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IS THE FATHER'S SISTER REALLY "BLACK"?

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The late Garth Rogers' article, "The Father's Sister is Black": A Consideration of Female Rank and Powers in Tonga (Rogers 1977), takes its title from a translation of the Tongan saying *Koe 'uli'uli 'amehekitanga*. Of the context in which he heard the saying used and its possible meaning, the author writes:

A Falehau widow once told me that her late husband's eldest sister was the person with ultimate control over her eight children. When I objected that this woman was old, lived on a nearby island, and was of comparatively low status, the widow replied: *Ko ia, kako e 'uli'uli 'amehekitanga*. 'True, but the father's eldest sister is black.' . . . I am unable to provide an exegesis for the metaphorical meaning of the saying, *Koe 'uli'uli 'amehekitanga*. The blackness of the father's eldest sister may refer to the power to curse (? the black-heartedness); it may refer to the mystical powers (? over ancestral spirits), as recorded by Collocott, Gifford, Beaglehole, and Bott (Rogers 1977:162- 3).

The purpose of this present article is to show that Rogers' translation of the saying into "the father's (eldest) sister is black" is incorrect and that, given the correct translation, the interpretation of "blackness" to refer to mystical powers or the power to curse can be eliminated.

It appears that Rogers' misinterpretation of the saying originates from his erroneous translation of the Falehau widow's words, *Ko ia, kako e 'uli'uli 'amehekitanga*, which is "True, but the father's eldest sister is black" (see above). What the widow's words really meant was, "True, but it is a blackness that is possessed by a father's sister" or, more idiomatically, "True, but it is the blackness of a father's sister." "Blackness" is used here by the widow to refer to the negativeness of the old woman's situation, specifically her old age, her living on a separate island and her comparatively low status. The implication of the saying is that such a "blackness" in a father's sister really does not matter because a father's sister will always be culturally powerful and high-ranking on account of her birth. This cultural greatness of the father's sister is not explicitly stated in the saying but is taken for granted because it is part of the native speaker's tacit cultural knowledge.

The saying, then, does not mean that a father's sister is necessarily "black" or that all fathers' sisters are "black". Rather, it means that, should circumstances be such that a father's sister is "black" (and it is in such circumstances that the saying is normally used),

that “blackness” would be inconsequential. The cultural greatness of the father’s sister is emphasised by the implication that any incidental “blackness” on her part would not detract from her already ample cultural powers. The idea of mystical powers or the power to curse is, thus, not contained in the word ‘uli’uli (black) but may only be inferred from the implied greatness of *mehekitanga* (father’s sister).

Tupou Pōsesi Fanualofanga, in fact, gives the correct interpretation of the saying when she explains that “even a woman of lowly social status and ritual insignificance (that is, even a woman who is “black”) has special powers as a *mehekitanga*” (Rogers 1977:163, note 23). “Blackness” in Fanualofanga’s interpretation refers to an incidental circumstance, not to an inherent characteristic of fathers’ sisters, as Rogers’ gloss “the father’s sister is black” indicates. If “mystical powers” was substituted for “black” in Fanualofanga’s gloss, the result would be “even a woman who has mystical powers has special powers as a *mehekitanga*”, which would not be logical in the context in which the saying was used. Unfortunately, her interpretation, although briefly mentioned in a footnote, was discarded in favour of other speculations.

It is not difficult to see how the saying *Ko e ‘uli’uli ‘a mehekitanga* could easily be misinterpreted: its syntactic structure is subject to two different meanings, only one of which is the normal interpretation of the saying. Native speakers of Tongan would be able to identify the intended meaning largely because the saying shares the same syntactic structure with other common Tongan proverbs that are all interpreted according to the same broad principles (see below). It would appear from Rogers’ translation of the saying that he chose the wrong meaning and discarded the meaning normally attributed to the saying.

Ko e ‘uli’uli ‘a mehekitanga can be analysed in two ways according to its two possible meanings. The first of these, (A) below, is not the intended meaning of the proverb but is very similar to Rogers’ gloss and may, thus, account for his misinterpretation of the proverb.

	Predicate	Subject
(A)	<i>Ko e ‘uli’uli</i>	<i>‘a mehekitanga</i>
	pred. marker A. black	abs. father’s-sister
	“Father’s sister is a black [one].”	

(A) literally means that (the) father’s sister (either with a generic or specific interpretation) is a black (dark-skinned) person. Compare this meaning to Rogers’ gloss, “the father’s sister is black.” According to him, this “blackness” may be metaphorically extended to refer to black-heartedness, the power to curse or mystical powers. There are two reasons, however, why this interpretation may be eliminated. First, as will be shown below, the proverb is only one of a number which have the same syntactic pattern and are interpreted in a certain way. That way is not how Rogers has interpreted the saying. Second, the strong association between blackness and evil in English (thus, black-heartedness) is not paralleled in Tongan. As far as I have been able to determine, ‘uli’uli, the colour black, has no connotation of evil in Tongan.

The unreduplicated form *'uli*, from which *'uli'uli* is derived, can be used to mean black or, more correctly, dark-coloured, such that we find words like *lō 'uli* (black ant), *ngatu 'uli* (tapa cloth dyed black) and *taka'uli* (black bruises), but this use appears to be neutral. The other meaning of *'uli* — dirt or dirty — is associated not so much with evil as with sexual impropriety, such that *fie'uli*, literally wanting to be dirty, means to be filled with sexual desire; *anga 'uli*, literally dirty mannered, means to be promiscuous; and *lea 'uli*, literally dirty speech, refers to taboo words denoting sexual parts of the body or sexual activities.¹ The word that does seem to be associated with evil (among other things) in Tongan is *po'uli* or *pō*, literally night, but the association is not so much motivated by the black/dark colour (*'uli'uli*) of the night as by the night's lack of light and illumination, suggesting secrecy, invisibility and deception. Thus, *fakapō* is the word for murder. What should be noted about the word *'uli'uli* is that it is unfavourable when describing skin colour. Blackness of complexion is regarded as physically unattractive or ugly. This probably originated from an association of black/dark skin with (a) being dirty or *'uli* (thus, a black-skinned person may be derogatively referred to as *mata 'uli*, literally dirty face); and (b) having a low status in society (thus, necessitating working for long hours in the sun and getting "black" as a result). But, even with these associations of *'uli'uli*, there is nothing there to suggest the idea of evil in the way that blackness may connote evil in English.

A second way of analysing the structure of the proverb, this time in accordance with its intended interpretation, is as a nominal phrase in which a head noun, which may be called the headword, is qualified by a noun adjunct, which may be called the qualifier, as follows:

	Headword	Qualifier
(B) Ko	<i>e 'uli'uli</i>	<i>'a mehekitanga.</i>
	Topic A. blackness	of father's-sister
	"It is a/the blackness of (a/the) father's-sister"	

(B) literally means it is a/the blackness of a/the father's sister. To understand the point of the proverb, however, one has to recognise a *semantic contrast* between the two parts of the proverb, the headword and the qualifier. To recognise this semantic contrast, one has to have certain *cultural* or *real-world knowledge* about the headword and/or the qualifier that is not actually stated in the proverb because it is shared by users of the language. Without this knowledge, the contrast will not be recognised and the intended meaning of the proverb easily overlooked. Whereas in (A) the contrast is nonexistent, in (B) it is central.

Because this semantic contrast is not always immediately apparent (thus obscuring the point of the proverb), several proverbs with the same structure as (B) are given below to illustrate how the semantic contrast in each case implies the point of the proverb. Each proverb has two parts: the *headword*, which denotes a quality or state, and the *qualifier*, which denotes a living thing or an object. The semantic contrast contained in the proverb is either that the headword has a "negative" meaning while the qualifier has a "positive" meaning, in which case the "positive-

ness” of the qualifier overrides the “negativeness” of the headword, or the headword has a “positive” meaning while the qualifier has a “negative” meaning, in which case the “negativeness” of the qualifier overrides the “positiveness” of the headword. In other words, the value of the qualifier always modifies the value of the headword.² I have included a Samoan proverb as the last of each type to suggest that this proverbial form is not exclusively Tongan.

“NEGATIVE” HEADWORD “POSITIVE” QUALIFIER

1. *Ko e pala* ‘a *kahokaho*.
Lit. the rottenness of kahokaho [species of yams].

(Unstated shared knowledge: This kind of yam is the “chiefly” variety and therefore the most prestigious.) Implication:³ A kahokaho may be rotten, but it will still be preferred to other varieties because of its “chiefiness”.

2. *Ko e tautehua* ‘a *niumotu’u*.
Lit. the hanging-by-itself of mature-coconut.

(Unstated shared knowledge: A mature coconut has many uses.) Implication: There may be only one mature coconut on the tree, but its uses are many.

3. *Ko e si’i* ‘a *ma’anga ngako*.
Lit. the smallness of mouthful-of-fatty-food

(Unstated shared knowledge: Fatty food is both delicious and filling.) Implication: It may be only a small quantity of food, but it will satisfy the appetite because it is delicious and filling.

4. *Ko e ‘auhia* ‘a *motu’a fānifo*.
Lit. the being-swept-away [by the current] of surfing man

(Unstated shared knowledge: A “surfing man” is an expert surfer with much experience in riding the breakers.) Implication: If an expert surfer is swept overboard, no one need worry; he will save himself.

5. *Ko e sosā / sosa’a* ‘a *tangata puli*.
Lit. the troublesomeness of disappearing man

(Unstated shared knowledge: A “disappearing man” is a temporary stayer. It often refers to a person who is soon to die.) Implication: The troublesomeness of a temporary stayer is easier to put up with because of the knowledge he will soon pass on/ pass away.

6. *Ko e tutungia* *'a hulu Tungua.*
 Lit. the being-shrivelled of dry-leaf from Tungua
 by-heat

(Unstated shared knowledge: Hulu Tungua ("Tungua dry leaf") symbolises the Tamahā, daughter of the Tu'i Tonga's sister. The Tamahā was the highest-ranking individual in ancient Tonga. Tungua is an island in the Ha'apai group where the Tamahā used to live.) Implication: The Tamahā or chiefly person may be old, ugly or deformed, but she will always be served, loved and respected because of her high status.

7. *'O le mamao* *a si'u tila.*
 Lit. the distance of masthead

(Unstated shared knowledge: When an approaching sailing boat is still far-off, only the masthead is visible from the shore. The masthead, thus, symbolises the approaching boat.) Implication: The boat may still be distant from land, but it will eventually arrive.

"POSITIVE" HEADWORD "NEGATIVE" QUALIFIER

8. *Ko e fe'ofa'aki* *'a kakau.*
 Lit. the mutual love of swimmers

(Unstated shared knowledge: The kind of swimmers referred to here are people who have been swept overboard or whose boat has capsized in a storm at sea.) Implication: The swimmers may sympathise with one another in their peril, but they are unable to help one another because each person is struggling to save his own life. Thus, in terms of helping one another, the swimmers may just as well be enemies.

9. *Ko e tonuhia* *'a faiekina.*
 Lit. the innocence of one-who-is-oppressed

(Unstated shared knowledge: An oppressed person is not heeded and often does not have the right to explain.) Implication: The innocence of an oppressed person is useless to him; he may just as well plead guilty.

10. *Ko e kāinga* *'a moa ta'ane.*
 Lit. the being-related of breeding cock

(Unstated shared knowledge: Breeding cocks have a tendency to fight, so they

symbolise people who constantly fight among themselves. On the other hand, relatives are expected to live peacefully among themselves.) Implication: Some people may be closely related but they have a habit of fighting among themselves, so they may as well not be related.

11. *Ko e 'ofa 'a fine pa'a.*
Lit. the love of sterile woman

(Unstated shared knowledge: Because a sterile woman has no children, she cannot experience the depths of maternal love.) Implication: A woman may profess to love children very deeply but, if she is sterile, her love is not real.

12. *Ko e tu'akoi 'a 'ōfato.*
Lit. the being-neighbours of white-grubs

(Unstated shared knowledge: Several white grubs can live closely together in one dead branch, but they cannot move about.) Implication: Some people may be neighbours but they do not see, help or interact with one another. Thus, the fact of their being neighbours and all that that implies is useless to them: they may as well live far apart.

13. *Ko e mamalu 'a mohuku.*
Lit. the thickness/dignity of long grass

(Unstated shared knowledge: Unlike shrubs of equal length, long grasses are easy to cut down.) Implication: Long grasses may be thick and seemingly formidable to clear, but they are, in fact, easy to cut down.

14. *'O le pulapula a lā goto.*
Lit. the brightness of setting sun

(Unstated shared knowledge: Sunset is transient.) Implication: The general effect of the setting sun may be beautiful, but it will not last long.

It will be seen from the proverbs above that, without the semantic contrast between the two parts of the proverb, there is nothing to imply and, therefore, no point to the proverb. Where the qualifier is “positive”, as in Nos. 1 to 7, the contrast serves to highlight that “positiveness”, so this first type of proverb tends to be used in situations where someone/something is being praised, defended, justified, and so on (cf. the situation in which the Falehau widow used *ko e 'uli'uli 'amehekitanga*). On the other hand, where the qualifier is “negative”, as in Nos. 8 to 14, the contrast emphasises that “negativeness”, so this second type is often used in contexts where, for instance, the

user is being ironic, sarcastic, or cynical.

Finally, in the case of the saying, *ko e 'uli'uli 'a mehekitanga*, the semantic contrast is that the headword '*uli'uli* (blackness) has a "negative" meaning while the qualifier *mehekitanga* (father's sister) has a "positive" meaning (see above). In order to recognise that contrast and thus appreciate the point of the proverb, one has to have certain cultural or real-world knowledge about '*uli'uli* and *mehekitanga* that is not actually stated in the proverb. A parallel may be drawn here with the proverb, *ko e 'uli'uli 'a fine 'Eua*, literally, '[it is] the blackness of 'Eua woman'. The unstated shared knowledge about the headword, '*uli'uli*, is that blackness of complexion is physically unattractive. The unstated shared knowledge about the qualifier, *fine 'Eua*, is that women from the island of 'Eua were known for being well-kept and closely guarded and were, thus, regarded as sexually pure. The proverb thus means that an 'Eua woman may be black-skinned and unattractive, but she is pure and untouched and, therefore, worthy of being sought after.

I have attempted in this article to explain something of the syntactic and semantic structure of the Tongan saying, *Koe 'uli'uli 'a mehekitanga*, at the same time showing, by reference to other proverbs of the same form, that it is not an isolated case, but only one of a number of sayings that are modelled on a particular pattern in which cultural or encyclopaedic real-world knowledge, as opposed to strictly linguistic knowledge, appears to play a part. It should be noted that the interpretation of the proverb given by Tupou Pōsesi Fanualofanga (Rogers 1977:163, note 23) was indeed correct and should be duly acknowledged.

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NOTES

1. It is difficult to know whether the word '*uli* has always been used in reference to sexual impropriety or whether this use was introduced along with Christianity.
2. Milner (1971) makes an analysis of Samoan proverbs in which it is hypothesised that a Samoan proverb is basically quadripartite, each quarter being analysable into a "good" referent with a plus value or a "bad" referent with a minus value. If the two quarters of a half are both plus or both minus, then the semantic value of that half is "positive", but if they are opposites, the half will have a "negative" semantic value. This mode of analysis, however, does not appear to apply successfully to the kind of proverb I am describing here. The combination of "positive" and "negative" parts of the proverb does not necessarily give a "negative" semantic value.
3. The meaning of each proverb explained under the heading "Implication" is only one level of interpretation. Being metaphorical, the proverb can usually be applied in a variety of situations as long as the ideas are strictly parallel and consistent with the relevant semantic contrast. Thus, No. 2 may be applied in a situation where a minority is not necessarily a disadvantage, for instance, where there are only a few but highly skilled staff members.

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