



**Runanga Whakapiki Ake i te Hauora o Aotearoa**  
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***Matapoto pea Lotopoto***

**Exploring intelligence and wisdom from a Tongan perspective  
for enhancing Pacific leadership in health, education and other sectors**

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## ***From the Editorial Team***

*HPF Occasional papers aim to share original health promotion ideas, tools, evidence and other such insights that can contribute to building the capacity and capability of health promoters and health promotion organisations.*

### **Abstract**

As Pacific peoples and communities move to take greater control of the determinants that influence their health and wellbeing, the need for good governance and leadership naturally increases. Certain concepts in indigenous Pacific governance and leadership can contribute to enriching the experience. Two such concepts are *matapoto* and *lotopoto*. This paper explores the Tongan concepts of *matapoto* and *lotopoto*. The aim is to contribute to the development of Pacific leadership in health, education and other sectors.

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On one level, *matapoto* means being witty and shrewd while *lotopoto* means wise. On a deeper plane, *matapoto* means being astute and highly intelligent whereas *lotopoto* means being judicious and wise with a high ethical/spiritual consciousness. When used conjointly, they refer to a state of high, multi-dimensional intelligence, wisdom and consciousness. Unpacking these two concepts and examining their coherent connectedness can contribute to the advancement of Pacific leadership in health and other sectors for the holistic wellbeing of Tongans and other Pasifika peoples, given that cognates with similar meanings also exist in several other Pasifika cultures.

Three morphemes, *mata*, *loto* and *poto*, make up the compound terms of *matapoto* and *lotopoto*. Knowing their basic meanings is one starting point for analysing and understanding their significance and utility. *Mata* has a number of meanings that include eyes, face, representative, surface, point, green and unripe (Schneider, 1977; Rabone, 1845). *Loto* means the mind, the centre, depth, and spirit, (Rabone 1845; Schneider, 1977). *Poto* means wise, discerning, intelligent, and clever (Schneider, 1977; Rabone, 1845).

In order to appreciate their many layers of meanings, the three concepts and some of their multiple meanings are further examined, starting with *poto*. The concept manifests itself in diverse forms. For instance, the Tongan term for the circle is *fuopotopoto* (the shape of *poto*). This use of *poto* means that the shape of the circle represents balance, whole and complete. In other words, *fuopotopoto* is the shape of wisdom because it represents being inclusive, equal and fair to all parties. As a second example, made up of a reduplication of *poto*, the term *fakapotopoto* not only means wise and intelligent but also refers to being frugal, prudent and judicious. From a Tongan community development perspective, *fakapotopoto* is an effective strategic framework for leadership and management (Tu'itahi, 2005).

At the social level, *mata* not only means the eyes or face of human beings but it also refers to the point of interface between two formations such as *matatau*/the vanguard of an army or *matapule*, the representative and orator for a high chief. Additionally, *mata* also refers to

certain natural phenomena such as *mataamatangi*/eye of the wind/storm and *mata'ila'a*/face of the sun. Related to this second meaning is the mathematical definition of *mata* as the point or intersection where two or more lines meet (Mahina, 2010, personal communication). It also implies that it is the centre or focal point of power or energy as in *mata'ila'a*/eye of the sun or *mata'itao*/point of the spear, referring to the point where the sun is hottest, and the spear sharpest. In terms of human relationship, *mata* stands as a symbol for the character of the individual. A person who loves and cares, for instance, is referred to as *tokotaha mata'ofa*/loving face, while an uncaring person is regarded as *mata'ita'e'ofa*/unloving face. A person who cares for the wellbeing of her extended family and community is known as *matakainga*/extended-family caring face. In the field of strategic leadership, a visionary and forward thinking leader is known as *mataloloa*/long distance vision.

Referring to human character, *loto* means heart and inner being. For instance, a person who is courageous is called *lotolahi* or *lototo'a*/brave heart, while a coward is called *lotosi'i*/faint-hearted or *lotofo'i*/vanquished heart. A loving person is referred to as *loto'ofa* whereas a heart full of envy is called *lotokovi*. On an abstract level, the concept of *loto* means interior such as *lotofale*/interior of a house. When reduplicated, it means depth as in *moana loloto*/deep ocean.

Exploring connections between *mata* and *loto* can reveal the systemic coherence among these Tongan concepts on a number of levels and dimensions. At the abstract level *mata*

means outside, exterior or surface whereas *loto* is interior/depth. In human and education terms, *mata* symbolises the mind while *loto* stands for the heart. Additionally, from a spiritual dimension, *mata* symbolises the material whereas *loto* refers to the spiritual. Furthermore, from a Tongan educational perspective, the on-going interaction between *mata*/mind and *loto*/heart is central to the learning and development of a person. Whereas *mata* refers to cognition and knowing, *loto* is the seat of emotion and has a central role in a person's decision-making. For instance, to agree to is to '*loto ki ai.*'

This strongly suggests that decision-making is both a mind and heart process. To motivate a Tongan person to learn or act, the *loto*/heart or spirit is the key. This is best illustrated by the old Tongan maxim of "*Tonga mo'unga ki he loto*"/the mountain of Tonga is the heart. When the Tongan's heart is motivated and moved, it will demonstrate qualities such as *mafana*/warmth, and that person is self-driven to achieve goals at high standards.

Having briefly explored the definitions and interconnectedness of these three morphemes, the meanings of the two concepts of *matapoto* and *lotopoto* are examined next. In practice, a person who is *matapoto* is one who is intelligent and discerning of trends and situations, and capitalises on them. In sports, for instance, a boxer who is *matapoto* is the one who outsmarts his opponent and ultimately wins. Likewise, a student who pro-actively seeks help from teachers and others, and therefore, become academically successful is said to be *matapoto*. Similarly, in a socio-political or economic context, a *matapoto* leader is the one who strategises, takes risks, and, therefore, pro-actively explores possibilities and creates

opportunities. In the hierarchical Tongan language, the more honorific term for *mata*/face is *fofonga*/countenance. A person of chiefly status who is sensible and astute in his ways is referred to as *fofongapoto*. Meanwhile, a person who is not pro-active and, therefore, misses opportunities is called *mata'ivale*/foolish face.

*Lotopoto* literally means wise heart. It refers not only to being intelligent and knowledgeable, but, more importantly, to using intelligence and knowledge under all conditions for the right purpose. Also, it points to a depth of wisdom that has intellectual and spiritual dimensions. Further, it indicates that a person who is *lotopoto* is one that acts wisely for the collective wellbeing rather for his personal gain and individual advancement only.

From a Tongan ethical dimension, if a *matapoto* person is fair and honest in his approach, then being *matapoto* is acceptable. For example, when a leader uses his knowledge and influence to create opportunities for his people, he will earn the trust and respect of his community. However, if his practice is unethical, for instance, by accumulating wealth through corruptive means, that person runs the risk of not being trusted and possible rejection. Such a person is then called *mata'ikākā*/dishonest face. This example further illustrates that there is a complementary relationship between *matapoto*, the knowledge of the mind, and *lotopoto*, the wisdom of the heart. While the mind can be knowledgeable and shrewd, the heart weighs options and decides what may be right and, therefore, what may be done.

As discussed earlier, the concepts of *matapoto* and *lotopoto* can add value to the Tongan process of *ako*/education. In her study of Tongan education, Helu-Thaman (2001) identified three basic educational ideas: *ako*, *'ilo* and *poto*. She elaborates:

*Ako* is used to denote learning as well as searching, and in the early part of last century it was also used to mean teaching. Later when schools were introduced, the term *faiako* (making learning) was used to refer to a school teacher. *Ilo* denotes knowing, knowledge and information and implies learning and/or searching. *Poto* refers to one who is wise or learned and is used to describe a state of being or mind, and implies the use of *ilo* for the benefit of the group and wider society (Helu-Thaman, 2001, p.53).

Through the lenses of *matapoto* and *lotopoto*, it can be suggested that the use of *'ilo*/knowledge for the benefit of society - a hallmark of a being *poto* - is largely an outcome of educating the *loto*/heart rather than the mind only. In other words, central to the notion of Tongan education is a clear and dynamic coherence between teaching the mind, and educating the heart. While *matapoto* focuses on acquiring knowledge and skills, *lotopoto* is more about embedding Tongan core values and principles such as *fe'ofa'aki*/love one another, *fetokoni'aki*/reciprocity, *faitotonu*/integrity, and *fakapotopoto*/wise, prudent and judicious. Therefore, Tongan education is about educating both mind and heart and its purpose is to attain *poto* in both spheres. It implies that knowledge, skills and values are equally important and interconnected; one cannot be learnt without the other.

Taufe'ulungaki (2011) observed that achievement of *poto* is always measured in context in terms of appropriate behaviour and beneficial actions.

Tongan educators maintain that values and principles are an important component of Tongan education (Helu-Thaman, 2001; Manu'atu, 2000; Taufe'ulungaki, 2011). The process and the achievement of learning occur within a context of shared values by people who belong and identify with a particular culture. To understand concepts and their meanings one has to understand the values that underpin them (Helu-Thaman, 2001). Taufe'ulungaki (2011) noted that values determine the ways individuals and groups behave, and if we are to understand any people, group, organisation or nation, we need to look at their values. Acknowledging that differences in cultural values are not mutually exclusive and are only reflecting differing world views and orientations, and are also generalisations to underline the significance of understanding context, she added:

The key values of western societies are often said to relate to individual rights and freedoms; justice in terms of equity and access; protection of privacy; promotion of competition and consumerism; and, scientific-rational thinking. Tongan values, on the other hand, which are similar to the values of other Pacific communities, emphasise the holistic nature of life and the centrality of good relationships; the connectivity of the past, present and future; of people, land, sea, and sky, and the spirituality that bind them together. (Taufe'ulungaki, 2011, p.3)

In addition to highlighting some of the key differences between the values of western societies and those of Tonga, Taufe'ulungaki's commentary also refers to the notion of *fonua*/people and their environment and the spirituality that binds them. A brief examination of *fonua* can provide more understanding of *matapoto* and *lotopoto*. Simply put, *fonua* means people and the land. More deeply, it is a socio-ecological philosophy that espouses and reflects the natural reality of humanity being one and in unity with the rest of the ecology.

This inter-connected and interdependent relationship is evident in the material and spiritual dimensions of Tongan life. For instance, in the human life cycle, four significant abodes of the human being are all referred to as *fonua*. The baby is nurtured in the *fonua*/womb of the mother. Meanwhile, the mother is nourished by the physical *fonua*/environment. Similarly, the baby is embraced and sustained by the physical *fonua* once it is born into it. The ceremony of burying the umbilical cord of the baby into the land symbolically, physically and spiritually ties the human being with the *fonua*. When a human being passes on from this natural *fonua*, her physical remains is returned to her *fonualoto*/land within the land, or grave, while her *laumalie*/spirit continues its journey to the *fonua ta'engata*/eternal *fonua* or life hereafter (Tu'itahi, 2005).

A Tongan verse (hymn) sums this relationship aptly:

*Mālō he 'omi ha fonua fe'unga mo e kakai/ Bestowed with suitable land, we are blessed*

*Ma'ungofua he me'a kotoa ke inu pe mo kai/All bountiful for our sustenance*

*Ko e kelekele mahu ē pea ka hala ia/Fertile land there is, but if barren*

*‘E lau ‘e hai homau koloa ‘e ma’u mei tahi na/Countless are our blessings from the sea*

(Tohi Himi Uesiliana fika 657, p. 512; English translation by the author)

In essence, Tongans, other Pacific peoples, and other indigenous peoples for that matter, have evolved their history of existence and their knowledge systems largely from the symbiotic relationship with Mother Nature (Mahina, 1992; Tu’itahi, 2009). Further, they have evolved a value system that underpins their harmonious and sustainable relationship with the ecology and with each other as fellow human beings. Through stories, song and dance, and other such cultural activities, Tongans preserve their history which is woven with the ecology. Exploring *fonua/whenua* from a health perspective, Maori academic, Mason Durie (2004), notes this symbiotic relationship. He writes:

All indigenous peoples have a tradition of unity with the environment and the tradition is reflected in song, custom, subsistence, approaches to healing, birthing, and the rituals associated with death. The relationship between people and the environment therefore forms an important foundation for the organisation of indigenous knowledge, the categorisation of life experiences, and the shaping of attitudes and patterns of thinking. Because human identity is regarded as an extension of the environment, there is an element of inseparability between people and the natural world. The individual is a part of all creation and the idea that the world or creation exists for the purpose of human domination and exploitation is absent from indigenous world-views (Durie, 2004, p. 4).

As Durie observes above, much of indigenous knowledge is derived from the relationship of indigenous peoples and their environment. The concepts of *matapoto*, *lotopoto* and Tongan *ako*/education and learning, as briefly discussed in this paper, are examples of that process. Mahina (1992) points out that *tala-e-fonua*/oral history, once regarded as mere pre-historical myths and legends, is, in fact, history. But because it is coded in Tongan cultural devices such as *heliaki*/symbolism, understanding *tala-e-fonua* can be challenging. Tu'itahi (2005) maintains that in addition to being Tongan history, *tala-e-fonua*, is also the Tongan knowledge system.

This paper has made an initial attempt to explore the concepts of *matapoto* and *lotopoto* and to discuss how it might add value and relevance to the leadership and education of Tongans and other Pacific peoples. It identified the dynamic coherence between training the mind and educating the heart and highlighted the importance of values as an integral part of knowledge and learning. Furthermore, it located Tongan education, its knowledge and values in its appropriate place of *tala-e-fonua*, the Tongan indigenous knowledge system.

As a result of the initial exploration in this paper, several areas identified need to be further researched, including a more systematic examination of *tala-e-fonua*/Tongan indigenous knowledge system and its many domains, not only for its historical significance but, more importantly for its potential to provide future strategic direction in a global context where western knowledge is largely dominant at the expense of other forms of knowledge.

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