

Heilala

For this exhibition, I chose to go through the process of creating artificial heilala because of the sacred significance of the heilala in Tonga and my belief that although the heilala is made by me, as opposed to grown in the soil, the sacred can nevertheless be imbued in the object through the intention with which I create them. The piece for this exhibition honours the description of how Heilala was first brought to the Material Plane from Pulumotu (the spirit plane) in branches. It also honours our creative process and how intention and meaning is carried in a thing because of what it represents and the intention with which it is created.

Heilala-Kakala Tapu

*In Tonga, Kakala: fragrant sacred flowers, leaves, seeds, and roots, are used to weave garlands as tributes and to create costumes. Each holds particular significance and when they are used to adorn bodies they signal place, legends, and familial lineage. Kakala, like many things in Tonga, are ranked in importance, valued for the fragrance they hold as well as their beauty. The **Heilala** is our national flower and our Kakala Tapu (sacred), the highest-ranked of all our Kakala. It was brought from the spirit plane, Pulumotu, by a Goddess and gifted to Tongans existing on the material plane.*

Legend describes that the king's fisherman is out at sea fishing for something to take as a tribute to the Tu'i Tonga for the annual Inasi festival. The Inasi ceremony is an ancient harvest festival where the first fruits and the best art, crafts, and even daughters are offered as tribute to the ancient God/King, the Tu'i Tonga. People from all over Moana that were part of the greater Tongan empire would come to present their best to the Tu'i Tonga.

The fisherman takes his special hook reserved for fishing for the king. He travels in his boat close to the island of Kao, a favorite fishing spot, then throws his hook into the ocean. He snares something and when he reels it in he sees a woman whose hair is snared on his hook. She tells him to not be fearful but to carry on fishing and she holds onto his boat and drifts along with him while he continues to fish. After a while, she tells him to meet her on the seashore the next morning because she must go back and pick. She then dives back into the Moana and returns to Pulumotu. Pulumotu is the spirit plane located deep in the Ocean, it is a paradise that holds the gardens of the Gods.

Early the next morning the fisherman makes his way to the beach to await the Goddess. At the break of dawn, he sees her swimming towards him with branches of Heilala entangled in her hair. Together they set off on the pilgrimage to the fortress of the Tu'i Tonga to take his tribute for the Inasi ceremony. The goddess picks and weaves the Heilala blooms into a garland during their journey and the term 'Tui tu'u ' is forever woven into Tongan metaphor. It is to weave while walking, the name of the original configuration, weave, of Heilala. She discards the branches on the roadside where they take root, thereby gifting future generations of Tongans with the beauty and fragrance of Heilala.

¹ as told by the late Masiu Moala in his book 'Efinanga. (Paraphrased and translated by me)

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The proof in the legend is that Heilala is the only flower that is sprinkled with ocean water to keep it fresh. Water from Moana wilts other flowers but it invigorates Heilala and makes it more fragrant. Heilala is kept fresh by sprinkling it with seawater and wrapping it in large leaves until it is ready to be woven together.

Heilala as Talisman and Totem over time

Making a Kahoa (garland) as a gift is an act of love and a celebration and an honoring of the other. This applies to all garlands but the highest and most sacred is a Kahoa Heilala. The time and care it takes to collect the tiny flowers, then weave them together requires true dedication and it is an indication of the admiration and love of the giver for the receiver. The flowers also have a beautiful perfume, an essential component of a kahoa kakala.

Many named heilala configurations have developed over time and they are known to most Tongans. To name a configuration of kakala is to mark it as a configuration designed for a special person or occasion, usually a member of the royal family or a noble person. It is learned and replicated by others and forever called by the name given to it at its first creation.

Kahoa heilala is worn by someone honored and loved, so to wear one is to signal that you are a treasured member of a family, a clan, and the community. It also signals that you are one favoured by the gods. It is a part of our Tauhi-Va, the way we nurture the space between us, our relationships with each other. The significance of Heilala is shown in how it is almost exclusively worn only by us. We make various floral garlands to welcome tourists however heilala is only reserved for ourselves, very special guests, or important personages. Prince Harry and Meghan were given heilala garlands when they visited Tonga recently and Queen Salote wove one for Queen Elisabeth when she visited in the 50s, but otherwise, it is a garland that we reserve for ourselves and only gifted and worn on significant occasions.

Heilala in Modern times

Today diasporic Tongans wear Heilala made out of plastic and other foreign material and I wanted to examine how a garland from our culture, recreated in foreign material, is still a talisman/totem (a thing of power) for us in the diaspora. It doesn't have the fragrance of the actual flowers, it is a representation of the thing itself, however, we still wear it with the same pride as if we're wearing the real garland.

My cousin received a gift of a garland of artificial Heilala from a relative overseas in the mail. When she opened it and held it up she was upset to find that the Heilala was interwoven with seashells. What sacrilege, she declared, how dare they desecrate our sacred flower by weaving it together with shells? Heilala is sacred and must only be interwoven with other Kakala. She set the garland aside and vowed to undo the weave and reconstruct it without the pollution of the shells. This reaction illustrates our understanding of the importance of Heilala, even though it was fake heilala but even having the representation of heilala interwoven with something unworthy is considered a sacrilege.

The power that artificial heilala holds for us, is that it is a representation of something sacred. It represents a gift from the Gods, Tonganess, and culture. Its meaning is known to us and like so much of global indigenous art, the symbolism and what the thing represents is what matters. It is the meaning that is imbued into the creation that makes it valuable. These heilala are made of plastic but because they represent something sacred to us we treat it with the same respect and wear it with the same pride.

Weaving Intention

Intention is a central part of making in Tonga.

We believe that as we create we weave intention and enchantment into what is made such that power and meaning are then carried within, making it a thing of mana.

The intention during the creative process is very important for us, we believe that the love and goodwill that we hold while creating is imbued into the creation.

This is present in all aspects of our lives, including in our traditional birthing practice, in the way we make a wish when cutting a newborn baby's umbilical cord. We envision what kind of life and role the child will play in the community then we cut the cord. We then raise the child with that intention in mind. A kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. When a child grows and becomes someone useful to the community, we say, "their umbilical cord was cut with that intention".

It is the same in the creation of kahoā. When we make kahoā it is to celebrate, beautify, perfume, and honor a person, to show love, and to mark someone as special, this intention is imbued into the kahoā thereby transforming it into a thing of power. It holds the love, honour, and intention of the maker that created it for us, plus the generosity of the gods. In this way, the recipient is given the intention of the maker within the giving of the kahoā.

In this world of fast fashion and instant gratification, and as we reclaim/continue our cultural creative practices we must recenter intention and the understanding that our ancestors had of the act of creating. There must be a junction between our intention and the act of creating, with an understanding that this intention weaves mana into what we make which is then passed down for generations through the object.

I have seen artificial Heilala flowers, produced in factories but the piece I have created is intending to show that what we create is different - that though made of fake Heilala, this Kahoa Heilala is still imbued with all these intentions and still holds the legends and sacredness of Heilala. Though it lacks the perfume of the original it is still a talisman/totem of culture, love, and kinship.