

Misa defies political correctness — both palagi and Polynesian



PHOTO: SEBASTIAN VAN DER ZWAN

NADA TIELU talks to controversial columnist Tapu Misa about love, life and religion. Misa reveals the pressures that come with reporting issues many would rather keep under the mat.

ALL SMILES: Tapu Misa at this year's Pacific Media Awards.

It's 11.15am and Tapu Misa is crying. Not bawling, but getting teary-eyed to the point where she has to get up and grab some tissues. It's Thursday and a good day to interview Misa. The deadline for her weekly column at *The New Zealand Herald* is on Tuesday. Her position as member of the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) does not currently require her attention. The kids are at school and her husband is at work.

She looks away for a moment and strands of black hair fall across her face, hiding a pair of brown eyes rimmed with black eyeliner and framed by a pair of sharp, black eyebrows. "I can't talk about it without tearing up," she says. Misa is talking about growing up in New Zealand after spending the first eight years of her life in Samoa - years that she remembers as "free and happy and light". She finds the whole reminiscing process painful, especially when she talks about how the move affected her parents. "My father had a lot of respect." That changed when her family moved to Wellington in 1968. Her father, a lay preacher, had to work three jobs, and

Misa was always worried that he would get sick. She says her parents were disappointed and became disillusioned. They expected New Zealand to be the land of milk and honey. Her mother even had a falling-out with her sister (Misa's aunt), who had convinced them it was worth leaving Samoa to start a new life in New Zealand.

She remembers those early years in New Zealand as "heavy, dark, cold". Looking at her now, it's hard to imagine Misa in such an unfortunate situation. She cuts a trendy figure, sitting at the table in her Onehunga home, dressed in jeans, a black boat-neck top, silver jewellery and a touch of red lipstick. She is 43, although she hardly looks it.

There are family photos sitting on the mantel of the fireplace and a *Malaga* CD on the kitchen counter. Her formative years in Wellington are captured in the artsy feel of the house, which has numerous paintings and drawings, many of them with a Pacific Island theme. It is this theme that Misa uses in her columns for the Wednesday edition of the *Herald*. It is also this theme that has generated the

wrath of many of the *Herald's* more conservative readers. She has broken the rules of political correctness in both palagi and Polynesian societies by writing about issues that many would rather keep under the mat. She has criticised Maori and Pacific people within the health system, supported Maori rights to the foreshore and seabed, and discussed how a lack of meaningful cross-cultural relationships is the main cause of misunderstanding between pakeha and non-pakeha. It is almost guaranteed a letter to the editor fuming about Misa's "radical" views will appear in the *Herald* each week.

Misa bursts out laughing when she starts to talk about her critics. Despite the tears early on, she has a hearty laugh that invites others to join in. She informs me, with a conspiratorial twinkle in her eye, that Garth George selects which letters are to be published. And what does she think of those letters? "The ideas are so 1950s. It's as though the world hasn't changed." She pauses, head tilted to one side. "It's quite interesting."

Gary Wilson, managing director and co-founder of *Mana*, says Misa deals with "very touchy territory" in an industry where the media often reflect their own ignorance and reinforce the ignorance of their readers. "She's a lone voice."

Misa is happy for the negative let-

ters to be published though. She hopes the more times reasonable people see these letters, the more they'll think "Oh my God!" However, Misa says only 2% of the letters she gets are negative. In fact, she stopped putting her email address at the end of the column because she was getting too many responses. "I started to feel very bad. People would write me lovely letters, so I felt really guilty about not being able to write back."

But despite her inclinations to be nice, Misa isn't afraid to criticise aspects of her own culture. Her column on the greed of church leaders struck a chord with many people - Pacific Islanders in particular. She says a lot of people told her she was very brave to tackle such a sensitive issue. Misa was certainly brave to enter an industry where few Pacific Islanders and Maori succeed. She is used to being the token brown person in a workforce dominated by white, middle-class palagi. But she also feels the extra pressure that comes with being a role model. "There is the awareness that you have to be so much better."

"My mother is trying to get me to go back to church because she thinks my life is very sad without it."

This probably explains why it takes her a day to recover from writing her weekly column. Apart from the fact that she gets up in the middle of the night to write it, Misa says she is never happy or satisfied with the end result. "I always want to make it better." Her interest in writing was honed at an early age by her mother, who would buy her books by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. Her parents also encouraged their children to speak English at home. Unlike a lot of Pacific Island girls, Misa wasn't into sports. She describes herself as "bookish".

She went to Porirua College until seventh form, when the family moved to Wainui and she went to Parkway College. "After that my dad said, 'Go get a job.' I wanted to go to university, but it seemed too hard. And they needed the money." Misa's first job was at Government Print, where she worked for a year before being promoted to Maori Affairs. During her time at Maori Affairs, she did an introductory journalism course, immediately making an impression. Wilson, who helped organise the course, says she had the makings of a very competent writer. "There was always a clarity and sparkle to her writing." He says she also came with the advantage of being quite articulate.

As a result, she did a one-year journalism course at the Wellington Polytechnic before marrying another journalist, Sefita Hao'uli. Then came a move up to Auckland, where she worked for the *Herald*, *More* magazine and *North & South*. Misa has also worked for *Mana*. Misa's close friend Helen Whitehead, who worked with Misa at *More*, describes her as "beautiful and charming - like a Greek goddess". Whitehead says Misa was also

notorious for not eating properly.

"Her drawers were full of chocolate. She survived on chocolate."

In 1990 Misa took a few years off to have children. Ten years, in fact. When Misa talks about her kids, it's easy to see what makes her happy. Her eyes light up when she talks about Ema, Adam and David. They are very palagi names for Samoan-Tongan children. "When I was at school, nobody could say my name properly. It was always Tepu or Topu or Tapa." She makes a face. "I still get Tapa."

She's blunt when asked why she took so much time off. "If you are going to have kids, you cannot leave it up to somebody else." This may seem like an age-old concept in an era where childcare facilities and nannies are common. It is strange to hear this from a person who eloped with her husband to avoid the traditional Pacific Island wedding festivities. She admits this probably stems from the Pacific Island culture. "We don't trust strangers to look after our kids." Yet despite her traditional views on childcare, Misa puts her foot down when it

comes to church. "I don't like church." Misa likes having dinner with close friends, a good bottle of wine and a good book. But the daughter of a preacher man is not a church member. "My mother is trying to get me to go back to church because she thinks that my life is very sad without it." Her voice drops a few notches as she thinks about an institution that is still very sacred in many Pacific Island countries. "I dislike organised religion. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in living by the morals that I was taught as a good Christian girl - the basic tenets of being a good, decent human being." Her opposition to organised religion is not a sentiment that everyone in her family shares. Her elder brother has a doctorate from Yale University and is now a minister in American Samoa. Until recently he ran the island's seminary.

But religious differences aside, it's obvious that family, both immediate and extended, is what Misa is most passionate about. And she admits she's lucky to have jobs that allow her to spend time with her family.

She is getting increasingly more requests for help from organisations asking her to either speak to their groups or to join them as a result of the publicity her column has generated. Misa is a member of the Mana Trust and the Pacific Education Foundation. Apart from her column and the BSA, she also does freelance work for various publications. She says she will have to start turning down requests if she wants to continue to play a role in her children's lives.

But she is undoubtedly in a good place at the moment, a far cry from when she first set foot in Aotearoa.

It is now 1pm and Tapu Misa can't stop smiling.