongan leadership can be understood through *talanoa* that can uphold the *mālie* of *vā māfana* from the *loto*. Otherwise, the basis for understanding the truth about Tongan leadership cannot be realised. *Talanoa he vā māfana* maintains a *talanoa* relationship that is friendly, authentic, grounded, and profound to peoples’ inter-subjectivities in which they realise, experience, and share invisible qualities towards achievements. Thus, *talanoa he vā māfana* is used to unpack the leadership realities that Tongans hold within their *loto*.

Drawing on the findings of the lead author’s doctoral study of Tongan people’s perceptions and experiences of their leadership practices in the NZPS (Paea, 2015), this paper discusses *talanoa he vā māfana* as an appropriate concept for developing an approach for which to explore and understand

the ideas of leadership that are understood and practiced by *Kakai Tonga* in a given context. According to the findings, the type of leadership that works well for Tongans and Pacific people towards progression in the NZPS is comprised of more than qualifications, rules, authorities, and political know-how (Paea, 2015; 2009). It is about understanding and recognising the leadership qualities that initiate from the *loto* including specific cultural knowledges that relate to, and connect with, Te Reo Māori me ona Tikanga and Te Tiriti Waitangi as wisdoms required and most valued in today's world. The virtues of the *loto* namely *loto 'ofa* (passion), *loto to'a* (courageous), *loto tōnunga* (faithfulness), *loto kātaki* (patience), and *loto fakamolemole* (forgiveness) are leadership qualities that drive and uplift performance, innovative thinking and actions, productivity, and problem solving.

The findings also argue that *talanoa māfana* (talking about the truth in love) is the most culturally methodology to understand Tongan leadership in a given context (Paea, 2015). This has extended in the concept of *talanoa he vā māfana* which is about caring for the *loto* keeping it with all diligence as the way of ensuring the spirit that warms the relationships among people. This is how the philosophy of *loto* underpinning *talanoa he vā māfana* can be used to explore Tongan leadership in any context.

There are three ways in which *talanoa he vā māfana* can be talked about. The first is called *talanoa mo e loto*, talking from the heart; the second is *pō talanoa*, sharing the truth of leadership in peaceful dialogues; and the third, *talatalanoa*, the on-going dialogues in spirit of *vā māfana*. Understanding the values, beliefs, and ways of *talanoa mo e loto*, *pō talanoa* and *talatalanoa* is paramount to informing a Tongan perspective of leadership. Equally important is the contribution and inclusion of such knowledge and strengths of indigenous leadership in Western organisation such as the NZPS.

### **Talanoa mo e loto**

*Talanoa mo e loto* is translated as talking from the heart and is essentially the basis for establishing *talanoa he vā māfana*. Here, *māfana* is related to the notion of *loto* but it also refers to the complex emotional perspective of *māfana* that encompasses the inter-connection of spirits, emotions, beliefs, knowledge and actions (Manu'atu, 2009). To establish a given *vā māfana*, *talanoa* has to be initiated and shaped as a spiritual practice that encourages people to *talanoa* from their *loto*, listen to their *loto*, and to gain wisdom and intelligence from their *loto*. *Loto* controls what we are, and for *Kakai Tonga* to be willing to engage in any *talanoa he vā māfana*, they must experience peace in their heart. When there is *loto māfana* (warm-hearted or enthusiasm), there is *loto lelei* or *loto fiemalie* (good hearted or generous heart that is willing to help) creating *vā lelei* (good relationship) to *talanoa* about Tongan leadership. Otherwise, *Kakai Tonga* would not feel happy to *talanoa* since their *loto*, heart and soul object, nor would they feel happy or satisfied with the engagement. Conversely, *vā kovi* or *vā tamaki* are constructs that embody one's dissatisfactions within the negotiations of *vā* connections and rhythms that are somewhat misaligned with the *loto's* desire to distribute *vā's* generative strength across *tā* (time, context, beat, rhythm) (Ka'ili, 2017; Mahina, 2010).

When *Kakai Tonga* talk about leadership, it is their *mo'ui* (lives) and *mata'i koloa* that they are talking about. *Mata'i Koloa* is the "invisible qualities which we cannot see and touch but are underlying cultural values and behaviours such as *'ofa* (compassion), *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *feveitokai'aki* (reciprocity), and



*tauhi vaha'a* (caring and maintaining inter personal relations)" (Lātū, 2009: 17). *Mata'i koloa* refers here to *vā māfana* that safeguard in the *loto*, which cannot be easily shared unless *'ofa* (love), as driver of Tongans success (Kavaliku, 1977), is secured within the *loto*, cheering Tongans to *talanoa* about their invisible leadership qualities. Unless Tongans' minds are spiritually connected to their *loto* they would not be happy to freely *talanoa* about their *mata'i koloa*. Almost all Tongans are Christians and people with such a belief system can easily connect to the notion of *talanoa mo e loto* because Christ is spirit and spirit stays in the *loto*.

*Talanoa mo e loto* is about unpacking the *vā* through *femātaaki* (see each other face to face) so people can have a sense of *mabeni* (familiarity) and *fe'iloaki* (greet) to allow and encourage them to *feohi 'i be 'ofa* (interact in love). Unpacking the *vā* is about creating a friendly space for people to meet and share, for strangers to feel belonging, for individuals to honor a culture of togetherness, and for different ages and gender to respectfully care for one another (Fa'avae et al., 2016). Such a space has to be connected to people's *loto māfana* (warm-hearted). When there is *māfana*, there is life, loyalty, high trust, respect, commitment, and relationship. This would make people feel welcome, happy to connect, and willing to offer their contribution.

*Femātaaki* is important for establishing new *vā* and/or reconnecting existing *vā* with people's *loto*. As the first expression of *talanoa mo e loto*, *femātaaki* is a vehicle to get into peoples' *loto māfana* through *fe'iloaki* and telling stories. Tongan identity starts from home, the place where the spirit of the *loto* is nurtured through interactions; it is about embodying *mātu'a* (parents), *tupu'anga* (ancestors), *ha'u mei fe* (place of identity), *Otua* (God), *anga faka-Tonga* (Tongan way), and the country we call Tonga. Once the *loto* is full of *māfana* and *mālie* then Tongans can offer their support.

*Ko 'eku ha'u pe 'o kole ke ke loto lelei pe ka ke tokoni mai* (I have come to ask whether you would be willing to help me). Note the term *loto lelei* is crucial for permitting successful *talanoa mo e loto*. This plea gives Tongans an indication that their *loto māfana* is important to them and to other Tongans. *Femātaaki* is a sign of eliminating doubts and insecurity while building and securing the authenticity of trust and respect. This is more culturally appropriate for gaining Tongans' *loto māfana* to be involved as they are more likely to *talanoa* with people whom they trust and feel comfortable to talk to (Vaiioleti, 2006). *Talanoa mo e loto* is more than just greeting and meeting people. It is about establishing lifelong relationships and commitment to benefit the Tongan community (Paea, 2015). *Talanoa mo e loto* is the basis for nurturing the level of *māfana* that Tongans are anticipated to acquire if they are to be engaged in effective *pō talanoa* and *talatalanoa*.

## **Pō talanoa**

*Pō talanoa* is described as a process of sharing leadership experiences through peaceful dialogue. Realisation and transformation can occur when *vā māfana* (warm relationship) is shared respectfully, peacefully, and spiritually from the *loto*, heart and soul in a given *pō talanoa*. The term *pō* means night, and adding *talanoa* implies the most convenient time for Tongans to *talanoa* about their life, and their *vā māfana* or their leadership *koloa* (invisible qualities of the *loto*). Usually, the quietness and peacefulness of the night gives Tongans ample time and freedom to *talanoa*. However, *pō talanoa* as it is used in this paper is quite different. Rather than waiting for the night to *pō talanoa*, according to the concept of

*talanoa he vā māfana*, it can be done at any time when the Tongan *loto* is at peace and happy to *talanoa* about their leadership *koloa*.

The crux of *pō talanoa* lies in the subjective movement of *vā māfana* during the *talanoa* interactions. People can freely share their deeply held perspectives and belief systems about Tongan leadership as they do trust and enjoy the spiritual movement of *māfana* within the *loto* while listening to other people's stories. This inspires listeners to stay on, learn and participate in the *pō talanoa* until the idea has been dispelled. When Tongans' *māfana* is well nurtured right from *talanoa mo e loto*, and specifically during *pō talanoa*, the process of sharing the truth of leadership through peaceful dialogue can be more authentic and fruitful as it comes from the *loto*. This brings happiness, peace of mind, and long life companionship to Tongans.

*Lotu* (praying) and *manatu melie* (reflection) are considered powerful in driving peaceful dialogues during *pō talanoa*. The opening and closing prayers create the spiritual context for a peaceful *pō talanoa*. This is important for *pō talanoa* that involves diversity, because the differences and conflicts in peoples' *loto* can cause *māfasia* (tension or burden), which may lead to discouraging them from speaking the truth in 'ofa, love. It is easy for Tongans to *pō talanoa* at home because the warmth of 'ofa already existed within that context through blood relations and connections of intergenerational familiarity way before we were born. Blood symbolises the *loto* and when we engage in *pō talanoa* at home, we take ownership through *tamai* (father), *fa'ē* (mother), *kui* (grandparent), and so forth. So we look up to them to revive and save the peace when tensions emerge. Moving outside the familial context, *vā māfana* has to be built, nurtured and maintained as the participant Kafa experienced:

I thank you very much for the prayer (emotional). I thought that's a lovely way to start our discussion (emotional) and I think that the Tongan language is so beautiful when you pray. I'm getting so emotional because I think it reminds us about the things that are important [to us Tongans] (Paea, 2015: 90)

*Lotu mo e loto* (praying from the heart) set the foundation of a peaceful *pō talanoa*. When we get the basic *vā māfana* right spiritually using the language that can touch the *loto*, then everything should be fine.

*Manatu melie* (reflection) enables Tongans to reconnect their *vā māfana* with the past through the different practices they have experienced with their upbringing. While listening, *manatu melie* allows Tongans to connect and reconnect *vā* (relationship) amongst themselves, as they may have had blood relations, but were never able to meet. This gives them a sense of belonging to the *pō talanoa* context knowing their stories are respected and trusted. *Manatu melie* is the first and foremost opportunity for Tongans to *talanoa* about their understanding and experiences of Tongan leadership. The lead author found that most Tongans were emotionally attached to their stories while talking about home and upbringing. This signifies that Tongan leadership starts from home, the place where Tongan identity of the *loto* is first experienced. The expression of tears in Tongan participants' eyes and voices reflect the authenticity and *mālie* (excitement) of *pō talanoa*. Such experience gives direction to listeners on how to appropriately relate back their own stories to others through *pō talanoa* from within the *loto*.

## Talatalanoa

Talatalanoa is translated as an ongoing process of maintaining *vā māfana* (warm relationship) through *talanoa* in good spirit of freely committing to one another's needs, as described by the participant, Fangamea:

If my father did not usually talanoa to us about the importance of education, I don't think I would consider going back to school ... (Paea, 2015: 82)

Clearly, *talatalanoa* is about looking after the familial *loto*, heart of the family, through parental advice as part of nurturing and preparing the children's *loto* so that they value and continue the same journey with future generations. *Ko 'ene tonu pe 'a e loto 'o e Tonga, ko e tonu ia 'ene ngāue kotoape*; Tongans can become successful in anything when they have a willing *loto* – *ma'u honau loto*, and the foundation of their *loto* is affirmed and secured regardless of the adversities that lie ahead. Otherwise, Tongans' achievements will be difficult to attain.

*Talatalanoa* is about letting go of individual's siloed mindsets and attitudes for familial growth that fulfils collective responsibilities. A caring and loving *loto* in the Tongan context refers to someone who values the collective over the individuals. Without *talatalanoa*, we often forget to appreciate the collective formation of the *loto* and our being Tongan, determined by how others' *loto* perceive us and our contribution towards enriching *kāinga* (collective relation). *Talatalanoa* is also about taking care of the community *loto*, heart/soul of the community, through participants' *talanoa koloa* (knowledge sharing), meaningfully imparting this in order to benefit their community and the next generation. The knowledge that they have shared during *talatalanoa* represents their life, whole self, and *loto*.

*Fakabingoa*, the use of Tongan pseudonyms is useful for safeguarding the warm spirit associated with *Kakai Tongas'* *loto* in the long-term. The pseudonyms have spiritual and cultural connections to the stories, also giving them life access to their *talanoa koloa* (knowledge). *Luva* or taking back knowledge to the community involved is a collective responsibility ensuring that Tongans exist to support one another, even when we disagree. This is why having an ongoing *talatalanoa* is important because it all goes back to the *loto* and its capacity to embrace happiness and satisfaction, involved in the commitment to *luva*. As good Tongan citizens, *talatalanoa* enables embodiments of the spirit of togetherness through *fua fatongia* (fulfilling responsibilities) (Lātūkefu, 1980; Thaman, 2004). In the context of *fakafāfā* (family reunions), *fakataba siasi* (church meetings) and *fono* (community meetings), Tongans utilise *talatalanoa* to unfold their pressing concerns, and the challenging issues, needs and topics, relying on the spirit of *vā māfana* (warm relationship) to negotiate collective sense-making and meaning-making. This type of practice is how Tongan communities fulfil collective responsibilities from the *loto*.

In *talatalanoa*, “we hold our participants in our hearts and within our bodies for a long time” (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012: 4), through collaboration and fulfilling collective responsibilities. *Talatalanoa* about Tongan leadership is an ongoing and long-term relationship that can be undertaken today, tomorrow and in the future to enrich *lotolahi* (brave or courageous heart), *loto feinga* (determined heart), and *loto 'ofa* (loving heart) to keep pushing towards achieving the collective needs, dreams, and hopes.

*Talatalanoa* from the *loto* is not just about fulfilling the University's research requirements; it is also about committing to lifelong relationships, transforming lives, and being responsible for the marginalised and often unheard voices. This paper is an example of our *talatalanoa* commitment to enriching Aotearoa New Zealand with the unique leadership capabilities that Tongans bring to the NZPS. Smith (2012: 16) emphasises:

Sharing knowledge is also a long-term commitment. It is much easier for researchers to hand out a report and for organisations to distribute pamphlets than to engage in continuing knowledge-sharing processes. For indigenous researchers, however, this is what is expected of us as we live and move within our various communities.

The idea of long-term commitment and knowledge-sharing reflects the root meaning of *talatalanoa*, stressing that whoever works with and/or for Tongans must commit to the long-term benefit of the community through the invisible qualities of the *loto*. *Talanoa he vā māfana* is a contribution to Tongans across the world in which the perspectives supporting the three approaches can be used as a guide to their leadership objectives and for maximising leadership capabilities.

### **Tongan leadership and talanoa he vā māfana**

Leadership is defined in this paper from a Tongan perspective as *taubi vā māfana* or nurturing warm relationship in which people's thinking and practices are influenced to change in a given context (Paea, 2015). The term *taubi* is usually known as a verb, meaning to nurture, look after or take care of people's *vā*, the social spaces or relationships among people such as knowledge, belief, and feelings. *Vā* is complex, and is different from the relationship between people and their physical environments because *vā* is made up of different interconnected social entities contextualised in the Tongan culture (Ka'ili, 2005; Thaman, 2004). Leadership here refers to the process of nurturing the *loto*, heart and soul through *talanoa*. Performance and achievements of the Tongan people can be realised when their thinking and actions touch their *loto* or when they can connect and relate to one another through the movement of *māfana*, warm sensibilities in the heart and soul. Such an experience can empower and inspire them to keep pushing beyond expectation.

*Kakai Tonga taubi* the *vā māfana* through *talanoa mo e loto*, *pō talanoa* and *talatalanoa*. For instance, parents are *taubi* or protectors of their children's *vā māfana*; teachers are *taubi* or custodians of their students' *vā māfana*, and organisational leaders are *taubi* or motivators of their employees' *vā māfana* and vice-versa. They have the responsibility to nurture warm relationships with their own people at all times through *talanoa mo e loto*, *pō talanoa*, and *talatalanoa* so they can apply the same with others. Through these oral or verbal interactions, the message is expected to touch Tongan people's *loto* so they can experience and witness the *keoloa* (invisible qualities of the *loto*) of leadership that include *fe'ofa'aki* (loving/caring for one another), *feongoongoi* (listening to one another), *fetokoni'aki* (sharing/helping one another), and *feveitokai'aki* (bearing/being humble with one another). Tongans' transformation takes place within these inter-subjectivities of *vā māfana* that do not formally label leadership as merely a position or person, as is typically the case as depicted in many conventional organisational charts.

In the NZPS context, *talanoa he vā māfana* gives direction to people who work with Tongans or who supervise Tongans in the NZPS on how best to understand and support their unique leadership potential. *Talanoa mo e lotu* requires non-Tongan leaders to unpack their *vā* with Tongan leaders by creating a *talanoa* space where they could sit down with them, dialogue and listen well to their voices. Tongans expect their leaders to unpack their *vā* through *femātaaki* (see each other face to face), build a sense of belonging and allow them to interact for their collective benefit and collective good. When Tongans know that their contributions are valued in the organisation, they thrive and more willing to strive towards achievement. Otherwise, they would remain quiet and unwilling to participate. Others tend to misinterpret Tongans' quietness as them being less capable but it means that they are bringing to the organisation different ways of leading that are culturally driven. Such culturally-inspired and culturally grounded competencies and practices are rarely understood or recognised by leaders in the NZPS (Paea, 2015, 2009). In fact, Tongans operate within the guidance of their *lotu* and unless leaders in the NZPS create a leadership context that is culturally and spiritually inclusive for them, they are unlikely to thrive, or reach success and progress well in the organisation (Paea, 2015).

Unpacking *vā māfana* with Tongans in the NZPS has to be done through peaceful dialogue which is why *pō talanoa* is crucial for resilience and sustainable good leadership practices (Paea, 2015, 2009). Once Tongans' *māfana* is secured in the *lotu*, it gives them high trust and respect to love and share their leadership ideas and experiences in any *pō talanoa*, peaceful dialogue with others. A Tongan person's *lotu* is at peace and happy to *pō talanoa* when the spiritual empowerment of *lotu*, prayer and *manatu kei 'api*, remembering home are considered part of the process. While praying and applying home experiences seem difficult to be accepted as normal leadership practices in the organisation, Tongan employees in the NZPS apply those as their leadership guidance and motivation (Paea, 2015). For instance, "When I'm having difficulties at work I give it to God in prayers ... So out of everything else I know it is my prayers and I couldn't do this [work] without my prayers" (Paea, 2015: 142). "The way I fulfilled my duties at the workplace was heavily influenced by my upbringing" (Paea, 2015: 137). These views value the key role of home-based leadership experience in the workplace, a call for leaders to think about *pō talanoa* as another way of understanding Tongans' leadership capabilities in any organisation (Paea, 2015).

For a successful *talanoa he vā māfana*, it has to be practiced continuously through *talatalanoa*. The best of Tongans' leadership capabilities in the NZPS can be understood, realised and supported in an ongoing *talatalanoa*. This means that the process of *tauhi*, nurturing/looking after the people's *lotu* must be done on a regular basis. When there is a long break in the *talatalanoa* process, people get lost, disconnected and demotivated. This would account to people who are responsible for *tauhi* of the *lotu*. Similar to how we feed our body, it has to happen daily. When *vā māfana* is not in place during *talatalanoa*, leaders who work with Tongans are expected to return to *talanoa mo e lotu* and fix the broken *vā* with Tongans for better outcomes. Tongans are not individualistic people and their successes are usually credited to the collective and cultural identities. To recognise Tongans' leadership capabilities in whatever roles and duties they are playing in the NZPS, leaders must conduct regular *talatalanoa* with them (Paea, 2015).

*Taubi* the *vā māfana* acknowledges leadership as a cultural practice of warm relationship, not just any type of relationship, and it must come first in conceptualising and practicing leadership in any context. To create transformative change in the way people think and act, it has to touch the natural and inspirational influences of *loto māfana* (warmhearted) through the three forms of *talanoa* so that change can occur from within. A call is made then, for more spiritual and human-nature relationships in the organisation that recognise interactions formed and maintained through the emergence of love, trust and respect, rather than by the use of rules and regulations to control workers' relationships (Clark et al., 2014; Sinclair, 2007). As Den Hartog and Dickson (2012: 425) suggest, we need a “more indigenous, local, and rich studies, yielding more culture-specific models [of leadership]” and ways to explore such a perspective. *Talanoa he vā māfana* contributes to this from an indigenous Tongan perspective.

### **Talanoa he vā māfana and the authors**

The decision to honour our group collaboration and connections as authors provides evidence as to how *talanoa he vā māfana* inspires our intentionality, deliberately coming together to enact *talanoa he vā māfana* and its potentialities within research undertakings. Defined as a powerhouse research team, the term powerhouse comes from the Rohoruas' familial value of being strong and courageous under God's guidance. We then decided to use it as a guide for the team's goal to publish together.

The Rohoruas are former high school teachers of the Paeas in Tonga. After many years of living separately in different countries, we finally reunited as academics and professionals at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji. In the process of re-connecting our *vā*, we spent a great time sharing our views and experiences through *talanoa māfana*. Our relationships went beyond a teacher-student to a parent-children relationship. Every time we got to *talanoa* about our research we always had to start and end with a prayer. It has moved and energised us to work together towards accomplishing the *mālie* of our shared goals. While talking about our needs and struggles to get our research published, it felt like we had been carrying each other's burdens as a group; and that we had a moral responsibility to help one another in the spirit of *loto māfana* (wholehearted) and not by monetary forces.

During the process of developing the current work, the Paeas and the Rohoruas believed there was a need to include someone who could critique the paper from the depths and richness of *talanoa*, *māfana* and *mālie*. The name that came to mind was Manu'atu who did offer her generous support to the Lead Author during the process of giving back her Ph.D. research findings to participants and the Tongan community in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. The first moment of *fe'iloaki* was incomparable. The sense of belonging into a new *vā* was driven by *mata'ofa* (loving face) and *mata tokanga* (caring face). The spiritual set-up of *vā māfana* within that context was deepened when Manu'atu actually *fofola e fala* (rolled out the mat) in preparation for *talanoa*. Manu'atu's feedback to the Lead Author's request resulted in the major contribution to the Tongan translation of the three approaches underpinning *talanoa he vā māfana*. This eliminated doubts the Lead Author brought with her to the new *talanoa* context.

Before submitting the paper for journal reviews, the Lead Author felt like it was important to be critiqued by a trustworthy scholar for consistency and alignment. Fa'avae offered this support as a

Tongan friend but most importantly as a well respected colleague who has contributed to enriching *talanoa* research within higher education.

The nature of our relationships above demonstrates the core of what *talanoa he vā māfana* has been called to do. To decolonise the way we view and experience the world, activating and implementing *talanoa mo e lotu*, *pō talanoa*, and *talatalanoa* from the *lotu*, prioritises the heart and soul as significant sources of Tongan peoples' sense-making and meaning-making of success. Decolonisation is about caring for the *lotu* by providing an ongoing dialogical support system that is inclusive, considerate, and respectful of diversity and *fonna*, whenua or place-based politics, seeking to honour diverse backgrounds, colonial histories, and socio-relational positions. Locating our *vā māfana* within the ethical guidance of *lotu'i Tonga* (courageous heart and soul of a Tongan person) requires us to *tauhi* (look after) our *vā* (relationship) through *fe'ofa'aki* (loving and caring for one another) and *fetokoni'aki* (sharing and helping one another). This signifies our lived realities as *Kakai Tonga* in the diaspora, allowing us to discover a sense of integrity and fulfillment of who we are as leaders. Sharing knowledge and responsibilities is a long-term commitment that is expected of indigenous researchers as a way of decolonising the world to benefit our community (Smith, 2012). The success and sustainability of being Tongan lies in the intentionality and visibility of *talanoa he vā māfana* that embrace feelings of *mālie* (inspired and uplifted).

## Concluding thoughts

*Talanoa he vā māfana*, an oral expression of nurturing warm relationships, is presented, analysed, and discussed in this paper as an indigenous Tongan way of conceptualising and framing Tongan leadership practices. *Māfana's* powerful role permits effective *talanoa* leadership from people's *lotu*, heart and soul. This emphasises the spiritual formation of *talanoa he vā māfana*, reinforcing that people's transformation can actually happen through the shared oral or verbal expression of knowledge, beliefs, skills, and invisible qualities within the *lotu* between people. Unless *vā māfana* is visible and felt, the spirituality of *talanoa* about Tongan leadership cannot be understood and shared from the *lotu*.

The presence of *vā māfana* can be realised through *talanoa mo e lotu* (talking from the heart and soul); *pō talanoa* (peaceful dialogues); and *talatalanoa* (ongoing dialogues in spirit of *vā māfana*). *Talanoa mo e lotu* enables the spiritual connection of new and existing *vā* to the *lotu* through *femātaaki* (meeting face-to-face) for building high trust and respect. *Pō talanoa* is about sharing truth through peaceful dialogues. *Lotu* (prayer) and *manatu melie* (reflection) shape the authenticity of *pō talanoa* by consolidating spirits together, allowing people to *talanoa* freely and respectfully. *Talatalanoa* aims at maintaining meaningful and long-term *talanoa he vā māfana* capitalising on *fakabingoa* (naming) and *luva* (taking back) of the leadership *koloa* (invisible qualities of the *lotu*) to the researched community. Whilst *femātaaki*, *fakafē'iloaki* (greet), *lotu*, *manatu melie*, *fakabingoa* and *luva* have been emphasised at different stages of the research, it is important to note that all these components must work inseparably from one another at different points of the implementation process, in order to produce better outcomes.

Whilst *talanoa he vā māfana* reflects the importance of phenomenology, narratives, dialogues, story telling and Kaupapa Māori, Vaiioleti (2014) noted that these methodologies are not grounded in the Tongan Way. The emphasis of *talanoa mo e lotu*, *pō talanoa*, and *talatalanoa* contributes new insights into

the literature of *talanoa* research, and to understanding of the Tongans and/or Pacific people's leadership capabilities in Aotearoa New Zealand to facilitate participation in higher positions. *Talanoa he vā māfana* can be applied to non-Tongan contexts through contextualisation, as supported by Hindley and colleagues (2021).

As authors of this work, we feel comfortable inspiring and standing up for our people in this way. Today is the time – not tomorrow – for us to decolonise minds and souls so they can be maintained while operating in a Western context. A better comprehension of Tongans and Pacific people's leadership capabilities in Aotearoa New Zealand involves a strong and continuous commitment by Tongans, Pacific, and the mainstream leaders. *Talanoa he vā māfana* is not a product of any systematic approach upon which the evaluation of Tongans' leadership capabilities should be based. Rather, Tongans' abilities to lead are dynamically and continuously shaped within the context of *talanoa mo e loto*, *pō talanoa* and *talatalanoa* with and from the *loto*, heart and soul.

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**Authors' biographies**

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**Dr Halahingano Tu'akolo Rohorua** is currently Manager Monitoring Evaluation and Learning in the Research and Evaluation Division of the Ministry for Pacific Peoples. Her professional background is in Economics and Mathematics. Prior to joining the New Zealand Public Service in 2020, she was a Senior Pacific Islands Scholar and Academic in education in high schools in Tonga, New Zealand and the Solomon Islands. Her university career spanned more than 25 years of teaching, researching, publishing and holding management positions at the University of Waikato and the University of the South Pacific.

**Dr Fred Rohorua** is from the Solomon Islands. He has more than 30 years of professional experience in leadership and management. His early career was in the field of education having taught in high schools in the Solomon Islands and Tonga. He later taught at the University of the South Pacific and University of Waikato. Over the span of his professional career he had lived and worked in Solomon Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Cook Islands and New Zealand. From 2009 to early 2019, he was a Senior government officer in the Solomon Islands Government, having served in the Ministry of Education, Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Public Service Commission. He now resides with his family in New Zealand.

**Dr David Taufui Mikato Fa'avae** is a Senior Research Fellow at Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland. David has ancestral connections to Ma'ufanga (Tongatapu), Taunga (Vava'u), 'Eua, Niuafo'ou, Pukotala (Ha'apai), and Satalo in Samoa.

**Dr Sione Paea** is a Mathematician at the University of the South Pacific. He teaches undergraduate and postgraduate mathematics courses at USP. Sione is interested in researching nanocrystal growth, coal pyrolysis, information architecture, differential equation application and talanoa application. His home place is Mounga'one Ha'apai, Tonga, where he first learned and experienced mathematics.

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