

Samoa: A paradise lost?

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When John Milton wrote his soul-searching verses under the title-'Paradise Lost', he was more concerned with Man's spiritual fall from the Grace of God than their environmental impact on the Garden of Eden. The book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 28, notes the following:

'And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moved upon the earth.'

The operative clause this discussion is – 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.' A glance at Samoa's population statistics for the 1991 census showed a total of 161,298; and the estimated total for the year 2000 was 170, 727 - a definite increase in numbers, thus fulfilling the first part of God's command - 'be fruitful and multiply.' But, unfortunately, during the process of living and maintaining our lifestyle and culture on these islands, the Samoans have unthinkingly failed to 'replenish the earth'; and instead of 'subduing it' cause part of it to be destroyed

The aim of this paper, however, is to draw attention to the intimate and inextricable relationship between Man and his environment here in Samoa, bearing in mind the allegorical implications of the poet's figurative imaginings.

Moreover, the concepts outlined herein, though deeply rooted in modern science and socio-educational practice, are nevertheless fashioned in such a way, so as to provide a useful local platform for the launching of sustainable environmental programmes in the villages throughout our country, where ordinary folk would be able to espouse them without much difficulty and; and in the context of their culture (which is to a large extent oral in origin), they would not find them intrusive or inappropriate to their daily lives.

As a young boy over sixty-odd years ago, my mother always insisted that I should spend as much time as possible with our family at the village of Pu'apu'a, Faasaleleaga, Savaii; the place where my ancestors, on her side lived for many generations in accordance with our oral history. For me, it was my Paradise.

It was there, at Pu'apu'a, where I fell in love with Nature - the different species of plants in the bush, the wild life including pigs, fowls and snakes as well as the birds in the wood.

At my favourite spot - Le Solo Cove, one could hear all day long the singing of the manutagi on the mosooi or the cooing of wild pigeons on a mamalava tree. On an average day, depending on the tide, sand crabs of all colours scurry along the beach looking for food, while mud-flappers such as the manoo seem to enjoy darting in and out of small holes in the soft mud amongst the aerial roots of mangrove trees in the foreshore, which was an important part of the natural habitat for the ecosystem in that part of the northern coast of Savaii.

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Le Solo Cove, to the west of Pu'apu'a is the natural home of the I'aeva - the wandering ocean-going mullet with a distinctive red ring around its nose-mouth region. Throughout the history of our people, ever since our fore-bearers settled on the Pu'apu'a coast of Savaii island as referred to in the oral history and legends passed down from one generation to another, the I'aeva, as a source of food, was not only regarded as a gift from God, but also a powerful icon to the village culture.

Over the centuries, the arrival of the I'aeva to spawn at Le Solo Cove, in the month of September (or about that time of the year, depending on climatic conditions, was always a special occasion in the lives of everyone in the village of Pu'apu'a - men, women and even children accompanying the arrival of the I'aeva from its travels within thousands of miles of the Pacific Ocean where it had been feeding around the Fijian Islands.

I remembered with nostalgia as a young man having participated in the festivities and 'po ula' during the evenings of the 'taliga o le I'aeva' - it was a time of revelry when relatives from other parts of Savaii and Upolu would arrive in considerable numbers; there were also visits by members of other villages through a so'o with Pu'apu'a.

The occasion of the arrival of the I'aeva was not only a time for catching large quantities of fish, but it was also a cultural festival of a unique kind - where the activities of human beings coming together at Pu'apu'a village, mirrored the designs of Nature taking place out in the lagoon by Le Solo Cove.

Through their legends, songs and dances, the village people maintained a proud tradition over the years through the uniqueness of their relationship with the I'aeva.

But alas! The catches of the celebrated I'aeva, have disappointingly been declining over the past 40-odd years. Recent attempts at setting nets to catch the fish met with failure. Only 200 fish were caught in the 2002 season - a miserable number compared with thousands in the Forties and early Fifties.

It appears that Nature has turned its back on the people of Pu'apu'a, and sadly, the story of the I'aeva and all the cultural celebrations surrounding it might have already passed into the realm of legends of the past.

I am also aware of similar problems in the relationship between man and Nature as described by Tu'u'u Ieti Taule'alo in a paper entitled 'Unsustainable Village Development; Reflections on the Changes at Lepa' (2000)

'The sea used to be a natural source of food. I remember when the tide was really low at night people were out on the reef with lights and just literally filled their sacks with green snails and stranded fishes. However, the effects of coastal degradation and years of over-exploitation and destructive practices have virtually destroyed the lagoon and reef environment that was once the village's main source of protein...'

Having acquired cognizance of the environmental and ecological problems faced by many villages throughout Samoa today, resulting from years of exploitation and destructive practices similar to the cases referred to above, I have decided to focus attention on EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS as part of the most crucial components of Resource Management for future environmental programmes in the villages throughout Samoa.

It is envisaged that Man and Nature in a holistic approach are perceived as important components of the living environment around the villages. These are outlined in the following concepts:

A. Man/Woman Including His/Her Culture Is A Product Of His/Her Environment

When our fore bearers arrived on these islands many hundreds of years ago in their fleets of alia, after traversing the Pacific ocean during migration from South east Asia , they found a pristine environment rich in native trees, shrubs animal life. The sea was blessed with an abundance of fish, and the reefs and rivers were teeming with creatures which provided people with food. As the settlers established homes and villages in their newly-acquired islands, their daily activities (involving fishing, hunting or the gathering of food from the forest as well as the chores associated with life on dry land) became the foundation of their new culture.

Culture, is defined as the way of life of a group or a community of people living in a particular place: it includes everything pertaining to Man's survival in his surrounding environment as well as his beliefs, behaviour and artistic attitude. To a large extent, we are what we are because of our culture - which is intimately linked to the environment in which we live.

Taking a closer view of the intimate relationship between the Samoans and their natural environment, let us sample a random selection of some of the well-known songs, sayings and legends:

- (i) *Malie e,
Tanifa e,
Malie, tanifa e,....etc
A i ai se tautai
Ua na iloa
Se mea feai
Mua oetc*

This chant is often referred to as a laulusiva - an introductory part of a major song or dance performed by a group of people. It conjures up visions of brave warriors and sea-captains on a fleet of fishing boats out in the open sea - the abode of large man-eating sharks and formidable tanifas. The chant is also a constant reminder to the people of the maritime nature of their culture - that which was also noticed by the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen in 1722, when, seeing Samoan fishermen in their canoes far out at sea referred to them as Navigators; hence the origin of another name for Samoa-the 'Navigator islands.'

- (ii) *Le ele'ele ua le malie i vai etc*

The song refers to dry soil unquenched by insufficient water. It symbolizes a person's yearning for his or her lover, and the wish for more favourable treatment.

- (iii) *Ua ta'ape le fua manusina
O si manu ma si ana I'a ...etc*

The saying is based on human observation of the natural behaviour of white terns (tava'e sina) or other sea birds on their way home from the sea. The birds were often seen carrying fish to their nests high up on the trees in the bush.

In terms of oratorical usage, the expression depicts the happy dispersal of people from a gathering, meeting or a social function where each of the participants takes a gift, food or

something of benefit to his or her home. It could also apply to intellectual or spiritual matters where those taking part at a gathering have reached a satisfactory consensus of opinion.

(iv) *Mata o le alelo.....*

This is, socially, a form of retort referring to the beastly swimming pool by the sea side - the site of the famous story of **Sina** - a very beautiful young woman and **Tuna**, the ever-present eel which became madly in-love with her.

The 'Mata o le alelo,' remark, according to the legend, was Sina's angry utterance conveying her disgust and horror at being stalked daily by and ugly creature in the form of an eel which became infatuated with her beauty, after seeing the super-sensuous naked body of the former, during one of her ablutions in the village pool.

Throughout the Pacific Ocean for many years, the story of Sina and Tuna was a popular source of cultural entertainment, folklore and justification for human behaviour.

The following are examples of the societal implications of the above legend:

- (I) The legend of Sina and Tuna (Polynesian - Samoan) bears a very close thematic parallel with the story of Eve and the Serpent (Jewish - Yahweh tradition)
- (II) The first coconut - arising out of the spot where Tuna's severed head had been buried bore nuts whose shells carried a close replica of its face.
- (III) The justification of the domestic role of Samoan women was linked to Sina's remorse when Tuna was killed by her people. Women 'loved' working daily with parts of Tuna's body in carrying out their domestic chores:
 - e.g. (i) Making baskets using tuaniu, and weaving pola, ato and other artifacts.
 - (ii) Sweeping the rubbish using the salu
 - (iii) Cooking using pe'epe'e etc

In all these domestic activities using parts of the coconut tree, the Samoan women were not expected to complain because of their 'love' for poor Tuna.

Similar beliefs and Nature-related stories also abound among other Polynesian cultures including the Maoris of New Zealand. In the case of the latter group, for instance, as represented in this case by the 'tangata whenua' or people of the land in the Waikato area, the folk concerned are very proud of their close relationship with the river of the same name. Like the Samoans, the Maori tribes of the area enjoy having a unique fa'alupega which no other tribe in New Zealand could claim:

He Waikato Taniwha rau

He piko he taniwha!

He piko he taniwha!

The Waikato of many tanifas

At each bend (of the river) there is a

Tanifa!

At each bend (of the river) there is a tanifa!

Their belief in having giant tanifas in each bends of the mighty Waikato River to protect them from their foes, is as firm today, as ever before the arrival of the white man in New Zealand.

Just before I left for Samoa last December, news broke out on TV New Zealand, featuring a group of Waikato Maoris, blocking the construction of a major extension to the Southern motorway, protesting against the intrusion of a new road on what they regard as sacred land presided over by local taniwha.

They maintained that the taniwha would be very upset if the road crossed the land in question. Accordingly, the protesters erected tents and held up placards on the site, preventing access to the area for construction workers and their machinery.

Aside from the political and financial implications of the protest by the Maori group concerned, a number of important corollaries could be deduced from this example for our own information:

- (i) That prior to taking action on land belonging to tribal (village) communities, state agencies must obtain the united consent and co-operation of the local people.
- (ii) That state agency e.g. Ministry for the Environment, Agriculture, Public Works etc ought to respect the culture and the specific needs of the local people whose lands, foreshore or resources are being utilized in implementing government projects.
- (iii) That notwithstanding the need to preserve the integrity of a proposed community project, a Public Relations Programme incorporating cross-cultural and educational inputs may be used in villages where environmental work is planned for the future.
- (iv) That state agencies involved in community projects should be on the lookout for groups or individuals from the local area, whose political or private agendas are disguised under the cover of culture (faa-Samoa).

B. The Pathways Of Knowledge For All People Are Through The Educative Process – Either Through Traditional Cultural Practices Or Modern Interventions Involving Institutions (for example) Schools, colleges, universities, the mass-media, churches and businesses.

The main problem which is often encountered by bureaucrats and field workers alike in implementing projects in the community is making people understand and appreciate the rationale behind such official ventures.

In other words, there is often

- (i) a failure by the well-meaning officers concerned to fully enlighten the local recipients on:
 - a) the merits of the programme
 - b) the benefits to the people both short-term and long-term
 - c) the likely problems to be encountered etc
- (ii) a large knowledge gap between the well-educated officials and the beneficiaries of the programme.

The foregoing discussion highlights the need for passing on appropriate knowledge to the local recipients of community projects – in this instance, scientific or environmental information. But, the question which immediately crops up is –

How?

The most appropriate response is through the employment of educative processes involving learning. Learning takes place when the learner has achieved a behavioral change. In other words, the learner, who is, in this context – the villager, in recognizing what is placed before him/her, behaves differently afterward, and that this new behavior becomes part of his / her repertoire of responses to future experiences.

e.g. A child quickly learns not to touch hot objects after burning himself/herself as a consequence of coming into contact with the same.

The oral culture of Samoa employs a system of rewards and punishments for its learners. This is the most popular practice in our homes and villages.

e.g. In teaching children the concept of obedience to parents and older people, the learner who displays it quickly is often rewarded with positive statements such as

- (i) Talofa e, i si a'u tama, lelei tele 'oe
- (ii) O le tama/teine usita'I e fiafia tele I ai ona matua.

On the other hand, a stubborn child who displays indifference or is somewhat slow in showing respect for his elders, may receive negative treatment in the form of a reproof or worst still, physical punishment: e.g.

- i) Tama/teine leaga tele oe
- ii) A leaga umi oe, o le a sasa loa etc

From this simple example, we can see that the learning process involving village practice, has been an integral part of our enculturative growth since our fore-bearers arrived on these islands.

Adult behavior displays similar learning characteristics, and a proper professional handling of this knowledge could be of benefit to environmental field-workers whose target is to enhance the quality and outcome of projects in the village.

e.g. A couple of months ago, the writer was engaged in an environmental discussion with the CEO of a certain organization (name withheld) in Apia.

Our meeting had to be temporarily stopped in order to allow a deputation of ali'i ma faipule from (out of respect for the village concerned, the name of shall remain anonymous) to state their mission. Their spokesperson, introduced the reason for their mission by referring to the intrusion and destruction of trees in their bush land by alleged encroachers from an adjoining village during the latter's involvement with a joint project once sponsored by the CEO's organization.

But, as the orator continued, their visit, in addition to informing the host of the damage done by the neighboring village, they were wondering if a similar community project (like that involving their neighbor whose members were already gaining financial rewards for their labour) could be started in their area.

The above example showed the following village learning processes in motion:

- (a) the complaining village learned a lesson for their indifference to starting a similar programme of their own when first approached by environmental officials

Most likely, the villagers concerned were inwardly tormented by the knowledge of their neighbors' financial success. In other words, they regarded it as a 'punishment' for their vacillatory behavior.

- (b) Shame in losing face is a common feature of the Samoan persona grata.

Thus when the spokes-person for the visitors introduced their mission, he immediately blamed the folk from the neighboring village for the unauthorized destruction of their trees.

His reference to the real reason for their visit was almost an afterthought, though it was sufficiently couched in expressive oratorical terms in order to drive the point home.

Our culture has helped us over hundreds of years to cope with our environment. But, the pressure of population growth, changing life-styles and modern-day economic developments, all combine to create environmental problems for our future as a nation, and as a people in a group of small islands in the middle of a vast ocean.

It is now time for the following institutions to play an active role in promoting environmental knowledge, and a real love for Nature in the community at large.

Pre-School Education

- Stories featuring animals and plants etc
- Songs featuring animals and plants and Nature
- Visits to selected areas e.g. beaches, lakes, streams
- Flower gardens

Schools/Colleges

- Gardens
- Environmental studies / Field trips / Camps
- Special Projects e.g. scholarships

Universities

- Environmental Studies
- Special Projects / Research etc
- International Exchange Programmes
- Organizing Public Seminars on Environmental issues

Churches

- Inclusion of Environmental themes in the preaching by pastors, ministers and priests
- Special Projects e.g. by Autalavou, Tina, Aoga Aso Sa, etc
- Inclusion of Environmental studies in the courses for theological students
- Initiate a Natural Replenishment Day (1 Genesis: 28) “.....and replenish the earth...)

Mass Media

- Regular broadcasts of environmental information
- Sponsorship of special projects in the community
- Initiate Song Competitions about the preservation of the environment

Businesses

- Sponsorship of environmental projects
- Scholarships
- Take positive roles in the removal and proper disposal of commercial and industrial wastes.

C. Samoan Society Is Currently Undergoing A Process Of Accelerated Cultural Change As A Result Of Increased Pressure From International Developments In Technology Economic Participation And Communication

The Samoan culture of today is no longer the same that we used to practice some fifty years ago. This is because it has undergone a process of change – just like the people who are practicing it.

Culture-change is a normal process in an advanced society. Cultures which fail to change in a changing society simply die a natural death.

Fortunately for us in Samoa, our culture is still intact despite the fast rate of change we are now experiencing as a result of inroads from overseas technological societies like those in European countries, America, New Zealand, Australia and other parts of the world.

Listed below are some of the agents of culture change and their effects:

1. The Church

The close relationship now existing between the Samoan Culture (Faa-Samoa) and the Church is by far the most significant change in our lives today.

In each of the villages throughout our country, the most prominent institution one would find there today is the church. It is also the seat of 'power' and influence in the village, beside that of the Council of Chiefs.

The village pastors now have their own fa'alupega:

- Ao o fa'alupega
- Faifeau Malolo Manumalo
- Toeaina etc

From the environmental stand point, the church is one of the most influential institutions in each of the villages with a potential for enhancing the development of community projects.

2. Education & Educational Institutions

Education, in its wider application to this country is, by far the most effective agent for culture change. Educated people have a wide range of opportunities and choices from which they could select the kind of life they wish to live. They are also the people who have had the most recent exposure to the world outside Samoa.

The educated Samoan publics are the people who form the main group behind the growing use and importation of western-type goods and technology to the country.

3. Technology & Modern Communication

From the day the Samoans used spoons, forks, knives and other western tools, their culture and language changed forever. Instead of using terms such as o'e they preferred naifi; asu became sipuni etc. Their food took on westernized names such as – sapaui, povi-masima, siaumeni, etc.

People's behavior also changed when they used modern machines, tools and imported raw-materials.

e.g. Almost every bus/taxi now subjects (entertains) its passengers to the constant Boom ! Boom! sound from its radio or built-in CD player.

From the environmental standpoint, the main problem associated with culture change as a result of our increasing use of overseas products and technology (which is unavoidable in the modern age) is what to do with waste-products such as plastics, old cars, toxic materials e.g. paints (lead), waste oil and other hazardous materials.

D. Environmental And Bio-Spherical Awareness Must Be Part Of The Cultural Environment For All Samoans – Men, Women And Children

It is of vital importance that programmes aimed at the preservation of Nature around us become part and parcel of our daily lives.

Samoa's culture, as aforementioned, was the direct result of man's inter-action with his environment over the hundreds of years of his occupation of these beautiful islands.

There are now enough community groups in our society which can play an active role, in promoting environmental and bio-spherical awareness in our homes and villages:

- Council of chiefs – Ali'i and Faipule
- The Samoan National Council of Women
- O le Siosiomaga Society
- The Women's Committees
- OTHER Environmental Groups and many other groups which are already providing useful services to our community.

Conclusion

In this paper, the emphasis has been placed on the damage already suffered by the environment as a result of man's activities. The potential contribution by certain institutions and groups for positive action has also been highlighted.

It is sincerely hoped that the matters raised in this paper, will serve as a positive stimulus for those involved with projects which aim at (as far as the environment is concerned) making our country a PARADISE REGAINED