

The *fact-or-myth* of Samoan cultural heritage: personal reflections on family oral history

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Samoan oral stories have been handed down by word of mouth over many generations. These stories describe family origins - where they come from, who they are and their places or status in their villages or districts. Some relate to ordinary chores like travel, hunting and fishing while some tell extraordinary events dealing with wars, spirits and the supernatural. This paper is about three such stories from my own family at Tuana'i, Safaato'a and Saanapu. The main focus is to explore how these oral stories have continued to shape our lives and beliefs and how they have influenced our attitudes as Samoans over the years.

The first story relates to my family of the Saga title at Tuana'i where my father's mother came from. Tuiaana Tava'etele married Sivalavala Fotumaleavega and issued a son Tuiaana Lelaolao and daughter Sinaletava'e who married Pili and issued four sons - Tua, Ana, Saga and Tolufale. These four inherited the original divisions of Samoa – Tua in Atua (eastern Upolu), Ana in Aana (western Upolu), Saga in Tuamasaga (middle Upolu) and Tolufale at Manono and Apolima Islands. Saga then married Lupe and issued Saga Fuaoletauloa who married Sauopuala'i from Nofaalii and issued Saga Masefau and his sister Sinamamala.

News of Sinamamala's beauty spread far and wide and reached the God Tagaloaalagi in the Ninth Heaven. Tagaloa was smitten and wanted to marry Sina so he sent his people to woo her. Sinamamala however did not want to have anything to do with him, thus the origin of my village's name of *Fatuatuana'i* or *Tuana'i* (passed over). Tuifiti (King of Fiji) also heard of Sina's beauty and he too came with his ship's crew to Samoa to win her heart. Sina was impressed and wanted to marry Tuifiti. Masefau however was worried about his sister's rejection of the Tagaloa's wishes and tried his best to change her mind but to no avail. Thus the Samoan saying *Ua ta lagoon a Masefau*, literally translated to mean Masefau preparing props for his boat to secure it, but signifying someone's good deed to achieve peace and security.

As expected the Tagaloa was extremely unhappy with Sina's rejection. While Sina prepared to sail away with the Tuifiti, Tagaloa called upon his spirits and demons to revenge Sina's unkindness. The thunder roared, lighting flashed like day; the wind blew fiercely and the rain poured heavily. Hence the origin of Saga's site of residence (*maota*) of *Uilao* or *Uilao* (lighting flashed like day).

Sina with the Tuifiti and his crew perished and turned into stones. There is to this day a coral formation in the lagoon at Tuana'i, near the Catholic compound at Tofamamao, known as *Papa Seugogo* which is believed to be the unfortunate Sina, Tuifiti and his crew. And when the people from Savaii escaping the volcanic eruption in 1905 settled west of Tuana'i their village was named *Leauvaa* (boat crew) remembering the Tuifiti's crew.

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The second story is about my family of the Tuimuaiava title at Safaato'a village in Lefaga district, where my grandmother on my mother's side came from. Chief Losivalevale (or Losi) was a *sau'ai* (half man-half spirit), lived in Lefaga and controlled the whole bay. He guarded the first or main reef opening (*ava*) at Safaato'a so no boats passed through without his approval - hence Losi was also known as *Tui-mua-i-ava* (king of the first reef opening).

Losi on his first visit to the god Tagaloa in the heavens stole a taro shoot, hiding it in his body. Tagaloa's celestials suspected him and searched him but found nothing so they gave him a hiding and kicked him back to earth. Losi vouched revenge and sent his *aitu* (spirit) Vae'aumoana to spy on the heavens. Vae'au was known for his speed and hence the saying *Ia e vae ia Vae'au* (may your legs be quick like Vae'au).

Vae'au reported back on the sleeping habits of the Tagaloa people, that they slept late and took some time to be fully awake. Losi then caught some stingrays as 'gift' for Tagaloa. He arrived at dawn and laid the fish out between the house posts. When the celestials woke up and stepped over the fish they slipped and hurt their heads. Thus the saying *Ai ma le foa mea a Losi* (they ate Losi's food with sore heads).

The celestials then planned their own revenge on the humans and invited Losi to visit for a sports competition. Losi organised his friends to go with him which included Vaatu'utu'u of Falelatai, Teleiai of Samatau, Tuimulifanua of Mulifanua, Pei of Satuimalufilufi and Soaalo of Samauga.

First there was a sliding competition where Losi and his friends were to float down a waterfall straight back to earth and to their death. However Losi's other *aitu*, Fulufuluitolo, caught the humans as they came down the waterfall and were saved. Hence the saying *O le lave a Fulufuluitolo* (saved by Fulufuluitolo).

Second the celestials wanted an eating competition with a huge feast hoping that the humans would eat themselves to death. However Losi's other *aitu*, Mosofaofulu, ate all the food including the empty baskets so Losi and the humans were again saved. And thirdly a club fight was arranged where the celestials hoped to killed the humans. However the *aitu* Fulufuluitolo and Mosofaofulu broke the celestials' clubs and were defeated.

Tagaloa and his people at last admitted defeat and gifts for the victors they surrendered to the visiting humans their *Ao* (paramount chiefly titles) to take back to earth. When they returned Losi distributed the titles among his friends at the *paepae* (rock formation) – Lavasii stayed with Losi, Tagaloa to Vaatu'itu'i, Fiame to Teleiai, Taimalelagi to Tuimuifanua, Tuifaasisina to Pei and Fetafune to Soaalo. The *paepae* was thus named *Ta'ape pāpa* (allocation of titles).

The third story is about my family of the Lesā title at Saanapu village, where my grandfather on my father's side came from. The family geneology went from Fiji to Savaii to Tonga and back to Saanapu in Upolu. Sao from Fiji married Futiafu and had a daughter Sina who married Lauifanua of Safotu and issued a son Muasautele. He married Sinalalotava of Samauga and had a son Taumatamu who married Mualepuso daughter of Taemanutava'e of Sili and issues a son.

Taumatamu with his wife and their son travelled from Sili to visit his family at Samauga and at Amoa they came upon a *poula* (night dancing) between the village people and the crew of a visiting Tongan ship. When they stopped over to watch the boy went and slept under the

sails of the ship. Later when the couple continued their trip the boy was left behind, each parent had thought he was with the other. The ship sailed with the sleeping boy on board and was only discovered out at sea. He was named *Samoa-na-galo* (the Samoans that was forgotten).

It rained while the Tongans made a call at Mulifanua so the boy sheltered under a rock. When the Tongans set sail again the boy was left behind a second time. He ran along the shore after the ship and finally near Samatau village he managed to attract the crew's attention. Hence this place was called *Le-one-saa* (the sand where the boy danced).

The boat then sailed to Tonga and stopped at Vava'u Island in the Tongan Group where they were the guests of Lesā, the paramount chief of the Island. When the ship left for the capital Tongatapu the boy was left behind for the third time because he was spending the evening talking with Lesā. He was given a another name *Lesā-na-alala* (one that spent the evening talking with Lesā).

Lesānaalala married Tunaifitimaupologa, daughter of the Tuitoga (king of Tonga) and issued a son, Latuivai, who married the daughter of Seiulialii from Sataoa and issued a son, Latuivai (the origin of my Lesā family at Saanapu) and a second son, Lesānaalala, who married the daughters of Malietoa Laauli of the Malietoa family.

The stories I have presented above are three examples of many that have been passed down through successive generations of my family. As with any oral traditions questions have been raised on how really genuine they are. It would not be uncommon for people to adjust their stories to make them look good with greater influence while their opponents weak and less significant. While these stories may be part fact and part fiction and at times seem far-fetched, the important point is to understand the reasons or purposes behind them and what they represent (e.g. was it to gain status or acquire lands and titles or to seek revenge or retribution). Is there evidence today of any past achievement or historical connections to other families or places? What effects if any do those past events have on the way that my family operates at the present time? And how do these stories compare to those of other families or Samoan oral traditions generally – in other words how universally accepted are they in the Samoan context?

The story of Tuimuaiava Losivalevale is still the basis of the Tuimuaiava title today. The paramount chiefly title of Lavasii is bestowed by Tuimuaiava who is addressed honorifically as *tafa'i paia* or esteemed spokesperson (for Lavasii). Tuimuaiava is also the head of the orator group of *Tuisavailuu* for Safaato'a and Lefaga. He also bestows the title Tuiluluu, the origin of Tuisavailuu. The super natural aspects of this story would enhance Tuimuaiava's status as warrior and group leader. Likewise the story Saga Masefau is the basis of the Saga (or Luafatasaga) title explaining the origin of the name of the village Tuana'i and Saga's place of residence of *Uilao*. The crew of the Tuifiti's boat is also remembered with the naming of a later settlement west of Tuna'i as Leauvaa. Both stories provide the background to a number of proverbs that are still widely used by orators in the speeches.

At Saanapu the story of Samoanagalo Lesānaalala describes the origin of the Lesā title. The titles Lesamoanagalo, Lesālatuivai and Lesānaalala are bestowed by Lesā and the name of Lesā's site of residence (*laoa*) of *Malaesaili* (place to seek wisdom) reflects the status of the title Lesā and how Lesālatuivai's counsel was sought by many as well as his connection to

various important families including the Tuitoga. This story also links various places and people with such names still in use today.

So as well as the physical connections that these stories provide there are also personal feelings and emotions that they create. These stories have helped me to understand my past and where I came from, making me appreciate my own place in Samoan society and how I can negotiate where I go from here on. They provide the linkages between my past, present and future, creating a sense of belonging to and security within my family and community. This for me was best illustrated by my wife, Dr. Vanya Taule'alo, in her art exhibition for her PhD where she explored the concept of her genealogy, the objects and stories that connect her grandchildren to her ancestors.

Finally the fact-or-myth question over my family oral stories really does not matter. Their legitimacy and relevance have been reinforced as they were passed down through family generations. They have filled many gaps in my family history and confirmed our connections (*faiā*) to others. And the Lands & Titles Court has also ruled in our favour based on some of these stories proving their critical role in understanding Samoa's traditional past generally and unraveling my own family's history in particular.

Some useful reading

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