Lifting the Tapu of Sex: A *Tulou* Reading of the Song of Songs

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I propose a *Tulou* hermeneutic as one of the ways of reading problematic texts, such as the Song of Songs (hereafter the Song), which Samoans and other Pasifika islanders avoid because of its carnal nature and sexual imageries. Because the topic of sex is *tapu* (taboo, sacred) in the Samoan context, the Song has not been engaged nor appreciated by Samoan readers. This nonengagement and unappreciation adds to the assumption from mostly nonislander circles that islanders cannot read and that they are too "naïve" and "simplistic" (Davidson, Aymer, and Havea 2015, 1). Such a colonial attitude was prevalent among early European missionaries, and as a result, many aspects of Samoan pre-Christian indigenous religion, which contained sexually charged stories, were whispered to later generations. These stories were whispered due to the tapu imposed on sex matters with the arrival of Christianity into Samoa (Efi 2014, 37).

In this essay, I appeal to key Samoan concepts to elaborate the importance of tulou in the Samoan context. The concepts of *fa'aaloalo* (respect) and tapu (sacred, taboo) are pivotal in understanding the context of tulou and its application. I define tulou as a construct of the terms *tu* (stand) and *lou* (pluck, bring down), and I use reader-response criticism as a theoretical framework for formulating my hermeneutic. The tulou hermeneutic informs my analysis of the Song, as I negotiate the Song from a humanistic point of view. I find in Samoa that the Song is whispered to the faithful without much attention to the sexuality expressed. I thus find that there is a need to lift the tapu and reread the Song from a different perspective. As such, a hermeneutic built on fa'aaloalo is ideal, given that fa'aaloalo is the foundation of the Samoan culture. Tulou is grounded in respect (fa'aaloalo), and it is with respect that I propose to read the Song.

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Constructing a Tulou Hermeneutic

In Pasefika (Pacific, Oceania), tulou acts as a pardon, or excusing a person out of respect for infringing a tapu with regard to another person or group of people. Nations around Samoa have similar understandings of the word:

Tonga	*tulou*	excuse me
Fiji	*tilou*	excuse me
Rarotonga, Maohi	*turou*	expression of glorification to deities
Maohi Nui (Tahiti)	*turou*	expression of shame and humiliation
Hawaii	*kulou*	excuse me

The common feature among these meanings is a lowering of oneself. Whether this lowering involves excusing the individual for breaching tapu, self-humiliation, or adoration and glorification, the need to lower oneself is imperative.

By lowering oneself, "*Tulou* permits one to wrong another, respectfully" (Havea 2013, 296). *Respect* in the Samoan context is essential to "save face" (Vaai 2006, 178). Much of the concern of tulou is dealing with those people who have been offended when their space is crossed. An awkward situation becomes apparent. As Alessandro Duranti (1992, 667) indicates, "individuals find themselves standing and hence higher than those sitting, some of whom are probably of higher status." To amend this awkward situation, one crouches down (in respect) and says "tulou." There is no hesitation to say tulou because tulou, in most Polynesian contexts, is expected and compulsory. The action of bending down one's body conveys to people that one is remorseful for breaching the tapu. My only point of contention with Duranti's understanding of tulou is that while fa'aaloalo is mostly paid to those of higher rank, tulou is not reserved for those of higher rank. Tulou can be said and given to anyone and to everyone, regardless of status or standing.

Tu ae Lou

To date, Pasefika writers have not explained where the term tulou originates. As such, I explain the construction of the word in my own view as an Australian Samoan. The word tulou has evolved from its original meaning. But I imagine that it is like other Samoan words, which originated either

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from Samoan mythology or from observations of the land and ocean in everyday life (cf. Lefale 2010, 323–25). Penehuro Fatu Lefale, in his article about Samoa's weather and climate, explains how Samoans named elements of the cosmos based on what they resembled. For example, the Belt of Orion was named *amoga* (load) because it resembled a man carrying a load on his shoulders (323). Following this pattern of Samoan etymology, I construct an etymology of tulou.

The word tulou resonates with the practice of plucking breadfruits from a breadfruit tree and lowering the fruit down to ground level, as tulou requires a lowering of oneself in respect of the other. This imagery allows us to understand how tulou can be viewed as a model for bringing the horizon of the text to our own horizon.

To elaborate, tulou breaks down into two words, tu and lou: The word tu means "to stand" or "to stop." As such, tu defines the stand-point of the person. In the example of a breadfruit tree picker, the person at the bottom of the tree represents a position of humility: a position from where fa'aaloalo is derived. And the word lou refers to the plucking action (the stick used for plucking is also known as lou). When one uses a lou to pluck a breadfruit, she or he is not interested in the lower branches but the fruits in the higher branches. These higher breadfruits are plucked and brought down to the ground. Therefore, lou represents a descending action. To see this in the context of fa'aaloalo, the high point represents nobility while the low point represents humility.

When tu and lou are put together, tulou means *tu ae lou* ("stand then bring down"). The person acting out of fa'aaloalo becomes aware of a sacred space and is obliged to stand or stop. As the person stops, the person realizes that she or he is in a place of nobility and must descend to a low point of humility; one lou(er) oneself. The person brings herself or himself down to a level of humility and utters the word tulou to show fa'aaloalo.

Breaching Tapu with Tulou

When a person breaches tapu through tulou, she or he *claims* (as opposed to *seeks*) permission. A person who says tulou does not wait for someone to permit her or him to walk passed but simply says tulou and proceeds. Even if the seated people would not grant permission, per se, tulou is still reciprocated through a positive acknowledgment of the person. As a result, the reputation of the person saying tulou is complimented. Those

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who are seated often meet the one who does not say tulou with sneers of contempt and disapproval.[1]

For the people who are seated, there is a changed attitude when tulou is uttered. This change in attitude is similar to a *palagi* concept known as *schema*. The schema reflects a positive change in people, where a person "can deliberately confront [an] anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place" (Douglas 2002, 48). This positive emancipation is what occurs to the people who are seated. What seemed rude is given a positive reality as those who are seated accept the need for the individual to cross their space.

Tulou as Hermeneutical Lens

Given the reciprocity of tulou, whose perspective in the tulou transaction is relevant for this hermeneutical exercise? Traditionally, tulou is given to other readers. For instance, in the traditional readings of the Song, one would tulou other readers by giving an allegorical interpretation so that the tension of speaking about sex in a mixed-gender audience would be reduced. The text itself was not granted the status of tulou, as readers prefer to avoid reading references to sex and would therefore fail to make meaning from the context of such sexual references. References to sexuality and eroticism were suppressed and not even mentioned.

Breaching Tapu

With a tulou hermeneutic, the reader approaches the text with the tulou mindset. The reader pays respect to the text. The sexual content in the text may cause shock and embarrassment to the Samoan reader, but through the tulou hermeneutic, she or he understands that the text exhibits its author's style, method, and message. With a tulou mindset, the reader becomes aware of tapu, but she or he must still cross that tapu space. Thus, the reader should not avoid the sexual content. The reader cannot avoid the text's eroticism. Engaging them is fa'aaloalo to the text, and making meaning of them is giving respect to the text. Through the tulou hermeneutic, the reader's mindset changes from the negative sense imposed by

1. This is based on the premise that people at Samoan cultural functions and gatherings are seated until the end.

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tapu into a positive one constituting openness to talking about sex and sexuality. From this positive context, the reader can make new meanings.

Through the tulou hermeneutic, possibilities eventuate. The reader can appreciate the sacredness of sexual imagery. The tulou hermeneutic can also diverge into a discussion of human sexuality as part of being "made in God's image." This is a problem in the Samoan context because mentioning of the word *susu* (breast), for instance, in public is tapu. As a Samoan male reader, the disturbance is out of respect for my sister, not out of disgust. Tulou relaxes the Samoan cultural tapu and enables the text to speak and the reader to make new meaning.

In addition, a tulou hermeneutic gives fa'aaloalo to other readers. It acknowledges that the space between myself and Samoan female readers is respected. This space is *va tapu'ia* (sacred space), which implies a sacred relationship. The reason that the *va* (space) is *tapu'ia* (sacred) is to ensure one party in the relationship does not offend or hurt the other. The topic of sex, for example, stands to offend and breach the va.

So how can tulou respectfully breach va or tapu? This requires that the conditions of tapu be redefined. In dealing with a text that is considered holy, it is necessary to breach the tapu between readers. As Samoans acknowledge (at least on an ideological level) the holiness of the Bible, a reading which maintains the integrity of the text is appropriate. This way, one pays fa'aaloalo both to the text and to other readers.

Reading with the lens of tulou is an exercise in reader-response criticism. The reader undergoes a change through the tulou hermeneutic. Hans-Georg Gadamer is adamant that the reader makes a contribution to making meaning through what he terms the fusion of horizons. This implies that the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader must fuse in order to come to an understanding. Gadamer (2004, 301) defines *horizon* as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point." In interpretation, each person has her or his own horizon, which is determined by her or his capacity to think. "Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth" (Gadamer 2004, 301).

Tulou Horizon

Tu signifies the reader's horizon. The reader's horizon is constituted with human experience, and the context of fa'aaloalo is a human context. This

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is important to note because as Stanley Fish (1980, 173) states, interpreting "is constitutive of being human."

The fa'aaloalo context informs the interpretive decisions that one makes of and about the text. The meaning that is constructed does not constitute primarily a fa'aaloalo to the tapu, nor does it ignore the tapu. Out of fa'aaloalo for the text, the sexual content is not disregarded by concealing it through allegorical and christological understandings. The reader instead must search for meaning within the eroticism of the text.

This may seem difficult for the traditional Samoan reader. In order to talk about sex in the Samoan context, an Australian Samoan understanding can provide a platform. Being an Australian Samoan, I am part of a community that values our traditional Samoan customs and is open to incorporating values which are not prominent in the Samoan context but are prevalent in the Australian context, such as gender equality and freedom of speech. We are aware of the multicultural context, and in our bid to survive in the Australian context, there is a need for openness and acceptance of other views.

This awareness of the multicultural context harbors a reading which values the notion of fa'aaloalo while at the same time concedes the chance for modern Australian views to inform traditional Samoan understanding. The result would be a reading that confronts the sexual imagery through tulou. The text is interpreted out of the traditional perspective of fa'aaloalo but with a twist, as the attitudes toward sex held by many Samoans in the Australian context put sex in a positive light. When a sexual metaphor is read, the reader pays fa'aaloalo to the text. The tulou reading proposed below promotes fa'aaloalo to the text and frees the topic of sex from the tapu that holds back Samoan readers.

Tulou in Reading

I go back to the two words tu and lou. Tu (stand) defines the reader's standpoint. Meaning which seems impossible to create is made possible with the use of lou, in a similar manner as the hard-to-reach breadfruits are plucked with the lou and brought down to where one stands (tu). There are in lou both ascending and descending actions. The ascending of the lou to the breadfruit constitutes a plucking of the text from the high grasps (spiritualized interpretation) of allegory, which the reader brings down to tu (humanistic interpretation). The lou becomes an extension of the reader's horizon into the text while the descending of the lou corresponds

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to the bringing of the text to the reader's horizon. The lou allows for the horizons to fuse, to bridge the gap between reader and text.

If we apply this to the tapu on sex, we realize that the tapu may not be congruent with the current context. The reality is that we participate in sex, whether it is for pleasure or for procreation, in the context of marriage or not. This is the horizon of the reader; this is the reality from where meaning must be made. We cannot make meaning from an alternative reality, for the Song has sexual overtones and makes references to erotic love.

Tulou to Readers

As a male reader, how might I deal with a female reader, and vice versa? The awkwardness is felt when the opposite sex is present, for example, in a Bible study group or village meeting. This is because blood-related males and females are in *vā tapuia* (sacred relationship), and they do not discuss matters of the body in public. Sex is thus tapu in the sense that it is taboo, not allowed to be discussed in public for fear that one might insult the vā tapuia. In addition, there is a Christian tendency to think shamefully about sex and to reserve it for private conversations. Samoan churches still honor missionary teachings according to which sex is dirty and defiling. So, when Samoans need to talk about sex or the Song in mixed-gender settings, awkwardness is avoided with allegorical interpretation. Talk of sex is bypassed or spiritualized, and the Song's sexual character is neglected. As expected, the text plays second fiddle to theological interests. In the lens of tulou, this shows no fa'aaloalo to the text.

The tulou hermeneutic puts allegory aside, leading to an alternative way of paying fa'aaloalo to the reader. How, then, might a male reader pay tulou to a female reader, and vice versa? Through the tulou hermeneutic, the reader's attitude toward sex changes. Sex is no longer awkward but is appreciated. What was previously viewed as awkward can be seen as positive and adored according to the next context (Douglas 2002, 48). This new context is created by the tulou reading. When we create new meaning, we rewrite the text (cf. Fish 1980, 172), and as we rewrite the text, we rewrite the context. In rewriting the context, I say tulou to my parents and to Samoans of past generations because in negotiating with traditional Samoan culture, I bring my horizon as an Australian Samoan. I also say tulou because I bring values such as freedom of speech and gender equality, characteristics of the modern Australian context that challenge the *fa'a-Sāmoa* and its limitations.

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A Tulou Reading of the Song

For this exercise, I choose to focus on Song 8:1 and 8:8. The challenge in 8:1 for Samoan readers relates to *feagaiga* (sacred relation between brother and sister, according to which the brother is responsible for his sister's safety and welfare) and the problem with lovers who call each other by sibling terms. The challenge with 8:8 is nudity, and a tulou reading helps construct alternative meanings to what allegorical readings present. I stand not to defy cultural customs but to maintain the sanctity of faʻa-Sāmoa in comprehending nudity in the text. At the outset, therefore, I must first say tulou!

It is important to point out that the traditional Samoan interpretive community is predominantly male, a reflection of the dominant male voice in traditional Samoan society. Being a Samoan male, I am located in this dominant male discourse; therefore, I say tulou, as some of my presumptions about the feminine voice in the Song may be misguided.

In this reading, I lou the text to my male Australian Samoan horizon. Through my Australian Samoan understanding of Samoan indigenous references and the theme of faʻaaloalo, I launch a bid to gain an interpretation of the sexual imagery for the Samoan context. Through the influence of my Australian context, I also make a case for bringing out the female voice which traditional Samoan society often subjugates.

As an Australian Samoan, and like many others, I have my own assumptions about the faʻa-Sāmoa and how these assumptions inform my own perspective. I thus perform a *negotiation of identities* "whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images" (Ting-Toomey 1999, 40). As a result, I negotiate with the behavioral patterns of traditional Samoans and the context of Samoa in the pre-Christian era. My understanding of the faʻa-Sāmoa is not complete, so the need for negotiation is necessary. By doing this, I satisfy my curiosity in Samoan folklore and legends as well as the customs of my Samoan heritage. On the other hand, I am equally intrigued by how the text can inform my own cultural worldview. In this hermeneutical exercise, I present my tu (standpoint) on the text and the problems of interpretation that the text presents for my interpretive community. I then seek to reconcile these problems in interpretation through lou(ering) the text to my tu in order to make meaning.

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"Like a Brother to Me": The Feagaiga Problem (Song 8:1)

Tu

One temptation for the Samoan reader in this passage is assuming that the brother of whom the woman speaks in 8:1 is someone in the feagaiga (between brother and sister) relationship. With this assumption, two things are likely to occur. First, any sexual activity suggested in the text is deflected because sex is not expected in a Samoan feagaiga. Second, if the text is unambiguous that sex occurred, it is avoided as an ambiguous moment in the text, and the sexual content is left aside with no interpretation. The problem of assumption hinders the ability to understand what "brother" could mean, which leads to the risk of avoiding interpretation altogether.

Duane Garrett and Paul R. House (2004, 247) explain that "*brother* and *sister* were common terms of endearment between lovers in the ancient Near East." This understanding is based on the context of Egyptian love songs to which the Song bore resemblance (Arnold and Beyer 2002, 192). "Brother" and "sister" were part of the language of foreplay, indicating interest from the opposite sex. This excerpt from an Egyptian love poem highlights the use of "brother" in expressions of sexual desire:

> My brother stirs up my heart with his voice, making me take ill.
> Although he is among the neighbors of my mother's house,
> I cannot go to him.
> Mother is right to command me thus:
> Avoid seeing him!
> Yet my heart is vexed when he comes to mind,
> for love of him has captured me. (Arnold and Beyer 2002, 192)

In the Samoan context, "brother" and "sister" are not used in such a manner due to the sacredness of feagaiga. The text becomes even more dubious through the yearning expressed in 8:1, "O that you were like a brother to me" (NRSV). The words connote a desire for an incestuous relationship. For the brother and sister even to be together is condemned in Samoan culture, as Raymond Firth (1970, 279) writes: "Those who call each other brother and sister cannot sit together, eat, walk or travel together." The importance of Firth's statement lies not in the actions banned but in the fa'aaloalo and care that siblings pay to each other. In the Samoan context, an interpretation that does not compromise the feagaiga is preferred.

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In the phrase "O that you were like a brother to me," it is interesting to note the woman's use of כאח "like a brother." The fact that the woman says "like," as indicated by the prefix כ, rules out any incestuous sentiments. Michael V. Fox (1985, 166) states that the translation "like *a* brother" (rather than "like *my* brother") allows for the endearing sense of the word "brother" to be assumed.

Michael D. Goulder (1986, 61) reasons that the woman desires an open show of affection and freedom to love her man openly. Her feelings for him are strong, and she wishes for social recognition. The woman's desperation for her lover is more of a desire "for social recognition of their relationship," so that the two lovers can be with each other without restraint (Patmore 2006, 241).

Lou

The feagaiga is socially recognized in Samoan society, which is why siblings are careful of each other's space, because tapu ensures that feagaiga is sacred. From the Samoan perspective of tulou: how can we avoid the temptation to read this as a text which expresses incestuous love? As tulou calls for fa'aaloalo interpretation, we see a woman of fa'aaloalo who yearns for their relationship to be *like* a feagaiga—that is, to be recognized by the society. Recognition, in Samoan society, is not a simple matter of people accepting and moving on; rather, it is the recognition that the relationship is *sā* (holy) and that there is a communal responsibility to ensure the relationship is kept sā.

Another significant element of the feagaiga is the role of the brother as protector. The woman in her desire for sex does not show desperation but a desire for protection from her lover. The desire equates with a wish for her lover to protect her sexual loins so that she is not touched sexually by anyone besides her lover. This need for protection appears clearly in the declaration by the brothers that they will "build a wall" (8:9) to protect the woman, perhaps a reference to her chastity. In the Samoan context, the brother safeguards his sister from many things, and protecting her chastity would be among the main priorities. The woman in 8:1 thus asks her lover to be like a brother by providing protection for her.

Through the tulou hermeneutic, we see fa'aaloalo with the text here in the voice of women. Women are often subjugated in the Old Testament, and their voices are regularly suppressed (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, xi). Athalya Brenner (1993, 15) argues that this is a product of androcentric

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readings of the biblical text, where "interpretation and teaching have been performed almost exclusively by males, and exploited to further the gender-specific interests of their dominant social group." Women whose voices had been suppressed in the Old Testament include, for instance, Tamar (2 Sam 13), who was raped by her half-brother in his quest for power. She dwelled " 'desolate' in her brother's house," yet the father remained silent (cf. Fontaine 1997, 84). In the traditional Samoan context, it is easy to see the Song's female protagonist in a negative light due to her unconventional sexual desires. But in rereading the text through the tulou hermeneutic, we avoid succumbing to an androcentric reading.[2] A focus on the woman's desire for public show of affection is not ideal, but this reading endorses the feagaiga relationship. The woman does not ask for cultural constraints to be broken but for her relationship to be publicly endorsed under the constraints of her own context.

A tulou reading replaces the focus upon the woman as the central concern of the passage. She instigates the need to be protected for her own purpose rather than the brothers taking the initiative to contain an errant sister, according to traditional readings of the passage. She does not pursue her erotic desires directly but yearns for them. In her yearning, her desire is for her lover to do what a brother does, that is, to protect her. By instigating the call for protection, she upholds the integrity of the feagaiga. From a Samoan perspective, this is a display of great fa'aaloalo. In the eyes of Samoans, the woman could be seen as a *matai* (chief) because she actively promotes the ideals of fa'aaloalo. Her acknowledgment of her brother's role is seen as wise because she prompts her brother to act out of fa'aaloalo. This resonates with the *tōfā* (wisdom) of a matai who seeks to inspire others to acts of fa'aaloalo.

In the traditional Samoan context, it is assumed that protection of the feagaiga is the domain of the brother. But the text can speak to the Samoan context if Samoans are willing to be challenged by the text

2. The misunderstanding of the woman's yearning resonates with the misunderstanding of the needs of Australian Samoans. The community of Australian Samoans demand acceptance from other Samoans. Regardless of vocation, choice of career, sexuality, or choice of partners (e.g., Samoan or non-Samoan), the ultimate concern for the Australian Samoan community is that we are accepted by our elders (cf. Anae 2003, 89). While our Samoan parents may view our willingness to adopt the values of the modern Australian context as *fia-pālagi* ("want to be pālagi"), we identify with our Samoan heritage.

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because, for an Australian Samoan, there is no reason why it should not also be the domain of the sister. The traditional Samoan reader may see the woman's yearning as acting out of rebelliousness, but the Australian Samoan can identify with the nature of the woman's desire. While her actions may seem carefree, the woman is also eager to have her relationship accepted. This displays faʻaaloalo because she wishes to maintain cultural constraints.

The dominant understanding of feagaiga is construed through male interests. In reading with an Australian Samoan perspective—which values Samoan tradition but also incorporates modern values, such as gender equality—I point to a glaring weakness with the traditional understanding of feagaiga (that only the brother displays faʻaaloalo by obliging to offer protection). The Song affirms that the sister can also show faʻaaloalo, for the call to be "like a brother" is acknowledgement of service that is not limited to the male gender.

No Breasts? (Song 8:8)

Tu

The sister's honor could be brought into disrepute in many ways, and in Song 8:8, talking of a girl's breasts is one example. In the Samoan context, this is an insult to the feagaiga relationship. How could the brothers see that she has no breasts? A male speaking of his sister's body this way is disrespectful in the Samoan context. To speak of nudity is disrespectful in the Samoan public. Since the arrival of the *pālangi* missionaries, adult women and men were required to cover up their private parts (including women's breasts). The mind of the Samoan reader is aware of this fact, and whenever nudity appears in the text, curiosity emerges also. Such curiosity seeks to dig for how the exposing of breasts, particularly those of a minor, could be deemed acceptable. First, before breasts are even mentioned in the verse, the text states that she is small. Fox (1985, 173) clarifies that small here does not refer to her size but to "her supposed sexual immaturity, as in mishnaic Hebrew, in which *qeṭannah* means a minor (less than 12 years old)." The explanation here permeates the understanding of "no breasts," as it indicates that the girl had "not yet reached the age of puberty" (Fredericks and Estes 2010, 412). The language hints also at the sexual activity of the girl, which at this stage is nonexistent. It is difficult for a Samoan reader who reads that the girl has no susu to envision her in a

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different situation than being naked. So how does one deal with this verse from a Samoan perspective?

Lou

From a tulou perspective, we pay fa‘aaloalo to the text by comprehending the image of the girl with no breasts. Commentators have claimed that the girl's lack of breasts hints at her sexual immaturity and sexual inactivity. Yet in the pre-Christian Samoan context, sexual activity was associated with the genitalia. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi (2014, 55) writes that "according to Samoan indigenous traditions the reproductive and sexual organs of the human body underline human divinity and spirituality. They are the instruments for procreation and symbolise the power to make new life. Sex in this equation was the vehicle for procreation and as such a sacred act." The breasts do not suggest sexual activity or procreation as the "female breasts were not necessary for the conception of new life and so not afforded the same *tapu* as the genitals" (Efi 2009, 13). With this pre-Christian understanding of susu, I contend that the girl's sexual activity cannot be determined by her breasts because they are not considered sexual organs. From a fa‘aaloalo mindset, the breasts are seen for their nurturing purposes. This formulates an alternative understanding of the image in 8:8, whereby the girl is seen as unqualified for motherhood. Her lack of breasts indicates that she is without child and does not bear the responsibilities of a mother.

In the context of chapter 8, verses 4 and 10 assist with this interpretation. The call for the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up love until it is ready, or "pleased" in 8:4, points toward the youth of the girl. The word שתחפץ ("she/it is pleased") is in the third-person feminine, which means that "readiness" does not necessarily refer to "love" but could also refer to the girl. In this regard, the girl is young and has not reached the age of sexual maturity.

Furthermore, the word שלום ("peace") in 8:10 points to a context of prosperity and fertility. When 8:8 is read in this way, the breasts of the girl refer to fertility rather than sexual pleasure. A different picture of the girl is envisioned: she is without responsibility. She is exposed in a social sense, with an emphasis upon the fact that she is not a mother. In the context of the Song, she is not ready for love and had no experience of it. The rationale behind the question that follows, "What do we do to our sister on the day which she will be spoken of?" (8:8 NRSV) becomes clear in this reading. This is a question that stems from the knowledge that the girl is

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not yet nubile. As Tremper Longman III (2001, 216) stresses, "the brothers represent social restraint on the woman's love, and the time appears to be right that that restraint may be lifted." Thus, this verse can be read as a preparatory stage of the girl's life, where the brothers brace themselves for the day when she will no longer be under their protection. From a Samoan perspective, exposing the girl's nudity is acknowledgement of her lack of social status and responsibility.

To scrutinize where I tu, the text can inform our perceptions of nudity in that, in the anthropology of being made in God's image, we readers can no longer be quick to lay tapu on what is essentially God's creation. The text pushes Samoans back to the pre-Christian understanding of nudity as a celebration of life. Genitalia were viewed as organs for procreation and were celebrated in public cultural festivities with the anticipation of sex between lovers. Sex is life-giving. The men in the passage were bracing for this eventuality that, as life continues, the girl will soon become a woman. Her nudity is a sign of her growth and a sign of social status. It is perhaps time that our understanding of nudity resides on the notion that one day our own young will become adults.

The Need for Tulou

The Song deals with sexuality and erotic love, topics which are tapu (taboo, prohibited) in the Samoan public context. Evidently, there is a need for tulou in order for Samoan readers to deal with the Song. There is a need to breach the tapu on sex. This is where tulou enters the fray because tulou is grounded on fa'aaloalo—a perspective where tapu (sacred) implicates adoration and worship. This leads to approaching and reading the Song from a perspective that appreciates its sexual content.

In the Christian context, the Song has been read in light of the relationship of the church to God. Jill M. Munro (1995, 12) poses a key argument regarding this type of allegorical reading:

> The allegorical interpretation in its various forms is a venerable tradition which, so far from being cold and mechanistic, is extremely supple. Its strength lies in its capacity to stimulate the imagination to explore the very parameters of faith. In so doing it discloses the spiritual and theological depths of a particular worldview, Jewish and Christian. The disadvantage however is that the Song is in danger of becoming a code to be cracked, a means to an end, for the vivid imagery of the Song tends to

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> be subordinated to a general interpretation in the light of which the Song as an imaginative ensemble increasingly fades from view.

Munro's claim that the Song tends to be subordinated is precisely what is occurring in the Samoan context. What is clear in the Samoan context is that the source of awkwardness and embarrassment one feels when reading the Song stems from a history, thanks to the European missionaries, of restrained attitudes toward sex.

In response, the Samoan tapu—in the sense of prohibition—needs to be breached. But tapu—in the sense of adoration—also needs to be restored for the sake of making meaning, and this can be done through tulou. Tulou does not avoid the eroticism but instead asks critical questions while making meaning of it. I side with Munro that the text should not be treated as though it is a code. The imagery is vivid, and it needs to be engaged. According to the tulou hermeneutic, treating the imagery solely through allegory signals a lack of faʻaaloalo (respect, for the text).

Tulou can also have an impact upon social change because the protagonist in the Song is in a relationship that was not accepted. In my Samoan mind, this can mean one of three relationships: that she was in an extramarital affair, that she was in a same-sex relationship, or that she was unmarried and was having premarital sex. Premarital sex was a cardinal sin in the time of the missionaries, but such an attitude is obsolete for many Australian Samoans in the present time. There is also acceptance by Australian Samoans of people in same-sex and extramarital relations, in spite of our traditional Samoan heritage.

The Song challenges the Samoan public, offering to redefine Samoan attitudes toward sex and acknowledge the reality of the context in which Samoans live. The Song does this by accentuating sex as a profound expression of love when expressed according to the spirit of faʻaaloalo. Tulou is a necessary breach, so if premarital chastity is breached, may it be breached necessarily out of love and faʻaaloalo. I stress that this impact upon social change is not a changed view toward marriage but a changed outlook on how sex operates in the context of faʻaaloalo (respect, between two lovers).

Finally, the need for tulou is crucial in our reading of women in the Bible. Women are marginalized in the Bible, often presented and viewed as femme fatales or originators of sinful acts. Through the tulou hermeneutic, the female character in chapter 8 of the Song is seen as a heroine in the Samoan context, for she is the instigator of faʻaaloalo. She seeks

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protection and mature love. She is represented as a matai who seeks to maintain fa'aaloalo in society. Since the majority of matai are men, a representation of the woman in chapter 8 as a matai is subversive. This representation confronts the common attitude toward women in Samoan society as behind-the-scenes members who are spared from the tensions of decision-making and controversy. The woman in chapter 8 is venerated amidst the controversy, and it is her wisdom (*tōfā*) that leads to her call for protection.

Conclusion

The tulou hermeneutic meets the need to negotiate problematic texts. Such problematic texts had been dealt with in a manner that compromised the integrity of the text, as readers traditionally overlooked the issues and problems in the text in favor of passive (mostly allegorical) interpretations. As I have argued, there is a need to deal with these texts more carefully, and I have proposed a tulou hermeneutic that brings the text down (lou) from the high points of allegory and spiritualized readings, down to a humanistic reading that allows the reader to formulate questions of the text from his or her standpoint (tu).

I use the Song of Songs, littered with sexual imagery and erotic language, to illustrate how the tulou hermeneutic may work. I lou(er) the text from the high point represented by spiritualized readings in light of God's covenant with Israel and the church. I lou(er) the text to the reader's tu, representing the reader's human standpoint, where I make meaning in light of my human experiences as an Australian Samoan who perceives sex in the Song as a celebration of human life. As a result, the text is given its integrity and the fa'aaloalo that it had lost through tapu.

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