

***O ulugalu ma vaigalu:***  
**embracing both the wakes and the gaps in our academic diving**  
(Review of 4th Measina a Sāmoa conference proceedings, 2010)

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I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, the Divine *Measina*. In His life, death and resurrection, the *niusina* (core elements) of heaven are explicitly revealed and made known. May the Triune God be praised.

I was instructed to do three things. Firstly, to do an overview of the 4th *Measina a Sāmoa* conference proceedings. Secondly, to speak bilingually. And thirdly, to limit my talk within 10 minutes. So I will do just that.

Given the proceedings and presentations for an overview, I am indeed humbled and honoured. This opportunity reminds me of our *nu'u-a-uta* (inland village) called *Papa Uta* in Sātāua, Savai'i, where I grew up on our family farm. In a *nu'u-a-uta*, life is a struggle. We rarely eat fish, or bread, or even lay eyes on a *pālagi*. Our normal appetite is the *'afato* (grub) retrieved from rotten logs, roast bats, and also wild pigs that workers caught from hunting. I humbly apologise if the presentation is without a delicate taste. My approach is that of a *nu'u-a-uta*, not a *nu'u-a-tai* (costal village) which is more modern and advanced. I am only a man from a *nu'u-a-uta* nurtured on food from the bush. I seek forgiveness if what you get is foreign to your modern taste.

Having read the papers which made up the proceedings of the 4th *Measina a Sāmoa* conference, I marvelled at the allure, the fragrance, the aroma. And I thank the director and the Centre for Sāmoan Studies of the National University of Sāmoa for this enticement; a *fa'apopoa* which titillates the minds and souls of our people. With this, we begin to see the *niusina* of the *fa'asāmoa*, as in the conference theme: *E lē ole fūsiga po'o le fīsiga, a'o le niusina o le fa'asāmoa*: In Search of the core elements of the *fa'asāmoa*."

After reading the papers, I was reminded of my experience in the sea when we go fishing at night at Piula where I work. This is called *lama moulu* where we dive with torches to aid spear fishing. When coming up for air, at one time I discovered myself on the *ulugalu*, or the wake of the wave, and another time I was swallowed in the *vaigalu* or the gap between waves. Identifying the core elements of the *fa'asāmoa* is like an invitation to dive into the deep ocean of Sāmoan history and culture, away from the shores of certainty and preparing to ride on the wake of the wave or the *ulugalu* and then down the gap or the *vaigalu*.

*Ulugalu* here refers symbolically to those dominant ways of thinking already accepted as core elements or *niusina* of the *fa'asāmoa*. In reading the papers, it was also interesting to find that not only were there presenters who prefer to ride on the *ulugalu*, but an effort was also made by others to dip into the *vaigalu*. *Vaigalu* refers to those important elements of the Sāmoan culture wrongly perceived and have long been marginalised and ignored by Europeans, as well as our own indigenous academic divers.

Descending into the *vaigalu* is not new. It is also found in the bible. For example, in the book of Revelation, John moved away from the wakes of the waves, the dominant and established ideas and perceptions of the world (the Roman world) and descends into the *vaigalu* in order to see the world from another perspective — heaven's perspective.



Many academic divers are comfortable riding the *ulugalu*. However, in my experience, we cannot float for long on the *ulugalu* nor jump from one to the next without descending into the *vaigalu*. It is only when we dip into the *vaigalu* that we reach the other *ulugalu* (Havea 2003). The way between two *ulugalu* is connected only by a *vaigalu*. In other words, it is only as we rise on wakes and dip into gaps that we uncover other core elements fundamental to our culture; elements that were long hidden from us; hidden on the other side. When we dip into the *vaigalu*, we come out of the next *ulugalu* with fresh perspectives and renewed hope. Both the experience of the wake and the gap are crucial in identifying the core elements of the *fa'asāmoa*.

That is why this book is very important because the papers present us with an opportunity not only to continually embrace the 'gift of the wake' but also the 'gift of the gaps' that we as academic divers sometimes ignore. It calls for a shift of perspective from the culture of permanency to the culture of possibility, taking the risk, and rocking the boat of perception. Like the words of the Israelites to Moses that they are only grasshoppers compared to the giants in Canaan, this book is like grasshoppers challenging giants (Numbers 13:32-34).

It is not my purpose here to individually review the papers for time is not on my side. However, I have grouped the papers into two sections; those who are comfortable to ride on the wakes (*ulugalu*), and those who are comfortable with descending into the gaps (*vaigalu*). Dr Lafita'i Fuata'i, Fiso Evelini Fa'amoe, Dr Unasa Va'a, and Matāvai Tautunu Aumua are scholars who prefer to ride the dominant perceptions and theories, but in their own way readjust them to fit their perspectives. For example, to select one, Dr Fuata'i employed John Dewey's experiential framework as a background theory in analysing how the social institutions of Sāmoa shaped and impacted on his life, and where he is now.

Those who prefer to descend into the *vaigalu* and offer an alternative perspective to that which is generally accepted are, Tamari Mulitalo-Cheung, Silafau Dr Sina Vaai, Ali'itasi Sua-Tavila, Leua Latai-Leonard, Alo Silia Pa'usisi, Lurlene Christiansen, Mema Motusaga, and Karoline Afamasaga-Fuata'i, Paul Meyer, Naomi Fili-Falo.

Let me take two examples. Firstly, Leua Latai-Leonard's paper on *Photography, text, image and meaning: A Sāmoan perspective*, argues how important it is to take ownership of the images and photographs and create a Sāmoan interpretation, a Sāmoan perspective. This needs to move away from the *ulugalu*, the dominant perceptions long established in Sāmoa since the European missionaries, and to descend into the *vaigalu*, is in response to the concept of "primitism". Primitism in visual arts is a foreign projection of the Sāmoan culture by the 'other' as expressed in myths of savagery, violence and sexuality. The challenge for me is that of *conscientisation*, according to Paulo Freire, where we are called to descend into the *vaigalu* and be aware of the social, political, economic and religious contradictions and prepare to take action against any oppressive elements.

Secondly, for example, Mema Motusaga and Alo Silia Pa'usisi had a common approach to the future of Sāmoan youth by suggesting that it may be possible today to be inclusive in decision making; to include the young people. The accepted tradition of the *ulugalu* is that parents and the old are the decision makers. Now there is a suggestion to dip into the gaps and to create a more interactive and understanding relationship between parents and children.

*Measina* are gifts, and to be a people under gift is to be rare and new. In biblical terms, the papers offer us the opportunity to break away from our comfort zones represented by the "flesh pots of Egypt" (Exodus 16:3). They call us to a new energy of possibility. Two humble suggestions I want to make. Firstly, because faith is expressed through culture, and because it grows out of the cultural context of the people, I want to



propose a theological perspective in our search for *measina*. Secondly, as we are now in our 5th *Measina a Sāmoa* conference, I wonder whether it is now time for us to put emphasis on the use of the Sāmoan language in our presentations and papers. *Measina* includes the Sāmoan language, and the possibility to go deeper to identify the *nūsina* (core elements) of the *fa'asāmoa* rests in its usage and analysis.

To end my talk, there is a Sāmoan expression, “*E logo le moana ile tuiipu,*” meaning that when the *tuiipu* (shark rattle) sounds, the ocean listens. If the *tautai* (fisherman) wishes for a huge catch as in the expression “*sau ia se felefele*” (let more sharks approach), the *tuiipu* must release a tempting sound that can lure the ‘chiefs’ of the deep to the canoe. And when the deep is tempted and persuaded, the catch will be successful. In light of this analogy, the different papers in the book represent the different single *ipu popo* (coconut shells) tied and aligned together to form a *tuiipu*. Now we have finished assembling our *tuiipu* — the book. I am sure each paper will contribute to make a unified tempting and convincing chorus to lure the greats of the *moana* (the world) to the richness of the Sāmoan culture. All that is left now is for the *tautai* (the Centre for Sāmoan Studies) to lower our *tuiipu* into the *moana* and pray, “*ia sau ia se felefele.*”

## References

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