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**Thesis Review: Tongan
Women Talking About Their
Lives by Sandra Kailahi**

Reviewed by
Philip Cass



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THESIS REVIEW

Tongan Women Talking About Their Lives by Sandra Kailahi

Unpublished thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of International Communication

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Sandra Kailahi's thesis, *Tongan Women Talking About Their Lives*, explores Tongan women in Auckland fulfilling leadership roles. About 60,000 Tongans live in New Zealand, the third largest group coming from the Pacific islands but, in keeping with a general trend in New Zealand, very few Tongan women hold leadership roles; although there are some notable exceptions.

Kailahi, herself a noted journalist and recognised figure in the Pasifika community, focuses on two main points: what leadership means to these women, and how gender and culture affects their leadership roles.

Literature on her topic is extremely scarce, although she was able to draw on earlier work by Sinama

Fa'anunu ('Experiences of Tongan Women Migrants at Paid Work in New Zealand', 2007), who documented the dynamics of Tongan women's social and economic experiences of paid work in New Zealand, and Mele Paea's 2015 doctoral study of Tongan leadership and culture in New Zealand public service. Kailahi's own work thus contributes to filling a gap in the existing literature and points the way to opportunities for further research by other scholars.

Her research combines a participatory visual methodology combined with *talanoa*, the traditional Indigenous Tongan research methodology involving face-to-face conversation. As a co-participant she was able to use an autoethnographical approach that employed semi-structured interviews, a semi-structured focus group and reflexive diaries. She describes the two methodologies as complementary, arguing that they allow the participants and the researcher to engage in social conversation, consultation, participation and reflexivity throughout the research process.

In combining *talanoa* with video documentary-making, she is breaking new ground in this area, and her detailed descriptions of the research process – the technical aspects and the difficulties that arose during the process – that she records in her exegesis will be extremely instructive for researchers who want to follow in her footsteps.

She originally intended to release the video at film festivals, but now describes it as an educational resource, because it does not meet the standard criteria for documentaries in this forum. She has uploaded the video she created from the interviews to www.tonganwomentalkabout.com.

Participants in her research include businesswoman Emeline Afeaki-Mafile'o, winner of the inaugural Women of Influence award for Community Service and Social Enterprise in 2014; parliamentarian Jenny Latu Salesa; Sita Selupe, CEO of the Rise Up Academy, the first Pacific charter school in New Zealand; Reverend Setaita Kinahoi Veikune, the first Tongan woman to be Director Pasifika Ministries for the Methodist Church of New Zealand; Salote Heleta Lilo, former President of the NZ Tongan Gay and Lesbian Association, and organiser of the Miss Appraxis Tonga beauty pageant; and youth worker 'Alisi Tatafu.

Kailahi's research underlines the extreme importance of questions of identity in diasporic communities, especially for one as widespread as the Tongan community. Identity became one of the central foci of the research: in her thesis, Kailahi says that, of the women she interviewed, those born in Tonga were more inclined to instinctively describe themselves as Tongan, whereas those women born in New Zealand viewed this differently because of other parts of their ethnic make-up or being first-generation Tongan New Zealanders.

She argues that culture also plays an important role: regardless of whether the women were born in New Zealand or Tonga, they all consider culture or 'being Tongan' an important aspect of who they are. During conversations with the participants, it became apparent that cultural attitudes towards gender roles, especially when coupled with traditional expectations of how people should behave, affected the women significantly. One of the leadership styles Kailahi describes is what Sita Selupe described as Aunty leadership, which she saw as deriving from the social and hierarchal position of women in Tongan society, especially the role of the father's sister.

However, while culture can have positive aspects, it can also present challenges. As New Zealand MP Jenny Salesa, who has campaigned to promote women's involvement in politics in Tonga, has said:

I think it would be fair to say that it was mostly what I experienced from my own ethnic group, from Tongans, that I found quite challenging. ... When you look at the political system in Tonga now you better understand what it is I mean. You have 26 MPs in Tonga and all of them are men. ... Only three women ever have been elected into the parliament in Tonga.

Kailahi's work is an important contribution to our understanding of the role of leadership for Tongan women in New Zealand. However, she argues that there is still much to explore, and suggests that future researchers could compare differences in leadership between Tongan women in New Zealand and in Tonga itself.

Thesis author bio

Sandra Kailahi spent most of her 25-year+ journalism career moving between mainstream and Pacific media, working mainly in radio and television. She has since combined her love of storytelling and expertise in the delivery of innovative communications and media strategies. Sandra is a published author, a playwright and has just produced her first short film, *The Messiah*, while also working on her first feature-length documentary, *For My Father's Kingdom*.

Review author bio

Dr Philip Cass is a Senior Lecturer teaching in Communication Studies at Unitec Institute of Technology. He is Associate Editor of *Pacific Journalism Review* and an internationally recognised scholar on the Pacific media.

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