

Water and the Samoan Indigenous Reference

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It has been suggested that World War III will be about water – about access to quality water. The crisis in Darfur, Sudan, is an example of the devastation possible when exploitation of our forests runs amuck. The tragic consequences of irresponsible deforestation practices on water supply (among other things) affect us all.

There is a story of a smart alec, who asked: water is free, so why am I paying for it? The answer he was given is: “yes, the water is free but the piping that brings the water to you is not!” When I told this story to my friends I was asked: “And, who owns the piping?” It seems to me after reading the information guidelines for your symposium that this latter question lies at the heart of your concerns.

As noted in my address to the UNESCO Pacific Bio-Ethics and Research Conference in November last year, the destruction of our physical environment has not been by accident. Man has been responsible for much, if not all, of this destruction. The toxic waste generated by the mass production and consumption of processed goods and modern conveniences must go somewhere. They go into our waterways and into the atmosphere, both key resources for ensuring a healthy environment.

In protecting our natural resources from toxic waste we protect ourselves. In respecting our natural resources we respect ourselves. To ask the question, but who owns the piping, is to bring to the fore the issue of responsibility, a key concern to all involved in the protection and conservation of our natural environment.

I was asked to provide a few opening words for your conference about the significance of water to the Samoan indigenous reference. Increasingly, the Western

world is taking real cognisance of indigenous knowledges of the natural world. Similarly, indigenous societies are finding Western scientific discourses about nature less abrasive. Often finding common ground requires the operation of grace. By way of addressing some of the themes of your symposium I want to retell three stories central to Samoan cosmology.

The first story is about Sina and Tuna (an eel). The second story is about Apaula and Vaea. And, my third story is about Tāfa'aola.

Water in Samoan cosmology

Sina and Tuna

This is a story about unrequited love where in the end the eel (Tuna) who pines for Sina without avail, eventually kills himself to death. His parting words to his beloved were: “When I die cut my head off and bury it in the earth and it will grow into a tree whose leaves will weave mats and shutters; whose milk will sustain your thirst; and whose flesh will give you food. Every time you dehusk the nuts from this tree you and your descendants will see my face. And every time you drink the milk from my mouth it will be an act of my undying love”.

According to Samoan mythology this is the origin of the coconut tree. The coconut tree is an essential feature of Samoan agriculture and core to Samoan spirituality.

Indeed today the leaves of the coconut tree are still used to weave mats and shutters for houses and to make food baskets. The coconut milk is still the principal beverage in Samoan society. And the flesh of the coconut is still staple food in our Samoan diet. The flesh is often grated and strained using sinnet to obtain cream and make oil. The cream provides flavour and taste to food; the oil can be used for massage and ritual blessings.

The metaphors of this story are present in our Samoan ritual presentations. It is most obvious in the rituals of the *sua* (ceremonial offerings). In *sua* rituals the first offering to be made to a guest of honour is a dehusked green coconut that has been pierced by

the stalk of a coconut leaf. The official acceptance of this offering by the recipients occurs where the orator for the recipient takes the green coconut, removes the stalk and drinks the coconut milk. This gesture is done in recognition of the offering of love shown by the hosts. The gesture relives the mythology of Sina and Tuna and underlines the point about being sustained by undying love.

Unlike the love of Tuna for Sina, the love of Vaea for Apaula is required.

Vaea and Apaula

The Vaea and Apaula story is about the grief of a wife, Apaula, who left Samoa for her homeland to give birth to their first child. On her return to Samoa she finds that her husband, Vaea, has turned into a mountain. In her grief she shed tears. From these tears of sorrow sprang a spring of water. This spring is today found in the village, *Lalovaea* (literally, underneath Vaea) and is called *Loimata o Apaula* (The Tears of Apaula).

In the old Samoan religion people used to come on pilgrimages to *Loimata o Apaula* to bathe, meditate and pray in the hope that the grieving tears of Apaula will bring spiritual and physical healing to their suffering. This story makes the point that grieving tears can bring solace and healing.

While the first story is about how the acts and products of sacrifice (i.e. the gifting of the coconut) can sustain life; the second story is about how sharing in the tears of true love can heal life. Following from this my last story is about how true reciprocity has the power or *mana* to conserve, protect and even revive life. This is the story of Tāfa'aola.

Tāfa'aola

Tāfa'aola literally means “the sprinkling of water to restore life”. It is the name of a spring in Falefa, Upolu. The story associated with the name goes that the emissaries of the Tui Manu'a went to see Tui Atua Leuteleite, a prophet from the Atua district, to reciprocate a favour he had done for the Tui Manu'a. They presented him with a

sacred coconut, a coconut invested with Tui Manu'a's *mana*. In the presentation they pierced the coconut to allow the milk to come out and be sprinkled into the spring. This gesture invested in the spring the *mana* of the Tui Manu'a's genealogy, mythology and spiritual culture.

According to Samoan oral history many warriors killed by wounds inflicted in war or sporting combat were brought back to life when sprinkled with water from Tāfa'aola.

Each of these three stories makes the point that water has a life, soul and story of origin, in much the same way as trees, families and/or villages have creation stories and souls.

According to the Samoan indigenous reference each living thing shares a common story of origin. Water shares a genealogy with land who in turn shares a genealogy with man, the cosmos and the gods. This genealogy is sacred and invests a legacy of responsibility on all living things (trees, clouds, volcanoes, water, animals, people) to respect through reciprocity, the divine balance or harmony they share. This is what Samoans call the *va tapuia* – the sacred relations.

The discoveries by Japanese Professor Emoto about water (author of the book 'The True Power of Water', 2005), i.e. that water has life, *mana* and power; that water is able to feel, is, for Samoans, not new or unusual. The significance of works like Professor Emoto's is that it is evidence that the Western and Indigenous worlds are beginning to find room to accommodate different paradigms of truth. This is a necessity if we are to dialogue meaningfully about the conservation and protection of our environment.

Samoan Principles of Conservation

Samoan indigenous principles of environmental conservation are founded on a particular philosophy of life. This philosophy is implicit in the Samoan saying: "*uaga o manu*" (which is translated to mean: 'rain is a blessing'; lit. *uaga* meaning rain, and *manu* meaning blessing). This saying speaks to the fact that in Samoa there are only two seasons: the dry season and rainy season.

During the height of the dry season it is not uncommon for people to plea to the gods for rain. In early Samoan times predicting the end of a dry spell was done with more than a tinge of hope. When the water or rain finally came, usually in a downpour, it was literally a blessing.

The idea of rain as a blessing is connected to the idea of providence for all good things, from good agricultural planning to carrying good thoughts. The dry season is a testing time for preserving food and water supplies. The visible and sometimes sudden transformation from having a withering or dying plant to an exuberantly green one, or from having a parched spring one minute to having a spring overflowing with water the next, is a welcomed blessing that bespeaks divine intervention. Rain here is considered a blessing because it relieves a burden and helps to rejuvenate life.

Rain causing floods, on the other hand, can take life. This suggests that in the Samoan indigenous reference when water comes after a dry spell it is a blessing; when it comes too excessively, however, it can be a curse. Here the message of rain as blessing or curse is not that it is dependent on the whims of the gods, but that it (rain) is a reminder (when it comes) to us all that the principles of cosmic balance and reciprocity are core to life – to its extinction and rejuvenation – and so dependent on us as much as on the gods for due respect. Rain or water is thus core to life in this sense. In the ultimate Samoans would therefore say water *is* life. This is explicit in the relationship between water and trees.

For Samoans the conservation of water requires that respect be given to trees, to the *tapu* quality of trees and for their part in preserving the quality of water. If you recognise that the tree has a life and a soul, then you must recognise that the tree has a purpose and that that purpose is divinely bestowed. The role of trees in water conservation has been identified by science and indigenous knowledges as having responsibility for cleansing the air and preserving water. Trees are able to catch airborne pollutants by their leaves and bark, and through their root systems are also able to cleanse ground water. Trees preserve water and cleanse the air necessary for man to breathe in ways that man cannot do. Respect for the life of trees ensures that the life of man will in turn be protected.

Traditional Samoan conservation practices also involved taking responsibility for making prudent decisions about scarce resources. These practices operated on a theory of reciprocity. One of the most challenging aspects of Ocean navigation is the culture of conserving water. Because the lives of the crew and passengers depended not only on the crew's skill in reading the stars and their natural surroundings, but also on their ability to conserve limited supplies of water, leadership in water conservation at this level was essential.

To maximise the supply of water during long voyages, Polynesian navigators used natural containers, i.e. the coconut shells provided by Tuna (the eel). But these were not just any coconut shells. Tuna provided a special nut perfect for use as a water container for long voyages, what Samoans call *niuvai* containers. *Niuvai* is a specific coconut tree that produces the largest and roundest nuts. These *niuvai* nuts were named *niuvai* because of their function as 'carriers of water'. *Niu* is the term generally used to describe the nut itself; *vai* is the term for water. On long voyages while the *niuvai* nuts could be taken along for their meat and natural juice, they were used more because they provided the largest natural storing devices for pure water.

Associated with these long voyages are a number of *tapu*. During these voyages water is critical to human survival. The *tapu* qualities of water are linked to the *tapu* of the water container (the *niuvai*), the elements and the people. There is a spiritual connection between the life of the water and the life of the coconut; between the life of a coconut and the life of people; between the life of people and the life of the sea. Each is dependent on each other for survival. *Tapu* offers an indigenous Samoan moral and religious framework that sees a spiritual essence and connection existing in and flowing between all things. Belief in *tapu*, in the spiritual power and essence of *tapu*, was what sustained early Samoan navigators in moments of crisis where survival depended on more than just physical sustenance and intellectual prowess.

In preparing for the long voyage Samoan navigators would seek the protection of the gods, the guardians of *tapu*. In terms of ensuring sufficient supply of water the navigators would prepare their *niuvai* containers by acknowledging through *tapu* ritual the sacredness of every aspect or element involved in undertaking the journey. For example, the navigators recognise that the *niuvai* coconut is a gift from the gods.

When preparing the containers there is a *tapu* on the use of all other parts of the *niuvai* coconut tree. The palms are not to be used for weaving. The *lapalapa* or stems cannot be used for firewood. The only thing that can be used is the coconut, the *niuvai*. All other parts picked from the *niuvai* tree must be ritually thrown into the sea. This is by way of making ritual offerings to the gods to preserve *tapu* and seek their protection for the long journey.

These ritual offerings are celebrations. But they are *tapu* celebrations. The celebratory aspect of these rituals is marked by the word *sami*, which not only means sea water but also celebration. In the case of preparing for a long voyage the performance of the *sami lolo* ritual (i.e. the fermenting of the coconut flesh with seawater) is a performance in celebration of the coming together of the *tapu* of the sea and the *tapu* of the flesh of the coconut (i.e. the flesh of Tuna).

The *tapu* celebration of *sami lolo* and *fono ma aitu* (conference with ghosts/spirits) begins once the sea water is poured into the coconut and the mouth of the coconut is sealed to make *sami lolo*. The *fono ma aitu* part of the *tapu* celebration follows ten or so days after the *sami lolo* ritual begins and is a sunset to sunrise ritual. Both these rituals are performed to celebrate *tapu*. That is, to celebrate (a) the spiritual connection between the tree and the earth (i.e. by piercing the mouth of the coconut and pouring the coconut milk on the earth); (b) the spiritual connection between the coconut and sea water (i.e. by pouring sea water into the coconut and then sealing the mouth of the coconut and allowing for the process of fermentation to happen where the two elements combine); and (c) the spiritual connection between the coconut and man (i.e. at the close of the official *fono ma aitu* ritual there is a celebration by all involved in the ritual, where they partake in a meal in which baked fermented coconut flesh (eel) is the main dish). Eating *sami lolo* is the equivalent of communion in a Christian ritual in that one is believed to be eating the body of Tuna.

In both the *sami lolo* and the *fono ma aitu* ritual celebrations you are calling on the *tapu* of all these things – the land, sea, and the mythology of the coconut – to combine to make the container most sacred. For it is on the *tapu* of these water containers that the lives of the crew and passengers, particularly in long ocean journeys, are secured. Within these rituals the mythology of Tuna and Sina is remembered and celebrated.

These rituals symbolise the Samoan indigenous community's commitment to the sacredness of life implicit in all living things. They provide evidence of a culture of conservation that respects the sacred and presents graphic evidence of how in the Samoan indigenous reference, water, through its various qualities, is celebrated as the giver of life.

In traditional times the Salelesi people were the loyal supporters of the Tui Atua. In recognition of their loyal service they were afforded certain privileges. These privileges included having access to the resources of the Tui Atua and/or his descendants, gifted to him or them at formal presentations. If they were to exercise this privilege, however, they needed to first perform the ritual presentations of the *afti tunu* (i.e. the gifting of fish, usually big fish, together with a large cow and pig) and of the *vaa*. Again, water is a central ingredient in these two presentations. To make my point I want to focus only on the performance of the *vaa* (or boat) ritual.

The *vaa* (boat) ritual symbolises life as a journey towards God and heaven. In the ritual the sex act is celebrated. The performance of the sex act is to underline the point that the link between God and man and man and man is genealogy. And, that sex is core to that genealogy.

To illustrate this the Salelesi performance of the *vaa* celebrates the sex act through taunt and exaggerated theatrics. The performance is a morality play that plays out in jest the power and vulnerabilities of man's relations with God, but as well makes the point that in the ultimate God shares a divinity with man.

In the performance the paddlers chant. Along the way the boat hits a *tu* or large coral formation. When this happens the *foe muli*, i.e. the paddler at the end of the boat who directs where the boat should go, calls out: '*taliu taliu ua mama le vaa*' – meaning 'bailer, bailer the boat leaks'. One of the performers, taking the role of the bailer, comes out of the boat formation and with his *taliu* or bailing instrument makes an exaggerated bailing action where he ultimately brings the bailer to his penis and

urinates into the bailer and then sprinkles his urine over the crew. The message here is that we are all issues of semen, which is in itself mostly water.

The climax of the whole ritual is where the paddlers come before the Tui Atua, their Temporal Lord, and flash themselves to him. The message to Tui Atua is that you are as much a man as we; that we share a common origin and destination – God is Progenitor not Creator and as father of the family he is in heaven awaiting our arrival as much as yours. As a descendant of God we too are therefore divine. We are divine by virtue of our private parts and its power to procreate. So whereas God can take life; we can make life. This is, as the Pueblo native writer Paula Gunn Allen says, a dance between power and vulnerability – man’s vulnerability in that he can not restrain God’s power to take life, although he has the power to make life.

The Salelesi performance is similar to that of court jesters. While on the one hand they are meant to amuse, on the other they in jest make fundamental points about life. A fundamental point in the Salelesi *vaa* ritual is that the sperm and egg represented by urine are mostly water; are core to procreation, and so should be celebrated. The prior value given here to water by the Samoan indigenous religion contrasts markedly with Christian ethics which places prior value on dust evident in the Christian incantation: “from dust to dust”. There is similarly a contrast between the celebration of man’s sexuality and the Augustinian hang-up or sense of guilt about sexuality.

The significance of these rituals – the Salelesi rituals and the *sami lolo* and *fono ma aitu* rituals – to water conservation is that they record and celebrate the *tapu* role that water plays in man’s ability to make and protect life.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by going back to our principal stories, to Sina and Tuna; to Vaea and Apaula; and Tāfa’aola. These are stories of love, commitment, sacrifice and redemption, core qualities in and of life.

When Tuna says that “every time you drink the milk from my mouth it will be an act of my undying love”, he means that what will sustain Sina and her descendants (us humans) will be contained in his gift of love to her - the coconut.

The blessings received as a result of Tuna's sacrifice are commemorated within the oft-quoted saying at Samoan weddings, "*ia fua le niu*" – literally, "may the coconut tree bear fruit". This makes the point that from true sacrifice can come blessing.

In the story of Tāfa'aola and in the story of Apaula and Vaea burdens of grief and responsibility can be alleviated through the spirit of true reciprocity. The principle of reciprocity is fundamental to our Samoan culture. So if you took from the environment then you have a responsibility to give back. If you have received from another, then you have an obligation to return the favour. In the Samoan indigenous reference to conserve the environment is to live the values of reciprocity.

To come back to the question of who owns the water pipes? When considering the stories of Tuna and Apaula, my simple answer is 'we all do'.

There is often a temptation to lay blame or to become so overwhelmed that one avoids action. Obviously the answers are not simple; but nor should they be paralyzing. Symposiums like this, where true sharing can emerge can help to work through the issues.

To dialogue with the indigenous reference is to first understand what that reference is. It is to explore without apology its core values, beliefs and practices. In sharing the three stories and their messages in the way in which I have, I share not only my history but me. These stories hold what are core to me as a Samoan living my faaSamoa, even today.

The world needs a culture of dialogue but one that can accept that the problems of taking responsibility for protecting our environment are the problems of all.

Soifua.