Tupualegase: The Eternal Riddle

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I dedicate this address to my dear friend Hans Kung, the theologian, who celebrated his 80th birthday on the 10th of March, which was yesterday.

Introduction

I was asked: Why do you need to understand the Samoan indigenous reference? My answer was: As a Samoan you need it in order to know yourself, to protect yourself and to find yourself in your search for meaning and for God.

The question of what is God I will come back to. Knowing oneself, however, is to seek one’s cultural heritage and to locate it in a lived and living cultural reference. In Polynesia we are often asked: where is your turangawaewae (or in Samoan your tulaga vae)? This is a question about place. Knowing your indigenous reference is a question about identity. Both are core to the question of Maori and Pacific leadership.

During my political career I was sorely tempted to take up an international post. Taking it up would have meant that I had to leave Samoa. At the time of considering this post, by chance I met in Apia one of the elders of my family, Gaopoa by name. At that time he was over one hundred years in age. I remember he grabbed my right arm, took it in both of his hands, and massaged it gently (as we say in Samoan, lomi). He looked into my eyes and said very slowly: “Tupua, tautuana ma oe le atumu”. Roughly translated, “Tupua, bear in mind the land of our fathers”. I knew then that I could not take up the post. I could not leave Samoa. Why might you ask?
To answer this I want to take you all on a little journey. Not a long journey I promise, but one that is hopefully interesting and of relevance to your own upcoming navigations through the questions/dilemmas/challenges/riddles of Maori and Pacific leadership.

I want to start with the riddle of the Samoan gods, *Tupualegase* and *Le Fee*.

**Tupualegase (Jupiter) and Le Fee (Octopus)**

*Tupua* in Samoan can mean a riddle; it can also mean god. *Legase* means the eternal. When placed together the suggestion is of God as an eternal riddle. The term *Tupualegase* is commonly used to refer to the planet Jupiter which is the god of the district Atua, in Upolu, Samoa. *Le Fee* means the Octopus and is the god of the district Aana, also in Upolu, Samoa. Both are manifestations of God. In early Samoa there was an annual festival celebrating the homage of Atua and Aana peoples to their respective gods, *Tupualegase* and *Le Fee*.¹

The ritual offering to *Le Fee* is known as *le tapu a Aana i le fee* (literally, the sacred offering of Aana to their god, *Le Fee*). The offering by Atua to *Tupualegase* was however, known as *amo*: *O le amo o Atua ia Tupualegase* (literally, the burden that we carry for *Tupualegase*).

The offering to *Le Fee* is described as *tapu*, while the offering to *Tupualegase* is described as *amo*. This is deliberate. With *Tupualegase* so far away the offering is a burden that we carry. With the closeness of *Le Fee* the emphasis shifts to the sacredness of the offering. The words *amo* and *tapu* speak to the relationship between man and their gods. They acknowledge that god is present in the awe inspiring cosmos as much as in what is close, visible and ordinary.

When thinking about *Le Fee* I was reminded of my experience in 2003 with Dr Pita Sharples and Rev. Morris Gray, former HoD of the Maori Department at the

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¹ This is also noted by Rev Stair. See Stair, J.B. “Jottings on the mythology and spirt-lore of old Samoa”, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 5 (1), 1896, p33-57.
University of Canterbury, when we walked up Pulemelei, in Savaii. I tell this little aside here to highlight how Le Fee reaches across Polynesia.

I remember walking up the pathway to the top of the Pulemelei mound, considered one of the largest monolithic monuments in Polynesia, a pathway which had just been cleared of brushwood and undergrowth and resting at the top on some flat slabs of stone. I recall Morris standing up, walking inwards and then throwing his arms up, pointing to the ground and exclaiming: “Down in the bottom in the ground level is buried an ariki”. He seemed like someone who, as we say in Samoan, ua ulu i ai le agaga, meaning ‘possessed’. “I know this place” he continued: “This is where our people came from. My family emblem is the wheke (octopus) and this mound is a legacy of the wheke. And, there are in this environment definitive markings which underline the sacred figure of 8”.

Morris’s reference to the wheke and the figure of 8 impacted on me because the river that flows through the plantation on which Pulemelei is sited, has 8 waterfalls. Morris did not know this at the time. Morris continued: “There are links between this mound and the skies, the sun, the moon and the stars. There is a link between this mound and the pathway”. He suggested that the astrology of this was what enabled the Polynesian diaspora.

The ritual offerings by Aana to Le Fee emphasises affinity and equation between man and animal. The ritual offerings by Atua to Tupualegase emphasises affinity and equation with the cosmos.

Tupualegase (Jupiter) can be seen as a planet in the distant night sky. It presents a metaphor of a distant god, a god above looking over us. The mystery of this god is characterised by distance; being able to be seen but not touched. Le Fee, on the other hand, is close to man, proximate and touchable. The riddle of Tupualegase and Le Fee lies in the fact that though both are different manifestations of god the essence of their manifestation is the same, i.e. they are both core to the mystery that is god.

Conceptualising god in the indigenous reference is a conscious attempt to connect the proximate, the tangible, the visible Fe’e, with the distant, unreachable, tantalizing
(and obviously mysterious) Tupualegase. Therein lies the riddle, the mystery, the paradox, the dilemma, the irony which invites and tempts tofa sa’ili, a search for wisdom. Tofa in Samoan is wisdom, saili is search.

The search for essence in modern times is most graphically expressed by Hans Kung in his book on Christianity:

“But against all rigid ‘essentialism’ I would immediately add that this essence shows itself only in changes. In other words, there is something identical, but only in variables; a continuum, but only in the event; persistence, but only in the changing appearances. In short, the ‘essence’ of Christianity does not show itself in metaphysical immobility and aloofness but always in a constantly changeable historical ‘form’. And if we are to get a sight of this original abiding ‘essence’ – which is not static and rigid but takes place dynamically – we must take note of the historical ‘form’ which permanently changes”.

This essence that Hans Kung speaks of is not fixed but dynamic. To me it is about the virtues or verities that remain constant despite shifts in form across time and space. Rituals capture both form and essence.

**Rituals**

In our funeral rituals Samoans offer salutations to the ten heavens, believed by Samoans to be the levels between us and god. The salutations to the fourth and fifth heavens are salutations to the knowable: “Tulouna le lagi tuafa! Tulouna le iloa!” and unknowable: “Tulouna le lagi tualima! Tulouna e le maua!” These imply that there is both the knowable and unknowable; the attainable and unattainable.

Man is bound to search for the knowable, knowing that the unknowable is beyond his reach. The boundaries of the knowable constantly move to the point that the more you know, it seems, the less you know. The search for knowledge is never ending. This is English physicist Stephen Hawking’s point about our search for understanding.

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where he says: “our search for understanding will never come to an end [because] we
will always have the challenge of new discovery”.3

The scholastic exercise, like exercising tofa sa’ili, involves the challenges or riddles
of doubting, thinking and knowing. Hans Kung’s expansion of Descartes’ famous
maxim: cogito ergo sum, finds that “it is precisely by going through all doubt that
human beings can attain the basic insight: as long as I am doubting, I am thinking, and
as long as I am thinking, I am.” (p671). This is in line with tofa sa’ili.

It is in line with tofa sa’ili in that it is founded on an acceptance of the limits of man,
which includes the limits of knowing. Reason alone as the beginning and end of
existence is not tofa sa’ili. Rather tofa sa’ili is founded on the premise that human
intelligence is flawed. Intellect, as rightly asserted by Hans Kung, should always be
the servant not the master.

have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for
faith”⁴ (in Kung, Christianity, p673) acknowledges the relationship between
knowledge and faith. What Kant raises here is the point that you can only deny
knowledge if you recognise that knowledge is in itself always incomplete. If man’s
knowledge was absolute then there is no legitimacy in denying knowledge. The
foundation of humility is accepting that there is an unknowable or an unobtainable
within human time and space. It lies in knowing that there is always more to learn.

Doubt is an admission of ignorance or lack of knowledge and the foundation of that
lack of knowledge is the essence that God is a riddle and beyond man’s
comprehension.

The Salelesi vaa or boat ritual is a ritual which involves flaunting man’s power to
procreate. Traditionally, the message of the ritual was conveyed not as riddle but as
fact. That is, the fact that man is divine; man has the power to procreate.

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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.

The ritual declares that first and foremost man’s divinity with the gods, the cosmos, the animals and environment, is through procreation and the evolution of life. To gain this divinity man must have certainty of self and that it is only through this certainty that he is able to gain certainty about God.

Here there is celebration not just of man’s divinity, but also of the fact that man shares divinity with the gods. The riddle here is that if man is divine how come he cannot know what god knows? The riddle lies in the fact that man can **and** cannot compare the essences of his divinity with that of the gods. This resonates with the riddles of Christianity, the dilemmas of Lucifer for example. It is in the acceptance that you can’t that the foundation of humility exists. This exists not only in Christian ethos but also in the Samoan indigenous reference.

The language of metaphor, allegory and allusion, used in Samoan rituals and oratory bespeaks recognition of the place of the eternal riddle, the place of *Tupualegase* and the Salelesi *va’a*, in our searches for indigenous meaning.

Polynesian oratory and rituals are filled with metaphor, allusion and allegory. They assist the orator, the teacher and student to invite rather than define meaning. The point of *tofa sa’ili*, the Samoan search for wisdom, is that in our searches meaning is always nuanced, shifting, contingent and incomplete. As such there is always room for improving our understanding not only of ourselves and our worlds, but also of others and their worlds.

Our Samoan rituals capture and celebrate our worldviews and values, our sense of place and identity. They capture what are core to Samoan leadership.

I want to now come back to my mentor Ga’opo’a.
Samoan Leadership

Gaopoa was recognised as a kaumatua of my family. His age and wisdom bespoke divine blessing. When Ga’opo’a said to me: “Tupua, bear in mind the land of our fathers”, he was not talking to me. He was talking to the gods of my fathers who inhabit my psyche. He was talking to my ancestors, living and dead, who murmur admonition to my soul. He was talking to the land, the sea and the skies, the antecedents of Polynesian man.

When I was talking to Ga’opo’a I felt like the man in Francis Thompson’s poem being chased by the hound of heaven. I felt like Fatutoa trying to run away from his village Falealupo (at the eastern most point in Savaii). He is standing on a rock in Aleipata, the western most point in Upolu, about to journey further afield, when he is touched gently on the back by the winds, the messengers of the gods. They are chanting to him: “You must not run away from your destiny”. So we say in Samoan: *Ua tata i le tua o Fatutoa le lai o Puava* (the back of Fatutoa was touched gently by the winds of Puava).

The Hound of Heaven⁵ I have not read for many, many years but it still echoes in my mind. It is about a man who is running away from God’s gaze and God’s scrutiny which I equate with the Samoan story of Fatutoa trying to run away from his spiritual and cultural home.

For Fatutoa just before he launches on a trip to Tonga the spirits of his family who have turned themselves into the form of a gentle wind, pat him on the back and say: “You must go back, your family needs you and you can only find haven in your spiritual home by restoring relationships with the land and seas, ancestors and gods”. The message here is that in times of trouble or discontent healing is not out there, or outside of ourselves. It comes from within; from within ourselves and our cultural reference. If you want sight and insight into the Samoan psyche, you will have to speak to the gods who inhabit it; you will have to eavesdrop on the dialogue between my ancestors and my soul.

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I acknowledge our shared pursuit for *tofa sa’ilili* and the challenges and riddles this presents. I acknowledge this by quoting the famous words of Fonoti to Toleafoa: “*E te le faautagia lau valaau, ae ui ina ou le vaai ma ou faalogo ia te oe, ae ou te taulagia pea lou suafa*”. Here Fonoti says to his brother Toleafoa: “You do not heed my call. I do not hear your voice. I do not see your face. But often I call your name”.

The call to leadership in our Maori and Pacific communities can often come as Charles Dickens says “like whispers in a distant room, teasingly indistinct, apprehended only with difficulty”\(^6\). The apprehension lies not only in knowing the eternal riddle but in recognising that within it, as noted within the words of Fonoti to Toleafoa, there is caring and loving.

**Conclusion**

As I have said elsewhere, in my Samoan reference we, as Samoans, Pacific or Maori peoples, are not individuals; we are integral parts of the cosmos. We share a divinity with our ancestors – the land, the seas and the skies. We are not individuals because we share a *tofi* (inheritance) with our families, our villages, and our nations. We belong to our families and our families belong to us. We belong to our villages and our villages belong to us. We belong to our nation and our nation belongs to us. This is the essence of our sense of Maori and Pacific belonging.

To return in conclusion to the question: what is god? the answer is: god is the eternal riddle. The principle role of the *tofa sa’ilili* (i.e. the search for truth) is to identify and locate God’s love, peace and justice.

After the funeral of His Highness Malietoa, my wife and I went on a retreat which lasted a week. The retreat ended in a mass in which Archbishop Alapati gave a homily based on two questions which were posed by Christ to St. Peter. The first question was: Peter do you love me? The second: Peter, where are you going?

These two questions provide a moral and ethical guide. The measure of leadership can be found in Christ’s question about love. Namely: Do you truly love your people and do they truly love you in return?

The question: where are you going? derives from a story about St. Peter running away from Rome to escape the persecution of Christians. Along the track, away from the city, Peter saw a vision of Christ, who asked him: Peter, where are you going? The question raises a point about responsibility.

On the face of it these two questions appear simple. But in the environment we live in they are not. Answers to these questions are not easy to find or admit. And, when they are found they are not easy to implement. In fact, they are difficult to admit precisely because they are not easy to implement. In the environment we live in it is difficult to assess what should be the deep and long view; it is difficult to unravel the complexities, to keep up with the pace of new cultures, the changes in the va (our relations) and tua 'oi (our boundaries).

The riddles of Tupuaglese, Le Fee, Samoan funeral rites and the Salelesi Va’a are riddles to be found elsewhere. They are just as present in Christianity as they are in the Samoan indigenous reference. In the essence the issues/challenges/dilemmas of Samoans are no different to what besets the mind of Christian theologians. For centuries all have attempted to find the essence of God. In the end all can only conclude that the essence of God is a mystery. Acknowledging this is the foundation of humility.

This humility is core to the search for meaning, for tofa sa’ili. Something core also to what my friend Hans Kung, to whom I give the last words, describes as the Spirit of Nazarene. He says:

“This spirit sees to it that there is not just research, information and teaching about Christianity, but that Christianity is experienced with the heart and also really lived out and put into practice – for good or ill, since that is human nature, and in trust in this spirit of God”.

See Kung, Christianity. 2003. p797.
If we read Christianity as sharing similar, if not the same, goals as our Polynesian indigenous references about knowledge and the search for knowledge, then the Spirit of the Nazarene can act like the winds of Puava patting gently on our backs reminding us that leadership while a riddle, an eternal riddle, can find meaning and accommodation through love, faith and trust in the essences of *tofa sa’ili*.

Soifua.