

‘Navigating our Future Together’

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Dialogue and Navigation

In a recent paper I gave in Wellington on cultural competence and leadership I concluded with the biblical quote: “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 Samoan person I am not embarrassed or ashamed to say, that the impasse in the current performance of our Samoan culture may find a breakthrough in the genius of the young, for it does not diminish leadership of the older generation to acknowledge that our young see visions.

This paper is a continuation of the dialogue between the young and the old.

The theme of this conference is ‘Navigating our future together’.

Bougainville named Samoa ‘Navigator Islands’ because of the natives’ skills in navigation – an accolade reinforced by the vast distances travelled within the Polynesian triangle. According to Pacific historian Dr Damon Salesa, this is evidence of courage and navigational skill.

Navigating culture

Navigation epitomises Samoan culture: our spiritual culture, building construction culture and navigation culture. Before construction there is a ritual search and identification of the tree/s for construction which is followed by a prayer ceremony. This ceremony seeks the approval of the God of the Forest and pardon from the tree. Seeking pardon recognises that the tree has a life and a soul. There are also ceremonies connected with preparing the sennit and the wood for the outrigger. At the completion of building construction the navigator and his crew takes turns to read the stars, meditate and pray for good fortune before setting out to sea.

In Samoan culture the ritual of appeasing the God of the Forest and seeking the pardon of the tree acknowledges a sacred bond between man and his environment. This belief system has something positive to offer the most pressing issue of our time, i.e. how can we save the earth.

There is an inherent spirituality in Samoan navigation by consulting the stars, something echoed in our funeral rituals. In Samoan funeral rituals there are salutations to each of the nine heavens. For our purposes it is sufficient to cite only three, i.e. the first, second and ninth salutation. The first salutation acknowledges darkness and the void. The second acknowledges the sense of smell. The ninth acknowledges the mountain.

Darkness and void is a metaphor that symbolises the prime mover's power to create substance from darkness and nothing.

The sense of smell symbolises bonding underlined by the significance of the nose. The sense of smell in the Samoan rituals of *sogi* and blessing of a successor is where you breathe in through the nose the *mana* of the other person through the act of kissing or where the incumbent breathes into the mouth of the successor his blessing. The spiritual contents of the chief's blessing and the breathed-in *mana* of the *sogi*, travel first to the lungs – the custodians of the breath of life – then to other parts of the body and mind.

The mountain symbolises man reaching out to the skies towards God. The mountain in many indigenous religions is a sacred symbol.

This is what navigation means in the Samoan indigenous reference. It is not only the physical and mental skills of taking on the elements; it is about the spiritual psyche and the bonding between man, environment and God.

Navigating our future together

Nothing brings home more emphatically the issue of ‘navigating our future together’ than what was said in a recent ABC interview on climate changes. The interview made three significant points:

1. Some of the islands of the Pacific will have to be evacuated by its resident population due to rising sea levels;
2. There will be a displacement of peoples in Indonesia and China due to rise in sea levels and this will impact on Australia;
3. It is estimated that in the next 50 years globally 150 million people will be displaced by climate change.

What these three points signal is that the problems of climate change is not just a national problem; it is a global problem – a problem for all countries, small or large. It is also not just a geographic problem; it is far more wide-reaching. This is a problem that will determine the need to navigate together our

collective futures. To achieve this humankind must have a common reference – a global ethic.

Navigating towards a global ethic

Hans Kung makes the point about the need for a common reference very effectively when he says:

“In recent years I have become increasingly convinced that the world in which we live has a chance of survival only if spheres of differing, contradictory or even conflicting ethics cease to exist. This one world needs one ethic. Our society does not need a uniform religion or a uniform ideology, but it does need some binding norms, values, ideals and goals” (Hans Kung, 1991, *Global Responsibility: in search of a new world ethic*).

There is common ground between Kung’s position and the celebrated quote from St Augustin, who states: “The truth is neither mine nor his, nor another’s; but belonging to us all, whom Thou callest to partake of it, warning us terribly, not to account it private to ourselves lest we be deprived of it.” (St Augustin, *Confessions of Saint Augustine, xiii-xxv*). Both are searching for a binding norm that begins with the recognition that the truth is neither mine nor yours exclusively.

Sartre says in his preface to Franz Fanon’s ‘*The Wretched of the Earth*’: “...when one day our human kind becomes full grown, it will not define itself as the sum total of the whole world’s inhabitants, but as the infinite unity of their mutual needs” (Jean Paul Sartre in Fanon, 1967). In the search for truth or a binding

norm I have no qualms in acknowledging that this is as much a moral imperative for our times as the statements offered by Kung and Augustin.

Navigating together towards a global ethic requires finding synthesis in different, sometimes conflicting or contradictory, references. It is not only a synthesis of views, but a synthesis with a spiritual environment that is core to the Pacific cultural reference.

Searching for truths is as important as searching for binding norms and finding cosmological harmony. Pacific leaders need to draw as much on their own Pacific indigenous experience as on those of the metropolitan cultures in which they might also live.

Samoans have a concept *moe manatunatu*, meaning a dream dialogue with ancestors and family gods. *Tofa* and *moe* are terms associated with the *moe manatunatu*. Both mean sleep: i.e. *tofa* is the sleep of the chief and *moe* the sleep of the orator. Through *moe manatunatu* the gods and ancestors are able to assist the leader not only in decisions concerning the self but also in decisions relating to family, community and nation.

One of the great *tapu* in Samoan traditional culture is that placed on the dialogue between the living and the dead. This is often expressed as *sa na tolofia le tofa poo le moe*, literally translated to mean, ‘that no one should be allowed to intrude into the imminent or actual dialogue between the living and the dead’. The equation of life and death here is a reminder that the received wisdom of *tofa* and *moe* is consequential, i.e. the dead give spiritual support to the decisionmaking processes of the living. The words *tofa* and *moe* are also the words for sleep but it is sleep informed by the wisdom of the dead.

Samoans believe that through *moe manatunatu* and *anapogi* (i.e. practices of abstinence, meditation and prayer), the soul is fed. Both invite self-reflection and re-assessment, not only of the contexts of today, but of yesterday and tomorrow. This spiritual insight assists in the achievement of mental and physical harmony. It is a spiritual insight that is core to many indigenous Pacific understandings of moral responsibility – something often missing from Western moral reference points.

Kung, in his thesis on global responsibility, acknowledges indigenous criticisms from Asia and Africa, who like ourselves emphasise the need to search for a binding norm that can provide for progress through a global ethic that can do four things. First, search for “wisdom to prevent the misuse of

scientific research”. Second, search for “spiritual energy to bring the unforeseeable risk of a highly efficient macro-technology under control”. Third, search for “ecology to fight against the constantly expanding economy”. And, lastly, search for “morality which could work against the massive interests of various individuals and groups in power” (Kung, 1991: p12).

Conclusion

I end with the words of my dear friend, Professor Godfrey Onah, a Nigerian Priest teaching at Urbaniana (Rome), who finds strength in the theme of this conference. He makes two valid points which are worth quoting in full. First he says:

“All sincere seekers are really seeking the same thing – the truth. It may present itself to us in various forms, but it is really the same. The contradictions over which we fight may only be apparent in the long run. What is needed is constant openness, especially to the truth that has been discovered by the other and the readiness to share our particular ‘truths’, so that in putting together our ‘truths’ we may get nearer to the truth - hence the need to ‘navigate together’” (pers. comm).

He concludes by saying that:

“Humanity has to learn that we will either be saved together or we will all perish together. Those who believe that they can live in an island of peace and progress, while the rest of humanity wallows in poverty and misery should know by now that no part of the globe is now too remote” (pers. comm.).

For emerging Pacific leaders ‘navigating our future together’ is more than political rhetoric or theology, it is a must.