

'Atenisi:
six terms of
reference for an
Athens of the Pacific

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The conservative avant garde

The western university of the past 20 years is a virtually unrecognisable cousin of its predecessors. Futa Helu's ironic method of assuring the continued quality and relevance of education in Tonga was thus to point to the roots of western academia in criticism, the importance of the formal disciplines and classical heritage, whether Tongan or western.

In an environment like contemporary Auckland, which often celebrates what Dostoevsky called 'that apparent disorder that is in actuality the highest degree of bourgeois order',¹ Futa Helu would have preferred the quietude of a discussion of the Greeks around the kava bowl, followed by the song-roused harmonies of a composition by a great Tongan classical poet such as Queen Salote or Malukava.

In Futa's words: 'Many have brought a branch of the tree of knowledge back to Tonga *but I uprooted that tree and I planted it in Tonga*'. That tree has proved to be a potent vehicle of dissent in the small Pacific kingdom and it has disturbed some of our film's Tongan and *palangi* viewers alike. The conservative 'Atenisi *avant-garde* thus exposes the anxieties and the ironies of contemporary cultural politics as well as problematic discourses around freedom and innovation.

1. Quoted in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (London: Verso Books, 1983), p. 88.

Unity as disturbance

In a world of awful global sameness, where fragmentation has been elevated to the level of aesthetic virtue, a reactionary draconian order weighs in to balance it with an excess of legalism, decorum and nostalgic form. By contrast, an 'Atenisi graduation celebration does not stand on ceremony. There are no dour processions to organ music.

The Tongan word *malie* expresses a joyful harmony that also intensifies the surrounding social order. Visiting lecturers from western societies often fret around graduation times at 'Atenisi because preparations for the big event seem to be too casual or unhurried. Soon they realise that this is because everyone knows their role in Tonga. Social events can come together very quickly, without the need to broadcast an intricate planning schedule.

The huge number of mats and tapa cloths that extended families would gift to Futa Helu and his university, above and beyond the required student fees, is also an indication of the grassroots support that 'Atenisi has enjoyed, despite the school's controversial position in Tongan society.

Loud cries, music and dance are simultaneous manifestations of *mafana* or emotional warming of an environment—what Futa, following Aquinas and James Joyce, would call the heart-warming aesthetics of *fulgente*—the vital complement to the unifying qualities of *claritas*, *integritas*, *consonantia*. As he once said during a graduation speech: '*Oggi, tutti sono in fiori*—today, everyone is in flowers!'





Independence of the knower and the known

The essence of the philosophical realism that Futa Helu inherited from his teacher John Anderson at Sydney University is expressed in the idea of the independence of the knower and the known. This translates into other ideals of independence—the independence of the knower from the state, of the knower from the church and of the knower from the global economic hegemony.

Philosophical realism comes easily when you are surrounded by pigs and the daily work of subsistence cropping. Political independence is also fairly easy to spot in Tonga, because power is so visible. In today's economically 'developed' countries, power structures are more difficult to perceive, hidden as they are within the language of career pathways, roles, reporting lines, functions, incomes and outcomes, quality assurances and service models, etc.

Almost by default, 'Atēnisi Institute has always preferred the way of life of the dreamy intellectual, at the expense of bureaucratic efficiency. Unfortunately the creeping standardisation of the global accreditation system has jeopardised 'Atēnisi's chances of continuing to do its own thing.

In Futa Helu's words:

Education has been hijacked by commerce and industry to produce obedient, uncritical followers of western-style consumerism, never before has the university been less of a critic of society than it is now. We need an educational system anchored in the classics and the objectivity provided by the scientific method—an education with a distinct character, a distinct morality and a distinct way of doing things.

Thinking as the art of unwrapping

In one of an eloquent series of musings on the recent goings on at 'Atenisi Institute in his blog [Reading the Maps](#), the poet and sociologist Scott Hamilton recalls a lecture by the current Dean of 'Atenisi Institute, 'Opeti Taliai, on the Tongan word for thinking—*fakakaukau*. It turns out that the word also means to *bathe* and it is related to the word *'au'au*, which means *scraping or unwrapping*. Hamilton notes how gentle the Tongan metaphors for thought seem to be, in contrast to the commonly brutal western notions of thinking as cutting, piercing or penetrating.

According to Hamilton's chronicle:

'Opeti also reported that, during some of the thousands of lectures he gave at the school he founded, Futa Helu linked the act of thinking to the deflowering of a huge idol which apparently once enjoyed pride of place in a godhouse on a Tongan island. The idol, which was wrapped in tapa cloth, had been consulted, during solemn and visionary ceremonies, for decades or centuries, by a fearful and reverent populace. When traditional religion began to collapse in the early decades of the nineteenth century, though, a group of Tongans entered the godhouse and unceremoniously removed the idol's tapa cover. After stripping off layer after layer after layer of tapa, the startled defilers discovered that the idol they had worshipped for so long was nothing more than a small seashell. By unwrapping the idol, Tongans had exposed an important truth.²

Futa Helu's method of unravelling *tapu* was constant but gentle, indirect and Socratic. It was only in this way that he managed to survive the reactionary onslaught of the Tongan government and society to ideas that were in fact very subversive. As he says in one of the more controversial parts of our film: 'There are no taboo fields. Taboo can be beneficial in some cases [. . .] but it is really destructive to the gullible'. On the other hand, he also told me privately that *tapu* was inescapable—it could only be twisted, transformed and renovated—made into new forms. In the best sense, Futa was a paradox.

2. Scott Hamilton, 'Bathing and Sweating', [Reading the Maps](#) (15 April 2003), online at <http://readingthemap.blogspot.co.nz/search?q=bathing+and+sweating>





Acceptance and Thy will be done

As an 'Atenisi advocate, I was often frustrated by Futa Helu's almost complete rejection of planning and his fatalistic attitude to his school's apparent languishing state. Informed by his teacher John Anderson's disdain for any form of engineering, it was as if he was quite happy to go down with the ship as long as his dignity and purity of intention remained intact. There were still no strategic annual plans in sight at 'Atenisi.

At several moments over the past seven years, it has seemed as if we were recording the end of the school. Yet despite Futa's passing, 'Atenisi is once more showing an extraordinary resilience. A new administration has given it renewed economic independence and new means with which to articulate its values in the face of the globalised educational bureaucracy. The school is producing many great students and it persists, of course, in the minds of hundreds of Pacific scholars, artists, ethical business people, activists and even clergymen around the world.

Viva 'Atenisi!