

# The two heavens of the tufuga: Creative expressions of tufuga Niue

*A commentary by*

*Nuhisifa Seve-Williams & Ioane Aleke Fa'avae*



*Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina*

Authors

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**Nuhisifa Seve-Williams** was born in the village of Avatele, Niue Island but raised in the urban village of Ponsonby in Auckland New Zealand. Nuhi has a strong interest in Pacific cultures and histories and completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees majoring in Social and Cultural Anthropology. She went on to complete a PhD in Sociology of Education at the University of Auckland in 2009. Nuhi continues to reflect and write on the theory that she used in her PhD thesis – Tā-Vā that was created by Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor Ōkunitino Māhina.



**Ioane Aleke Fa'avae** was born in Niue and migrated to New Zealand at a very young age. He hails from the village of Mutalau. Ioane is a very skillful and master of Niue oratory and traditions, a choreographer, composer, educator, actor, author and playwright. As a tufuga and an accomplished heritage artist, his expertise and skills in vagahau Niue and culture are often sourced for various projects both at national and international level. He is a recipient of Creative New Zealand Arts Council 2014 Pacific Heritage Arts Award for his excellent contribution towards New Zealand arts. In recognition of his work in vagahau Niue language and culture at international capacity he received The University of Auckland Blue's Arts and Cultural Award (Culture and Language) - highest accolade attained at university level in 2010 and 2011. It was the first time in the history of the awards, that culture and language was created as a section to honour his achievements. Ioane Aleke Fa'avae is a former broadcaster, journalist, and news reader for New Zealand's largest Pacific media outlet PMN (*Radio 531pi, Niu FM, PMN News*). He was also a tutor of vagahau Niue to adults at Pasifika Education Centre in the past. He has led, choreographed, and composed songs which were showcased at ASB Polyfest, Pasifika Festival and Pacific Arts Festivals. He currently sits on Pacific Dance New Zealand Board and was recently appointed as a Peer Assessor for Creative NZ. Ioane is currently working as an Academic Development Lecturer at Unitec Institute of Technology.

## Peer Reviewers

**Birtha Lisimoni Togahai** is the Director of Education Niue. Birtha is a member of the Niue Language Commission and is a tufuga Lagi-tua-ua in Niue. Birtha has researched and published several books on Niue.

**Zora Feilo** is a well-known tufuga Lagi-tua-taha in New Zealand. She is the president of the Tupumaiaaga Trust and with other tufuga hold workshops to teach young people knowledge and skills in the creative tāoga of Niue. Zora and her daughter are in the forefront of creating and recreating hiapo motifs for block printing.

**Leki Jackson-Bourke** is a multi-disciplinary, multi-award-winning creative/performing artist of Niuean, Tongan, and Samoan descent. Leki has worked freelance in the arts industry for over 10 years and has toured NZ, Australia, USA, Europe, and the Pacific through multiple Pacific Theatre productions.

**Inangaro Vakaafi** was born, educated, and raised in Niue Island. Ina is of Niuean and Cook Island heritage but was predominantly raised with a strong connection to her Niuean culture. Ina went on to work in the broadcasting field as a reporter, journalist, producer, and news anchor with the Broadcasting Corporation of Niue. Ina is a former Niue Youth Council President (NYC) and a former Vice President of Pacific Youth Council. Ina now works as a radio producer for the Pacific Media Network in New Zealand with the hope of contributing to the revitalisation of vagahau Niue and tāoga Niue with tagata Niue in the diaspora.

## Front image caption & credit



**Name:** Ilili Niue

**Description:** This ilili Niue was made by tufuga ilili Niue Hana Tauekipaoo in 2014. The body of the fan is intricately woven young coconut leaf with a wooden handle and coconut sennit fibre lashing interwoven with pandanus leaf. Ilili Niue are only made for special occasions and Hana, at 82 years old, is the only surviving tufuga of ilili Niue and currently resides in Niue.

**Credit:** Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 2015.14.4, 56756.4

**Link:** [https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am\\_humanhistory-object-779937?c=eocrm%3AE22\\_Man-Made\\_Object&k=2015.14.4&ordinal=0](https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-779937?c=eocrm%3AE22_Man-Made_Object&k=2015.14.4&ordinal=0)

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## Western concept and assumptions

In 2018 I (Nuhisifa) visited the Louvre museum in Paris to view the Mona Lisa and to see the Pacific arts collection. Walking in the hallways of the world's most famous art museum towards the Mona Lisa I felt overwhelmed by the wall to wall European paintings and sculptures. It was not hard to find the Mona Lisa as one had to only look for the crowds of people. After some maneuvering (aka pushing and shoving) of people I was able get to the front and view the Mona Lisa up close. Satisfied that I had achieved one of my goals for the day I went in search of the Pacific arts collection. Tucked away in a corner and down in the basement area of the museum I found Art of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas collection. As I slowly made my way around the beautiful Pacific art pieces on display, I noted that there were very few others in this area. In my world this was not an unusual experience. Art like many other western ideas are hierarchical spaces that are contested, subjective and biased. The segregation of the Art of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas collection away from the main hallways of the museum is reflective of societies biases that anything outside European art remains in the realms of primitive art and therefore not worthy of time, space, or consideration. Against this backdrop art as understood and practiced by the west is problematic when used to understand tagata Niue worldviews of art.

## Tagata Niue

Tagata Niue are not a homogeneous group. Rather there are two main groupings – tagata Niue in the diaspora that reside in New Zealand and Australia - the largest group are resident in New Zealand; and tagata Niue that live on the island of Niue. While these groups share some similarities, there are distinct differences between the groups in terms of worldviews. Although a wider discussion of the groups are outside the scope of this paper it is important to recognise that the diaspora tagata Niue in particular the multi-ethnic New Zealand born tagata Niue are likely to understand and view arts from a western perspective. Despite this there is merit in understanding how tagata Niue historically represented their world in the tangible creative expressions that we see today.

## Tufuga Niue

Oral traditions say that all tufuga (knowledge holders and skilled practitioners) of Niue originated from the goddess Hina who lived in Lagi-tua-ua (second heaven) with her children. Hina is an offspring of Huanaki who was one of two tupua (deities) who completed the island of Nukututaha (Niue). The children of Huanaki lived in three places – Fonuagalo (the underworld or deep ocean); Lagi-tua-taha (first heaven where there is dry land and daylight); and the Lagi-tua-ua (second heaven where the sun, moon and the stars reign and there is endless light).

Lagi-tua-ua was believed to be where tagata tufuga lived. It is also known as Motu a Hina (Hina's world) or Aho Hololoa (endless daylight). Hina lived with her children and they were the tufuga of Niue:

- Lata, the tufuga of vaka (canoe) making
- Mele, the tufuga of lalaga and tia (weaving)
- Fakapoloto, the tufuga of hele lapa tifa (cutting of seashells for kaho necklace making)
- Hakumani, the tufuga of helehele and tutu hiapo (cutting and beating hiapo)
- Matilafoafoa, the tufuga of tika making and throwing
- Muitautini, the tufuga of all other creative works like composition of songs and chants

These specialised skills of the tau tufuga (collective of master practitioners) indicate the creative talents present in Niue at that time. These tangible creative expressions were aesthetic as well as utilitarian in nature. Knowledge and skill were required at the various stages of the tāoga (treasure) being created:

1. Design particularly in ensuring functionality of the tāoga
2. Gathering and preparation of the raw materials
3. Aesthetics of the creation.

As an example, hiapo (Niue barkcloth) making required extensive preparation prior to the painting of motifs on the barkcloth. The motifs consisted of geometric patterns like the manu lua (two frigate birds) motif and literal representations of nature like branches of trees. The motifs were symmetrically painted on the barkcloth using natural dyes and tools. Many of the geometric motifs are commonly found in other Pacific nation's tapa or barkcloth, ngatu (Tongan barkcloth) and siapo (Samoan barkcloth).

## Tufuga Niue dichotomies

A tufuga who lives in diaspora is known as a Lagi-tua-taha as opposed to a tufuga who lives in Niue who is a Lagi-tua-ua. In the Niue context a tufuga is someone who has acquired knowledge and skills both in creation and spiritual understandings of a specific practice. Tufuga knowledge and skills were only passed onto selected people. Knowledge and skills were safeguarded as mana (power) was vested in the tufuga.

Lagi-tua-taha tufuga in the diaspora were those that had acquired their skills and knowledge through study or training in western institutions or through their own self-acquisition. Several tufuga in the diaspora are currently active in the revival and maintenance of Niue's creative expressions. Over time and space some skills in the creation of tāoga were not passed on or were lost. For example, hiapo making was slowly eroded due to the introduction of mass-produced fabrics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Substitution of raw materials like barkcloth in the diaspora is common. Hiapo patterns are being recreated and reproduced onto fabric using block printing techniques. Likewise, new forms of creative expression are being created by tufuga that reflect worldviews and life of tagata Niue in the diaspora. Western forms of creative and performance arts are being adapted to the Niue context in New Zealand.

Invariably tensions arise in the tufuga Niue community with some questioning the authenticity of the creation in terms of the use of materials, movement and composition. What has become increasingly evident particularly during Polyfest is that the dance movements of Niue are being influenced by other Pacific hand and hip movements. Moreover, the introduction of contemporary choreographic devices (augmentation, embellishment, and canon) have altered Niue dance vocabulary and choreography. The intent is to enhance the aesthetics presentation of Niue dance. This is in stark contrast to how tufuga choreographed dance historically and currently in Niue.

### Walking backwards into the future

I (Ioane) am a descendant of tufuga Lagi-tua-ua and have mastered the skills to be a tufuga Lagi-tua-taha. My great grandmother Faleni Agimatagi Aleke was a talented tufuga Lagi-tua-ua skilled in weaving. Many years ago, my mother was gifted an ilili (fan) Niue from my great grandmother. I never understood the importance of the gifted tāoga until years later. My mother kept the tāoga and made sure that the ilili Niue came with us when we migrated to New Zealand. In later years I learnt that the ilili (fan) was woven by my great grandmothers' daughter Hana Tauekipaoa who had acquired knowledge of the tufuga ilili Niue (expert with knowledge and skills in the making of Niue fan) from her mother Ahimanogi Agimatagi. Ahimanogi and her eldest sister Fitiola were renowned master tufuga ilili Niue in the village of Mutalau. No other women in the village were as skilled as they were in the tufuga ilili Niue. When they migrated to Aotearoa in the 1960s, both women continued to weave the ilili Niue with materials sent from Niue by Hana. Sadly, there is only one of these ilili Niue that was kept as family tāoga. None of Ahimanogi's daughters mastered the tufuga ilili Niue nor did Fitiola's daughter.

**Image 1:** Ilili Niue and the tufuga – Ahimanogi Agimatagi (left) with her son Kaitau Agimatagi and tufuga fati lologo and older sister Fitiola Fetukutoga (right).



Today my grandaunt Hana at the age of 82 is the only surviving tufuga of ilili Niue who resides on Niue. The Department of Tāoga in Niue has recognised this and commissioned her to make an ilili Niue for the Niue museum collection. Hana has never taught any family members the tufuga ilili Niue and we have never asked her. My grandaunt often reminds us that even if the tufuga is not taught, it will be spiritually acquired and passed on through generations to come. However, we are looking to being proactive and approaching her as a magafaoa (family) to see if she could pass the skill on to someone in the family.

The ilili Niue is seen only during Niue Constitution Celebrations in October annually, as it is only made for special occasions. I was fortunate to acquire one that was woven especially for the Centennial Celebrations of Niue in 2001. A close inspection of this tāoga (treasure) shows intricate weaving details of the tufuga not seen in creations by other tufuga lalaga (Master weaver). Growing up in Niue I was exposed to many tufuga, within the family and village. Tāoga like the dances, oratory, songs, myths, and legends were taught to us at a young age. This was foundational knowledge and an important stepping-stone in becoming a tufuga. The practical aspects of song and composition were taught to us but hidden meanings like those in the following chant was not elaborated on. Meaning, like that of the composer's names have disappeared in the annals of time. What is left is for us to decipher that meaning. The following chant is an example of how composers used moki (metaphorical language) in their compositions.

Through historical documentation of songs and chants we see glimpses of how tagata Niue understood their world and their place within it. For example, the chants to Niue's supreme God Tagaloa are laden with literal and metaphorical references to the power and benevolence of Tagaloa. The colours red and white, sacred sea creatures (shark and turtles) and references to the environment are evident in the chants. The presence of moki in the songs and chants

shows the tau tufuga skillful use of words to convey their veneration of Tagaloa as seen in the abridged chant:

<i>Tagaloa</i>	<i>Tagaloa</i>
<i>He uhila kua lapa tata mai</i>	<i>The lightning is near</i>
<i>Fatiia ho la tavahi mata e</i>	<i>Shattering upon its' tavahi branches</i>
<i>Tagaloa</i>	<i>Tagaloa</i>
<i>Ati kula mo e hina</i>	<i>Red and white</i>
<i>Tagaloa ne alito aki</i>	<i>Tagaloa, our centre</i>
<i>E fonua galo e</i>	<i>In this hidden land</i>
<i>Monū, monū Tagaloa.</i>	<i>Praise, praise Tagaloa</i>

The use of words like uhila (lightning) and the colours kula (red) and hina (white) are representative of power. Veneration of Tagaloa and his powers are apparent in this chant as is his benevolence. In other compositions of tau lologo (songs) moki is used to mask the tau tufuga sexual fantasies or contempt of a person or place.

In the diaspora composition of songs and chants are still being created by tufuga fati lologo (composers). Like that of historical compositions Tagaloa is still present in current compositions as he is symbolic of unity. However, there is a growing trend amongst young tufuga to compose and sing their songs in English or a mixture of Niue words with English translation. The songs represent the worldviews and values of the diaspora. Many of the compositions and accompanying melodies are influenced by English, other Pacific or western popular song tunes. There are very few original song compositions and written chants that are unique to those that were written in the past. The use of moki is still evident in the songs but one can decipher the hidden meaning in the song more easily because the contexts of the songs are more familiar. Newly composed songs and chants of tufuga fati lologo are primarily heard and performed at church events, secondary schools Polyfest and community groups that congregate to weave.

## Tala fakaoti

This commentary reflects our critical perceptions of tagata Niue understandings of arts. We have shared some of our personal experiences in and of 'art' as a consumer (sometimes producer of tāoga); and as a recognised heritage artist and tufuga Lagi-tua-taha to contextualise our position discussed in this paper. There will be variable insights and different experiences of other tagata Niue tufuga that are just as relevant, valid, and contestable as ours. Our hope is that they continue this talanoa and write of their experiences and perceptions as we will continue to critically reflect on the work of the tufuga Niue of the two heavens.

Fakaue lahi to lagi-tua-ua - Kesaia Agimatagi Fisitule magafaoa for allowing the iliili Niue, made by Ahimanogi Agimatagi in 1970's, in New Zealand to be photographed for the purpose of this paper; our peer reviewers noted above and their comments in strengthening this paper



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## Glossary:

Aho Hololoa: Endless daylight  
Fakapoloto: The tufuga of hele lapa tifa  
Fati: To compose songs  
Fonuagalo: The underworld or deep ocean  
Hakumani: The tufuga of helehele and tutu hiapo  
Helehele: To cut  
Hele lapa tifa: Cutting seashells  
Hiapo: Barkcloth  
Hina: Ancient Goddess/white  
Huanaki: One of two tupua who completed the inland of Nukututaha  
Ilili: Fan  
Kahoa: Necklace/garland  
Kula: Red  
Lagi-tua-taha: First heaven, where there is dry land and daylight/name for a tufuga who lives in diaspora  
Lagi-tua-ua: Second heaven, where the sun, moon and the stars reign and there is endless light/ name for a tufuga who lives in Niue  
Lalaga: Weaving  
Lata: The tufuga of vaka making  
Lologo: Song  
Magafaoa: Family  
Mana: Miracle/Power/Authority  
Manu lua: Motif of two frigate birds  
Matilafoafoa: The tufuga of tika making and throwing  
Mele: The tufuga of lalaga and tia  
Moki: Metaphor/hidden  
Muitautini: The tufuga of all other creative works  
Nukututaha: Ancient name of Niue  
Tagata: People/person  
Tāoga: Treasure  
Tagaloa: Niue supreme God/Also known as God of the rainbow  
Tau tufuga: Collective of knowledge holders and practitioners

Tia: A type of weaving

Tufuga fati lologo: Composer

Tufuga: Knowledge holders and skilled practitioners

Tufuga ilili Niue: An expert who has knowledge and skills in the making of Niue fan

Tufuga lalaga: Master weaver

Tutu hiapo: Beating of barkcloth

Tika: Dart

Tupua: Deity

Uhila: Lightning

Vaka: Canoe