

'Atamai, fakakaukau and vale: 'mind', 'thinking' and 'mental illness' in Tonga

Abstract: This paper explores the concepts of "mind", "thinking" and "mental illness" from a Tongan perspective. Their old Tongan equivalents are *'atamai*, *fakakaukau* and *vale*. Of specific interest is mental illness. A specific state of mind, mental illness is investigated, firstly, in the conflicting relationships of mind and thinking and, secondly, in the context of the dialectical relationships between traditional forms of disease and illness and medicinal and healing concepts and practices. Their inherently clear spatio-temporal basis gives them a sense of realism. This realistic sense is much more revealing when they are positioned in the context of *ta* and *va*, Tongan for "time" and "space". Ontologically, time and space are the common medium of existence of all things, in a single level of reality. On the epistemological level, time and space are social constructs, deriving from their relative arrangement across cultures. Conflicts inevitably arising from the time-space, form-content transformation of types of human activity, create symmetries and asymmetries in the natural, mental and social realms. By integrating time and space, a general *tā-vā* theory could be developed, so that we can better understand the complexity surrounding nature, mind and society.

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Introduction

I will examine the formal and functional aspects of *'atamai*, *fakakaukau* and *vale*, the Tongan conception of "mind", "thinking" and "mental illness". These are distinct yet related psychological processes. The purpose of this essay will be to examine traditional forms of Tongan disease and illness, as well as a number of ancient Tongan medicinal and healing concepts and practices. These psychological processes, including phenomena relating to disease, illness, medicine and healing, can be better comprehended in the context of time and space, specifically their ontological and epistemological dimensions. In meaningful ways, the spatio-temporality clearly underlying these Tongan phenomena and practices, whether by way of ontology or by means of epistemology, gives them a sense of realism. Ontologically, time and space are an abstraction of the form and content of things commonly existing in one level of reality. As a case in point, the form and content of mind, thinking and mental illness are expressed in terms of the spatio-temporal organisation of their actual substance.

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In ontological terms, time and space are the common medium in which all things are, in a single level of reality, spatio-temporality or four-sided dimensionality. That is, that all things, be they natural, mental or social, take place in time and space. When things are thought to occur outside of time and space, where there are no relations of cause and effect, we have myth, dream and hypnotism. Ontologically, time and space are synonymous with history or reality in general. But, on the epistemological level, time and space are social constructs, as specifically manifested in their relative organisation within and across cultures. Basically, it involves a time-space transformation of form and content of socio-cultural concepts and practices. This kind of spatio-temporal relativity is, for instance, evident in *ta* and *va*, the Tongan concept and practice of "time" and "space", as opposed to their differential arrangement in Western capitalist democratic cultures. However, the integration of time and space can provide us with a realist basis for a new general *tā-vā*, "time-space" theory of mind specifically and of society generally.

'Atamai, fakakaukau and tā-vā: "mind", "thinking" and "time-space"

The Tongan mental concepts *'atamai* and *fakakaukau* can be translated as "mind" and "thinking". The term *'atamai* literally means "self-image"; *'ata* stands for "image" and *mai* "in the direction of", in this case, the knower. So, *'atamai* as a mental activity of "self-imaging" is here the known which is, in turn, independently presented to the knower as objective knowledge. On the other hand, the word *fakakaukau*, literally points to "the act of relating", in this context, the *'ata* "images" which are themselves self-manifesting in the direction of, and autonomously presented to, the knower as real knowledge. It follows that mind, as a complexly constituted electro-chemical,

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spatio-temporal matter or substance, is, by its very own nature, "to know" the images out there in reality.

As a psychological process, mind is, in the form of thinking, engaged in the act of relating the self-manifesting images that are being independently presented to the knowing or waking mind as objective knowledge. Thus, objective knowledge, the real relation between the knower and the known, is derived from the conscious action of the active mind in qualitatively relating these self-projecting images or impressions. Originally, objective knowledge is a quality, dependent on the known. When the psychological process of relating these images becomes rhythmically intensified, we have theory, or, for that matter, criticism, which is a form of abstract thinking. In a parallel manner, the same applies to art, which involves the symmetrical "beating" of space -- as in the spatio-temporal transformation of language, sound and body into poetry, music and dance respectively -- in order to produce harmony and beauty. Given their time-space, historical or actual content, there is unequivocally a realist basis underpinning the Tongan conception of mind and thinking.

As a form of critique, the Tongan realist foundation of mind and thinking assists us in the rooting out of the relativism in the idealist treatment of mind, knowledge and reality or the knower, knowledge and the known. Problematically, the existence of these spatio-temporal mental entities, as well as their historical inter-relationships, is taken to be mind-dependent. Given their realist, time-space underpinnings, mind and thinking are, in themselves, critical; they are, by virtue of this objective capacity, transformative and emancipatory, in that they clear away confusion and ignorance and put in place real understanding and objective knowledge. Equally, concept, idea, paradigm and model are often conflated with mind or treated as mind-dependent, when they are, in actuality, i.e., time and space, simply qualities intrinsic to the so-called self-manifesting images in themselves.

Likewise, from a realist standpoint, awareness and consciousness are, like knowledge, taken to be a relation, in this case, between the knower and the known. In ceasing to be a relation, knowledge converges with either the knower or the known, giving rise to subjective knowledge or objective knowledge, i.e., ignorance or understanding. In like manner, the age-old, unexamined notion of hypothesis has been for so long given a free reign in the field. A kind of guesswork, hypothesis is none other than the conflicting human experience of reality, now the subject of ongoing critical scrutiny. Similarly, methodology, as well as epistemology and pedagogy,

are regarded as a "pointer" to actual situations in reality, the ultimate decider of objective knowledge. For validity and soundness, the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding human experience or hypothesis is tested on reality, and not vice versa. One can, then, say that errors in awareness, consciousness or knowledge, blinded by human emotions and interests or mental defects or both, are a *problem of mind but not of reality*.

Mahaki, puke and tā-vā: "disease", "illness" and "time-space"

The Tongan terms *mahaki* and *puke* stand for "disease" and "illness"; both mental entities are fundamentally spatio-temporal. Following the discussion of mind and thinking, there is undoubtedly an extension of their realist tendencies to *mahaki* and *puke*, the Tongan way of characterising disease and illness. The analysis of these concepts and practices has been made in largely descriptive and ethnographic manners, leaving them locked in symbols without making concrete links to their underlying time-space basis. Worse still, these concepts and practices are transcended above the single level of spatio-temporality to a supernatural order. In doing so, their attribution to a lower or higher level of existence is conducted in dualistic and evolutionary ways, where they are either given a secondary position in the scheme of things or relegated to the ceremonial. Formally abstract, beautiful and functionally beneficial, these concepts and practices are much more spatio-temporal, historical and realistic than what they have been problematically made out to be in ethnographic work focusing solely on symbolism.

The word *mahaki* literally means "emptying". The other two meanings of *mahaki* are death and genitals, probably pointing to the respective "emptying" of life and of sperms and eggs through sex and procreation. As a process of "emptying", *mahaki* exhibits an absence of *langimālie*, an ecology-centred well-being that is inclusive of human beings, i.e., a state of harmony and beauty between people and their environment. The traditional term *langimālie* has been displaced by the word *sai*, meaning "being good", now in common use. This kind of holistic situation, where a multiplicity of opposed physical, mental and social tendencies are symmetrically integrated, coincides with the Tongan collectivist arrangement of time and space, which is "outward", orienting away from self towards others and the environment. By the same token, however, the word *puke*, which literally means "held" or "possessed", a situation where a person, in the absence of being good, is conceived to be held or possessed by an illness. Thus, *mahaki* and *puke*, on the one

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hand, and *langimālie* and *sai*, on the other, as counterbalancing physical, mental and social tendencies, are manifested in terms of the opposition between the state of "emptying" and "possession" and that of "harmony" and "beauty."

The term *malie*, as in *langimālie*, the ancient Tongan collectivist, holistic and human-environment sense of good health, is applied as a common suffix to all forms of social activity. Of all forms of human activity, here are but a few illustrative examples: *faingamālie* "opportunity," *tu'umālie* "wealthy," *kaungamālie* "well-attended," *napangapangamālie* "well-balanced," *lotomālie* "middle point," and *faivamālie* "good work of art." These mutually-inclusive, symbiotic situations are established, specifically when a state of harmony and beauty is reached and maintained in the context of the complementary and opposed relationships between chaos and order, in nature, mind and society. In opposition to *malie* is *tamaki*, as in the case of *fakataamaki* "misfortune," *tu'utāmaki* "poverty," and *kaungatāmaki* "lack of support," to name a few.

Vale and tā-vā: "mental illness" and "time-space"

The terms *mahaki* and *puke* are increasingly interchanged with *vale*, now taken as normal descriptions of "mental illness". Their common application is possibly a later addition to these descriptions. "Mental illness" is now commonly referred to as *mahaki'ia faka'atamai* "disease of the mind" and *puke faka'atamai* "illness of the mind". The more traditional names for "mental illness" are probably *vale* and *sesele*. In some cases, reference is made to "mental illness" as *puke he sesele* or *fakasesele* "illness in being a fool or foolish". The word *sesele* portrays a picture of "thinness," "on-the-surface," "superficiality," and "indirectness," which symbolically accounts for "mental illness" as a mental state of a peculiar spatio-temporal type. The shift in usage from *vale* and *sesele* to *mahaki'ia faka'atamai* and *puke faka'atamai* seems to be justified purely on moralistic grounds, as if the former have negative connotations, without knowing that they are more befitting and objective as descriptions of mental illness than the latter.

The word *vale*, another traditional term for mental illness, is derived from *valevale* "small", e.g., *fanau valevale* "small children". On a different twist, *vale* is also deployed to designate children's sense of curiosity and exploratory behaviour, e.g., *tamaiki vale* "inexperienced, foolishly behaving children." The latter usage of *vale* is extended to cover adults behaving in a *fakataamaikivale* "childish manner" or simply the mentally disordered. There is, then, a Tongan formulation of *vale* "mental illness" as having the small mind of an inexperienced, foolishly behaving child.

The other sense of *vale*, deriving from *vālele* or *vālelea*, clearly shows its spatio-temporal composition. Like *vale*, the terms *vālele* and *vālelea*, literally means "off-running space" and "abruptly twisting space" respectively. In spatio-temporal terms, however, *vale* can be viewed as an altered state of mind, differentiated from an ordered mental condition.

'Āvanga and tā-vā: "acute psychosis" and "time-space"

There is one type of mental disorder called 'āvanga, which is a form of "acute psychosis" common mainly amongst virgin, unmarried girls. Professor 'I Futa Helu first gave the 'āvanga disorder some critical attention, followed by Dr Mapa H. Puloka, Tonga's only psychiatrist working at Vaiola Hospital, who has done some extensive research on the subject. Professor Helu examined 'āvanga from a psychoanalytic, Freudian perspective, treating it as a means of escape from culture to nature, from the rigidity and complexity of society to the relative autonomy and beauty of the serene sandy beaches and inland bushes. There could be two possible meanings of 'āvanga; firstly, it may mean *ava'anga* "place of opening", and, secondly, 'āvavanga, literally meaning "waking and drifting in thinking", i.e., "day-dreaming". The transformation involving both 'āvanga and 'āvavanga is itself a movement in, *ta* and *va*, "time" and "space".

Whichever way it goes, and as a matter of convenience, both interpretations can be combined to provide an explanation of 'āvanga. Conceptualised as the emptying of normality in thinking through some kind of opening in the mind, and, by extension, the waking mind is projected beyond the ordinary and drifting farther away from reality. Over the years, there have been additional labels constructed for labelling mental illness, highlighting it as a strictly spatio-temporal phenomenon. The term *taimi*, the Tongan translation of the English word "time", has come to displace *ta*, its traditional equivalent. Some notable ones include *taimi vave* "faster time", *taimi tuai* "slower time", *masoli* "cracked", *matiti* "chipped" and *siasi* "church[y]". These newly-created versions point to an abnormal, off-beat, cracked or chipped mental state. The last, *siasi*, makes mockery of the so-called ignorant churchgoers believed as suffering from some form of mental disorder.

Tofoto'o, faito'o and tukuto'o: process of healing

The process of *faito'o* "healing" revolves around the concepts of *mahaki*, *puke* and 'āvanga, which separately

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involve "the filling in of the empty," "freeing of the possessed," and "the opening or normalising of the waking mind". The word *faito'o* literally means "to do the removing," and this is done in the form of filling in, freeing and closing or normalising different types of illness. As a practice, *faito'o* is marked by *tofoto'o* literally "to operate and remove" and *tukuto'o* literally "to stop the removing," individually defining the beginning and end of the process of healing. The word *tofoto'o* is a corruption of the *tafato'o* literally "to operate and remove," e.g., *tofotofo'i* and *tafatafa'i*, both meaning "to operate repeatedly." The *me'a'ofa* "gifts" of *kava* roots presented to the *taulafaito'o* "healer," undoubtedly as material payment for the service rendered, are also called *tofoto'o* and *tukuto'o*, marking at the same time the start and finish of *faito'o*, the praxis of eradicating *mahaki* and *puke*.

As a practice, *faito'o* was the function of the *ha'a taula* professional class. Organised under this main professional class were the sub-divisions *ha'a taula'eiki* "class of priests" and *ha'a taulafaito'o* "class of medicinal healers," whose separate but closely related offices sometimes converged for the same economic and political purposes. Whereas the former mediated between the gods and mortals, the latter negotiated between the souls of dead ancestors and the sick. Not only were the *kava* roots, *tofoto'o* and *tukuto'o*, a form of payment enforced by customary prescriptions, they were also appropriated through fear and superstition and at other times via mental coercion and physical force as means of appeasement with the dead. These hereditary functions, which were rigidly-organised and politically-controlled, worked as an excellent tool of social control, with utilitarian outcomes of effectively amassing economic wealth on which these professional classes depended for their livelihood.

Towards a *tā-vā*, "time-space" theory of mind

There is an increasing number of Tongans, in both Tonga and Aotearoa New Zealand, who suffer from what can be referred to as mental illness, ranging mildly from emotional stress through forms of compulsive and suicidal behaviour to clear cases of extreme mental defects or disorders. There is an indication of such a defined group as a mixture of people whose illnesses are either socially-induced or simply caused by inherited genetic, schizophrenia-type defects or both. It is probable that the socially-initiated instances of mental illness are caused by a faster rate of social change, i.e., radical shift or conflicts in the organisation of time and space. The same can be applied to suicide. The sharp increase in mental illness and

suicide may be attributed to an asymmetrically, faster pace of social change. Such a highly accelerated change involves an abrupt shift in the arrangement of time and space.

An outline of a new general *tā-vā*, "time"-space theory of mind could be developed from the substance of the preceding discussions. As general theory, it integrates the temporality and spatiality clearly underpinning the Tongan conception of mind, thinking and mental illness, as well as forms of disease and illness and related medicinal and healing concepts and practices. Two things are bound to emerge from the contradictory organisation of time and space within these psychological entities. As far as the time-space arrangement relating to mind, thinking and mental illness go, it can be a situation of either symmetry or asymmetry, expressed in the form of either understanding or ignorance and either mental order or mental disorder. To gain understanding and mental soundness means constantly dealing with confusion and mental disharmony, where conflicts in mind and thinking are symmetrically transformed from disparity to uniformity. This movement, from disparity to uniformity, in the production of understanding as opposed to ignorance and of mental health against mental illness, is a balanced transformation in time and space. These are a major preoccupation of this new line of theoretical development.

Towards a *tā-vā*, "time-space" theory of society

Similarly, a new general social theory, which incorporates time and space, could be advanced for a better understanding of the mode of operations of society. Such a *tā-vā*, "time-space" theory of society can best account for the dynamics of social complexity. An account of social change in Tonga, for example, can be formulated by way of cultural and historical processes, defined by constantly ordering and transforming forms of human activity through time and space. Social change can be defined as the reconstitution of space in time, making all kinds of transformation spatio-temporal in essence. The spatial formation of different times, on both the general and specific levels, is dependent on the competing attitudes people have towards cultural ordering and historical altering of time and space. The tensions in time and space are most conspicuous in the case of economic development, which is permanently negotiated in the context of the conflicting relationships between traditionalism and modernity, expressed on the level of the irreconcilable relationships between the collective and the individual.

The sharp increase in mental illness and suicide may be attributed to an asymmetrically, faster pace of social change. Such a highly accelerated change involves an abrupt shift in the arrangement of time and space.

There are inherent conflicts arising from the ontological and epistemological dimensions of time and space, not only as the common medium in which all things are, in a single level of reality, but also in their trans-cultural arrangement across cultures. These contradictions occur through the separation of mind from time and space, i.e., of concept from reality or history and the opposition in their cross-cultural organisation. In the case of Tonga, for instance, time is considered less important than space, except when it comes to the performance of prescribed social obligations and artistic and literary creation of harmony and beauty that both time and space become equal in worth. This collectivist sense of time and space is, more often than not, opposed to their individualist arrangement in Western societies, particularly the capitalist democratic cultures, where the individuals are spatially slotted into highly rigid temporal slots. The increasing tensions in the organisation of time and space have the tendency of symmetrically or asymmetrically affecting the psychology of people, with effects that are therapeutic or neurotic in character.

The collectivist-individualist opposition in the relative arrangement of time and space is evident in the settlement of such democratic ideals as justice and human rights in the wider uncompromising relationships between traditionalism and modernity. Neither of the two extremes, collectivism and individualism, is a preferred solution. The most practical of solutions would be to find a middle point where these two forms of social organisation could be merged, with the best elements drawn from both and harmonised in the process. This work in social engineering is also a work in social art, with the expressed aim of permanently dealing with social conflicts by transforming them to social harmony, i.e., from social chaos to social order. These are what the *tā-vā*, "time-space" theory of society should be all about.

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Conclusion

A critical examination of the Tongan view of mind, thinking and mental illness, as well as numerous Tongan medicinal and healing concepts and practices, reveals their inherently spatio-temporal basis. By situating these phenomena and practices in the broader context of the Tongan conception of time and space, we continue to witness with clarity the spatio-temporality underpinning them. As such, it gives the uniquely Tongan conception not only of mind, thinking and mental illness but also of time and space a sense of realism. This realism applies as much to the ontological dimension of time and space as it does to their epistemological component. The organisation of the substance of these Tongan phenomena and

practices is a transformation in time and space, involving the ordering and altering of their form and content. The temporal, formal and transformative organisation of the spatial, practical and substantial content of forms of activity is one of conflict, which dialectically produces symmetries and asymmetries in nature, mind and society. These subject matters constitute the chief concerns of a general time-space theory of mind and of society.

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Corporation: An ingenious device for obtaining
individual profit without individual responsibility.
Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914) American journalist