

A Wedding, A Party and Samoan Funerals: Pacific Leadership and Cultural Competence

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Keynote Address
Pacific Health Leadership Programme
Ministry of Health, Wellington, New Zealand
26 April 2006

“Mulimuli ane, e iu ina ou liligi ifo ai lo’u agaga i luga i tagata uma ona perofeta ai lea o outou atalii ma o outou afafine, e fai miti o outou toeaina, e iloa faaliga e o outou taulelea”. Ioelu 2:28

“It will happen afterward that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions.” Joel 2:28.

The requisite qualities of a leader are the ability to:

1. Identify the problem/problems;
2. Own up to the problem/problems;
3. Search for solution/solutions;
4. Find solution/solutions;
5. Implement solution/solutions.

The opposite of cultural competence is cultural incompetence. I want to illustrate by reference to cultural incompetence in our funeral culture as practised in New Zealand.

Cultural incompetence stems from a mindset premised on the belief that culture and custom is/are above accounting and scrutiny. Change and modification to accommodate the contemporary context is often argued to be at the expense of identity and soul, i.e. that current practices cannot be challenged because they represent the essence of our being Samoan. This is a fundamental flaw, for no culture nor custom, nor for that matter religion, is above accounting and scrutiny. Life is a dynamic and the principal imperative

on leadership is to seek, find and implement accommodation with a changing context. The only restraint on accommodation is that it does not compromise the verity which underpins culture.

Cultural competence denotes a knowledge, practice, vision and/or value that can resolve a difficulty, bridge gaps and/or provide a methodology for achieving a cultural objective. Culture refers to an ideology, praxis or religion. It is something that promotes a truth referenced in the Samoan context on our mythology, history and everyday experience.

In traditional Samoan funeral culture people present according to *sii alofa* (literally meaning, presenting out of love), the presentation is intended to share the burden of grief and expense. It is a breach of the code of our funeral culture to add to the burden of the grieving family.

In the traditional Samoan funeral culture the apportioning of resources is determined by what is available. Debt, whether raised in banks or in stores or with relatives or friends, is outside the traditional context. This absence of a debt facility afforded protection for the grieving family from expending family resources beyond what is affordable and reasonable.

The availability of debt servicing creates imperatives in the funeral culture, for it allows the controllers of funeral expenses to expend according to a misguided notion of face and honour, beyond the capacity of the family, particularly the widow/widower and children. Debt servicing has resulted in dire consequences for many of our people where sometimes the immediate family is burdened by a crippling debt for several years.

In the traditional Samoan funeral culture there is only one *taulaga* (offering) and that is to the village. The acculturation of the Christian faith into the social and political context of *faaSamoa* added another *taulaga*.

What usually happens at traditional Samoan funerals is that a family is bound by Samoan culture to deliver a *taulaga* to the village and a *taulaga* to the church. The village will apportion the resources allocated to them to the village, district (to which the village belongs), and national (*Tumua* and *Pule*) hierarchies. In the traditional scene the village and pastor distributes the resources (the *taulaga*), amongst those clergy officiating in the religious ritual and those attending.

The common practice in Samoan funeral culture in New Zealand of *taulaga* is a breach of traditional culture. In New Zealand the funeral service and burial are often followed by a meal. Towards the end of the meal, or after the meal, there are presentations of fine mats, food and money. In New Zealand, instead of the village and pastor, it is the grieving family or their representatives, apportioning the *taulaga*. This creates a situation where the grieving family is placed in a vulnerable position where advocates on behalf of *Tumua/Pule* family hierarchies and the clergy promote a case for entitlement premised on face and honour. Such a situation can often make a family susceptible to an unseemly rhetoric of greed and self interest.

On another tack, in the Samoan funeral culture what happens is that people buy kegs and carcasses of beef and cases of tin fish, and in the process of hectic reciprocation it is very difficult to keep tabs on resources, i.e. on whether you are ahead or behind. As such it is not uncommon that the grieving family come out way behind in resources at the end of the funeral. Additionally, the extra work of carting, loading and moving these goods requires strong able bodies, sometimes for as long as a week. This adds to the financial burden because of the loss of income incurred from staying away from work.

With the replacement of agricultural goods with kegs and carcasses of beef, etc. in the modern context, the question is, does this alleviate the burden on the grieving family? If not, why not?

The critical word in a traditional Samoan funeral culture is *sii alofa*, which literally translates as 'presentation that is motivated by love'. The whole exercise is intended to

underline bonding and more importantly the sharing of grief and expense. The basic idea in our traditional culture is that while you return some, you leave some so that the grieving family are ahead in their resources. That is, in today's times that the family is left with enough resources to pay for the funeral expenses.

The end result of many funerals is a crippling debt, disenchantment and disillusionment because of cultural incompetence. This is sad because the essence of the funeral culture is love and sharing. The rituals, the conventions, the protocols, are all intended to promote and underline love and sharing. The monies or kegs of beef are intended to be expressions of that love and sharing. If our funeral practices falls short of love and sharing they have no place in our funeral culture. It is not *alofa* to saddle the widow/widower and the children with a crippling debt after the funeral.

Identifying vulnerabilities and abuses for what they are is the responsibility of good leadership. Assiduously seeking appropriate remedy/remedies, which ensures bonding, love and sharing, unfettered by abuse and blatant stupidity, is surely a goal for high vocation. Initiative would gain impetus and momentum if it came from those who benefit the most from the current funeral culture, i.e. clerical and cultural leaders.

Already there is disaffection and disillusionment with the abuse and the exploitation of our funeral culture. If the current practices are allowed free rein it is not impossible that some of the most significant features of our funeral culture, i.e. the love, sharing and bonding will diminish in value.

In searching for remedy we can take heart and inspiration from the work of the young. The older generation should not be ashamed or embarrassed to acknowledge the genius of the young as exhibited in the recent films Sione's Wedding and No.2. Both films show how we can take our ethnic identity with confidence, finesse and panache and place it in visible graphics on the mainstream context.

In Sione's Wedding the blending of traditional deference to the pastor and elders with chutzpah in the workplace and an easy savvy in society carries Albert and his cohorts through a Samoan church, a mainstream workplace and an Irish pub with equal ease. This blending transforms ethnic idiosyncrasy to a common humanity. It is a blending that can also be found in other places where some of our young are leading.

In No.2. the culture of dying and the imperative of leaving a worthwhile legacy impels a Fijian matriarch, before her imminent departure, to assert her authority by imposing a celebration of family values and reconciliation. The importance of these values is not exclusive to Pacific peoples. They also appeal to mainstream audiences.

What both films have accomplished is, to make the nuances of Pacific culture a comfortable part of the heritage of the world.

This brings me back to my biblical text: "It will happen afterward that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions" (Joel 2: 28).

What this biblical text says to me is that God speaks to the old and the young and not exclusively to either – thus imposing an imperative of mutual respect and dialogue. As an older person I am not embarrassed or ashamed to say, that the impasse in the current performance of our funeral culture may find a breakthrough in the genius of Sione's Wedding and No.2. For it does not diminish leadership of the older generation to acknowledge that our young see visions.

Soifua.