

Spirituality and care of the elderly: Pacific island perspective

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Kia ora, Kia orana, Bula vinaka, Fakalofa lahi atu, Malo e lelei, Talofa lava and Good morning

The phrase “Pacific island perspective” might suggest that there are uniform ways in which people of the Pacific understand themselves. This is far from the truth. Tongans understand being Tongan in Tongan ways. So as Samoans, so as Fijians and so as the many Pacific peoples that have been brought under the category Pacific Islander. Fakatonga, Faasamoa and Vakaviti speak of ways of being Tongan, Samoan, Fijian respectively. But having said that, there are some similarities in core values across the Pacific Islands that inform action, for example, on how Pacific Islanders offer care to the Elderly. These have been collectively described by the late Ratu Mara as the “Pacific Way”. While Mara’s coinage was done in a context of politics, it points to values that are inherent in ways Pacificans deal with each other. These may be encapsulated in the ideas of belonging, of interconnectedness and having and developing right relationships. All these are intricately woven so that the essential hope is for a balance and harmony to exist. These ideas contradict Newtonian theory that objectifies the world but have in common with emerging paradigms through the works of, for example, David Bohm¹, Fritjof Capra² and , Margaret Wheatley³, the recognition that systems theory has a lot to say about how the world operates.

When thinking about the “Pacific way” one cannot help but think about language. Language is spoken of as the carrier of culture but language needs to be spoken and acted out in many forms of communication. Thus language as communication implies that for meaningful communication to occur across the cultural divide all that informs a lived experience of a people, that is, what expresses their spirituality⁴, need be understood. So what of Spirituality and care of the aged?

I saw the newspaper recently an article headlined “woman of dignity fare welled” and described in the text by her son as a woman of “dignity, devotion and love”. This captured my attention because she was 92 and I recalled my mother who died at 94. From a Pacific perspective for an elderly person to die with dignity is to die surrounded by family. This is because to die alone in an institution sends signals that the person has no family. This is an insult to the dignity of the person because of the interrelationships of belonging to family and identity. I want therefore in this paper to discuss some aspects of Pacific spirituality that might inform care for the elderly.

¹ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the implicate order* (Washington: Taylor and Francis, 2007).

² Fritjof Capra, *The web of life* (New York: Anchor, 1996).

³ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006, [1994]).

⁴ I speak of spirituality here as ways of being or ways which have been accepted by communities that leads to optimum life conditions.

I recognize that I am Samoan, so what I am going to say is largely informed by this fact. For example, the name Vaotogo belongs to my mother's extended family and through her my belonging to that family-hence my use of the term "my family". The understanding that underscores belonging for me as a Samoan is that, place, name and family are inseparable because they symbolize and engender belonging.⁵ Samoan cosmology understands place, name and family as integral in genealogical links that go back to origins hence linkages between the divine, the environment and the human family. Thus belonging to the divine and creation engenders a sacred relationship the va- tapuia that extends to the whole of creation.

The terms va and tapu are two Polynesian words that expresses space-time sacred relationships across difference. What do I mean by this? There is difference between subjects who relate to each other whether it be human-human, human-creation, human-divine relation. The difference encapsulates the va. The term va implies space-time dimension. It is in this dimension that communication occurs be it language, ritual, or some other cultural behaviour. The term tapu refers to a sacred essence or sacred relationship. The sacred relationship is derived from cosmological understanding of the origins of creation explained above.⁶ The practical outcomes in behavioural aspects is that in human interaction at all levels actions whether in speech or any form of action between people, the imperative is with faaaloalo. This term connotes respect. The manner in which actions are performed is with faaaloalo for the "other". Faaaloalo is a life in relation with the "other". It may be described as a principle, value, practice, custom or attitude which defines and expresses what it means to be Samoan in human relationships. It is a way of being that is manifest in word and action, the focus of which is doing what is aesthetically pleasing to the other. Faaaloalo is enacted in the va the space that is the point of difference from the other because relationships are governed by the tapu dimension. Va-tapuia relationships therefore govern how one deals the other in human interaction and enacted in faaaloalo. These three aspects are intricately connected. Faaaloalo assumes a listening posture for those in communication. It implies speaking last and allowing the other to speak first. It implies affirmation of the value one places on the other.

Faaaloalo recognises tuaoi (boundary). An example may illustrate this. Sometime ago as a young medical doctor my senior colleagues invited me to perform a pelvic examination on an elderly patient. Instead of making a firm response to the request for a pelvic exam, she

⁵ The concept of "mata" (face) is also connected to belonging. Mata recognises who one is. But from a collective perspective mata also refers to those whose face your face represents. So mata points to origins and belonging. Therefore, to speak to ones face meaning not showing any respect is to also disrespect family who the face represents.

⁶ In terms of creation myths Mercea Eliade contends that myth narrates a sacred history and that it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the beginning in his *Myth and Reality* (trans. Willard R. Trask, London: Harper and Row, 1963). Myths therefore reveal how reality is constructed and how human conduct is shaped by such revelations. Malama Meleisea recognised this and thus begins *Lelalaga: A Short History of Western Samoa* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1987) with a Samoan theory of origin, its creation stories.

says to me: “Sau ia si au tama foi. Talofa e, a e gasegase lava,” (come my offspring, don’t burden yourself,). By addressing me as her offspring/son she was invoking tapu relations between son and mother. It is tapu for sons to see private parts of the mother and therefore it is usurping boundaries and thus not showing any faaaloalo if I were to proceed. To proceed would amount to my being assessed as not having any knowledge pertaining to these boundaries and therefore breaching protocols and at worst not a Samoan. But she also invoked by addressing me as son the idea that young people should respect the elders. Elders are considered the seat of wisdom since they have experienced the world much longer than young people. Thus it would un faasamoa to proceed. And if I were to proceed I would have earned the wrath of the family.

I understand the term faasamoa (the Samoan way), as a kind of shorthand Samoans use to indicate a wide range of things. These include our perception of how our ancestors lived, our persistent concern with propriety and a truly Samoan way of living, to the tension between what many see as conflicting interests of tradition and the need for modernization and development. It suggests that the term faasamoa is a collective terminology that reflects an aspiration for deeper relations that may be perceived to lead to a harmonious way of life.

An example may be seen in a recent panel discussion on what it means to say that a wedding is done the faasamoa way in the present, the panelists agreed that the term faasamoa in the context of a wedding in the present time means that the groom’s family and the bride’s family have met and that they have come to an agreement about how the wedding should be conducted. There are two principles at work here. The first is that a meeting of the two families has occurred. The second is that a consensus is reached following these discussions. All the other decisions follow from this meeting and consensus.⁷ Here, there is a clear linking of decision-making to consensual agreement in a wedding done faasamoa. This aspect of decision-making decries one-sided views. But it does not follow that all weddings in Samoa would apply the same principles. Rather, acceptance of this view indicates what may be seen as an ideal situation because it is premised on a deeper sense of belonging. When one belongs, one would do everything to promote a harmonious situation. Such a situation will exist when all have taken part and have come to an agreement.

Faasamoa then may be called a code. But it is not a totalizing code, since, as we saw in the examples above, there is a malleable and porous attitude to change allowing flexibility and adaptation. The code, I suggest, is something which is sought after or pursued rather than adhered to or obeyed, a process of desire rather than a fixed standard of regulation.⁸ If

⁷ Leaula Amosa, "Fa'aipoipoga Fa'asamoa," in *Proceedings of the Fale'ula: Ministry of Internal Affairs* (Apia: Samoa Broadcasting Corporation, 2007).

⁸ Fa'asamoa may also be seen as a concern for an ultimate way of being that is sought in the cultural processes that command attention, points to the religious nature of communal life setting. Perhaps, this is what Paul Tillich describes as “ultimate concern,” the yearning for something more than ordinary: Cf. D. Mackenzie Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 4. Meleisea (1987), for instance, pointed out that during the Mau movement (a resistance movement to foreign occupation which came to a head during the time New Zealand administered Samoa) the term became a rallying cry for unifying

spirituality is concerned with ultimate ways of being, the term faasamoa (and faka tonga) describes ways of being that speak about aspirations for a truly authentic way of being Samoan (or being Tongan for that matter). In this sense, it speaks of ways in which people seek to bring harmony to bear.

Speaking of harmony, Tui Atua T.T.T. Efi in his paper, "In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoan Indigenous Religion" offered at a recent conference in Apia is instructive. He categorizes the search for harmony as "harmony with the cosmos: harmony with the environment; harmony with one's fellow men; and harmony with one's self."⁹ Harmony is the Samoan equivalent of peace. A search for harmony is a search for peace. Thus, situations and conditions of peace and harmony are always in flux. A search for harmony is part and parcel of the Samoan search for equilibrium in conditions of conflict. The implication is that while there will always be conflicting situations¹⁰ in which we may find ourselves in our locatedness, individuals and communities seek to bring harmony in their locale through various means. In the case of caring for the elderly, the issue is, how can policy, carers and those involved with care of the elderly of Pacific origins bring about care that promote harmony and dignity for them.

What then can I draw from this discussion in relation to the care of the elderly? First, the importance of recognising that a person while in a sense an individual, the sense of belonging implies that person is not complete without family. The phrase "I belong and therefore I am" aptly describes this. Thus, decisions for the care of the elderly are best done in a dialogical manner with the families of the elderly. Failure to do this make optimum delivery of care difficult to achieve. Second, and following from this, the care for the elderly is best given within a family environment. Thus policies for the care of the elderly of pacific origin should prioritize family members as care giver when circumstances allow. Third, the concept of faaaloalo is best kept in the forefront when dealing directly or indirectly with the elderly of pacific origin. Fourthly, to achieve optimum outcomes, one need operate with an understanding the interconnections between values, actions including speech and decision making.

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people for a common objective. Fa'asamoa, in this case, has nationalistic overtones brought on by a feeling of being treated as second class citizens in their own country.

⁹ Tui Atua T. T. T. Efi, "In Search of Harmony: Peace in Samoan Indigenous Religion," in *Pacific Indigenous Dialogue on Faith, Peace, Reconciliation and Good Governance* (ed. Tamasailau M Sualii-Sauni et al, Apia: The University of the South Pacific, 2007), 1.

¹⁰ I use the term "conflicting situations" as a general term to indicate controversial issues in communities, for example, issues of distribution of wealth, the use of power, and absence of participation in decision-making and in the care of the elderly conflict of ideas about actualizing of care.