

CLUTTER IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH AND HISTORY: A SAMOAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The transfer of traditional knowledge in the Pacific is often governed by tapu, and sometimes the full meaning of certain knowledge may be lost to the new generation. This is particularly a problem for expatriate communities. Centres of indigenous research and restoration play an important role in preserving traditional knowledge. However, retrieving some knowledge may not be possible without the lifting of tapu.

INTRODUCTION

My brother, who was a beautiful person, died last year. He lived in Samoa, and during his latter years became quite reclusive and very spiritual. During these years I would often say to him: "*Ae a pea e alu ese ma lena pumoo, ae alu e manava seisi ea fou?* – Get out of your cubby hole and get some fresh air! – *Ta o i Niu Sila!* – Let's go to New Zealand!" In one of our last discussions, after repeating my usual request he responded: "*Ou te le mana'o e seu lau vaai ma mea taua o le olaga nei, ma o mea taua lea lalo le isu* – I don't want to be distracted, I want to focus on the most beautiful things in my life and for me they're right under my nose!"

This comment has given me much cause for reflection and sets the tone for this paper.

This paper is about clutter, about the negative consequences of clutter and why we should avoid it. It is about how we as Pacific peoples might identify and sift through the clutter in order to gain appropriate focus, perspective and direction in terms of making sense of our indigenous knowledges and history for the contemporary present.

I want to start by beginning with the assertion that traditional rituals are authentic tools for recording history.

1 Acknowledgements

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi is the former Prime Minister of (then) Western Samoa and one of the paramount matai of Samoa. He is also widely regarded as an articulator of fa'a Samoa and the author of a number of books on Samoan culture and custom. His recent work "*Talanoaga na Loma ma Ga'opo'a*" or "*Intended Conversations with Ga'opo'a*" posits conversation as a methodological tool of analysis. "*Clutter in indigenous knowledge, research and history: A Samoan perspective*" is based on a presentation that was part of the Pacific Research & Evaluation Series of Symposia and *Fono*, Wellington, New Zealand, 24 November 2004.

TRADITIONAL RITUALS, CHANTS AND DANCE FORMS AS RECORDS OF INDIGENOUS HISTORY

For oral cultures like the traditional Samoan culture, rituals, dances, chants, songs, honorifics, family genealogies and names of places, peoples and events were tools for recording indigenous history.

Samoan history is the story of *tulaga vae*, or *turangawaewae*, footprints in the sands of time. For oral Samoa, the languaging and recording of these footprints were done by way of rituals, dances and chants. This is something not fully realised by many scholars, past and present, engaged in writing Samoan history. There are a number of reasons for this, some to do with imperial arrogance, others to do with a lack of indigenous language competency.

I have written now a number of pieces on Samoan rituals and chants that detail their significance as records of Samoan history – in particular, rituals associated with death and dying, house-building and marriage (Tamasese 2004a, 2004b, 2005). In 1994, I also published a piece making the same point about genealogy, honorifics and place names (Tamasese 1994). To avoid repeating myself, I want to make the point here by reference to dance.

The significance of the dance rituals and how dance was in itself a language or communication medium transferring knowledge and history between generations is underestimated. For example, the *mauluulu* or dance ritual of Solosolo celebrates the heroic achievements of their ancestors. And as well, the *tu'iē* of Manono, which is a lament performed through song and dance about their assassinated *Tamafaiga* and the glory that he had brought to the Manono confederation. To this day, the *mauluulu* and the *tu'iē* have not been explored for their full historical potential.

These traditional Samoan dance forms recorded events of importance to the family, the village, the province and the country. We have to capture the meanings associated with these dance forms or else the dance rituals become empty theatre, shallow and bereft of substance. Our traditional chants and dance forms, once explored via their historical significance, are powerful tools for preserving history and maintaining ethnic pride – both important to personal development.

Today we draw more on Christian hymns or European ballads and melodies for our ethnic inspiration than on our traditional chants and dances. When the living legacies of indigenous dance and song are no longer part of contemporary dance and song forms, the depths of our indigenous cultures are lost. Similarly, the fundamentals of Pacific traditional theatre are no less powerful than European theatre and so no less profound. If you want to research indigenous knowledges and histories you have to

research these chants and dances, for these cultural institutions are the history books of our ancestors. If we are going to recapture and keep these legacies then we need to have access to that depth.

The teaching of traditional Samoan dance was by way of rote learning. The full significance of meaning associated with dance forms, styles, movements, etc., was rarely known to the performer. This knowledge was only available to family knowledge custodians. Transferring that knowledge to a wider audience, including those responsible for performing the ritual, chant or dance, was deemed unnecessary in traditional times. The social structure of Samoa at the time negated the need for such knowledge transfers. In fact, to do so would have seriously undermined the role and status of these custodians.

Today, however, the socio-political structure of Samoa has changed. The influence of Christianity, Western democracy and global capitalism on Samoa's indigenous socio-political structure has been profound. The need to lift the *tapu* over certain knowledges emerges as our indigenous knowledges and histories become lost with the passing away of traditional custodians. By tracing rituals, chants or dance forms one can trace historical events. The reliability of these historical records is, as in science, achieved through the corroboration of stories.

Hence in answer to why we no longer have the poignancy of our traditional chants or the pace of our traditional dancing, it is because their full and profound meaning is lost to the new generation. Retrieving such knowledges requires, among other things, the lifting of *tapu*.

LIFTING THE *TAPU* ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

In the traditional setting, the custodians of knowledge were normally of *tulafale* or orator status. The Samoan term for someone who was selected to be a recipient of knowledge was often referred to as *o e nainai*, he or they who are specially selected for the transfer of knowledge.

The knowledge of *tulafale* is sacred as is the transfer of this knowledge to the *nainai*. Generally speaking, *tulafale* were all schooled in genealogical history and in the meanings of mythology, rituals, chants, songs, dances and so on. Senior *tulafale* are known as *tuua*. When *tuua* transfer their knowledge to a *nainai* the transfer is considered to have depth.

Because Samoa was mostly at war during the whole of the 18th century, the practice of retaining and authenticating Samoan indigenous knowledges was hampered. Consequently it is difficult now to assess what is legitimate Samoan indigenous

knowledge or what had been fabricated as a consequence of political partisanship. The mythology of certain political factions became sacrosanct because it had become the core of family and church history.

The passing on of knowledge, especially *tapu* knowledge, between one generation and the next is usually done within the confines of the family. This practice is *tapu* because such knowledges are under the special guardianship of a god – *Atua* or *aitu*, or spirit. The *tapu* knowledge includes genealogical, house-building and fishing knowledges and the transfer of these knowledges to outsiders would incur the wrath of the protecting *Atua* or *aitu*.

Increasingly, authentication of history today depends on the Samoan Lands and Titles Court and the way in which they arrive at their decisions. Any flaw in the Court's decision-making process influences the authentication of their findings.

Last year the Samoan Department of Courts severely restricted access to the Lands and Titles Court records because records were being tampered with and because families were unhappy with their records being available to the public. This restriction, however, disadvantages many who do not have access to the same records held outside of Samoa or who were not able to access these records before the change in policy.

The availability of modern archival technology can go some way to curbing further loss of written records. However, little can be done about the loss that arises because custodians are not sharing their knowledge before they pass away.

The rigid adherence to *tapu* on sharing knowledge requires reappraisal. The reality of some litigants today is that they lose their rightful inheritances not because the substance of their case is wrong but because their rendering of events does not tally with archival records, many of which have not been openly available for public and scholarly scrutiny.

The way that the Lands and Titles Court arrive at their decisions is as much a part of defining history as it is a part of processing claims. Flaws in the process of recording and analysing cases produce flaws in future understandings of Samoan indigenous knowledges and history.

I am criticised by custodians who say that I am abusing my special access as *Tamaaiga* to information. Dissemination is the prerogative of custodians, not of *Tamaaiga*. My case is that a lot of the information is already in archival records and therefore publicly available, or lost when custodians take the knowledge to the grave.

We need to tread carefully when engaging in *tapu* knowledge. The guiding issue in the reassessment of *tapu* has to be about how we ensure that this knowledge continues through to the next generation in a manner and form that preserves its integrity.

RETENTION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Indigenous languages are the lifeblood of indigenous cultures. It is what communicates and gives meaning, form and nuance to the social and cultural relationships between individuals, families and other social groupings. When a language dies, histories die with it and identities change. Here the most nuanced connection between the past and the present is therefore lost to the future.

For researchers who are engaged in searching for meaning, in communicating nuance and giving form and substance to knowledge, the existence of a common language and the need to preserve that language are critical.

By and large the Samoan language is still alive and strong. However, for over a decade now there has been some considerable clutter mounting and inhibiting the flourishing of the Samoan language and knowledges. In Samoa there currently rages much heated debate over how to teach Samoan language. The debate focuses on the written language but has obvious implications for the spoken context.

Today there exist three different schools of thought on the appropriate construction of Samoan language. The first school of thought, mostly supported by the churches and taught within their *aoga faifeau* (or pastor schools), adheres to the language form and devices developed by the Rev George Pratt in the 1890s and used in the writing of the Samoan bible (Pratt 1893, South Pacific Bible Society 2002). It is this school of thought that my parents' generation and mine were schooled in.

The second school of thought emerged under the auspices of Aiono Tagaloa Dr Fanaafi, one of Samoa's first Western-trained doctors of philosophy (Tagaloa 1997). The most significant change directed by Aiono Fanaafi was that of removing from written Samoan the use of glottal stops and macrons. The problem with this is that these were the only devices for noting differences between words of the same spelling whose difference is only able to be captured by way of highlighting the place for appropriate intonation. The rationale offered for the removal of these devices was that they were an unnecessary imposition on the Samoan language and that it was possible to learn and understand written Samoan without their use. Moreover, where a word might indeed be unclear on first reading, it was argued that the meaning would be made apparent by reading the context in which the word is used. A number of Samoan language writings have adopted this line of argument.

The third school of thought is that promoted by Mosel and Hovdhaugen (Mosel 2000, 2001, Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992), two linguists, one German and the other Norwegian. This school of thought arose after increasing controversy over Samoan language competence. It was decided that glottal stops and macrons are in fact necessary and should therefore be reintroduced or at least made mandatory within Samoan language school curricula. However, instead of returning to the rules of language construction developed within the Bible and promoted by the first school of thought, this group developed what seemed to be a new set of rules.

To be able to read, to teach and to use language creatively presupposes the existence of a coherent system of rules for language construction. Without this, the ability to gain effective communication, appropriate information transfer and language development are lost. This should be of concern to all supporters of indigenous language and knowledge.

The evolution of the Samoan language, like any other Pacific indigenous language, is ongoing, and so it is only natural that as times change so too do certain language usages and forms. However, the fundamental components of a language – i.e., the basic structures of Samoan phonetics, grammar and spelling – by and large do not change. To alter or replace these key components is to fundamentally alter the basic rules of language construction. This is quite different from coining new words to capture new contexts or new usages. Changing these basic rules needs careful deliberation by appropriately skilled bodies.

In any case, I provide this example as an illustration of the clutter that can surround the retention of indigenous languages. For me the danger of such clutter is not about protecting indigenous languages from change, but rather about protecting indigenous languages from loss.

The written medium, today, is critical to the preservation of indigenous languages. The traditional methods for learning the indigenous languages of oral cultures like ours are increasingly being replaced by new technologies for learning. The most significant, however, is still the written word.

With regards to the Samoan language issue raised here, for me the question is not about which school of thought is right or wrong, but rather how we in Samoa can resolve the stalemate. The focus should not be on asking how to develop a right school of thought, but rather what purpose it serves.

With Pacific migration to places like New Zealand the importance or significance to migrants of these institutions – of culture, of language, rituals and principles of *tapu* – is no less than that felt by those living in their homelands. However, in places like New

Zealand, where indigenous Pacific cultures are a minority, the amount of clutter to fight through may be considerably more.

PACIFIC INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES IN METROPOLITAN CENTRES

To illustrate the point about the clutter that surrounds Pacific indigenous knowledges today outside of our Pacific homelands, I want to re-tell a story about the problems of giving *meaalofa* or *koha* in New Zealand, recently told to me by a friend.

Recently a Pacific group were commissioned to conduct some work on cultural competency matters, and the process was made interesting by the issue of what would be an appropriate amount for the *meaalofa* or *koha* for the pastor. There were five Pacific ethnic groups involved. Each ethnic group held its own *fono*. One group suggested giving \$2,000 for their pastor; another \$300; another \$100; another \$50; and the amount for the last group was unknown.

When the issue was raised among management staff, one of the *palagi* managers politely asked what the rationale was for having different *koha* amounts. To this, one of the older Pacific spokespersons commented rather curtly, "Well, it's culturally inappropriate to pose that question. *Koha* is *koha* and you don't understand because you are *palagi*." When the differences were brought to the attention of one of the young Pacific project managers, the response was: "\$2000? Is the pastor expected to write the report as well?"

In raising this story I am not belittling the importance of pastors nor the importance of *koha*. Both are a valuable part of Pacific life. What I want to point out is how easily the object of an exercise – in this case, to develop understandings of cultural competencies – can become befuddled and unnecessarily cluttered by competing or unclear designs and by gaps in the transfer of customary knowledges across space and time.

Politicians are often bemoaned as the cause of unnecessary clutter, while scholars, researchers and evaluators are heralded as the poor souls who have to "unclutter the clutter". But agreeing on a methodology for how best to do this is as important to politicians as it is to researchers and evaluators. The exercise of uncluttering the clutter therefore draws as much on professional expertise as it does on personal temperaments and political manoeuvrings.

In the context of Samoa, preserving indigenous Samoan knowledges and histories has meant for me the need to establish a research and restoration centre called *Afeafe o Vaetoefaga*, which seeks to become a centre of research excellence focusing on the restoration of our Samoan indigenous knowledges. It seeks to work alongside similar initiatives in Samoa and elsewhere.

With the migration of Samoan and other Pacific peoples to the metropolitan centres of the world, the methodologies for preserving and enhancing our indigenous knowledges and histories in these centres must similarly migrate. Hence working alongside indigenous institutes and initiatives at home and abroad is critical to restoring culture, bridging knowledge gaps and enhancing ethnic identity, security and health.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this paper, I note a conversation I had with three young Samoan friends over lunch. One was a librarian, one a researcher and the other a health service manager. They were each interested and engaged in developing in New Zealand better understandings of Pacific knowledges, Pacific research models and communities of like-minded Pacific peoples. During this lunch conversation the point was raised about the sometimes paralysing effects of clutter. In reflecting on their talk and on the object of this paper I was reminded of three other conversations.

The first is a conversation between Alexander the Great and the scholar Diogenes, where Diogenes, who when sunning himself outside in the sun, was visited by Alexander the Great. When Alexander the Great came across to Diogenes he stood over him and asked: "Ask of me any boon you like". The scholar merely replied: "Stand out of my sun".

Second is the conversation between two soldiers after the battle of Lutzen between Catholics and Protestants. The battle had caused much devastation for both sides. In surveying the devastation one soldier said to the other: "I wish we were atheists so that we could live like Christians!"

The last conversation was the one I began with, that between my brother and myself.

In all these conversations giving deference and having peace requires acknowledging the advice my brother gave to me, that often we search and fight for things that at the end of the day are far from what matters, because often what matters is right under our noses.

The challenge of this paper is therefore to look carefully at what we have before we dismiss it, to search for meaning and substance within ourselves before going abroad, and to watch for the clutters of life that can unnecessarily impede our focus on what really matters. What matters in the pursuit of indigenous Pacific knowledges is that it survives – and survives because it gives us meaning and belonging. Everything else is clutter.

Soifua.

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