Faka(l)ongo e folofola: Silencing/hearing Jonah with Sia Figiel

Jione Havea

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Abstract: This presentation launches from the *silencing* of Jonah by God and moves toward *hearing* the sailors and the people of Nineveh: After Jonah delivered God's words to Nineveh, God ignored him. The character who was pushed to speak is literarily silenced; the one sent to *fai lauga* does not get the kind of audience that he preferred. God preferred that Jonah is fakalongo (silence). I draw upon three moves that Sia Figiel makes in *Where We Once Belonged* (Kaya, 1999)—su'ifefiloi (the art of storyweaving), un-clinging from the past, reclaiming the collective "we"—to fakaongo (hear) the stories of the sailors and of the people and beasts of Nineveh.

Keywords: beasts; fai lauga; fakaongo; fakalongo; Jonah; Nineveh; sailors; su'ifefiloi; talanoa; tulāfale

> Thus I became a madman.
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> And I have found both freedom and safety in my madness; the freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us.
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> (Kahlil Gibran, 2002, 8)

Jonah is one of the characters from the Bible that most Pacific islanders think we know. This story is so fabulous that it is ridiculous and unreal. It is most definitely a fishy story!

Many islanders have not read Jonah's story, but draw upon what they heard at Sunday School and through talanoa and bantering with their friends and relatives. For most Tongans, Jonah is the one who brought bad luck to the travelers on the boat. The Tongans identify with the sailors, who had to endure the storming seas that came about in response to Jonah's flight from God. Yet, most Tongans are not ready to un-identify with Jonah and the people of Israel and Judah (qua people of God). I am curious as to with whom the orators and *tulāfale* of Samoa identify when they appeal to the story of Jonah. Do they speak about Jonah? Have they read the story of Jonah? Have they read other stories from the Bible that they recall in their *fai lauga*?

I raise these questions not because i want to privilege the biblical text over against the musings, meanderings and ruminations of local peoples. I am not one of those biblical critics who is obsessed with the illusive "correct interpretation." Rather, my interest is around identifying voices that, as suggested by the subtitle to my presentation, *silent* and/or *hear,* that *fakalongo* and/or *fakaongo,* suppressed voices and characters in biblical stories. The acts of fakalongo/silencing and fakaongo/hearing overlap: many times, in trying to fakaongo/hear the story one ends up fakalongo/silencing the story, and in attempting to fakalongo/silence the story one in effect fakaongo/hears the story.

I choose to approach the story of Jonah with the overlapping movement of faka(l)ongo because i find both fakaongo and fakalongo in it. God called Jonah to announce (also: fakaongo) words to (against)

Nineveh, and in the end God wanted Jonah to be silent (fakalongo). After Jonah delivered God's words to Nineveh, God snubbed him and disregarded his death wish. The prophetic character who was pushed to speak is literarily silenced; the one sent to *fai lauga* does not get the kind of audience he was hoping for—an unyielding, unrepenting crowd. God in the end preferred that Jonah is fakalongo (silenced). The story of Jonah is accordingly an appropriate site for unravelling the workings of faka(l)ongo. It is with these concerns that i[1] converse with the insights of Samoan novelist Sia Figiel.

SU'IFEFILOI

I am interested in what Sia Figiel presents as a traditional Samoan storytelling form, *su'ifefiloi,* in her novel titled *Where We Once Belonged* (NY: Kaya, 1999). This novel explores the legacy of colonialism in Samoa through the story of a young woman named Alofa Filiga. The story is set in Malaefou (new field, new land), suggesting a new beginning, at a new location from where the narrator (Alofa) looks back to *where we once belonged* before the arrival of the Christian mission and Western cultures. Figiel's point is clear: Samoa has changed, for better and for worse, due to the arrival of the *papālagi* and their consumerist cultures. I will return to this critical observation later, but here briefly engage with Figiel's methodological nudging.

Su'ifefiloi is the art of weaving stories together, which we hear a lot from our orators and tulāfale. They weave stories that come from different places and times, stories that do not have anything to do with each other, but the orators weave them together and consequently create a new story. The appropriate site for su'ifefiloi is therefore Malaefou—new malae/marae, new site, new location, new beginning, new talanoa.

Su'ifefiloi is story-weaving (cf. Brett and Havea 2014), linking different stories in a very fluid (oceanic) process through which stories fly together into the unknown. Su'ifefiloi for Samoans is similar to *talanoa fakatatau* for Tongans, but with a slight difference: su'ifefiloi is the creation of one storyteller or orator whereas talanoa fakatatau is the creation of many storytellers/orators in the mala'e/marae or pangai (see Havea 2009). Notwithstanding this difference, both are about people giving wings to stories so that they may fly, fly into the unknown—*puna ki he ta'e'iloa.*

Is the book of Jonah the working of su'ifefiloi? When this kind of query is raised by traditional biblical critics, they quickly notice the different forms and genres in this short novella—the book is composed of a prose and a poetic prayer. The poetic prayer is most likely from a different place and time, but most critics assume that the prose (chapters 1, 3-4) is one whole unit. Figiel on the other hand invites us to raise other questions: Could this be the case of su'ifefiloi, where a narrator has woven two or three stories together? Has the narrator done such a great job that we have been fooled into thinking that we have only one story in the prose?

It is possible that we have three stories woven together in this narrative: the story of Jonah and God, in two parts (chapters 1 and 4); the story of the non-Hebrew sailors; and the story of the people of Nineveh. This possibility is not a historical or literary suggestion, but an ideological one. Let me come at it from the other direction, echoing the popular query among feminist critics: in whose interests do we read this narrative? The majority of biblical scholars read on behalf of Jonah and God, hence also in the

[1] My usual explanation for using the lowercase is that i also use the lowercase with "you," "she," "they," "it," and "others," and i do not see the point in capitalizing the first person when s/he *is* in relation to, and because of, everyone/everything else. This time, i add the madman's confession: "The 'I' in me, my friend, dwells in the house of silence, and therein it shall remain for ever more, unperceived, unapproachable" (Gibran, 2002, 11).

interests of Israel and Judah, and so the sailors and the people of Nineveh are seen as serving the interests of the Jonah-God exchange. The narrative reads differently when read in the interest of the sailors (see Havea, 2014), in the interest of the *moana*/sea (see Vaka'uta, 2014) or in the interest of the people of Nineveh (see Lindsay, forthcoming). The opportunity provided by su'ifefiloi and talanoa fakatatau is the possibility that a biblical narrative is the weaving of multiple stories—this is hardly a controversial suggestion, in the ears of source and tradition critics—and in that regard, there is an opening here to read the same narrative in the interests of different, especially minor and subaltern, characters.

When we read in the interests of the sailors, we sympathize with the working class and their duty of care, the vulnerability of travelers and migrants, the openheartedness of non-Hebrews, the soundness of the vessel (the boat was fresh!), the bearing of the burden for others, and so forth. The story of the sailors is one of duty, service, safety and survival.

When we read on behalf of moana, we learn to relax our anthropocentrism and appreciate the gifts and forces of the moana, the courage and freedom that come with the moana/sea orientation, the presence of rescue in the very depths of the deep sea. It is worth noting here that the storm was not self-inflicted by the moana; rather, it was hurled upon the sea by God. The story of moana is about being troubled and finding resolution within.

When we read on behalf of the people of Nineveh, we learn to love our enemies. It's that simple! Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, one of the empires that occupied the land of Palestine in the biblical past. To read in the interests of Nineveh is like asking Samoans to read in the interests of their worst enemy. Being a Tongan, i dare not ask who your worse enemy is!

Reading in the spirit of su'ifefiloi encourages us to hear/fakaongo the characters and stories that have been silenced/fakalongo because of the interests of Jonah, Israel and God. This reading has thus far only heard/fakaongo the silenced/fakalongo voices within the narrative. I invite your suggestion during our discussion of nonbiblical voices and stories that you would like to hear/fakaongo alongside these voices.[2]

UN-CLINGING FROM THE PAST

I return to Figiel. There is in *Where We Once Belonged* a longing for the past, but Figiel does not fetishize precolonial Samoa. There is something worthwhile in the past, but there is also something maddening and even suicidal in clinging to the past. This is the case with the character of Siniva, Alofa's aunt, who returns to Samoa in 1972 with both a bachelor's and a master's degrees in history. Siniva succeeded in the palagi education, focusing on the history of her native home. She returned and called for privileging of the old religion and the ancient cultures of Samoa. She was certified in a palagi education system to cling to the past of her people. She even refused to eat non-native and imported foods, both the physical and spiritual types of food: "Each prayer to Jesus means a nail in our own coffin. Each time we switch something ON (radio, lamps, TV, ignitions ...) means a nail in our coffin. And agaga as we once knew it dies in our still biologically functionable bodies, full of junk food ... darkness-food ... white-food ... death food" (238). The community ignored Siniva, and she becomes blind and eventually committed suicide. She died clinging to a dream of a pure past; a past *where we once belonged.*

[2] I resist labelling these as "foreign voices" because that gives the impression that i prefer the voices of Jonah, God, Israel and Judah.

In the spirit of su'ifefiloi, i turn back to Jonah looking for evidences of clinging to the past in the narrative. The sailors did not cling to their past, for even though they were not Hebrews they at the end of their story worshipped the god of the Hebrews. They let go of their tradition and the past of their people, as if they were ready to enter and occupy a Malaefou. This kind of move is problematic. While clinging to the past is maddening; uncritically endorsing a new and foreign [pālagi] culture is also problematic. No one lives in the past; also, no one lives in isolation. We are affected by the cultures—religious and otherwise—that cross our shores, and we must evaluate the assumption that pālagi and Christian cultures are always healthy for us. And for islanders who now reside in the Pasifika Diaspora, here's a question for us: Have we taken full advantage of the opportunity to affect and alter the dominant cultures in which we live?

If we take seriously the su'ifefiloi invitation to read the narrative in the interests of the sailors, than their religions and cultures are, in their eyes, the dominant ones. They have let go, given up, what was dominant for their people. In this connection, the story of the sailors is a lesson for dominant societies—that it is not suicidal to give up the past and the traditions of their people.

The sailors were not suicidal at all. They wanted to survive, and they even refused to throw Jonah overboard as he had instructed. Their response to Jonah's instruction was to row harder toward shore. When they did not succeed, only then did they throw Jonah overboard, against their better judgment. This would have troubled them greatly. That they were sailors as well as non-Hebrews do not mean that they did not have any values. Their willingness to let go of their tradition and their past was in response to a troubling experience. Indeed, it takes a devastating experience to come to terms with the devastation of clinging to the past.

Notwithstanding, given their placement in the margins of the society, the sailors may not have had much investment in their cultures and religions. It would have therefore been easy for them to let go of their past. They were sailors, what else should we expect?[3]

In the case of the people of Nineveh, they had no problem un-clinging from their past. Jonah barely started to preach (only 4 Hebrew words) when the people of Nineveh put on sackcloth and repented, together with their animals. Their repentance is sign of their willingness to un-cling; to repent so easily is testimony to their character. They were wise people; they knew what was good for them, and they acted accordingly. The people started to un-cling, and the king followed their lead. On the one hand, we see here who the real leaders of the city are—the people, rather than the king; on the second hand, we see what happens when the people lead—there is sparing and survival. The un-clinging was the people's movement. In comparison, i'm inclined to think that it was the king's leadership that led to God sending Jonah in the first place to "speak against" Nineveh.

But the king is not a dud: he ordered that beasts too should fast and put on sackcloth. Readers tend to make light of this move—how ridiculous of the king of Nineveh to issue such an order? But in this, is a critical move if we read the story in the interests of the people of Nineveh. There is an inclusive feel about the Ninevite community. I will return to this in the next section.

Jonah on the other hand was not ready to let go of the past; he was not ready to let go of his expectation of God—that God will pardon Nineveh. Also, Jonah was suicidal: first on the boat, when he instructed the sailors to throw him overboard, and later outside of the city, when he twice demanded that God let him die. In clinging to the past, Jonah withdrew to himself, away from Nineveh, that great city that God spared. Jonah wanted to be alone, a move that draws us back to Sia Figiel.

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[3] Tongan joke: *kamo pē seila kuo piki e feke!*

RECLAIMING THE "WE"

There is an attempt to reclaim the collective "we" in *Where We Once Belonged.* With the arrival of the Christian mission and Western consumerist cultures came individualistic tendencies, over against the communitarian ways of precolonial Samoa. Alofa resisted the drive toward individualism, which she saw at school in an exercise that Miss Cunningham required of the students—each was to write about her/his individual experiences. For Alofa, this exercise requires her to think *as if she was alone.* "You were always with someone ... Nothing was witnessed alone. Nothing was witnessed in the 'I' form -- nothing but penises and ghosts. 'I' does not exist, Miss Cunningham. 'I' is 'we' ... *always"* (136, 137). For Alofa, the narrator, who speaks on behalf of Sia Figiel, the author, the 'I' is always a "we".

This is where the story of Jonah differs from the stories of the sailors and of the people of Nineveh. Jonah's story is about his "I" whereas the stories of the sailors and of the people of Nineveh are about a collective "we." In the case of the story of the people of Nineveh, the collective "we" includes the beasts. Seeing that God's final words in the story refers to the beasts, isn't it wonderful that God has learned something from the people of Nineveh?

> And the Lord said: You took pity on the kikayon, for which you did not toil nor did you make it grow, which one night came into being and the next night perished. Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well? (Jonah 4:11; Tanakh)

I attribute God's concern for the beasts at the end of the story to the influence of the order by the king of Nineveh in 3:6-10:

> And the word reached the king of Nineveh, whereupon he rose from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh: By the counsel of the king and his nobles, saying: Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep shall taste anything; they shall not graze, neither shall they drink water. And they shall cover themselves with sackcloth, both man and beast, and they shall call mightily to God, and everyone shall repent of his evil way and of the dishonest gain which is in their hands. Whoever knows shall repent, and God will relent, and He will return from His burning wrath, and we will not perish. And God saw their deeds, that they had repented of their evil way, and the Lord relented concerning the evil that He had spoken to do to them, and He did not do it. (Tanakh)

Indeed, the people of Nineveh affected and conditioned God. God changed God's mind because of what the people and the beasts of Nineveh did. The people and the animals repented; God responded by also repenting!

FAKA(L)ONGO E FOLOFOLA

This reading of the Jonah narrative is under the influence of Sia Figiel! I drew upon the spirit/agaga of su'ifefiloi to help me fakaongo/listen to the stories of the sailors and of the people of Nineveh which tend to be fakalongo/silenced because of readers' interest in Jonah, God, Israel and Judah. I offer this reading with an invitation, that "we" engage with the imaginations of the native writers from Oceania and that "we" cooperate in *faka(l)ongo e folofola* -- in the silencing/hearing of scriptures.

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