

VEISINIA TONGA

A story of repatriation

The English word 'taboo' comes from the Tongan word 'tapu'. It is believed that Captain James Cook adopted it after his visits to Tonga in the 1770s. The true meaning of the word, unfortunately, is lost in the translation.

In English, it has come to mean something forbidden. However, in Tongan, it means more than just 'forbidden'. It refers to someone, something or some place that is sacred or revered. It is something to be treated with veneration and respect, with prescribed cultural protocols for how we interact with it. These are taught to us by our elders.

Our funeral rites have various tapu that we observe. Even though modern Tongan funeral rites are a mix of ancient traditions and Christian funerary protocols, the core of our traditional funeral rites are still observed and practised. The roles that we play in the funeral are predetermined by how we are related to the deceased. It is a democratising tradition, and it is not unusual to see the neurosurgeon cousin standing by the fire cooking and cleaning while the janitor cousin sits as a guest of honour. We know what our expected role is because it is predetermined by where we stand on the family tree of the deceased.

The body of the deceased is rendered tapu, and there are strict protocols for how we interact with it.

The 'Ulu motu'a (eldest male from the deceased's paternal line) of the clan acts as the funeral director. He ensures that everything goes to plan and is responsible for notifying the wider kainga (extended family), receiving tributes and feeding everyone attending the funeral. He is the talking chief for the clan during the ceremonial parts of the funeral. He is helped by the liongi — those in the family who are lower-ranked to the deceased. They provide and cook the food, clean and do all the menial tasks. They oversee what happens outside. The maternal clan are responsible for what happens inside. They dress and look after the deceased and are responsible for

the koloa (cultural tributes) that are presented by the various clans. These tributes are reciprocated by a return of koloa. The funeral often lasts for several days and is followed by a longer period of mourning, during which a number of tapu are observed.

Funerals for Tongan royalty add many extra layers of tapu and ritual. From the chiefly Ha'a Tufunga clan, royal undertakers are selected. They become the Nima Tapu, the Sacred Hands, who are the only ones allowed to touch the sacred body of the deceased king. This responsibility has been carried by this clan for generations. They prepare the royal body for burial, wrapping it in oil and tapa to encase the king's mana and protect the living.



Figure 1: Royal Tombs at Mala'e Kula, Nuku'alofa, Tonga. The men dressed in black are the Nima Tapu, the hereditary custodians responsible for the care and handling of the Tongan monarch in death. Mala'e Kula is the royal burial ground of the kings and queens of Tonga. Pacific Docs; photographer: Kalo Foleti; copyright Kalo Foleti.

Once they fulfil their duties, their hands become tapu because of contact with the king. For a prescribed period, they are forbidden to use their hands and are fed and cared for by others until the tapu is lifted. In the past, the role carried an even heavier burden. Because their hands had come into contact with the divine ruler, the Nima Tapu could not return to ordinary life. Some were killed and buried alongside the kings they prepared, while others had their hands chopped off.

We observe the same tapu towards the remains of our ancestors as we do towards our living royals.

As a young person in Tonga, I knew that in the heart of Nuku'alofa, the modern royal tombs stood in a park called Mala'e Kula, which translates to the Red Cemetery. I remember that when you walked past, talking loudly and making noise was kept to a minimum. It was also tapu to eat or laugh near the park, and both young and old observed this practice.

No-one ventures into the park because it is only open when a new royal is interred, yet the tapu is still observed by everyone walking past. Conversations end and a respectful silence falls whenever you pass the park. There is no-one policing this rule. We are simply told about it when we are young, and we observe the tapu, partly out of respect and partly out of fear of reprisal from an angry royal spirit. On the edges of the park there are several schools, and it is almost eerie how silent the students become when they walk past. All conversation stops, and it only begins again once they have passed beyond the park.

It is within this understanding of tapu that this story sits.

In the late 1980s, my aunt, an anthropologist, was working with the Pacific Collection at the Bishop Museum in Hawai'i. It was during this time that she became aware that some of the royal remains of Tonga's ancient rulers were held in the museum's collection. I can only imagine how she must have felt.

These royal remains were brought to Hawai'i by American archaeologists in the early 1900s. They had been taken from the ancient terraced tombs in Mu'a, the location of the ancient capital and the royal fortress on Tongatapu, the main island of Tonga.

Among the remains held at the Bishop Museum, there was an unusual royal figure: a tamapua (doll), who according to legend had once been appointed king. The ancient Tu'i Tonga line were considered divine rulers, and it was customary that on their deathbed, a Tu'i Tonga would appoint the next ruler. As the story is told, a young Tu'i Tonga, dying from illness, appointed this tamapua as king, and his people honoured his final wish. The tamapua was treated as royalty and interred in the royal terraced tombs in Mu'a.

Buried within these tombs, alongside the ancient kings, were a number of Nima Tapu — the same lineage of royal undertakers who still hold this responsibility today.

You can imagine my aunt's anguish and distress when she realised that the place where she worked housed remains that carried the highest level of tapu in our culture.

In 1990, an opportunity arose. President George H. W. Bush signed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act into law, requiring federal agencies and museums that receive federal funding to return Native American cultural items to their rightful communities. These items include human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural significance. The law also created processes for repatriation and imposed penalties on institutions that failed to comply. It was primarily designed to address the long history of Native American ancestral remains and sacred objects being taken and stored in museums and research institutions, and it made it a criminal offence to traffic in Native American human remains or cultural items obtained in violation of the act.

For my aunt, the passage of this law opened a door. It created a pathway for the return of ancestral remains and gave her hope that the sacred remains of Tonga's ancient rulers might one day return home. Even though this legislation was primarily aimed at Native Americans and other Indigenous peoples who had been colonised by the United States, she saw within it an opportunity. She believed it might provide a pathway to return the remains of our ancient kings to their original resting place in Tonga.

She approached her supervisors at the Bishop Museum and proposed that Tonga's royal remains be repatriated. To her surprise, they agreed. She then arranged

contact with Princess Pilolevu Tuita, the Princess Royal of Tonga, and several cultural leaders, and arrangements were made for a delegation to travel to Hawai'i so they could accompany the royal remains home.

But the responsibility weighed heavily on her. She agonised over the protocols, how the remains should be handled and even how they should be packed for the journey back to Tonga.

During this time, she began to have a series of vivid dreams. In these dreams, she believed the ancestors were coming to teach her what needed to be done. The dreams always ended the same way. A large tapa cloth would be thrown over her, covering her completely, and she would wake suddenly in her bed, gasping for breath as she struggled to push her way out from beneath the heavy cloth.

She believed these dreams were guiding her. Through them, she began to remember the rituals that needed to be performed before the remains could be returned home.

Following these instructions, she arranged for members of the Nima Tapu to prepare the remains properly. They would takai lolo (anoint the remains with sacred oil) and then carefully wrap each one individually in tapa cloth, as was the ancient custom. The wrapped remains would then be placed into a large wooden crate for the flight back to their original resting place.

On the final night before their journey home, my aunt and the delegation from Tonga gathered to prepare the remains for travel. They packed the crate with great care and respect. First, a tapa cloth was laid at the bottom. Then the bundles containing the remains were gently placed on top. When everything had been arranged, another tapa cloth was laid over the remains to cover them.

But there was a problem. The final tapa cloth was too large. It overfilled the crate, making it impossible to close the lid.

It was late at night, and everyone was exhausted from the emotional and physical work of preparing the ancestors for their journey home. After several attempts to adjust the cloth, they decided to leave the matter until morning. They carefully placed the tapa cloth back over the remains and left the crate open. Then one by one they respectfully backed out of the room, leaving the ancestors in peace for the night.

The next morning, when they returned, they found the container closed.

My aunt asked the museum staff what had happened to the tapa cloth that had prevented the crate from being shut the night before. The staff told her it was still inside and that it now fit perfectly.

She and the delegation were moved to tears.

They knew that the ancient kings wanted to return home so much that during the night, they must have jostled each other to make room for the tapa cloth so that they could finally go home.

For them, it was a sign.