SONGS FOR A DEAD *ARIKI*: THE DELICATE ART OF PERFORMING POLITICS

RICHARD MOYLE

*The University of Auckland*

The second part of Patrick Kirch and Roger Green’s 2001 monograph *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia*, is devoted to an examination of the cultural and social features of the earliest Polynesian era, using the evidence of language, specifically the relatedness of Polynesian languages, to trace the origin and geographical spread of specific terms. Among the best-known of those terms from the region as a whole is *ariki*. Indeed, the word, or a cognate variant, is reported from 32 regions of Polynesia. Examining the meaning of the term in each region, the authors identify five recurring features (p. 228): (i) the term related not just to secular leadership (the most common meaning) but frequently also to a primary sacred role as, e.g., the principal priest or religious leader; (ii) the *ariki* was associated with a particular descent group; (iii) succession to the title *ariki* was hereditary, usually by being the firstborn in the patrilineal line; (iv) titleholders were typically male; and (v) *ariki* were regarded everywhere as *tapu* ‘sacred’ or possessors of *mana* ‘supernatural power’. This article uses specially composed songs for a dead *ariki* as a critical tool for exploring the institution of *ariki* in one Polynesian culture.

I use the past tense in this summary of features for the good reason that the institution of supreme leader was successfully challenged in most parts of Polynesia firstly by European missionaries and administrators, and later by the creation of national governments having elected membership. True, the title “Ariki” or “Ariki nui” still exists, for example, in Aotearoa New Zealand, parts of French Polynesia and individual islands in the Cook Islands, and titleholders there do indeed continue to maintain social privileges and influence. However, such is the pervasive and enduring influence of Christianity in Polynesia that the former religious leadership exercised by the *ariki*, and the possession of bodily sanctity and supernatural power, have now declined. I am, however, not suggesting that contemporary Takū society resembles Ancestral Polynesian Society as outlined by Kirch and Green but, rather, that the contemporary religious roles exercised by Takū’s sole *ariki* appear to be more extensive, more clearly defined and more frequently enacted than in other Polynesian societies.
THE ARIKI AS RELIGIOUS LEADER ON TAKÛ

Takû society comprises five patrilineal clans ranked in seniority according to the sequence in which their respective founding ancestors arrived on the atoll. Each clan is headed by a mâ tua ‘elder’. The elder of the primary clan, Hare Ata, is also ex officio the ariki. This clan is defined as foremost in recognition of that clan’s mythological ancestor’s superior religious powers. Takû’s island council decision in the 1970s to ban Christian missionaries and churches has meant that, among other things, the traditional responsibilities and attributes of the ariki continued to be recognised by the community. This ban has remained in force among residents despite constant external proselytising attempts by evangelical churches. In fact, it was not until 2009 that significant changes became apparent, as I outline below.

Takû’s ariki was, and is, the supreme religious leader, although the nature of the role has changed markedly in the past century. Until the 1880s, when the atoll was unwittingly sold to a copra plantation owner and the local population was forced to live in conditions of confinement for some 40 years (Moyle 2007: 34), the ariki lived in isolation from his community, spending much of his time inside his hare aitu ‘spirit house’ communicating with his ancestor spirits, as well as officiating at a period of three to six months of daily dancing each year in front of an image of the ariki’s clan progenitor, Pukena, in order to entertain the ancestor and so—through his kindly disposition as a result of the entertainment—ensure ongoing food supplies and communal safety (Moyle 2007: 56).

Although the physical image of this aitu nnui ‘great spirit’ no longer exists, traditional religious belief positions Pukena himself as the principal protector of the island as a whole. Pukena was visually distinguished by a sharp point on the top of his head (called noti) which was broken when he was kidnapped by rival spirits and taken to an island called Ävai. Other spirits from Takû went to Ävai and were able to rescue him and return him to Takû, minus his topknot. Today, each ariki makes his own noti upon assuming the position and attaches it to his head before presiding on the marae for a tukumai ritual (a grief-shedding event held some six months after a death in the community). And, while seated on the marae with the noti, the ariki becomes Pukena to the extent of embodying his protective power over the assembled community. However, other spirits having potentially malevolent powers to inflict accident, disease or even death on anyone attending are also present, so the ariki and the other four clan elders wear a variety of individually named protective devices around their necks, tied to their forearms, on their brows and tucked into their waistbands. The noti itself is protected by an amulet tied around it (Figure 1).
The result of wearing all these amulets is a clear example of the representation in visible form of some of the powers of the ariki. Each item he wears has been imbued with ancestral power through the invocations spoken to them first as the ariki makes them and again as he dons them.

One of Kirch and Green’s attributes of the archetypal ariki, his personal sacredness, was clearly evident throughout the chieftainship of Avo Sini, the subject of this study. Only his wife could cut his hair or fingernails or toenails or tend to any wounds or massage him. He was not allowed to work in his gardens, or repair the thatch or mats of his own house, nor could he build or maintain his own canoe; he attended house buildings and canoe launchings but always as an observer because he stopped all forms of physical labour the day he assumed office. (Fishing in the lagoon with a visitor or during a competition appears not to constitute “work”.) Nobody could make a loud

Figure 1. The ariki Avo in regalia ready to enter the marae for a tukumai ritual. Photograph: Richard Moyle.
noise in his presence, or walk close behind him or close in front of him while he was seated (except for his own family members) or point a spear or stick in his direction.

Takū’s normal line of succession is patrilineal; the possibility of an ariki being either childless or having only daughters is accommodated by the widespread practice of adoption. In a few reported instances, a brother or nephew may be chosen as successor with the proviso that the title will revert to ariki’s own direct descendant in the next generation. The actual transfer of authority is achieved as the corpse of the incumbent lies inside the ariki’s house prior to removal to the cemetery. The successor attaches amulets to the corpse, then crawls on his knees twice around it before bending over the corpse’s head and invoking the dead man’s spirit to approve the act of succession.

However, starting in 1973, the ariki’s position had undergone unprecedented changes. In that year, the titleholder died while in hospital off the island, and his chosen successor was working on a boat elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. There was, therefore, no formal transfer of authority since there was no corpse on the island itself. In the turmoil that followed on the island, a kind of regent was eventually appointed and in 1991, when that man died, Avo was formally installed as ariki, remaining there until his death in 2009.2

TAKŪ’S SONGS FOR THE DEAD

Songs composed after the death of someone socially important are a feature of most regions of Polynesia, either as spontaneous expressions of grief while sitting next to the corpse or as crafted group songs rehearsed and performed in public at a later date.3 In most case, the singing memorialises a relationship and brings closure to the period of formal grieving, exploiting the mnemonic qualities of poetic structure and musical structure to help extend the lifetime of that remembered relationship. Typically, poetic themes focus on loss.

On the death of any Takū resident, between three and five tuki ‘praise songs’ (see Moyle 2007: 244-46) are composed by fellow residents and rehearsed daily over several weeks for performance on the island’s marae at a five-day tukumai ritual several months later. The newly composed tuki are given a first—and usually only—performance on the marae on the evening of the first day of the ritual, sung by the deceased’s fellow clan members, both men and women.4 The number and content of newly-composed tuki songs are not an index of a person’s social standing or notable achievements or general popularity while alive. The song poetry for those who are very young, and those afflicted with physical or mental handicaps, contains the same kinds of accounts of notable achievements while alive as for other residents. And, since most tuki focus on fishing, the community’s principal food source, individuals unable to catch fish are afforded poetic accounts of success equal to the most
successful fishers in real life in one final act of affectionate egalitarianism. An extreme example in 1997 was at the death of a boy with a severe mental disability who had been ostracised by everyone except his older sister. When he died, his uncle composed two songs for his *tukumai*. The lyrics did not speak about the boy’s own productive achievements in life because they were, in local estimation, nonexistent. Instead, the lyrics spoke about fertile gardens and plentiful fish stocks which had been achieved by his spirit in the afterworld—in other words, a diplomatic set of unique and face-saving topics.

By contrast, at the other end of the scale of social authority, the *ariki* Avo was distinguished in life by a series of inherited privileges and responsibilities, afforded primacy in the distribution of food and valuables, treated with deference by adults, and with care and a degree of fear by children. But the *ariki*’s reputation in death—at least as depicted in these songs—rested in the hands of a few fellow clan members able to compose both poetry and melody. As with all such compositions, the poets had to choose whether to represent the dead person by focusing on the features that distinguished him/her or those that were shared with other community members: that is, to be either exclusive or inclusive in their textual references. Examination of the lyrics of more than 300 *tuki* first performed between 1994 and 2009 confirm a strong trend for the latter, that is, to be inclusive. Takü frequently characterise the purpose of the songs as *ki ahu te tautai* ‘to praise the master-fisherman’, but therein lay a problem in Avo’s case because he had something of a reputation for not catching fish. When Avo took me onto the lagoon in 1994, for example, we managed to catch a mere three fish between us in a whole afternoon. The event so astonished the community that on each of my subsequent seven returns to the island, I was routinely teased on arrival with a reminder of my ineptitude. And for at least one fishing competition, in which those who fail to reach the minimum number of fish in the canoe are publicly humiliated by daubs on the face with charcoal paint, Avo jumped overboard before reaching land on his return to avoid such punishment.

How, then, to match poetic expectations of plenty with the historical reality of few? The solution was relatively simple in that Takü poets routinely, consciously and deliberately create in their *tuki* an idealised image of their culture: according to that image, there are no fishing failures (Moyle 2007: 187-88). The image of the ideal usurps the memory of history, and so the canoe always returns full. In Avo’s case, as shown below, he is indeed depicted in a canoe and catching fish—just like the poetry for any accomplished fisherman. But unlike the memorial poetry for a good fisherman, the greatest number of fish ever caught is not mentioned for Avo.

Avo assumed the *ariki* position in unprecedented circumstances and, while holding that position, he also instigated several significant changes
in the island’s secular and religious life, some as a result of circumstances thrust upon him and others apparently of his own volition. Several accomplishments in his 19-year term were notable and might reasonably have been included in any songs memorialising him. These included approving the indefinite abandonment of the tânaki ritual, in which a spirit medium in trance would sing an entire new dance song sent back from the dead. In a related move, he approved a format change for the tukumai ritual and the insertion of part of the tânaki into the second day’s activities; that insertion involved the public abandonment of items used by the deceased or associated with him/her, which were immediately uplifted by anyone present who desired them, in order to avoid creating painful memories. Three years later, following complaints of abuse of that privilege, he stopped that part of the ritual altogether. He permitted a further variation to the tukumai in the form of the distribution of 100 or more live chickens as well as the usual taro and tinned meat. Following a series of drunken fights in the early 2000s, he instituted year-long bans on making and drinking coconut toddy (while allowing the private importation of liquor). And he held out against a constant stream of requests from evangelical churches to visit the island and try and convert the younger residents.

For these actions and others, all considered positive by the community, Avo was held in respect. By contrast, his inability to speak or write English denied him the capacity to directly negotiate with Government or church officials or speak on the occasional visit of other important officials. And his preference for imported liquor over coconut toddy also impacted on his personal reputation in the community.

THE SONGS FOR ARIKI AVO

Residents identified by name in tuki poetry are of three kinds: first, surviving family members; second, the mänoni, the man who assembles and places the henua mate (lit. ‘death placenta’) or death necklet around the deceased’s neck while he/she lies before being shrouded and buried. For the surviving family members, textual references are usually of two kinds: (i) acknowledging that the deceased person remembers them and continues to grieve for them, and (ii) urging named individuals to continue to care for other, named individuals. The henua mate insures that the corpse is attached to its clan afterworld; without it, the spirit cannot travel there. Once the necklet materials have been collected and attached with correct procedure, the act of placement is crucial to the spiritual journey and ongoing spiritual welfare of the dead. Mention in the poetry may be considered as a non-material complement to the presentation of prestige food received by that man in the days after the burial. Named people in these two categories are always alive and well
in the island when the songs are composed and sung. For the mānoni, the
naming publicly acknowledges his special role and legitimises the role such
a person has with the dead person’s family in his capacity as a lifetime spirit
medium and adviser.

The situation for those in the third category of people mentioned in lyrics
is different: they are already dead. In fact, they are the people for whom the
songs are composed in the first place. References to the dead are usually
for political purposes: to bring closure and a degree of certainty to matters
of succession. By poetic convention, the way that such ends are achieved
is for the lyrics to take the perspective of the dead person and to announce
that a certain succession-related act has been carried out. It will be evident
that manipulation of the lyrics for personal gain is quite possible and some
Takū people mutter privately their suspicions, but the enduring element of
uncertainty that separates suspicion from accusation is enough to keep such
views private.

Personal names themselves represent a dual-layered situation. Although
each infant receives a name at birth from the father, another name—a familiar
name—is normally substituted throughout that person’s life, and the person
may in fact never know his/her own birth name. The songs composed when
that person dies, however, always use the birth name, or a poetic variation
of it, as indeed they do for all individuals named in the lyrics, a situation
which sometimes has audience members asking who Such and Such was
in the lyrics, since they have known that same person by another name for
all of their life.

When Avo died, three significant matters required resolution: firstly,
information about the fate of his spirit. A catch of tuna by the family or
clan canoe soon during a five-day period of deep-sea fishing constitutes
acknowledgement that the spirit has safely reached the appropriate afterworld.
The rationale is that the tuna have not been discovered by the crew by skill
or chance, but that they have been sent by the spirit to the canoe: for that
reason, the song poetry using the first-person perspective speaks of “my”
school of fish. The general expectation is that, within five days of a death, the
community will know the spirit’s fate; the general hope is that the evidence
of the tuna will signal a favourable outcome.

Secondly, who would be chosen as his immediate successor? The choice of
Pāsia as ariki was an ad hoc decision made by Avo in his final days, realising
that the man he had been grooming for the position for several years was off-
island and could not return in time because of the erratic nature of the boat
service. The choice was made on the understanding that the position would
go to that preferred man on Pāsia’s own death. The tuki poetry offered the
opportunity to confirm that immediate successor.
Thirdly, the identification of who was Avo’s preferred successor. It was widely, but privately, known that Avo’s preferred choice of successor was Tekaso Laroteone, his nephew. Before he died, Avo stated his wish that Tekaso be the *ariki* after Pāśia and, to ensure there was no later misunderstanding, Avo’s decision needed to be formally made known to the community. The *tuki* poetry offered the opportunity to announce that long-term arrangement.

In order to clarify the nature of the songs composed for Avo and to contextualise them within the overall *tuki* repertoire, an outline of the structure of the songs now follows.

THE STRUCTURE OF *TUKI* SONGS

Takū indigenous terminology for song structure is precise (see Moyle 2007: xxii). The poetry of *tuki* songs is constructed of pairs of *puku* ‘verses’ whose first line contains general statements which are particularised in the second line. As the acknowledged authority on the community’s songs and dances, Nūnua Posongat, explained to me: “*Te puku rā i mua seki ttapa te mē e ttapa aī* ‘The first line of the verse hasn’t yet addressed the subject matter.’” The second line is referred to as the *soa puku* ‘companion verse’. In the following example, the second line supplies details of the speaker, his clan and the canoe not specified in the first line:

\[
\begin{align*}
Äïë, \text{ ni } \text{ hana } \text{ iho } \text{ ko } \text{ nau } \text{ ki } \text{ taku } \text{ hare } \text{ no } & \quad \text{I went to my house and gazed at the} \\
\text{matamata } \text{iho } \text{ ki } \text{ te } \text{ vaka;} & \quad \text{canoe;} \\
Äïë, \text{ ni } \text{ hana } \text{ iho } \text{ Teature } \text{i } \text{ Hare } \text{o } \text{ Ania } & \quad \text{Teature went to Hareania and gazed at} \\
\text{no } \text{ matamata } \text{iho } \text{ ki } \text{ te } \text{ Terupo.} & \quad \text{Terupo.}
\end{align*}
\]

With the exception of specific nouns replacing generic nouns, each verse-line is usually identical. After the first line (*puku*) and again after the second line (*soa puku*), a relatively short section called *hakamau hua* ‘singing stabiliser’ is sung. And after singing the second line and repeating the *hakamau hua*, a *hati* ‘refrain’ is sung. Each *tuki* starts with an introductory section called *vvoro* ‘starter’ (which, optionally, may have identical poetic content to that of the *hati*), followed by the *hakamau hua* and *hati*. The sequence of named parts of a typical *tuki* song begins thus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{vvoro} & \quad \text{starter} \\
\text{hakamau hua} & \quad \text{singing stabiliser} \\
\text{hati} & \quad \text{refrain}
\end{align*}
\]

For each verse then following, the sequence of named parts is:
Each of the tuki composed for Avo follows broadly this structural outline.

I present below the four tuki composed for Avo. As with tuki composed on other occasions for other dead residents, the sequence of singing them appeared to be a personal choice of the composer, who usually starts the first one or two words alone before being joined by the group. The same singing group of approximately 30 men and women sang each song seated in a tight inward-facing circle on the marae. Because the tukumai ritual was for Avo alone, all those present knew that these songs, performed at the very beginning of the first all-night period of singing, were new compositions for him: even in songs which did not identify Avo by name, there could be no doubt about the poetic focus.

Song 1
The identity of the composers is unclear other than it was a joint effort from several women of Hare Ata clan.

vvoro Ai lö, penapena mai te ariki te henua, The [new] ariki was established on the
Te kïpü ma te Matarupe, nā ē From the southern to the northern islet.

hmh Tani taku aroha iā nau nei. And now I myself weep in sorrow.

1a Ai lö, penapena mai te ariki Hare Ata; The [new] ariki was established in
1b Haerea mai ko te hare hakamataku, Hareata [house];
nā ē. People were constantly walking in and

hati Uruhia mai ka roto a Hareata, out of the awesome house
nā ē;
Uruhia mai a te hare hakamataku nā ē People gathered and went inside

2a Ai, ni aroha nau ki taku soa, Hareata [house];
nā ē; People gathered and went inside the
2b Ai, ni aroha Sina ē ki Maria, the awesome house.
nā ē. Sina grieved for Maria.
3a Ai, ni aloha nau ki te haitinana,  
   nā ē;  
   I grieved for the mother and son;  
3b Ai, ni aloha nau ki Katina ma  
   Temurilaki, nā ē  
   I grieved for Katina and Temurilaki.  

4a Îê, ko te taina sārea mai ko taku  
   sau, nā ē;  
   The brother took over my position;  
4b Îê, ko Päsia sārea iho ko te sau  
   Sina, nā ē.  
   Päsia took over Sina’s position.  

Notes:  
2b Sina is Avo’s birth name; Maria is his wife, better known as Samoa. The structure of  
   the sentences in this verse is found in most tuki.  
3b Katina is Avo’s second grandchild, first son of his own son.  
4a In reality, Päsia was Avo’s FBS, a relationship included in the scope of taina  
   ‘brother’. The poetry here assumes the perspective of Avo himself.  

Although this tuki alternates between descriptive and direct speech, the audience understands that the sole perspective is that of Avo himself, speaking from the afterworld; this situation is a common feature of such songs. Unusually, within the context of tuki, this song makes no mention of fishing, but it does—by default—reflect the reality that he was a poor fisherman. The last verse is a political statement: the first-person perspective has Avo’s spirit confirming Päsia as his immediate successor, a statement that nobody would (or did) challenge.  

Song 2  
The poetry of the second tuki, composed by one of Avo’s close friends, Hareata  
Säre, does indeed focus on tuna fishing. However, the canoe identified by name—Hakatautai—belongs to Hareata and not Avo. In fact, Avo’s name is not mentioned at all in the poetry, although members of his family are, and the audience immediately makes the connection. Hareata is saving face for his friend Avo, but in a different textual manner, in that the lyrics name several members of Avo’s clan known to be good fishermen. This is a poetic device aimed at enhancing Avo’s own reputation by association, common to much Takü song poetry.  

vvoro Ā, ni tuku iho taka vaka ki te sao  
   taku tamana, rō  
   I put my canoe in the water after my  
   father’s death.  

hmh Aku mata hano i te vaetelani, ko te  
   ika rō e hiti i laro te manu ē, tere iho  
   nau rō, uru őiē  
   My eyes went to the horizon where fish  
   were agitating beneath the flock, I  
   sailed over and entered the flock.
hati Ā, ni tuku iho Hakatautai ki te sao a Sina, nā ē.  

Hakatautai was put in the water on the occasion of Sina’s death.

1a  Ko nau e uru ki loto ro hakia te lākau, rohi ilō ma te rimu;  
1b  Hareata e uru ki mouku, rō hakia te manarua.  

I went into the bush to pluck the plant, and mix it with seaweed;  
Hareata entered the bush and plucked the double branch.

2a  Te tamana tuku iho te inaho i aruna te vaka, ki kīte ai tō soa;  
2b  Sina hakatoko te kanapu i aruna Hakatautai, ki kīte ai Maria.  

Someone brought the birds above the canoe so your wife could see them;  
Sina sat frigate birds on Hakatautai so Maria could see them.

3a  Aku tama noho he tureki i aruna te vaka, ko te ika mapuna i taku kātea;  
3b  Ko Telauika serea ko taku marari, ko te atu puna i taku kātea.  

My child jostled for position on the canoe, and the fish splashed on my hull side;  
Telauika cast out my live bait, and tuna surfaced on my hull side.

Notes:

1a While on its way out onto the ocean, a tuna canoe stops and is rubbed with certain leaves and seaweed to make it attractive to tuna. Invocations to ancestors are uttered during the act.

1b The canoe itself is ritually rubbed with carefully selected leaves to make it irresistibly attractive to the chosen fish.

2a Sina is Avo, whose founding ancestor was guided to the atoll by a frigate bird. So, without mentioning Avo’s name, the singers are stating that it was Avo’s spirit who sent the birds to this canoe to ensure fishing success, and that Avo’s wife witnessed the event. As a result of the mythical episode, Avo and his family are banned from catching, killing or eating frigate birds.

3a Men stand side by side facing the side opposite the outrigger to catch tuna with short rods. There may be some jostling to ensure enough elbow room to lever a fish straight into the canoe.

3b Telauika is the son of Tekaso Laroteone whom Avo had been grooming as his successor. So, without mentioning his name, Tekaso is linked to Avo’s spirit, and the implication is that Avo is announcing his approval for Tekaso to succeed the man who followed Avo only by default. Because it is the fishing expedition leader’s responsibility to throw out the live bait, the song elevates Telauika’s status far beyond his actual teenage years.

On a functional level and indirectly, the singers proclaim Avo’s earlier decision for Tekaso to be the ariki on the death of Pāsia. The song narrator is the composer, Hareata, and the lyrics composed from his perspective use the convention of an idealised Takū society.
Song 3
Hareata Säre is arguably the most prolific composer within Hare Ata clan, and is visibly and audibly prominent at the period of dancing on the marae in his capacity as a purotu ‘performance specialist’. His contribution of this third tuki for Avo is in keeping with his creative reputation, and indeed he has composed multiple tuki for several earlier tukumai.

vvoro Ė ko tū nau i aruna taku vaka I was in my canoe.

hmh Mai taku vaka ka aro ē In my canoe and paddled it.

1a Aro ki te manu e tū mai i tua e maru mai ē ki te vaka, tuku ē Paddled to the flock on the ocean casting a shadow on the canoe.
1b E tū nau i aruna Hakatautai Mai Hakatautai ka aro. I was in Hakatautai. And paddled it.

2a Taku tama te nohia ko tuākau, hakamārama taku vaka, mai ē; My child, there’s flotsam beyond the reef, because my canoe was attractive;
2b Hē ko soko Rehu te rimutoro ko tuākau, hakamārama Hakatautai. Only Rehu used amulets beyond the reef, making Hakatautai attractive.

3a E uru taku vaka i loto a te purina, hakahua i tako kātea, Taku tama uhu ko tana matila, Kotikoti ki ana rima hakapare ki te ama toha. As my canoe went inside the circling fish, splashing on my hull side, My child pulled out his rod. It almost broke in his arms as it touched the outrigger platform.
3b E uru Hakatautai i loto a te purina, ko Säre uhu ko tana matila, kotikoti ki ana rima hakapare ki te ama toha. As Hakatautai went inside the circling fish, Säre pulled out his rod. It almost broke in his arms as it touched the outrigger float.

4a Huri nau ē, huri ki loto te inaho, taku mā ni tahuri ma tana paronu, “Mānau ko e kō tō soa, utania tuku vaka ki te ika”, mai ē. I went around, going inside the flock, my affine turned with his rod, saying, “Think about your wife as you load my canoe with fish.”
4b Huri nau ē, huri ki loto te inaho. Ko Siō ni tahuri ma tana paronu, “Mānau ko e kō Temurilaki, utania Hakatautai ki te atu”, mai ē I went around, going inside the flock, Siō turned with his rod, saying, “Think about Temurilaki as you load Hakatautai with tuna.”

5a E taku tama ni heaki ki tana soa, “Ko te vaka ku hakkaiō mai tai, tātou hare ka hora ki te ika.” My child told her husband, “The canoe is calling from the sea, at our house the fish will be displayed.”
5b Ko Te Loea ni heaki ki Pāsia, 
Hakatautai ku hakkaiō mai tai, 
Hareata ku ua ki te atu”, mai ē. 

Te Loea called to Pāsia 
“Hakatautai is calling from the sea, 
Hareata will make tuna freely available.”

Notes
1b Hakatautai is Hareata’s own canoe.

2a Tuna frequently gather near ocean flotsam; the reported sighting in this verse is offered as proof of the correctness with which the ritual enhancement of the canoe was undertaken, in that the canoe attracts the fish.

2b At Avo’s burial ritual, Arehu (abbreviated here to Rehu and better known as Rex), son of Francis Puāria, accompanied the mānoni into the bush near the cemetery and climbed a coconut tree to bring down the topmost leaves from which the henua mate ‘death placenta’ was made. For undertaking that role, the composer names him.

3a, 3b Only at the command of the fishing leader do the crew stand and take their rods from the outrigger platform. The rod used by Sāre, Hareata’s other son, bends with the weight of a large fish to touch the canoe float, indicating that, after being hooked, it has swum right around from the hull side; only with enormous effort could a tuna be lifted out from that position.

4a, 4b A common form of sentence construction in tuki poetry, exhorting the maintenance of close support for grieving family members. Siō, better known as Pokohi, married Avo’s eldest daughter, Temurilaki. An ardent fisher, he and his wife lived adjacent to Hareata and cared for Avo and Samoa in their later years.

5a The phrase “my child” indicates affection rather than a biological association. The crew of an exceptionally successful tuna-fishing canoe continually calls out Iō to trumpet their achievement as they return across the lagoon. A large catch of prestige fish such as tuna is displayed outside the death house for the benefit of the mourning relatives before distribution among the fishers’ families (See Fig. 2).

5b Te Loea’s (more commonly known as Loea) call to her husband Pāsia is a way of incorporating Pāsia in the story about Avo; he was, after all, the substitute successor, and the poet uses this indirect referencing as a diplomatic way of legitimising the choice of new ariki. The significance of the line is that the tuna catch was so great that, instead of allocating set numbers of fish to each family, people were invited to come and freely take away as many as they wanted—a rare event. Additionally, the catch is displayed outside Hareata, the house of the new ariki where the phrase tātou hare ‘our house’ indicates that Pāsia and Loea are already resident.

Hareata’s poetry idealises an optimal fishing outcome, in complete contrast to Avo’s own lack of fishing success but indicative of an emphatic signal that Avo’s spirit is in the clan afterworld.
Song 4
Tomi Atomu was perhaps the man closest to Avo throughout his period as ariki. Simultaneously a neighbour, an assistant to Avo during rituals on the marae, and a cousin, he was one of Avo’s few confidants. Although Tomi has created few tuki, the closeness of his relationship to the paramount chief prompted him to create a song when Avo died.

vvoro Ai ilō, tuku ē ilō, tuku te manu a te moana,
Lō tuku ē lō, tuku iho ki taku vaka.

The ocean sea birds paused; Paused around my canoe.

hmh Lō tuku ē lō, tuku iho ki taku vaka

Paused around my canoe.

hati Lō tuku, hakassoro te ika te moana;
Lō tuku, hakssoro te atu a Tehetau

Gradually the ocean fish came; Gradually Tehetau’s tuna came.

1a. Lō, tuku iho ki taku vaka se tanata e tū ma te rimu tana vaka.

When my canoe put to sea, a man stood with seaweed in his canoe;

1b. Lō, tuku iho ki taku vaka soko Usi e tuu ki te kautasi a Tehetau.

When it put to sea, Ausi alone stood with ukuuku leaves for Tehetau.
2a. Lō, tuku iho ki taku vaka se tamana o te ika e tū mamao e.
When my canoe put to sea, someone said that the fish were far distant;

2b. Lō, tuku iho ki taku vaka Sina ko te atu Tehetau e tū mamao e.
When my canoe put to sea, Sina said that Tehetau’s tuna were far distant.

Notes:

vvoro  The flock of birds that usually signals the presence of surface-feeding tuna was initially not hovering over the water, but flying aimlessly around the canoe waiting for the fish to rise.

hati The invocations for ancestral help in attracting the fish to the canoe were initially unsuccessful. Tehetau is the canoe of Ausi, who was mānoni at Avo’s burial and therefore qualified to be named in the lyrics, although it was said that he did not have a good record of catching tuna.

1a When charged with ancestral power through invocation, certain species of seaweed are rubbed on a canoe hull to generate potency and attractiveness to the target fish.

1b Usi is a poetic form of Ausi, the mānoni at Avo’s burial ritual. Leaves of the fragrant ukuuku bush (Vitex trifolia) are used to ritually rub attractiveness onto the hull.

2a No tuna were caught when the canoe went to sea on its first day, although the following day’s expedition was successful.

2b Sina (i.e., Avo’s spirit) confirms that the school of fish was too far away to catch on that first day.

The principal poetic focus is on Ausi’s canoe’s lack of success on its first ocean expedition, as sometimes happens. The eventual success is attributed to the correct application of leaves and seaweed on the canoe hull by Ausi, and by continued invocations to ancestors. The poetry is characterised by extensive use of vocables, namely ai ilō, tuku ē ilō, lō tuku ē lō, and lō. Ai ilō is a poetic convention on neighbouring Fead Island, but the other verbal formations are common among Takū’s own tuki. Tomi himself acknowledged to me that he had modelled his tuki on an earlier composition which contained the same vocables. Such modelling is common among poet-composers unwilling or unable to create entirely new material. The phrase Tuku ē ‘It is finished’ occurring in both the vvoro and hakamau hua is—coincidentally or otherwise—uttered by the ariki while seated on the marae to formally announce the end of ritual activity there. The other vocables have no such relationship to events on the island. I have not included vocables in the translation above.

It is now possible to propose an answer to the question posed earlier: the ariki is distinguished in life, but what happens at death? The evidence of these four songs is consistent and clear: there are no greater number of songs than for any other dead adult on the island, no unique melodies, no difference in the number of verses from songs for other dead at that same tukumai, no unique features of
the lyrics, and no enlarged body of singers performing the songs for the first time. On Avo’s death, then, two seemingly contradictory things happened: the songs recognised him as someone special in the community by acknowledging that he had been the ariki, but the same songs also applied to him the same musical and lyrical conventions applicable to anyone else in the community.

Although the outward face of Takū society is one of egalitarianism, the principle of egalitarianism that applies to the community as a whole does so only while activities are in secular mode: in that mode, anybody acting as a leader leads only as a result of personal initiatives. The situation might be better defined as a principle of pre-eminence among equals: Avo was an equal before becoming ariki, and the only public verbalisation about his death, i.e., singing, treats him as an equal after he stopped being the ariki, i.e., after he died. The production of egalitarianism, of sameness, in the performing arts is achieved through a limited repertoire of dance movements, the frequent use of melodic stereotypes, the use of thematic conventions in song lyrics, and by singing in unison without any designated leader. The production of difference in the performing arts is achieved by the reversal of these norms, but only for particular song categories and only for particular performance occasions. Songs for the dead are sung, as they say, ki pesi te aroha ‘to shed grief’, and the comfort of that emotional state is achieved largely through sympathetic presentation of what is familiar and hoped for; for that reason, novelty and surprise are inappropriate.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare Avo’s memorial songs with those for other ariki on the island because those earlier songs have disappeared from the active repertoire and from the communal memory. It is a feature of Takū oral tradition that, although some accomplishments during the lifetime of earlier ariki are frequently remembered and recounted at parties, no songs composed in their memory are ever sung.

It is sometimes spoken aloud on the island, but I suspect more widely believed in private, that songs brought back from the dead inevitably contain words and references not universally understood by a Takū audience. In fact, one man turned that belief around and told me that, if you can understand all the words of a song, then it cannot be a song from the spirits. The songs composed for Avo contain no such obscurity, but they do have individual lines structured as first-person statements, that is, from Avo after death. At least, that is what the composers wanted their audience to understand and, hopefully, also to accept and believe. The songs therefore occupy a midway position between totally spirit-composed and totally human-composed. Avo’s reported speech in these particular songs is decisive: (i) giving clarity at a moment in the island’s history when information of the leader’s fate after death was a matter of general concern; (ii) bringing evidence of Avo’s spirit’s
guidance to fishing activities, always interpreted as possible only if the spirit has safely arrived in the clan afterworld; and (iii) providing confirmation of Avo’s preferred choice of successor.

Avo’s death in January 2009 marked the latest in a series of unexpected and unprecedented events in Takü which has affected the integrity of the patrilineal descent line for the last half-century. In Avo’s case, the succession line was changed, not because the death itself was unexpected (he had suffered from asthma and diabetes for several years) but because of the coincidental absence off-island of his chosen successor combined with the need for that successor to be present at the burial in order to allow Avo’s *mouri* ‘spirit’ to transfer his spiritual authority. After his own appointment, Päisia told me that he was completely surprised—and therefore unprepared—at the announcement. Shortly after assuming the chieftainship role, he left the island for medical treatment in Australia, where he has been living for several months. A stand-in, Francis Puäria, was appointed in 2010 and is still there in 2011.

On a broader front, the songs composed and sung for Avo’s *tukumai* present a microcosm of the limitations faced by researchers, particularly ethnomusicologists, when the sole or primary research source material consists of song poetry. Had only the lyrics of these particular four songs existed for purposes of study, they would have yielded potentially erroneous information:

- stripped of their background, the lyrics would present a quite misleading image of the *ariki*, in particular his fishing skills;
- stripped of their encoded cultural information about the position of the *ariki* within the community, the songs would appear to be nothing more than a narrative account of a fishing activity;
- alternatively, but stripped of the songs’ performance history, they might be interpreted as enduring markers of an highly significant event in the island’s history and likely to be preserved in further performances into the indefinite future out of enduring respect for the chief. But none of the songs has been sung a second time in public in the past 12 months and, even one year later, the original singers were having trouble remembering the lyrics at all.8

An examination of these song lyrics reveals more than just ethnographic detail:

- it discloses the workings of poetic diplomacy;
- it demonstrates how the incorporation of messages from the spirit world can be used to publicly confirm wishes and instructions given privately about future events—in this particular case, Avo’s wishes concerning the future succession of the *ariki* position;
- it illuminates the unseen efforts to ensure that the commemorative farewell of a leader loved but not universally respected could be made to fit into
existing poetic conventions without gross bending of the truth or causing offence to his family; and
• it identifies and highlights the abstract qualities of respect and compassion.

These dimensions of importance do not diminish the fact that, for Takū and indeed much of Polynesia, singing exists as the vehicle for the transmission of the song words and is thus a means to an end. Singing represents a culturally elevated form of verbal utterance and a good poet is more likely to be remembered longer than a good singer: outstanding poetry outlives a beautiful voice. One reason why the beautiful voice is a relatively new concept in Polynesian music generally is that most singing represents group behaviour within a performance context intended to foreground essentially communal views and values; the role of the individual singer is correspondingly reduced.

Of course, such a situation does not preclude an individual person being the focus of a group song; each of Takū’s 300-plus tuki composed and performed over the past 20 years, and doubtless long before, commemorates a single dead resident. In articulating relationships both among the community and between the community and the supernatural world, qualities of affection and commitment tend to be fore-grounded. The songs for the ariki Avo demonstrate both of those qualities. Affection is demonstrated by a focus on the extended family as a key social unit of Takū society and, by naming Avo’s family members and acknowledging him as a family man, the composers and the singers are affirming Avo as being one of them, i.e., by a focus on social inclusion. Commitment is demonstrated in preserving the dignity of a traditional leader by focusing on his positive attributes and diplomatically elevating his real skills into idealised scenarios such as fishing, i.e., by a focus on cultural inclusion.

Despite the severance that death brings, and perhaps as a counter to that severance, the songs for this dead ariki focus on several kinds of continuation. The songs speak of not just continuation of the position of ariki, but continuation that has been approved by the previous ariki, first in physical form and later in spirit form. The songs celebrate the belief that death does not bring about a total dislocation, thanks to ongoing spirit communications with the living. Death is, rather, a kind of relocation to another, partially accessible, plain of existence. In that respect, the expression of Takū belief appears to operate within a three-phase process: traditional religion is founded on principles some of which relate to death and the afterworld; the poetry of songs affirms particular instances of such tenets; and the act of singing combines the principles and the particulars in ways that proclaim a shared humanity providing a degree of communal comfort and of ongoing hope for the island’s future, and a poignant and enduring sense of social unity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for the eight periods of fieldwork on Takū between 1994 and 2010 and totalling 20 months came from UNESCO's Territorial Survey of Oceanic Music, a Marsden Grant, a McCarthy Fellowship grant, Television New Zealand, and internal funds from the Department of Anthropology and the Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Auckland. Extended residence on Takū itself was made possible only by the generous support of the Ariki Avo and the island's Council of Elders, and by the generally welcoming attitude of the community at large. Natan Nake and Tekaso Laroteone were my able research assistants both on and off the island.

This essay is an extended version of a lecture delivered to the Research Symposium of the New Zealand School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington, in May 2011. I am grateful to the two anonymous referees, and the editor, for their constructive comments.

NOTES

1. All the male ancestors were spirits (aitu) but some human (tama) females were brought from other islands, and their descendants in due course populated the island with humans.

2. In 1994 the ariki Avo formally adopted me into his family during my first visit: he gave me the name of his own great great grandfather, set aside a small house for me to use while living on the island, and allowed me free access to himself over the following 18 years. In return, he requested various forms of assistance for family members on and off the island.

3. McLean’s very comprehensive summary of Polynesian music (McLean 1999) identifies dirges and laments from more than 20 island states.

4. The period between the death and the ritual is to allow taro to be planted and grow to maturity for harvesting and then public display and distribution in the course of the ritual. See also Moyle 2007:75-6.

5. The songs’ composers smiled when I asked them why and said, “What fish?” It seems that a rule can be bent only so far.

6. By convention, and for reasons of line length or isorhythm, a proper name appearing in song poetry may be shortened by the removal of a syllable (e.g., changing Ausi to Usi in song 4) or lengthened by the addition of the definite article “te” (e.g., changing Loea to Te Loea in song 3).

7. In the song poetry presented below, I have abbreviated hakamau hua to hmh, and distinguished the first and second parts of each verse by the letters a and b after the appropriate numeral. A comma follows any vocables to distinguish them from the line proper. I have not reproduced vocables in the translations.

8. Stripped of their musical context, the singing might sound exotic, but there is nothing new in the melodies: all four use stereotypes that have existed for at least two generations.
REFERENCES


ABSTRACT

This paper uses the lyrics of four songs composed in 2009 for a recently dead *ariki* on the Polynesian outlier of Takū as a critical tool to examine community attitudes towards the institution of *ariki* itself on the island. Diplomatic choice of poetic expression smoothed over both limitations in the *ariki*’s accomplishments while in office and potential problems surrounding the nature of the appointment of his immediate successor. The lyrics also incorporate the *ariki*’s after-death instructions concerning other matters vital to community welfare.

*Keywords:* Takū, *ariki*, songs, religion, Polynesia