



pacific perspectives

Pasefika Wellbeing: Our Uniqueness, Our Connections

Pasefika conceptual frameworks:
Re-thinking interpretations of
Samoan concepts

Paper presented by Maiava Carmel Peteru at
the International Pacific Health Conference
held in Auckland on 3 November 2014.

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Introduction

In academic discourses on Pasefika, and in particular Samoan epistemologies, concepts used to explain and to locate identity and belonging are often written about in three ways:

- The first is that there is an assumption or expectation by the writer that the reading audience is versed in the writer’s understanding of fa’aSamoa, its language and practices. There is no philosophical ground for the audience to reference.
- The second is that concepts and indeed the Samoan worldview is under-theorised. This inevitably leads to meanings being attributed to concepts in an uninformed way, resulting in a confusion of meaning and intent.
- Thirdly, concepts are often explicated as autonomous or independent entities – separate and distinct from other concepts that together comprise an integrated, interdependent and interconnected view of ourselves, our relationships to each other and the world at large.

This presentation shares key learnings from the development of *O le tofā mamao* – a Samoan conceptual framework to address violence in Samoan families and communities living in New Zealand.

My focus is on two questions: What is it to achieve depth? and What is it to connect?

I address these questions by explaining the ‘peeling’ process taken to achieve depth in the Samoan conceptual framework: *O le tofā mamao*. I then describe the natural synergies and the complexities that have significant bearing on the connections between the seven conceptual frameworks.

“My focus is on two questions: What is it to achieve depth? and What is it to connect?”

As a brief background: between 2011–2012, seven Working Groups representative of seven ethnic Pasefika communities met and developed their conceptual frameworks to address violence in their families and communities.

These conceptual frameworks are collectively known as the *Nga vaka o kāiga tapu* documents. Each Working Group was supported by one or more writers whose tasks were to gather, research, critique and articulate their indigenous and contemporary knowledge within a conceptual or philosophical framework (See Insert 1).

This type of undertaking required specific skills and numbers within each ethnic community to bring their conceptual frameworks to completion. This was managed under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Development and the Pacific Advisory Group (Ministry of Social Development 2012).

INSERT 1: PASEFIKA CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR WRITERS

Cook Islands Māori	Turanga Māori	Jean Mitaera, Ani James, Apii Rongo-Raea
Fiji	Vuvale Doka Sautu	Sai Lealea
Niue	Koe fakatupuolamoui he tau magafaoa Niue	Manogi Tavelia
Samoa	O le tofā mamao	Maiava Carmel Peteru
Tokelau	Kāiga Māopoopo	Salapima Everdina Fuli
Tonga	Fofola e fala kae talanoa e kāinga	Emeline Afeaki-Mafile’o
Tuvalu	Toku fou tiale	Manuila Tausi

Complexities in interpretations and translations across languages

Conceptual frameworks are by and large philosophically grounded. To develop *O le tofā mamao*, an understanding of the Samoan indigenous worldview and its conceptual components was needed.

Three concepts were identified from community consultations, a literature review and working group discussions as core values and principles: *vā*; *ʻāiga*; *faʻaaloalo*.

A first draft revealed two things: that the English translations of Samoan indigenous concepts were highly problematic; and that the Samoan indigenous worldview was significantly under-theorised.

“Every translation is at the same time an interpretation”

(Gadamer 1960)

Looked at this way, the English gloss of the Samoan concepts is a simplistic interpretation of complex concepts. The essence of meanings has literally been lost in translation (See Insert 2).

Assumptions of the Samoan indigenous worldview

There are assumptions of the Samoan worldview that are arrived at through incorrect English interpretation and translations. When uninformed English translations are the sole lens for understanding Samoan concepts, there is no Samoan knowledge being transferred across, because the lens of interpretation is embedded and, as a consequence, languaged through a Western view of the world:

- Western and Samoan worldviews are in constant conflict. There is a translational flaw of concepts and words when meanings between two disparate worldviews are inferred as having equal value;
- concepts are interdependent and interconnected reflecting a worldview that is integrated. A fragmented or siloed worldview would not be encompassed by *vā* relationships;
- there is a profound encounter between the secular and the sacred at all levels of Samoan life;

- the word culture is loaded with, for example, anthropological theories. By using *faʻaSamoa* or *aganuʻu a Samoa*, *faʻaSamoa* and its conceptual understandings are located at the centre of the conceptual framework.

From this position, *faʻaSamoa* when correctly understood and applied is able to interrogate ‘false’ interpretations and translations.

INSERT 2: SAMOAN CONCEPTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Concept	Glossed translations
Faʻaaloalo	Respect
ʻĀiga	Family
Vā tapuia	Sacred relationships
Faʻasinomaga	Belonging and identity
Tapu and sa	Forbidden and sacred
Gagana Samoa	Samoa language
Gafa	Genealogy

Finding depth: Peeling back the layers of meanings

Colonisation was also about capturing the thinking of Pasefika people. The appropriation of language for their own institutions such as central government, religion, education and health enabled shifts in indigenous meanings to reflect Western values and concepts. As new meanings took hold, changes within traditional practices and beliefs occurred.

Peeling back often times involved unpacking both history and language. There are three pre-conditions that set the ground for interpretation and translation which need to be satisfied.

The first pre-condition requires that the interpreter/translator is free of ambiguity. By being free of ambiguity, I mean that the interpreter/translator understands the contexts and frames of reference which the author or speaker writes or speaks from.

The second pre-condition requires an indigenous Samoan 'frame of reference that provides the context within which meaning making can be made' (Wood 2000). The critical elements of the frame of reference constitute and are 'mediated socially, culturally, historically, linguistically' (Wood 2000) and 'mythologically and spiritually' (Tui Atua, 2003/2009)¹. Without this frame of reference, the basis upon which meanings, insights, and understandings of indigenous Samoan concepts are understood, becomes vulnerable to the notions and definitions of Western concepts.

The third pre-condition is a mindfulness and duty of care to context, nuance, and meanings of languages. An essential attribute of mindfulness is that the interpreter/translator is conceptually bilingual (Peteru 2013).

In light of O le tofā mamao, the unpacking process was especially critical in understanding changes to the roles of women in Samoan pre-contact society. The Gender-Culture discussion for example, entails a critical gaze on the different ways in which women are viewed in Western society and in *fa'aSamoa*.

One is defined by biology, the other is defined by birthright. Central to this discussion is the concept of the brother-sister covenant.

The Samoan worldview is encompassed by the term *va* (Aiono-Le Tagaloa 2003), and which is the site of all ethical actions (Mila-Schaaf 2009). Every Samoan person exists in *vā* relationships which are bound by covenants or *feagaiga*.

In a family setting, there are *vā* relationships between parents and children; spouses; same sex siblings; male and female siblings; grandparents and grandchildren; matai and families; *faifeau* and *nu'u*. The most important of these covenants is that between brothers and sisters, and is a binding relationship underpinned by mutual responsibility and duties until death.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the brother-sister covenant was held to be *va pa'ia* – sacrosanct (Simanu, 2002). Today that relationship has been corrupted by other values and beliefs and is classed as *va tapuia* – forbidden or sacred. In the brother-sister relationship, the sister is referred to as the *Feagaiga* – she is the covenant.

The brother-sister covenant provides the foundational principles for behaviour and attitudes between non-related males and females. The decline of the brother-sister covenant means that this form of modelling or instruction is not readily available or understood within families. The blurring of *vā* relationships is one significant cause of violence and violations in Samoan families (Peteru 2012b).

When the first London Missionary Society missionaries arrived in 1830, the 'supreme head' of Samoa and his advisors sought to locate the missionary in the village setting. Having discounted the house of matai and the house of untitled men, it was decided that the missionary will become the new sister – *fa'afeagaiga* – to be like the sister.

1. The process for the mediation of language noted in the second pre-condition is not detailed in this paper.



There are countless versions as to the interpretation of this event however the outcome from that time on was the gradual removal of the status of the sister to be replaced by the missionary and his wife. In situations of violence in the family by men towards their female partners, there is a peeling back of history and meanings to the brother-sister relationship and the implications of this for families.

Another example of peeling was to reclarify the use of Biblical text to justify male dominance and abuse in the household. A question that is asked by a practitioner of his group of male offenders is, at what point did Samoan men become heads of households? The peeling back to history, personal and familial knowledge, worldview epistemologies must in the interpretation and translation of words and terms enable meanings that are liberative and humane to be re-awakened.

Cultural scripts – fixed or transformative?

Peeling back to find depth in meanings of language assumes that there is a need to change what is in place and to find meanings that are transformative of peoples lives. *O le tofā mamao* cautions people to apply concepts based on their correct meanings. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese states that if *fa'aSamoa* is not based on *alofa*, then it is not *fa'aSamoa*.

The irony is that many parents severely beat their children because they love them. If *fa'aSamoa* is killing our women and children, we need to critically re-examine our interpretations of *alofa* and of *fa'aSamoa*.

If Christianity is brutalising our women and our children, we need to revisit our interpretations of the Biblical scriptures. In that neither *fa'aSamoa* nor Judaism in the Old Testament nor Christianity in the New Testament condone violence and violations

in families and communities, we can only look to ourselves and in our communities for those who perpetrate 'texts of terror' in *fa'aSamoa* and in religion.

The following quotes from Underhill-Sem (2011) highlight two contrasting approaches to culture:

INSERT 3

"...that culture is a sacred template [that] should not be meddled with."

"When culture is understood as a script to be followed, the social action of an individual is the execution of the existing system and therefore not the responsibility of individuals."

Underhill-Sem 2011

Powerpoint 4: Transformative script

Under the fixed script approach, Samoan people take meanings for granted and blame culture when things go wrong. There is no expectation of personal responsibility or reflectiveness on their behaviour.

The transformative script, however, references a conceptual system that privileges what is significant. Being able to respond to any new or unforeseen event based on interpretation of what the conceptual system identified as significant allows culture to be enabling.

INSERT 4

“...when culture is understood as a conceptual system that defines what is significant, then one can interpret something unforeseen into the script... This is the enabling property of culture that encompasses and assimilates novel situations and events.”

Underhill-Sem 2011

The sacred in concepts and language

Samoan concepts and language carry both secular and non-secular attributes. Vā relationships exist at all levels of encounter between people, people and their Gods, people and their natural and cosmological environments.

The ‘ava ceremony exemplifies through ceremony and ritual the importance of all these relationships and the centrality of the concept of vā to the Samoan worldview (see Insert 5). It is not *fa’aSamoa* that is sacred, it is the people.

INSERT 5: ‘AVA – HONOURING RELATIONAL SPACES

The ‘ava is ritual... Ritual connects the present with the past... When we engage in the ‘ava we are celebrating shared history, mythology, values, vision and alofa.

The ‘ava is a gift from the mythological Gods. The ‘ava ceremony is the ritualised affirmation of sacred relationships between human beings; human beings and their Gods and divinities; and human beings and their physical, cosmic and ancestral environments... the theological purpose of tapua’iga permeates the fale and its environment, every aspect of language and performance of ritual; and those within the fale.

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi 2009

‘Ava is tapuaiga. The theological theme in tapua’iga is the honouring of sacred covenantal relationships.

Ifopo So’o (personal communication 2013)

Connections & Conclusion

There are natural synergies as there are unique differences that flow across the conceptual frameworks of Cooks Islands, Fiji, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga and Tuvalu. The connections are spiritual and mental, and physical. They are genealogical. The differences that flow throughout these connections are that each Pasefika ethnic group language and play out connections in common in their own unique way.

For example, *tapu*, *vā*, *‘āiga* are concepts that are well understood throughout the seven communities; however the multiple contexts for these concepts are unique and therefore performed in day to day and ceremonial events according to local beliefs and values. Outsiders who do not have insider knowledge would incorrectly label these societies as homogenous.

Migration has changed what is of significance, however institutions such as the church and elders in families play a significant part in reminding Pasefika people of where they come from and where their futures potentially lie.

Violence and violations in families languages the disruptions and fracturing of the sacredness of Pasefika people. The displacement and loss of relational based identities lead to the creation of different ways of languaging belonging and being:

“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.”

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi 2005/2009

The closing inserts provide an overview of the key components of the O le tofā mamao framework:

INSERT 6: CONNECTIONS

Vision: Achieve wellbeing and strong and vibrant families and individuals

Continuum of wellbeing: Includes the balance of physical, spiritual mental, psychological and dimensions of human beings

Ethnic specific concepts, principles and values: are interdependent and on their own do not fulfil the purpose or potential of their meanings

Elements of the frameworks: akono’anga; tovo vaka Viti; aga fakaNiue; fa’aSamoa / aganu’u a Samoa; tū ma aganuku o Tokelau; anga fakaTonga; tu mo faifaiga faka Tuvalu contain the expressions of knowledge, beliefs, customs, morals, art and personality of their peoples. They are independently and collectively referred to as culture

Practice Imperatives: are informed by ethnic specific concepts, principles and practitioner standards of practice. (Ministry of Social Development 2012)

INSERT 7: CONNECTIONS

Factors that protect family wellbeing: reciprocity, respect, genealogy, observance of tapu relationships, language, belonging. Reference must be made to each ethnic specific publication for depth of meaning and contexts

Factors that contribute to family violence:

- **Situational factors include:** socio-economic disadvantage, migration, culture and identity
- **Cultural factors include:** beliefs that women are subordinate to men, beliefs and perceptions about what constitutes violence, (mis) interpretations of concepts, values and beliefs about tapu relationship between family members, unresolved historical and intergenerational issues
- **Religious factors include:** (mis)interpretations of Biblical texts, fusion of cultural and religious beliefs and their (mis) interpretations

Violence and violations: violence is defined as violations of tapu of victims, perpetrators and their families...

Transformation and restoration: Education is a critical process for transforming violence behaviour and restoring wellbeing to families.

(Ministry of Social Development 2012)

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