7. Walking the Line between *Anga Fakatonga* and *Anga Fakapalangi*¹

My experience researching the life of a Tongan king

Areti Metuamate

In this chapter I discuss the challenges of writing the biography of a fellow Pacific Islander and elaborate on the approach I adopt. The issues I confront are not unique but are variously shared by other contributors. During a visit to Tonga in early 2012 I was told by a Tongan friend that as a person of Pasifika heritage² I did not quite fit the mould of being a *palangi* in Tonga because I share a common connection as a native of Polynesia. At the same time, however, because I was not Tongan I was also not considered an ‘insider’.³ My friend explained that from a Tongan perspective only a Tongan could be an insider and a *palangi* was, by definition, an outsider. However, she suggested that my position was unique because I was neither; I was walking the line between the two. ‘You can do what a Tongan and a *palangi* cannot do,’ she said, ‘but you have to walk that line carefully so people know you are not pretending to be either.’⁴ She was referring to my research on the life of King George Tupou V, the previous king of Tonga.

Reflecting on what my friend said to me and what it means to be neither an insider nor an outsider in Tonga, I concluded that I would adopt the analogy she used. ‘But what’, I asked her, ‘does that actually make me?’ ‘You’re just in the middle,’⁵ she replied. This was a particularly interesting conversation as my friend has no academic background studying the insider/outsider dynamics of societies and was simply explaining what she saw as my position in a language we both understood, English. However, in the context, I felt it was much better coming from someone who simply saw things from the perspective of a local and who says it how she sees it. Whether her view would be widely held by other Tongans is something I am uncertain of, but I warmed to the idea that I was walking the line between being a Tongan insider and a *palangi* outsider. I was, in a sense, an in-betweener.

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¹ *Anga fakatonga*, simply defined, is the Tongan way or Tongan custom, while *anga fakapalangi* is the way of the *palangi* (non-Tongan, usually of European descent).
² Maori, Cook Island and Tahitian.
³ Conversation with the author, 15 July 2012.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
An important question arises when considering my friend’s comment and that is whether it is appropriate for a non-Tongan to write a biography of a Tongan king, a question I have pondered deeply and sought advice on. My considered position is that it is appropriate for a non-Tongan to do this. Even though, as I will discuss later in this chapter, I have no expertise in Tongan language or history and no first-hand experience of living in Tonga, in many ways it is easier for me to undertake this research than it is for a Tongan, especially a commoner.\(^6\) In her book on Queen Salote, Wood-Ellem points out that ‘it would be difficult for a Tongan to write about such a chief, a chief who achieved the sacred mana’\(^7\) because a Tongan would be restricted in so many ways with cultural barriers and protocols that a non-Tongan would not be subject to or expected to adhere to. Most Tongan commoners, for example, would find it difficult to interview a member of the royal family and almost impossible to interview the king because of the many restrictions on questions that could be asked, ways of engaging, what can be recorded, et cetera.

In addition, there are a myriad of sensitive relationships that a Tongan would need to bear in mind when writing a biography of their king, in terms of historical relationships (between the author’s family and the royal family), perceptions of these relationships, and the general view of the Tongan public as to whether the author is of the right rank or status to be writing about Tonga’s most sacred and revered person. While these may also be considerations for me, they are not barriers in the way they could be for a Tongan. My friend acknowledged this point when she said that I ‘can do what a Tongan and a palangi cannot do’. She was referring to my distance from Tonga and yet at the same time my closeness as a fellow Pacific Islander/Polynesian which would facilitate a unique access and perspective in my research journey, as the line I walked might be more permeable as neither outsider nor insider. At the same time, her words ‘but you have to walk that line carefully so people know you are not pretending to be either’ held particular resonance with me. I realised that I would need to be sensitive to the similarities and differences between Tongan and Maori or Cook Islands culture and at the same time have confidence that our close Pacific relationships and shared values would help guide my steps in my research of Tupou V’s life.

This chapter will discuss my research journey and the main considerations I have grappled with while, as my friend put it, ‘walking the line’. Before doing so, I will provide a brief background of my subject, King George Tupou V.

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\(^6\) Commoner, while a word I do not personally favour, is the word Tongans have used to me in interviews to describe a person who is not of royal or noble birth, noble being between royal and commoner status.

\(^7\) E. Wood-Ellem, *Queen Salote of Tonga: The Story of an Era* (Auckland 1999).
The fifth Tongan monarch

According to Tongan history, Tupou V is a direct descendant of the god Tangaloa and a Tongan woman. Tupou V’s birth name was Siaosi (George) Tāufa’āhau Manumataongo Tuku’aho; he was the fifth monarch of the Kingdom of Tonga, the only Polynesian monarchy that still exists today. Since 1875 there have been five kings and one queen, but before that there was a long line of traditional Tongan chiefs known as the Tu’i Kanokupolu. Tupou V was the 23rd Tu’i Kanokupolu. Aged 63 when he died in March 2012, after less than six years as king, Tupou V was not very old compared with his immediate predecessors. His father, King Tāufa’āhau Tupou IV, lived until his late 80s and served 40 years as Tonga’s monarch, seven years less than his own mother, Queen Salote Tupou III, who ruled for almost half a century.

While the official record, the Tongan Line of Succession, shows that Tupou V had no children, it is acknowledged by many in Tonga that he had an illegitimate daughter in 1974. Her recognition, including by some members of Tupou V’s own family, has no legal force and, even if Tupou V had himself publicly acknowledged her as his daughter (which he did not), the law, based on the Tongan constitution of 1875, is very clear that only a child of a legal marriage can succeed to the throne of his or her parent. There are also complex Tongan social dynamics and traditions that would make it very difficult for Tupou V’s daughter to be recognised as the daughter of the king; for example, the tradition that only men can inherit land and that a child’s rank is determined by the rank of one’s mother. (Tupou V’s daughter was not born of two royal/noble families and she lives her life as a commoner.)

Although referred to by western news media as ‘eccentric’ and out of touch, the misunderstood Tupou V was considered by Tongans to be highly educated and sophisticated, speaking several languages and regularly travelling abroad for both public engagements and personal interest. He attended schools in New Zealand and Switzerland, studied at Oxford University and trained at the Royal Military College Sandhurst in England. He was in many senses a ‘man of the world’, one who read a great deal and enjoyed debating matters related to

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8 M. Daly, *Tonga: A New Bibliography* (Honolulu 2009).
9 E. Wood-Ellem, *Queen Salote of Tonga*.
10 Ibid.
11 Tongan Ministry of Information and Communications website, available online at www.mic.gov.to.
12 Tongan Constitution, Part 2, Sec. 32.
13 Conversation with the Hon. Lupepau’u Tuita, 14 December 2012.
15 Conversation with H.M. King Tupou VI, 16 July 2012.
16 Conversation with the author, 15 July 2012.
history, religion and international politics of the day.\textsuperscript{17} Tupou V’s commercial involvements over many years, which included owning one of the main telecommunications companies, being the Chair of the electricity and water boards and owning, or part-owning, other smaller businesses, show a flair for business and entrepreneurship. He had many and varied interests, including producing films, horse riding, cooking, and designing military uniforms, both for himself and the Tongan military.\textsuperscript{18}

At Tupou V’s funeral I could not help but be struck by the massive contradictions in the perceptions of his person. Here was a man who was born and raised to be the king of Tonga but who also spent many years living like a playboy bachelor travelling abroad, seemingly without a care in the world. Yet at the moment of his funeral such individual pursuits and styles seemed irrelevant. The focus was exclusively on the king as king, as the occupant of a divine role and descendant of a long royal lineage.

My research on Tupou V’s life is primarily to inform my PhD thesis at The Australian National University. It will be presented as a narrative of the life of the late king. I am choosing to write a narrative of his life because I am interested in the genre of biography and because the life of one person, particularly a monarch, is a lens through which we might view the broader subject of Tonga, its culture and history.

There is a scarcity of literature available on Tupou V’s life apart from references to him in works written on his father and grandmother, and in some Tongan songs and poems, such as the \textit{Upe o Tāufā‘āhau} composed by his grandmother, Queen Salote.\textsuperscript{19} There is a significant body of information available from the news media, particularly in New Zealand and Australia, but it is rarely factual or correct. As a non-Tongan researcher, the richest sources of information have been people with professional, personal, and familial relationships with the king, or with Tonga. Therefore a large part of my research involves interviewing people ranging from current and former Tongan government officials, academics specialising in Tonga, friends and family of Tupou V, members of the wider Tongan community (both in Tonga and the Tongan diaspora), and pro-democracy activists. I have found that Tongans are very willing to talk about their king and their views on him are always respectful, even if they disagree with behaviours he displayed or decisions he made. Essentially, it is the views, opinions and insights of the Tongan people, along with friends and colleagues of Tupou V that inform my research.

\textsuperscript{17} Conversation with Angus and Jenny Rogers, 20 February 2013.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} E. Wood-Ellem, \textit{Songs and Poems of Queen Salote} (Tonga 2004), 207.
Tonga culture and history

Undertaking research on a foreign country or people entails empathy and immersion in the intricacies of another culture. It is important to reiterate that Tonga and Tongans are not my area of expertise. My own upbringing was in a trilingual, multicultural family where we walked in the worlds of Pakeha, Maori and the Cook Islands. But even with my own Oceanic experience, it was challenging to consider Tongan matters from the cultural lens of a Tongan. At first I made a number of assumptions about similarities between the Cook Islands and Tonga, and Maori culture and Tongan culture. This was partly due to cultural similarities and shared traditional values and practices. Further to this, our languages come from the same Austronesian family of languages; I noticed as a young child that many words in lea fakatonga (the Tongan language) have the same or similar meanings to words we use in te Reo Maori (the Maori language) and Maori Kuki Airani (Cook Islands Maori). Tongans have not expected me to be fluent in their language, and are very forgiving of my lack of knowledge on some matters, but I remain conscious of the need to respectfully demonstrate my ignorance and maintain a culturally sensitive approach to my engagement. For example, when I informally asked a Tongan noble and his wife, ‘What was your relationship with the king?’, the immediate response was, ‘Oh, we cannot answer that. It is impolite for one to talk of how they are related to the king.’ That was an interesting response as my question did not necessarily imply an answer as to how they were related genealogically to the king, but more about their broader social relation to the king (and the king to them). Nevertheless, a careful rephrasing of the question: ‘What was the nature of your interaction and relations with the King?’ has been more compatible with Tongan courtesies and protocols. This is despite the fact that it would be fair to assume that most Tongans would know in detail how their family is related to the king because of the importance Tongans place on knowing one’s genealogy and one’s place in relation to other people in society.

Tupou V compared with other kings/queens and leaders

Tupou V’s father and grandmother appear to be the two people who most influenced his life, especially as a child and young man. Two excellent works have been written about his grandmother Queen Salote’s life. The first is by Margaret Hixon titled Salote, Queen of Paradise and the second by Elizabeth

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20 Conversation with the author, 17 June 2012.
Wood-Ellem titled *Queen Salote of Tonga: The Story of an Era*. Both accounts are foundational to understanding Tupou V, and the authors spent a great deal of time learning about Tonga directly from Tongans and in Tonga.

Fanny Wong Veys’ article on King Tāufa‘ahau Tupou IV’s funeral also brings to light an interesting perspective regarding the different elements that make the Tongan king who he is. Her reference to Tupou IV as a ‘descendant of a mythical ruler, the fourth king in a modern Christian dynasty and as a contemporary ruler who reformed both education and economy’ reinforces the argument made by Wood-Ellem in her work on Queen Salote, that the Tongan monarch is a complex and multifaceted personality, not like any other person in Tonga.

The very question of how Tupou V styled himself is one that I will examine, especially in relation to his dress and the way he spoke. His British/Oxford manner does raise questions around how Tupou V viewed himself; however, it has also been noted that his father and great grandfather, Tupou II, both wore British-looking military uniforms. Hixon suggests that Tupou I, perhaps best demonstrated by the constitution he developed in 1875 that had many adaptations from Britain, was very keen on modelling the Tongan royal tradition on that of Britain. More recently, I have learnt that Tupou V was himself one-sixteenth English, a fact that is not widely known, or at least not widely discussed in Tonga or by Tongans.

**Tonga’s constitutional and political reform**

Tonga has been through some major constitutional and civic reforms in the past few years. A recently published report by Guy Powles has given an excellent analysis of where the reforms are at, and a book by Ian Campbell, *Tonga’s Way to Democracy*, provides a comprehensive discussion about the history and journey Tonga has taken towards democracy. The underlying purpose of the recent reforms was to move Tonga towards democracy and, as Powles implies in the title of his report, *Political Reform Opens the Door*, to make government more accessible and transparent to the people.

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22 E. Wood-Ellem, *Queen Salote of Tonga: The Story of an Era*.
23 M. Hixon, *Salote, Queen of Paradise* (Dunedin 2000).
24 Tupou V’s mother, Queen Halaevalu Mata‘aho, was the daughter of ‘Ahome’e, the son of ‘Amelia, who was the daughter of Ma’ata Ane Blake, who was the daughter of Alexander George Blake and Matelita Fusilangoia. Blake was a British subject who travelled and settled in Tonga.
25 Conversation with Semisi Taumoepeau, 18 February 2013.
26 G. Powles, *Political Reform Opens the Door: the Kingdom of Tonga’s Path to Democracy* (Wellington 2012).
28 From 2006 onwards.
Both Powles and Campbell show that Tupou V, in his short time as king, was largely the power behind the reforms, although it is important to note that there were clear demonstrations by the people that they also wanted change. From a position of having near absolute power over the affairs of government, Tupou V ceded most of the monarch’s executive powers to the Cabinet of Ministers\textsuperscript{29} and this came to fruition when, on 25 November 2010, the people of Tonga had a government elected by them instead of appointed by the king.\textsuperscript{30} The number of elected members of parliament representing the people increased from nine to 17 while the number of elected nobles stayed at nine.\textsuperscript{31} It would be the first time the general public had more seats in parliament than nobles since it was established in 1875.\textsuperscript{32} Even the new prime minister was elected among his peers in parliament rather than appointed by the monarch; the king had made it clear the day before the election that ‘in the future the Sovereign shall act only on the advice of His Prime Minister’.\textsuperscript{33} With this new elected government, Tonga’s political system would change forever and, to Tupou V, 25 November 2010 would be ‘the greatest and most historic day for our Kingdom’.\textsuperscript{34} Certainly for him, it would be a day he would never forget. That was the day he relinquished much of his power to the Tongan people. In his address to the nation, he said:

\begin{quote}
At sunrise on Election Day you will feel the warmth of the sun as well as the gaze of your ancestors from the past and those of countless unborn generations in the future turn towards you. For a few brief moments in our meagre lives we shall occupy the attention of history itself and we will be judged on how we have kept its trust. It will be at this moment that our true character as a nation will show.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Tupou V clearly saw the reforms as a positive move in the history of his kingdom and they will surely be his main legacy.

It would be fair to say that the story of democratisation is one I am still in the early stages of researching, but I intend to gather further insights into Tupou V’s motives behind supporting, or leading, the reform and in understanding what the reforms now mean for the role of the king in Tonga. What are his powers now? And what impact does the king have on the day-to-day life of the ordinary citizen? These, and other questions, continue to be on my research agenda.

\textsuperscript{29} Powles, Political Reform Opens the Door.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} V. Tupou, Address to the Nation on 24 November 2010, Office of the Prime Minister of Tonga, available online at www.pmo.gov.to.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} V. Tupou, Address to the Nation on 24 November 2010.
My preliminary research on biography, and particularly on biography in the Pacific, has precipitated important questions in framing my approach to researching the life of a Tongan king. Neil Gunson in *Telling Pacific Lives* argues that ‘the biographer from outside is often tempted to ignore or dismiss facets of a subject’s life that appear alien or irrelevant to him or her’.36 As mentioned above, my own assumptions around the similarities between my cultural lens and that of Tongans were challenged very early and I realised it would take a great deal of work to acquire even a basic understanding of *anga fakatonga*.

In Gunson’s paper he also observes that ‘kinship provides the basic framework for identifying the individual life’37 and Brij Lal and Vicki Luker argue further, in the preface of the same book, that in the Pacific:

… personhood is defined largely by relations with kin, alive and dead – Western concepts of the individual, together with the consciousness of the self on which ‘biography’ and ‘autobiography’ in important Western senses depend, are alien and, some would argue, inconceivable.38

This has become more and more apparent in my research so far. Not only is the king seen by Tongans as a descendant of so-and-so, and from such-and-such clan, he is also very rarely seen as an individual person but rather through his role and relations. His kinship ties are what people, usually privileged, valued. In the case of Tupou V, I was told people would often see traits of his father and his grandmother in him and that gave them a different perspective of him than if they were to look at him simply as an individual, as a western biographer might presume.39

One of the long-standing debates in the literature on biography comes from the Victorian era and concerns the ethics of biography. I have found reference to two especially useful articles in Ray Monk’s work, both titled ‘The Ethics of Biography’ which, ironically, take opposite views on the matter.40 Margaret Oliphant argues that a biographer ‘has a greater obligation to [preserve] the good reputation of his or her subject than to the truth’,41 whereas Edmund Gosse argues that the responsibility of the biographer is ‘to be as indiscreet as possible.’42 This tension

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37 Ibid.
39 Conversation with ‘Akanesi Palu-Tatafu.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
is one I have reflected on a great deal in my work so far, and a recent debate at
the ANU-hosted symposium on political life writing in the Pacific helped me to
define my own position. During the course of discussion on Chris Chevalier’s
paper (see this volume), one of the scholars in the audience commented that he
believed ‘that a good biographer goes up to the bedroom door [of their subject]
and not beyond’. I found myself disagreeing with this point and, when it came
time for me to present my own paper, I made the following comments:

For public figures in positions who make decisions that impact on the
private lives of others (such as politicians, judges, monarchs et cetera),
there has to be a level of acceptance that their own private lives will
come under scrutiny or review from others as par for the course when
in such a position. If it is right for you to make decisions that affect an
aspect of another person’s life, then that aspect of your own life should
be transparent, even if it is something usually confined to the bedroom.\(^4^3\)

Although I disagree with the idea that a good biographer goes no further than
the bedroom door of their subject, I can see that such an approach may have
merit in certain cases. In the case of my subject, Tupou V, the fact that he had
an illegitimate daughter is highly relevant in the context of Tonga’s hereditary
positions, land titles and the questions around power and influence over other
people. If Tupou V were a private citizen simply going about his business,
having an illegitimate daughter would be much less relevant. His position as
king, a fundamentally public role and, at least before the democratic reforms
were implemented, an immensely influential one in the day-to-day lives of other
Tongans, lessens any claim to the right of privacy on his part. This does not
make the job of his biographer any easier, however, because there will always
be questions around what is relevant in his private life and his public life, and
discerning what information to share and what not requires careful judgment
and consideration.

It would be fair to say that my approach to biography would lie somewhere
between the two extremes outlined in the twin ‘Ethics of Biography’ works
of Oliphant and Gosse.\(^4^4\) Because of personal friendships I have with some of
my subject’s relatives and the people of Tonga, I could not aim to be, as Gosse
would argue, as ‘indiscreet as possible’\(^4^5\) without damaging these relationships
and, potentially, causing more harm than good from the results of my research
(both for myself and my university). I believe that being as indiscreet as possible
is a dangerous way of approaching the writing of another person’s life. On the
other hand, I consider it unethical to do as Oliphant suggests and write a thesis

\(^{43}\) Notes for presentation to ANU Symposium on Political Life Writing in the Pacific, 18 October 2012.
\(^{44}\) Monk, ‘Life without Theory’.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
that paints my subject in a positive light at the expense of confiding information crucial to understanding the truth of his life, or at least one view of that truth. To hide or sugar-coat the truth to ensure one’s biographical subject has a ‘good reputation’ is an approach that undermines academic inquiry and weakens the integrity of the words written.

**People – the heart of my research**

I am in a fortunate position, as I touched on earlier in this chapter, of having personal friendships with members of Tupou V’s family, specifically a number of his nieces and nephews. These friendships hold personal significance but they also bring about both advantages and challenges for my research. Clearly, being able to interview my friends and through them other members of Tupou V’s family, such as the current king, is an extremely valuable and privileged opportunity for my research. I am hugely grateful to them for their help. On the other hand, when people in Tonga become aware of my personal relationships with members of the royal family, there is a risk of distrust regarding my motives and objectivity. They may assume I might not take what they have to say too seriously because they were not as close to Tupou V as the people I already know, or that I will simply write a biography that will please my friends. The challenge is for me to reassure every interviewee that their perspective has value and that anything they share with me enriches my research. I also make an active effort to outline that even though my friendships are important to me, I would never compromise the integrity of my academic work (I often point out the Gosse/Oliphant debate and position myself in the middle) and neither would my PhD supervisors allow me to. This is possibly the biggest challenge I have faced in my research so far.

Another challenge I have faced stems from the fact that few people get to meet a king personally and even fewer get to know one. In the case of Tupou V, his family and close friends knew him well and, although he was well-known internationally, few people actually knew him. As is the nature of the position of a king, uninformed opinions abound; however, this can be useful because it means no shortage of information available from those who have opinions on the king. The challenge here is to balance these with information from people who actually knew him and who have credible material about his life – and that is not always easy. Even though I have friendships with Tupou V’s family members, he had numerous friends across the world and many of them

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46 Ibid.
47 As relayed to me by one of my earlier interlocutors in Tonga, who would prefer to remain unnamed.
48 A perception that has been discussed with my PhD supervisors and others in Tonga.
were not known to his family. Discovering these people and attaining access to them can be difficult, especially when you consider who friends of a king are likely to be. They range from other royals, presidents, governors-general, major businesspeople, celebrities and top lawyers. This is proving to be one of the more interesting elements of my research at the current time – trying to get in touch with people like Sir Michael Hill the jeweller, Lord Glenarthur of Britain and the King of Bhutan! Surprisingly, the social media website Facebook has been very useful for contacting friends of Tupou V. I was shown Tupou V’s Facebook page by some of his close friends (he used an alias) and was told that he was a regular Facebook user just before he died. From that I have been able to go to his Facebook page and see who his personal Facebook ‘friends’ were and make contact accordingly. The responses have been very positive as people are very willing to talk about their friend.

Each of my interlocutors is supporting my research and I have a deep sense of gratitude to them all. Meeting family and friends of Tupou V is both fascinating and valuable, but speaking with the local dairy owner on Tonga’s main strip, or having a chat with a waitress from the restaurant I eat at, unearths equally interesting insights and colourful stories. My research is greatly enriched by the sharing of their perspectives, and it is very apparent to me that without the support of these people I would not be able to undertake research on this doctoral topic. I believe that it simply would not be possible for a non-Tongan to write the life history of the king without having some connection to the people and their culture.

**Conclusion**

In Tonga the king sits at the pinnacle of society. He is the head of state, the highest traditional chief, the most prominent celebrity and a person of divine descent. Writing the life history of such a person, one whom every single member of Tongan society knows of and has a view on, requires the researcher to have a depth and breadth of interviews with people from all sections of society. For any researcher, Tongan or not, that is a huge task.

I started this chapter quoting a comment made to me by a Tongan friend while on a recent visit to Tonga. Her words helped me to position myself as a young scholar thinking about what perspective I bring to academia in the Pacific and how I relate to people I engage with. People, and the relationships I build along the journey, are at the core of my research. It is only through the perspectives of other people that I will get to know my subject. Throughout my research so far I have proudly seen myself as someone walking the line between being an
insider and an outsider. An in-betweener may not be a term that catches on in the academic community but an in-betweener I am. This is the position I see myself in on this journey, researching the life of King George Tupou V.
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