



**pacific** perspectives

# Culture as a Foundation for Care

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Paper presented by Sister Vitolia Mo'a at the  
Aniva Pacific Health Workforce Fono

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# Contents

Culture as a Foundation for Care .....	1
Contents .....	2
Introduction .....	3
The Samoan concept of care .....	3
Service & Identity .....	4
Concepts of sickness.....	4
Spiritual wellbeing.....	5
Being at at rest, at peace, with oneself.....	6
Closing thoughts .....	6

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# Introduction

I was asked to share with you some thoughts on: *Culture as a foundation for care* with particular reference to the multi-cultural contexts of life and health care for Pacific people in New Zealand. While these thoughts are mainly drawn from a Samoan cultural perspective my hope is that some concepts will resonate with your own lived experiences highlighting culture as a vital component to health care and health service.

## The Samoan concept of care

The word 'care' in Samoan is multi-descriptive. Care is often expressed as *alofa* – love. A state of non-caring is: *le alofa* – without love; *agaleaga* – without kindness; *tuulafoa'i* – abandoned and neglected; and *agavale* – heartless and inhumane.

The word care is also connected to another nuanced word *tausi* – being a custodian and steward. The Samoan word for a nurse is *tausi-ma'i* or *tausi-soifua*. *Tausi-soifua* is of more recent usage but it expresses a more comprehensive concept of health because wellbeing is deeper than the mere state of being sick.

The word *tausi* can be found also in such concepts as: *tausi-aiga* – custodian of family/aiga; *tausi nuu* – custodian of village; *tausi eleele* – custodian of land; *tausi mavaega* – custodian of inheritance; *tausi soifua* – custodian of life and well-being.

The word *tausi* is also connected to the word *tautua*, service; and service is intrinsic in the life and purpose of a custodian. The custodian not only embodies the values and identity of the group but his or her stewardship also extends to ensuring these same values are lived and witnessed by all members of the group for the sake of the wellbeing of persons, the *aiga*, the community, the organisation etc.

For the act of providing health care, for the custodian of life and well-being, to *tausi* would mean: nurturing clarity of identity and purpose; cultivating structural interconnectedness and coherency; fostering life

values above ideological frameworks; developing a deep sense of care and respect for the sanctity of life in all its stages; promoting inclusiveness and equality of access and opportunity; and as a custodian of *soifua maloloina*, having the courage to exercise a prophetic stance for the most vulnerable and for those without hope.

The concept of care and practice in the Samoan culture is both particular and relational. Since the human person, according to the Samoan perspective, is by nature social and relational, care as a human activity is likewise personal, relational and communal.

In this connection we can say that care is primary to existential well-being. It is a fundamental and all-inclusive human activity from which must flow conscious and integrated efforts to address the multi-dimensional contexts related to wholeness and wellbeing of the human person. Caring is fundamental to humanity. It is part of being human and it has no cultural, social or economic boundaries.

It is true that every human person is born into a culture and becomes part of a multi-cultural milieu. We can say culture in its many forms contextualises human experiences providing lenses through which we see, hear, feel, sense, know, discern, act, and inter-relate. All of us are informed, influenced, and conditioned by the multi-locations of culture and the necessity of cross-culture interactions.

# Service & Identity

It is also true that every culture has its defining characteristics or ethos. As such, culture is a thing of identity. It marks a person and groups of persons or peoples leaving distinctive imprints on ways of seeing, sensing, feeling, knowing, acting and inter-relating.

Thus, culture becomes the integrative feature of a people and is dynamic; it continuously seeks after development, adaption, renewal, and enrichment. Just as identity is multi-dimensional so is culture. Culture and identity are features of human relationality. They must not be ideologically maneuvered to qualify positions and/or levels of care. As Pope Francis puts it in his encyclical *Laudato Si*: 'Service is not an ideology: we do not serve ideas; we serve people'.<sup>1</sup>

Care and service are integral to the existential wellbeing of every human person – birthed and progressively developed via culture (single or multiple). If we accept this, then the primary foundation to service and care is the wellbeing of every human person complete with all its multi-dimensional cultural contextuality.

1. <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/encyclicals/index.html#encyclicals>

Care would have to take into account all the circumstances of the who, what, and where of the person's relational condition as each one of these aspects has important bearings on a person's way of seeing, sensing, knowing, and connecting. A person's care cannot be outside of and/or isolated from the cultural identity, and his or her cultural identity cannot be outside of or isolated from his or her existential contexts.

An illustration from the Samoan context might throw better light on the meaning and development of the word *ma'i* which in Samoan is a generic term for sickness and un-wellness. A headache is *ma'i-ulu*; a toothache is *ma'i-nifo*; ailment of the mind is *ma'i-leaga-le-ulu*; heartache is *ma'i-manatu*; spirit sickness is *ma'i-aitu*; worry, *ma'i-popole*; and pregnancy is *ma'i-tagā* or *ma'i-tane*.

## Concepts of sickness

What then is *ma'i*? *Ma'i*, as the Samoans understand it, is anything that alters and modifies the balance and equilibrium of the person. This can come through the body in its physicality, the spirit, the mind or the emotions. *Ma'i* is induced from within the person or from without or both.

*Ma'i* then is seen as an integral imbalance in the human system, which affects the wellness of the whole person. Pregnancy, seen as *ma'i*, indicates an alteration in the human system with changes that bring about a shift of balance in the person – the physical, the spirit, the emotions, and even on the level of relationality.

The recognition of such inter-connected shifts within the person requires the same inter-connected realignment for restoration of balanced wellness. Thus, the Samoan concept and practice of care and healing of *ma'i* is integrative; it is about synergy.

Care cannot simply be about alleviation or cure of a physically localised and identified area of *ma'i*. Care must take in the whole person in the realignment of all its composites in the 'well-setting' of the physical, the spiritual, the emotional, and the relational.

# Spiritual wellbeing

To illustrate the point I would like to discuss different kinds of 'Samoan' *ma'i* such as the *mai-aitu* – the ghost or spirit sickness. The Samoans see two forms of *ma'i-aitu*, one is *ulufia*, possessed, and the other *fasia*, literally, smacked by the *aitu*.

*Fasia* is a form of *saua* – 'an encounter with the spirit beings which involves straying into their *aitu*/spirit space.'

*Ulufia* expresses itself through talking in the manner of *fasa*, either an incoherent babble or a well-articulated speech delivered in an 'other-worldly' voice. The phenomenon of *ulufia* is basically about delivering a message, principally from the ancestors to an individual or to the whole *aiga*, with the person *ulufia* as the medium.

This is a case where the whole family is drawn together to listen and in many cases converse with the one who is *ulufia* for clarity of message and for the appropriate actions to be taken in response.

The process of engaging with the person who is *ulufia* can be quite drawn out. If the message is of a recriminating nature, which often is the case, the family will have long hours of incensed talking to. Part of the ritual of encounter with ancestors in this form is *faamaualaloga*, the act of self-abasement seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with the spirit world. At the end of the process, the one *ulufia* falls into a deep exhausted sleep and when awoken hardly remembers anything that happened.

The case of *fasia*, that is, being smacked by the *aitu*, involves breaches of the *va-tapu*, the sacred space

between humans and spirit beings. Relationships in the Samoan culture are governed by the *va*, and any serious infringement of the *va tapu* is subject to discipline and penalty.

It is important to note that the *va*- relationship between the spirit world and humans, in the Samoan context, is mostly amiable and mutually beneficial, and as with human relationships, care for the *va* ensures healthy co-existence. But, it must also be said that certain groups of *aitu* are known to be more capricious, territorial, and less lenient towards human foibles.

In some cases the *fasia* person is perhaps more the victim of *aitu* vanity than any real breach of the *va*! Still, keeping the *va* with the spirit world is a sacred obligation and the ritual of identifying and locating the upset *aitu* through his or her *aiga* and/or village must be made – including the *faamaualaloga* – to ensure healing through restoration of peace and a right relationship with the spirit folks.

Not every case of *ulufia* and *fasia* is genuine. Very often the symptoms mask deep psychological and spiritual disturbance and while I call for caution and greater discernment when confronted with cases of fake *ulufia* and *fasia*, the approach should always be that of healthy respect and open-mindedness.

And the involvement of family members, and maybe even culturally and professionally trained health and religious people, around these cases is very important. Care for the personal and relational components of the spirit and soul of the human person is vital to the Samoans.

# Being at rest, at peace, with oneself

I am also interested in how we language health, care, and service. In the Samoan language, health is *soifua maloloina*. *Soifua* means life but *maloloina* is a much more nuanced word. It means a lot of things. It is related to the word *malo*, which is impossible to translate.

*Malo* forms part of the Samoan greeting – *malo le soifua*. *Malo* also expresses exhortation, praise and gratefulness for: wisdom and discernment – *malo le tofa saili*; prudence and forbearance – *malo faapalepale*; a well-carried out accomplishment – *malo fai o le faiva*; patience and tolerance – *malo onosa'i*; love and caring – *malo alofa*. The word *maloloina*, then,

as in *soifua maloloina*, meaning health, is descriptive of the profound life-related attitudes and behavior reflexive in the state of wellbeing.

Obviously the absence or diminishment of any of the above life-attitudes can induce stress, high blood pressure, and other forms of un-wellness. As the word *malolo* also means 'rest', *soifua maloloina* means to 'be at rest in oneself' – to be at 'home' with oneself, or to be in one's own personal space of restful healing and wellbeing. There is an obvious connection between health care and caring for health.

## Closing thoughts

I will end with a story of an experience I had in Peru. I worked in Peru as a member of my religious congregation, the Marist Missionary Sisters, or SMSM. We worked up in the mountains, in the Sierra.

Our parish is so vast and the villages so remote we could only visit some communities once a year. Transport is mainly by foot and on horseback. To cover one area of the parish we would be in the mountains for sometimes two weeks at a time.

On one of these parish visitations, a New Zealand sister and I were walking down the mountain to another community when people came to ask us to see an old lady who was dying, and particularly for us to perform the Catholic rite for the sick and dying, the anointing of the sick, which also includes confession.

Now, if there are any Catholics among you, you would know that only a priest can do this. But, we went; gathered the whole family around the old lady and with each person placing their hands on her we began the ritual of reconciliation and farewell. Each family member talked to the old lady, thanked her, and asked her pardon. And all the time we had our hands placed on her, connecting, supporting, loving – accompanying her on the last stage of her journey. Tears running down her thin cheeks expressed her response as visible calmness, acceptance, joy, and peace enveloped all of us.

I wanted to conclude with this story because I believe as custodians of *soifua maloloina*, health care servers are also pastoral carers. You are there for life and dying and death. You are facilitators of life-giving environments and life-enhancing situations.

It is of no small significance that this morning we are invited to reflect on the importance of our cultural references as an indispensable component to understanding ourselves as persons entrusted with the care, health, and wellbeing of persons, families, and communities.

Understanding our cultures and consciously allowing their values to inform our manner of being health care givers will surely lead us to uncover and rediscover the deep spirituality of care and caring.

And by spirituality I do not mean, 'religion.' I mean that which is deeply embedded in the dignity and sanctity of human life and in your sacred calling as healers, promoters, and facilitators of integrated well-being and as stewards and protectors of the weak and those lost in the margins of health care service.

May you continue to plumb the depth of your identity as 'custodians of life' so as to help you sustain your vision with wisdom and courage.

*Soifua ma ia manuia*