

In search of Tagaloa: Pulemelei, Samoan mythology and Science

(Address by Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese, Samoan Exhibition at the Kon-Tiki Museum, Oslo, Norway - 16 April, 2004)

Thor Heyerdahl and the Pulemelei Mounds

I want to begin my talk on the search for Tagaloa with a quote from Thor Heyerdahl. Thor states:

“And both the wind and the people who continue to live close to Nature still have much to tell us which we cannot hear inside university halls. A scientist has to distinguish between legend and myth and make use of both”.

Thor was one of the few scientists I know that actively engaged in an attempt to do this and to do so in a way that afforded our peoples and our knowledges respect and dignity.

I met Thor and Jacqueline Heyerdahl twice in February 2002. Firstly in an informal meeting with the Nelson Properties Board who own the Pulemelei lands and later at a dinner hosted by my relatives, Joe and Tui Annandale. At the beginning of the dinner, Thor seemed tired and jaded and made brief interventions in the conversation. Somewhat late in the evening, Thor warmed to his topic and seemed to draw life from his enthusiasm. He became a man transformed and we became transfixed by a face that in a sudden acquired a glow and by a fluency of expression which reflected complete mastery of his subject. It was a *tour de force* that went on for two hours; a performance which was all the more amazing when we found out later that he was terminally ill.

Two months later, Thor died and we who were privileged to share a few moments with him in February assumed that the Pulemelei project died with him. Shortly after Thor's funeral, we were told that the project was still going ahead.

Pulemelei and the Dig

In September 2002, the first archaeological dig at Pulemelei began under the supervision of Drs Helene Martinsson-Wallin, Paul Wallin and Geoffrey Clark. The Pulemelei mounds are made up of several mounds. The principal mound was excavated during the 2002 dig. When the dig reached foundation level and the near approaches were cleared, the spectacle of what was exposed was awesome. It invited re-assessment.

In terms of the Samoan landscape, the Pulemelei mound seemed to me to be overwhelmingly large and high. One of the smaller mounds on elevated ground in the north gave a commanding view of the top level of the principal mound. Another mound on the southern slope and the star mounds nearby each incited wonder and curiosity. Even more curious was what was later discovered to be a pathway from the east.

The pathway or *auala* in Samoan, is significant in Polynesian culture. Our funeral rituals are called *auala* or the pathway, meaning the pathway to *lagi* (heaven) or *Pulotu* (the underworld). From the top of the mound one can trace a pathway linking Manono, Apolima and Upolu islands. In early 2003 bush and trees hid this pathway. However, today the pathway is clearly visible, thanks to the clearings made by the January hurricane this year. Whilst at the top of the principal mound one can not help but reflect on the strategic and navigational value of such a view for our ancestors.

Making connections: Polynesian Mythologies, Genealogies and Science

In early 2003 I invited two Maori friends, a Maori anthropologist Dr Pita Sharples and Rev Morris Gray, former HoD of the Maori Dept at the University of Canterbury, to visit Pulemelei. When they came we climbed the path to the mounds.

The pathway up to the top of the mound is steep – well, it is steep for people like Peter, Morris and me who are getting on and who have put on weight. By the time we reached the top, we were puffed. We made for flat slabs of stone, seated ourselves and took a breather.

Shortly after, Morris stood up, walked inwards, stopped when he reached the middle, threw his arm out and pointed to the ground: “Down in the bottom in the ground level is buried an *ariki*” he said. 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. “There are links between this mound and the skies, the sun, the moon and the stars”, he proclaimed. “There is a link between this mound and the pathway”. The astrology of this, he suggested, was what enabled the Polynesian diaspora.

Morris pauses then walks deliberately towards the seaward direction. He calls to the plantation manager, “Where does the sun rise?” The plantation manager responds, “You are facing the direction of the sunrise”. Morris was standing directly in front of the principal pathway to the top of the mound suggesting that the pathway pointed to the direction of the sunrise.

He turned to me and said, “I ask for your leave to address our forbears in chant”. When given, he began to chant. At the bottom of the mound we saw the Samoan people down there instinctively stand. I pondered on this - on why they stood to a Maori chant.

When the chanting was over, Morris walked towards me and said, “If there’s going to be a dig, in all likelihood they will come across human remains. In that case we require a purification ritual.” In searching for why and how we should conduct the

purification ritual at Pulemelei I became fascinated by the suggested links between Pulemelei and Tagaloa. Thus began my search for Tagaloa.

In Search for Tagaloa: Moving Between Mythology, Genealogy and Science

In the cosmologies of most Polynesian peoples, Tagaloa is the senior anthropomorphic god. He is pre-eminent in Samoa and Tonga and is the pre-existing Creator in Tahiti. In East Polynesian cosmology, he is equal with other first-order gods.

The fact that important founding ancestors attained the status of gods is evidence that for Polynesian peoples, Tagaloa was a very important founding ancestor. The correlation for Polynesians between biological origins and language and culture therefore is one founded on genealogy and mythology. The fact that the name and status is so widespread suggests that he was part of Polynesian tradition from an early stage. For Polynesian peoples Tagaloa is more than a tradition: Tagaloa is mythology; history; culture and heritage. In contemporary Samoa, Samoan culture, its lands and chiefly titles are ultimately founded on mythology – a mythology which links back to Tagaloa.

Tagaloa in Samoan/Polynesian Mythology

In the Tagaloa mythology, the earth is the consequence of the Big Bang i.e. the separation of *Lagi* (heaven) and *papa* (rock) and human life originates from germs (*ilo*). The Tagaloa thesis is closer to the scientific explanation of evolution than Christian biblical text.

In Samoan/Polynesian mythology *Tulī* (plover), Tagaloa's messenger was sent down to earth and discovered the Samoan islands. Here he introduced varieties of plants and trees. After Samoa, the plovers did the same for Tonga and Fiji. Then the plovers by Tagaloa's command, designated the figure of Man from germs and they were sent to populate these three islands.

The Tagaloa regime is well recorded in Samoan oral history, especially its fall. To this day, it is commemorated by the chant at a chief's funeral: *Tulouna a le lagi ma le lagi ma le lagi!* The orator chants the honorifics of each of the nine heavens. When the orator reaches the honorifics of the ninth heaven, a member of the deceased family will intervene and invite them, i.e. orator and party, into a residence as official mourners. The chant is their passport into the residence.

In the ninth heaven, Amoā the daughter of Tagaloa intervened on behalf of her father and offered herself in marriage in order to spare her father and his personal entourage from the wrath of the victor Lu Fasiaitu. This intervention is commemorated by the Samoan proverb: *faalava le Amoā* (meaning, 'intervention by Amoā').

The casus belli was the theft of Lu's sacred chickens by Tagaloa's people. The discovery of the sacred chickens is commemorated by the Samoan proverb, *E ufiufi*

atu lava tama'i moa ae 'io'io mai, meaning the attempt to hide the chickens under the kava bowl was given away by their cry. Lu's sacred chickens meaning *Sa Moa* became the name of the islands.

Lu became the first Tui Atua. According to the Samoan Tui Atua and Tui Aana traditions, the Tagaloa inheritance was divided amongst the progeny of the union between Tui Atua Lu Fasiaitu and Amoā; this provided for the separate inheritances of Tui Atua, Tui Aana, Tui Manu'a, Tui Tonga and Tui Fiti.

There is no Tui regime in the Hawaiian, Tahitian, Aotearoa or the Rapanui tradition. The suggestion is that they migrated before the fall of the Tagaloa regime. In the Hawaiian, Tahitian, Aotearoa and the Rapanui traditions, there are several references to Savaii (Hawaiki), Manono, Upolu, Tutuila, Manu'a, Tonga and Fiti and even To'elau and no mention of Samoa. This suggests that the name Samoa is more recent.

Along this genealogical reasoning, Tui Atua, Tui Aana, Tui Manu'a, Tui Tonga, Tui Fiti are of equal ranking. Notably within this list there is not yet any specific reference to a Tui Samoa of equal ranking or of contemporaneous origin. When the missionaries arrived in Samoa in 1830, Samoa, as a distinct political entity included only Savaii, Apolima, Manono, Upolu and Tutuila – not Manu'a. In 1900, Manu'a, by colonial design, was joined to Tutuila.¹ The joining has no basis in Samoan historical precedent.

In sum, within the Tagaloa mythology, Man originates from the union between *lagi* (heaven) and *papa* (rock). Because of this genealogy, Man shares divinity with the sun, the moon, the stars, the sea and the land. The core symbols of the Tagaloa religion are celebrated linguistically in words like *'ele'ele* (earth) and *palapala* (mud) which are also words for blood; and *fatu* meaning rock, which is also the word for heart. To underline the links across Polynesia, the placenta which is *whenua* in Maori, is also their word for land; *fanua* in Samoan is used in the same way to refer to both land and placenta. Also, the umbilical cord is similarly named, i.e. *puke* in Maori and *pute* in Samoan, these (both placenta and umbilical cord) are buried ritually in the earth. Rituals are a direct link to mythology, to Tagaloa.

Mythology in Samoan Rituals: Faalanu, Liutofaga and Fono ma Aitu

Faalanu

Mythology in Samoan rituals returns us to Pulemelei. Why did we need to do a purification or *faalanu* ritual? The answer is: because whenever *tapu* (sacred bond) is broken, you have to ask for pardon. Moreover, the respectful reference to the dead is *tua'ā o loo tofafa i tia* which is reference to “forbears who are sleeping in their graves”. When you dig graves, you are disturbing the sleep of the dead and you have to ask pardon.

I want to underline the point about asking pardon. The word purification in Samoan is *faalanu*. Literally it means: cleansing by asking pardon. I was a member of a Samoan party which visited Whakatane in New Zealand last year and was taken by

¹ However, Manu'a only acceded after considerable colonial pressure in 1904.

our host Pouroto to an old Maori *pa* dating from the late twelfth century. On our way back, one of our party saw an *avaava-a-aitu* plant or in Maori *kawakawa*, and she said "I want to pluck some leaves". Another of our party said, "No you shouldn't. This is *tapu* ground and you have to ask Pouroto's permission." She then asked permission and so Pouroto launched into a chant which is *faalanu* before we could pluck leaves. You are breaking *tapu* in plucking leaves and therefore you have to ask for pardon.

Furthermore, when you cut down a tree, the word in Samoan is *oia*. The word *oia* is derived from the word *oi* which means cry in pain presupposing that the tree suffers pain and a tree has a life and a soul. The core of Samoan spiritual life is the *tapu* relationship between Man and his environment. The greatest threat to Man's survival is the threat to the ozone layer. Sometimes one wonders whether the solution of the ozone problem is recognition by Man of the *tapu* relationship between Man and trees, Man and rocks, Man and rivers, Man and the sea, Man and the elements. Thus, in Polynesian belief, before breaking *tapu* Man must reflect on the break to that spiritual bonding.

Liutofaga

The next question was, if we were to find human remains, what are we going to do with them? In other words, what are the appropriate processes and/or methods for dealing with the remains? We concluded that it would be the process for a secondary burial, in Samoan *liutofaga*. *Liutofaga* means changing the resting quarters.

In Samoa, one of the essential ingredients for performing *liutofaga* would be sandalwood and sandalwood leaves. This is evidenced in the Samoan word for funerals *falelauasi*, meaning the house that is lined with sandalwood leaves. Sandalwood like incense is one of the essences of Samoan culture particularly Samoan spiritual culture.

Fire is another core ingredient. The ritual making of fire is a direct inheritance from the Tagaloa mythology where Tiitiiatalaga brought fire from the underworld for the use of Man.

The purification ritual thus involved the ritualistic lighting of flares, bonfires and *asi* wood fires - all symbolic of the Tagaloa mythology.

Fono ma Aitu

The purification ritual had associated rituals. Putting together the purification ritual itself was as much a search as was the sequel. There were three sequel rituals: the *fono ma aitu* (conference with the spirits), *lolo sa* (making of holy oil) and *sami lolo* (making of containers for the oil).

The *asi* or sandalwood leaves and wood which were presented at the purification ritual, were carefully stored for the sequel rituals. To save time, I will speak only of the *fono ma aitu* (conference with spirits) ritual.

The ritual like most of the old religion religious rituals is oriented to the sunset and sunrise.

In the Tagaloa mythology, the Sun is not only a source of energy but also one of the principal progenitors of Man. The hours of the day is measured by what is known in Samoan as *itula* the 'side of the sun' i.e. the line which divides the shade and the sunlight. The setting of the sun is welcomed by the crickets so we say, the time when the crickets cry, *tagi alisi*. Midnight is when the *alii o le po*, a sweet-smelling flowering plant, opens its petals and pervades the night air with a strong fragrant perfume. Morning is welcomed by the chickens thus their honorific *faailo ao*, herald of the morning. Day and night are mythological husband and wife who like life and death are one and equal. The beginning of day as is the beginning of night invite spiritual contemplation.

At twelve noon, the principal participants begin their fast. The principal participants i.e. the four conferees who take up the four main posts in the house, the two *matuatala* and the two *pepe*, i.e. the two main posts on the side and the two main posts on the front and the back, break their fast at midnight.

A little after six just before sunset, the big wooden drum *lali* or *logo*, tolls eight times symbolizing the eight tentacles of the octopus which is the earthly manifestation of divinity. This is the signal for the people inside the house to rub wood, *si'a* which is the ritual way of making fire. After making fire, sandalwood oil in burners were lit inside the house then the blinds *pola* were put down (save one at the back entrance). When sandalwood fires outside the house were lit, a flare was taken to the *malae* i.e. the open ground in front of the house and bonfires were lighted. This was the signal for the procession to begin. The procession was led by an orator dressed in tapa cloth and wearing a pandanus necklace. He is holding a long speaking staff and chanting the marriage chant which is a prayer that man's desires will marry God's intentions. He is followed by the four principal participants wearing head-dresses, necklaces or *'ula* and skirts made from sandalwood leaves. They in turn are followed by a support group which included the Tuaefu Methodist pastor. When they reached the house, each of the four principal participants were given a pierced green dehusked coconut. Each of the principal participants took up their designated posts inside the house. The support group dispersed except for those individuals assigned to ensure the fires kept burning throughout the night.

At exactly midnight, the *lali* or *logo* tolls eight times again. This is the signal for the "ghosts" to then proceed from the *malae* to the *fale*/house. Half of the "ghosts" bodies are painted black. As they walk along, they mimic the cry and the manner of dogs, woodpigeons, the *ve'a* (the bird whose cry is supposed to be the signal for death) and owls. There is a belief that the 'ghosts' incarnated themselves in these animals. When the 'two ghosts' reach the *fale*, they enter and drink the green coconuts after which they would then retire to where they came from.

When the 'ghosts' withdraw, it is time to break the fast. Specially-prepared food known as *sofesofe*, which is sliced taro or yam sprinkled with coconut cream and covered with taro, banana and breadfruit leaves are tied with scraps of skin from the *fau* tree and baked in the *umu* (Samoan oven).

As the sun begins to rise, emissaries are sent to the *fale* to find out whether the coconuts have been drunk. When it is found that they've been drunk, they return and

report using the ritual call: *Ua talia e le Atua le fanoga* (The gods have heeded our prayer).

A procession heads for the *fale*. They are headed by an orator who is traditionally garbed and chanting marriage chants. Amongst the procession is the Methodist pastor. The call for marriage acknowledges the marriage between the old religion and the new. On reaching the house, the procession enters single file through the opening at the back. The Methodist pastor then says a prayer. After the prayer, the blinds of the house go up. This is followed by a kava ceremony. After this is the distribution of sandalwood and sandalwood leaves (which are the essential ingredients in making holy oil), between the four separate households. A specially prepared breakfast marks the official end of the ritual.

We had to search for the ritual because even though the *fono ma aitu* was the most common ritual of prayer seeking the gods' blessing for an undertaking in the old religion, the last time they were known to be performed was in the late 1890s.

One of the principal participants, Joe Annandale, a director of O.F.Nelson Properties Board said: "The experience was awesome and one of the most spiritual in my life."

For Polynesians, each of these rituals are directly informed by mythology.

Juxtaposing Mythology and Science

How can we place our respective knowledges about Pulemelei together to find common purpose in creating universal understandings? And, how can we do this without questioning the integrity or legitimacy of one or the other? I am not sure. What I am sure of is, however, that I would like to begin to try. Allowing for the dig at Pulemelei was one step in that direction.

I am told that plovers breed in Siberia and in the winter months migrate to the warmer South Pacific. Current readings of the Lapita evidence point to settlement of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa 3000 years ago. Similarly, settlements in the Marquesas are scientifically dated 300-600 AD; Hawaii as 650-850 AD; and New Zealand (Aotearoa) as 1000-1200 AD. Clearly the origin of the Polynesian diaspora would have to be placed in Fiji, Tonga or Samoa and nomenclature suggests that Savaii is the mythological Havaii, Hawaii or Hawaiki. In any case the dates make for interesting comparisons alongside the preliminary dates received thus far from the Pulemelei digs. That is:

1. Between 200 BC and 850 AD, settlement activities featuring earth ovens, Polynesian plain ware pottery and stone tools have been found.
2. During 1100-1400 AD the Pulemelei mound was probably constructed and used;
3. 1400-1600 AD there were other significant [human] activities in the area;
4. 1700-1800 AD the Pulemelei site was abandoned and/or lost its importance;

To me, such scientific evidence seems to echo the mythological history I cited earlier.

The question remains thus: is it possible to connect mythological and archaeological evidence? Or was Thor Heyerdahl mistaken? If he was not, the quest remains: how we are to determine 'how'.

In searching for answers, I find that the Maoris of New Zealand/Polynesia are making, in my view, the most significant contribution to this quest. Their attempt to negotiate Maori lore alongside Western legal terms is I find a wise start. Justice Eddie Durie, (former head of the Waitangi Tribunal and current member of the NZ Law Commission) in his paper, "Will the settlers settle?" shows how all aspects of culture interrelate to comprise a coherent system. I believe that the Maori initiative will in time be accorded the highest accolades not only by the *fanauga* but by the world.

Early last year, I began building at Vaialua in Samoa a cultural research and restoration centre known as the *Afeafe o Vaetoefaga*. In September last year, I visited Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiorangi, the Maori University at Whakatane (New Zealand). Here I was awarded an adjunct professorship. Awanuiorangi is the best known Maori research and restoration centre in New Zealand and internationally. We, that is Awanuiorangi and *Afeafe o Vaetoefaga*, are committed to mutual cooperation for promoting common goals. One of these goals is to find ways to collectively share in this quest. Further understanding the juxtapositioning of mythology and science is, therefore, in our view part of that quest.

In search of Tagaloa – the legacy

I want to conclude with a comment on the legacy of Tagaloa. In searching for Tagaloa, I am searching for the legacy. When I said to Morris that we needed to consult about the purification rituals at Pulemelei, it literally meant we had to search and research into our spiritual culture. Christianity has effectively demonised the legacy of our Samoan ancestors to a point where their rituals, liturgies and beliefs have been rejected and spurned. Ironically, Christianity is today doing an about-face. In the latter part of the twentieth century, Christianity has acknowledged the deep spirituality of indigenous religious culture and is strenuously trying to find an accommodation. This seems reminiscent of the mythological attempt by the siblings to separate and after separation, to unify *lagi* (heaven) and *papa* (earth).

The point is that the search for Tagaloa is the search for our human legacy.

I believe that the findings from Pulemelei will provide useful information that will help address many questions about the connections between traditional mythology and contemporary society. Already the carbon dating has opened avenues to new insights and perspectives. It also opens visions of *soo* (connection or connecting) between the Polynesian *fanauga* - from Hawaii to Tahiti to Rapanui. All, I hope, can gather one day at a connection festival at Pulemelei to celebrate common heritage.

I want to end by reiterating the quote by Thor Heyerdahl used at the beginning of this talk. I reiterate it for in it, I believe, is the legacy of our collective futures.

“And both the wind and the people who continue to live close to Nature still have much to tell us which we cannot hear inside university halls. A scientist has to distinguish between legend and myth and make use of both”.

Faafetai,

Soifua.

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