

THE TALE OF THE KANAHĒ— FROM THE VILLAGE OF LOUTŌKAIANO, FOLAHA, TONGA

AS TOLD TO SIOLA'A FAKAHAU 'AHO

Fangota kihe kato ava
(Fishing with a bag that has holes in it)¹

—Tongan proverb

Editor's Note:

This story was told to the author by Tupouleva, the Matapule of Folaha, Tongatapu, Tonga and Mr. Nimilote Leha, also of Folaha, Tongatapu, Tonga in 1960, and again by Mele Sinai Mone of Folaha, Tongatapu, Tonga Island in 1975.

INTRODUCTION

Tales and legends are not merely entertainment, but hold deep ecological knowledge about sustaining natural resources. The following tale has been passed down for many generations and conveys important knowledge about social relationships and respect for both the environment and the King. In the tale, two women who fish for the King compete over resources—a fish called *kanahē*. One woman finds an abundant supply hidden in a cave and keeps this knowledge to herself. When the other woman discovers her supply, she accesses the fish and accidentally leaves the entrance to the cave open, thus releasing all the fish and reducing the food supply. As a result of this, both women are transformed into stones that overlook the King's bay.

1. This proverb shows that while you can have all the skills and the right attitude, if you don't look after the basic needs, you will fail.

This story has been memorialized in songs, poetry, and place names that tell of the importance of sharing resources and sustainable environmental management. Today, the community of Folaha still observes the fishing *tapu* (prohibition) of this particular fish, which in the tale was depleted by the actions of the two women. This tale illustrates how food security was achieved and taught in ancient Tonga.

THE TALE OF THE KANAHE

There once was a Tongan King named Na‘a‘anamoana on the small island of Nuku, near the village of Nukuhetulu. He had two female servants named ‘Ila and Hava. They were very loyal to him, especially when capturing and serving his meals. These two women were very beautiful and paid much attention to their duties to the King.



In the evening they would go into the water to capture fish. Hava would go west while ‘Ila would swim down toward the small island of Kanatea, just near where Hava was fishing, so that Hava would think she was nearby.

‘Ila would turn and swim east to do her fishing and eventually discovered the cave of the fish called kanahē (mullet), so every time they would go out to fish, ‘Ila would always go to this cave to get all her fish. As they returned to the King’s throne, called Matamoana, ‘Ila would show off with her basket full of kanahē. When it came to Hava’s basket, it would be but poor, with very few small kanahēs.

When the next day came, the same would happen. ‘Ila would proudly present her basket full of kanahē while poor Hava stood and watched with sadness. So it came to Hava one day that she should follow ‘Ila to know where she was getting all her fish. As they set off the next evening into the water, ‘Ila poked her torch flame onto the spot where she usually fished in hopes that Hava would still think she was near while she swam towards Vai ‘o Ika, the fish cave, not knowing that Hava was following right behind her.

As ‘Ila neared her destination, Hava was close behind, keeping a distance so she would not be noticed. ‘Ila opened the cave and caught her fish and then closed the opening and was on her way.

Hava was overjoyed as she opened the cave after ‘Ila left, happily taking all the fish she needed and setting out to return to the King. Hava was so excited that she carelessly forgot to close the opening of the fish cave.



As Hava returned with her basket full of fish, ‘Ila was surprised to see that their baskets had similar quantity and quality of fish. There were no words exchanged—just an eerie stare. A moment later, a loud rumbling sound was heard from the distance as a massive school of kanahē made its way from the cave.

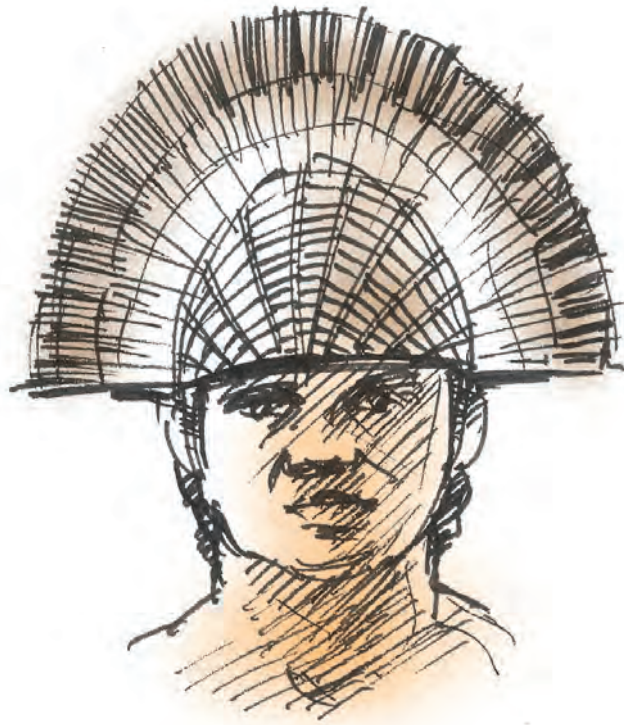
‘Ila knew immediately what had happened. They both ran into the water crying and pulled the edges of the land to close the cave, but it was too late: the fish made their way to deeper water as ‘Ila and Hava cried out “Kana hē!” meaning “the mullet is lost.”

“Kana hē, Kana hē!” they cried. Now all their fish had gone, and there was no way of getting them back. Poor Hava and ‘Ila would stand endlessly at the very spot they were in, sobbing, knowing they had lost all purpose to live now that their fish had gone. Both women turned into stone.

From then on, the two stone women stood facing the island of Mata'ano. In the early days, they were very visible to fishermen and swimmers. Over time, some constant bashing of tides and swimmers abusing the stones and debris caused some slight deformations. Sadly, today they have gone down into the waters and are no more to be seen. It is unfortunate, as these stones and the story of the kanahē

were once wonders of the village of Folaha, as was the Cave of the Kanahē.

In the plantation and water areas of Veito, Veipahu, and Vai Poaki stood the Bay of the King Lokofa in the island of Nuku. All around that area were pools of water. In the aftermath of Hava and 'Ila stretching and pulling the lands trying to save their precious fish, they cry:



*“Send my love to Vai ‘o Ika, which is the Fish Cave.
Vaipoaki and the bay of Lokofa,
Oh! Kanatea, Nukunuku land, and Fasia,
Please await them, as we are unable to withhold our precious fish.*

We pulled Mataika to Haumaniu, our precious fish turn their back, we pulled Mata‘aho, which is an Island, but it was still, we pulled Fieto‘a, but our fish dodge north, Fautaaupe, get up! And await our precious fish while we wait as stones.”

Let it be known to Folaha, Tuvana, and Ha‘aloka Matamoana his throne, and that is the story.”

These are their cries heard from the lands as they cry “Kana hē” while pulling on the lands.

Today, as in the past, it is still *tapu* (prohibited) to fish for kanahē in June because that is when the kanahē are spawning and will travel from wherever they may be to gather in the bay. They travel down to the Bay of Lokofa and spawn there, where eventually the fish ask permission to enter into the waters of Vaipoaki and then turn and head toward Mata‘aho Island to the stones ‘Ila and Hava as they make their way out back into deeper waters. When it is low tide, the tiny little fish are visible as they squirm about and look for deeper water.

Another story tells of King Na‘a‘anamoana, who had a daughter by the name of Veiongo, known as Vei. Her beauty was flawless and one of a kind, so they named the fish cave after her: Veiuu. The Bay of Veiuu now includes the places that surround the bay: Veito, Veipahu, Veisine, Veitongo, and Veimoho.



The beauty of Princess Veiongo was overheard in the islands of Samoa. When the Mana‘ia from Samoa heard of her beauty, he decided to travel all the way to Tonga to see this beautiful princess.

Once he had completed his traditional ceremonial greetings and goodbyes, he departed. Upon departure, Princess Vei told the kanahē to guide the Mana'ia safely back to Samoa. The Mana'ia stood from the edges of Mataika across Nuku and saw the Princess crying. After seeing her cry, the Mana'ia said, “Nuku he Tutulu,” which means, “Nuku is crying.” That is how the village Nukuhetulu got its name.

Another story tells of a bay called Tokonofo, which was located in the middle of the village of Nukuhetulu. *Tokonofō* means “to sit and paddle.” *Tōko* means “a stick used for paddling” and *nofō* means “to sit or stay.” When the King presented himself in this bay, it was prohibited for anyone aboard the canoes to stand taller than him. Thus, the passersby in canoes would have to sit and paddle, which was quite difficult.

Let the chiefs and the people of the land know that the kanahē plays in the ponds and bays, visible in the many waters of the land. This story tells of how the kanahē came to be known by its name and how other words got their names as well. For instance, Loutōkaiano means there were small plants resembling sugar cane, called *tō*, which grew in these pools of water and would only absorb these pool waters. Kai Ano means to eat from the pool, because there was no more free water streaming from the lands being pulled in Folahā. The places and locations of the story still stand even throughout these spawning times of the kanahē in June. No matter where these fish are in the world they have always asked for permission to leave back into the waters, and as the years have passed, they have always asked for permission before entering back to the waters.