

*Head of State of Samoa*

*His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi,*

*Address at American Samoa Flag-raising Day*

*17 April 2017, Pago Pago, American Samoa*

We thank God for this beautiful day whereupon we have come to celebrate a historic moment in remembrance and prayer.

I want to thank Rev Malaki Timu for his homily and prayers.

I want to thank Governor Lolo Moliga and Lieutenant Governor Mauga for the high honour of speaking on this auspicious occasion. It is not usual among governments to have another speak at such events. But Samoa and American Samoa are forever bound through our bonds of kinship.

An elder once said that on occasions like this we must search the heights of the heavens (Lagi) and the depths of our family histories and mythologies (Sa Lefe'e) in order to gain insight and perspective. In my meditations, I searched and was drawn to the words of the Psalmist:

If I forget you,

O Jerusalem,

let my right hand forget

its skill!

Let my tongue stick to

the roof of my mouth,

if I do not remember you,

if I do not set Jerusalem

above my highest joy!

(Psalm 137: 5-6, ESV).

The words – if I do not remember you, if I do not set [you] above my highest joy, [then] let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth – are sharp and vivid. They paint a harsh message. They are cries of pain that urge us to embed and nurture in our hearts and minds, in our thoughts and deeds, and in those of our children, the verities of what make us Samoan.

The Psalmist implores that it is when we are in exile that we must be most vigilant not to forget this. We must not forget or discard our mythologies, histories, values, customs and language. For they are what gives us our identity and colour.

From where or from whom would we find the guidance not to forget?

From God. For God is the source of all knowledge and identity. It is from God that the message of the soul is brought alive by the tongue. The Psalmist reminds us that it is through our languages – our Samoan, English, Hebrew languages – that God celebrates with us as unique cultures and us with Him. It is through our mother tongues that we come to know and retain the heights and depths of who we are as unique peoples.

How do we know this? We know this through the beauty of language, and through the language of faith. God spoke to Adam and Eve, to Abraham and to Moses. And He spoke to them in their mother tongue. He asked them to have faith despite all that was going on around them. God knew that it was through Hebrew that they would remember Jerusalem and hold steadfast to their Jewish faith.

The question of Jerusalem is also a question of boundaries. The boundaries of land. In Old Samoa land was both functional and sacred. It too was a gift from God. Its boundaries were both material and sacred, and reflected history and culture. In Old Samoa, Samoa extended from Saua, Manu'a, in the east to Analega, Falealupo, in the west. Hence the saying: "O Samoa e pau mai Saua, pau mai Analega".

The ritual of planting the placenta and umbilical cord into the land underlined a belief in a shared genealogy or kinship between land and people. The word for land in Samoan is fanua. Fanua is also the word for placenta. Both nurture the birth of life. The continuation of these rituals are testaments to the philosophical heights and depths of our faasamoa (Samoan culture and values), our faasinomaga (Samoan identities), our tuā'oi (cultural boundaries) and tofi (cultural roles, designations and responsibilities).

The impact of climatic changes on our Samoan nations evidence a breakdown in our guardianship responsibilities over our kin, over what is tapu, over what is our faasinomaga and our tuā'oi with nature. We have forgotten our Jerusalem.

In the religion of our forebears there was the "Sa o Manuvao", or ritual performances acknowledging the sacred boundaries between people and the forest, especially with the God of the Forest (Manuvao). In days of old ritual deference was paid to Manuvao before a tree could be cut, or before lands could be cleared. These tapu boundaries have today been both sadly forgotten and rejected.

A breakdown in the relationship between people and nature is further emphasised when we consider changes to our fishing culture and the loss of traditional fishing knowledge and its associated tapu. We used to know when the palolo would rise by reading the appearances of the moon. When they rose we would ritually welcome them by chanting: "Fanau mai, fanau mai" (Be born; Be born). Our ancestors knew that in the act of rising the palolo were also birthing (laying eggs). This was evidenced by the languaging of their palolo chants.

But how did our ancestors know when the palolo would rise or that the palolo were actually giving birth? They knew through careful and active observation. They knew by watching and counting lunar movements and noticing how seasonal clocks worked in the natural world. They knew because they took time to converse with nature and with God. There is an old adage which says: "E le laa le uto i le maene (as the floater cannot intrude on the function of the sinker), e le sopo fo'i le sami i le lau'ele'ele (the sea cannot encroach on the boundaries of the land)". The adage reminds us that in everything there are sacred boundaries. The biggest problem facing our families, villages, churches and governments today is the crossing of boundaries or sopotuā'oi.

Sopotuā'oi is where there has been a crossing or breach of the boundaries in a relationship or covenant (ua sopo le tuā'oi). In the situation where children, especially adult children, impose great disrespect towards their parents or treat them badly, elders believed that misfortune or malady, sometimes described as the curse of parents or mala matuā, would befall them. By the same token those children who show genuine care and respect for their parents would receive blessings or faamanuiaga. With the breakdown or loss of traditional values and beliefs, sopotuā'oi is spreading and is evidenced by our horrendous child abuse and domestic violence statistics. Our church, government and non-government sectors are also not above the reach of sopotuā'oi.

New communication technologies, such as the internet and facebook, have taken our communities by storm. Traditional methods for protecting the va and tuā'oi in this social media space seem useless. The languaging and courtesies of Pasia and Lofipo, distinguished orators in old Samoa, celebrated for their wit, style, manners and wisdom, represent a different, seemingly irrelevant, world.

I remember how my mentors described how Lofipo of Saleaula in a debate at the historic Malae o Ti'afau in Mulinuu, during the Mau period, reciprocated with Pasia of Safotulafai through diminutives. They were by now close friends and had deep respect for the skill and integrity of the other. They were two of Samoa's most preeminent orators by this time.

Lofipo, the younger of the two, begins their debate by saying: "Sia, you go ahead and speak". Pasia responds: "Po, no you go ahead, I will defer to you". They would to and fro like this for some time before Pasia eventually agreed to speak. They modelled the height and depths of our faatau (oratorical debate) culture. When one compares the art and languaging of the faatau of Pasia and Lofipo with the faatau of today, one cannot help but yearn for the civility of yesteryears.

Remembering Jerusalem involves more than just pining for what was. It also involves taking a stance on retaining what should continue to be. And we would retain this because we agree that if we lose it we lose a fundamental part of our being Samoan.

One of the main responsibilities of elders, especially preeminent elders, is to role model not only how to live but also how to die. In Old Samoa, there was always a concern for the legacy one leaves behind. Dying was considered as much an art form as living.

The family and village would normally build a house a little bit away from the village compound when it was clear that their preeminent chief or elder was nearing their time. People were specially selected to attend to their needs. Setting them up in their own space in this way recognised the indignity of keeping them in the public glare. It helped them to retain their mana and dignity during the dying process.

When Soifuā Gese was dying, he instructed the boys of his family to build his coffin. When it was finished it was placed on a low-lying table in the middle of his house. Soifuā would sit in the front of his house and eye people passing by. When he saw someone he thought was worth sharing conversation and tea with, he would invite them in for a meal. After their meal or tea he would then take them on a tour of his house, including an inspection of his coffin. When they reached his coffin, he would say, "Isn't it a lovely coffin?" Then he would open the coffin and lie himself in it. "See", he would say, "It's a perfect fit, isn't it? I look regal, don't I?"

It took a while before Soifuā actually died, but by the time he did, his invitations to tea had become quite famous throughout Samoa. Soifuā's story reminds of the saying: "Ia e iloa ola, ia e ola oti" – May you know how to live, may you know how to die.

I end by returning to the words of the Psalmist.

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Samoa is bounded in the east in Saua and bounded in the west in Analega. Those are the boundaries of our faasamoa, our faasinomaga, tofi and tuā'oi. Those are the boundaries of our heritage, language, history and mythologies. As our ancestors have said: I am you and you are me, for we were born from the same womb, we share the same inheritance, speak the same language, and live and die in search of the same destinies.

If we forget you Samoa let our right hands forget their skills, let our tongues stick to the roofs of our mouths. Today we remember you and honour you.

I wish you all a blessed Flag Day! Soifua.