

Heka he va'a mei popo: Sitting on a rotten branch of the breadfruit tree: Reading the poetry of Konai Helu Thaman: Commentary from 2011

BRIAR WOOD

It is a mark of the most inspiring and influential of poetry that it keeps growing in your mind long after you have read it. That's how I think of Konai Helu Thaman's poems – they carry on doing what they are doing in a way that is linguistically economical and luxuriant. I don't use the active word 'doing' here casually, nor do I propose an organic metaphor – the poems as plants - without due consideration. I've had a long time to reflect since first meeting the poems and then the poet herself, to conduct an interview in the process of writing the article republished here.

I remember well that her first response to my questions about her poems was to take me around the garden in the grounds of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji and show me a number of the plants I was asking about, but had not seen. Like the poems, which I came across as a university student in the 1970s in Aotearoa New Zealand, there are layers and layers of historical meaning attached to the plants. As a reader, it is a joy and a challenge to keep working to understand them.

Knowing of Konai Helu Thaman's enduring commitment to education, it is reassuring to think that the practical and applied side of her work will continue to be felt in educational practice, as her poems reflect and intensify this process. Having the privilege of writing on her poems as part of a research project opened up a global and a wider Pacific perspective – her educational years in the US bringing a wide-ranging knowledge of cultural and political theory, as did her Tongan cultural connections and her extensive travel in the Pacific. I was grateful in turn, to my own literature teacher Aorewa McLeod, who supported the writing process and published it.

There is courage in the poems in speaking out against political wrongs, 'ofa for people, plants and places, ecological awareness, unflagging support for women's education and the improvement of social conditions in the Pacific Islands generally. The arts in Fiji have played a vital role in creating cross cultural communication and social cohesion through difficult political times (the tensions in 1997 - 1998 Fiji while working on this essay were palpable) and the poems of Konai Helu Thaman have been key texts in this process. The subtlety and range of the poems as political commentary will continue to unfold to attentive readers, as Sina Va'ai's study *Literary representations in Western Polynesia* has shown. To have seen the many aspects of her work taken up and amplified by the next generation of fine women poets such as Teresia Teaiwa, Sia Figiel and Selina Tusitala Marsh has been a real pleasure.

If the essay, in tribute to the poems, reveals much about the political moment it was written in, there is still a great deal to say about the poems in their Pacific context, their tā and vā, their past, present and future, and I look forward to future developments in this area.

b.wood@londonmet.ac.uk