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Publication Date

2004-05-26

“By being better Samoans you are also becoming better Americans”: An Emic Pedagogy of Applied Identity for Samoan Youth in San Francisco

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A Samoan studies professor at the National University of Samoa introduces a new word, fa’asinomaga (identity) in the mid 1990s. A teacher rehearses a skit with a room full of Samoan teens on a chilly summer day in a working class neighborhood of San Francisco in July 2002. A librarian in Carson prepares herself for a Samoan linguistics conference to be held in New Zealand in the winter of 2003. These three events, separated in place and time evoke both the scope and orientations of the Samoan diaspora as well as give a glimpse of an active and ongoing attempt to keep a traditional culture current in face of the culturally homogenizing influence of globalization.

This paper has two parts. In the first part I will briefly explore the Samoan conceptions of culture and identity. In the second part I will look at how one Samoan teacher has applied identity principles in a summer youth program in San Francisco. Ultimately I will argue that this attempted cultural reification is an example of, what I will call, ‘applied identity.’

Fa’a Samoa and Fa’asinomaga

Since the day I began researching the South Pacific archipelagos of Samoa I have been coming across the term Fa’a Samoa. Its spelling changes, one word or two, with or without a long a, with or without an uppercase ‘s’, italicized or standard font and so on;

and its precise definition changes from author to author but it remains ubiquitous in the discussion of Samoan culture, mostly because above all it means Samoan culture. Some have defined it as the Samoan way of life, of doing things, and of custom (Keesing 1934; Wendt 1973), some specifying that it is the traditional or old Samoan way (Holmes and Holmes 1992) and others preferring more open ended understanding that allows for both tradition and innovation (Morton 2002).

Borrowing a term from Marcel Mauss, Evelyn Kallen (1982) calls the Fa'a Samoa a "total phenomenon" in that "it is at once a world view; a way of life; a cherished heritage; a set of structural principles for ordering social life; a plethora of formidable constraints upon behaviour; and an ideological underpinning for strongly positive ethnocultural identification" (p. 35). The fa'a Samoa can mean vastly different things, from precise directions about how to cut up and serve a pig, to more abstract generalized principles like, the importance of respect, and the mastery of language both of which were repeatedly stressed in my interviews with Samoan teenagers in California. Simply because it seems to include almost everything in the culture, anthropologists have a tendency to mistake whatever it is they are studying as being at the heart of the fa'a Samoa. And yet, perhaps they are right in seeing it that way. Because of its holistic totality everything is in fact, arguably, equally at its center.

The etymology of the term remains ambiguous. My attempts to uncover its early usage by searching through the published literature on Samoa, going back as far as the mid 19th century, has yielded naught prior to 1934 at which time the anthropologist Felix Keesing (1934) wrote about it, though he was simply reporting the use of the term and not introducing it himself. I continue to seek out whether the word and the behaviors that

it codifies emerged independently or as a relational foil against other cultures that began arriving in these Samoan Islands, in numbers, by the 1830s.

It was only after more than five years of research, asking young and old alike about the fa'a Samoa, but meaning identity really, that I came into contact with the term fa'asinomaga. Since then I seem to encounter it more and more frequently and I can't think how its existence escaped me in the past. It was at a Sunday youth group meeting at a church in San Francisco that I first heard it used. The youth group leaders were friends of mine and they had invited me to attend the group in order to get some of my surveys completed. One of my friends introduced me by telling them that I was studying Samoan youth identity among California Samoans. "Does anyone remember the Samoan word for identity?" he asked. A lot of eye contact avoidance, no audible response, and a guilty awkwardness followed the question. My friend eventually relented and reminded them of the word fa'asinomaga, and of the Samoan speaker, Dr. Aiona Fanaafi le Tagaloa, who had come to the church to talk to them about it.

Though in my experience most of the kids had good Samoan language comprehension, particularly those who regularly attended churches where the service was held in Samoan, that they should be unfamiliar with this word, and that I had not stumbled across it earlier in my research, is not all that surprising. Though the origins of the usage of fa'a Samoa may remain mysterious, fa'asinomaga enjoys no such ambiguity. It is introduced only recently by the very same Dr. Fanaafi. She combined together the existing word fa'asino (to point or show) with the nominal suffix maga. Thus the new word literally translates as that which is being pointed at or shown.

Access to her works and the dissemination of their contents are interesting issues that are worthy of elaboration. As the majority of her work is published in the Samoa and in the Samoan language, it can be difficult to obtain overseas. Those who do seek her work out are pre-selected by their interest in the politics of language and culture. Much like the Samoan catechists of the missionary movement who helped spread the gospel throughout the Pacific, these new teachers have taken Fanaafi's work, often added their own interpretation to it, and passed it on to others and discussed it among themselves at events like the Samoan linguistics conference in New Zealand that I mentioned at the start of this paper. The important thing here seemed to be that those who need to know about the fa'asinomaga do. This work was clearly done by Samoans and for Samoans with little interest whether it has an impact beyond their community. Though the idea may have started in the islands, it is now moving freely through the diasporic network and its origin is perhaps not so important.

Nevertheless, access and understanding of Fanaafi's original intentions is of ongoing interest and a number of questions remain. First, for whom was it intended to be most useful? Second, does it suggest a Samoan specific version of identity the way that fa'a Samoa does or is it a culturally impartial notion much as the word identity itself is? Thus we could talk of Mexican fa'asinomaga, Chamorro fa'asinomaga and so on. And third, what prompted the need to establish a Samoan word to describe identity in the first place? Does this updating of the language signify the explicit need of Samoans to keep their language current and in so doing, place themselves within the global debate on identity politics?

Whether this is a case of theory leading thinking or of the old language merely taking its time catching up with debates that are underway with or without its compliance is perhaps irrelevant, though the latter instance seems the most likely. I gained this insight when a Samoan friend cryptically deflected my clumsy leading attempts to ascertain if fa'asinomaga was part of some sort of post-colonial semiotic revolution or not, by offering his opinion that Fanaafi was “more of a modern conservative than a radical traditionalist if you know what I mean”. I wasn't sure if I did, but I thought it was a start.

Ultimately the relationship between fa'a Samoa and fa'asinomaga remains a complicated one as there appears to be much content overlap between the two ideas, as we shall see in the next part of this paper. In an effort to better understand the intricacies of the relationship, I sat down, one day, with yet another Samoan friend to show him my visual representation of overlapping spheres representing culture (fa'a Samoa), identity (fa'asinomaga), and respect, (fa'aaloalo). He was interested in my schema but he rejected it suggesting instead a new one that had fa'a Samoa as a single large sphere with fa'asinomaga and fa'aaloalo as concentric components of it. “Ah”, I said, not entirely getting it but realizing that I was heading in the right direction.

San Francisco Culture Camp

Jump forward to San Francisco now. We are in a middle school cafeteria on the south side of town. There is a stage at the front of the room and beside it stands a Samoan man in his early 40s, his hand resting on an old piano. He is lecturing energetically and earnestly to a group of 40 or so Samoan kids, aged 5-18, with most of them in the middle teenage years; calling on them by name to ensure that they are following. He is preparing

them for a performance. This is the Pacific Islander Youth Alliance and the kids who are a part of it come every weekday afternoon for six weeks in the summer to practice dance, learn a skit about Samoan identity, to rehearse a traditional Samoan opera, to keep up on their studies through their participation in writing and video workshops, and to hang out with their friends. The program culminates with a performance to an auditorium packed with their family and friends that is taken very seriously by both the students and the teachers. Today, the teacher is explaining the theory behind the identity skit that they will be performing. Talk about taking the performing identity concept literally.

“Anybody want to try to read this quote?” he asks. Eventually a reluctant volunteer is co-opted. The word, which the girl stumbles over at first, is fa’asinomaga, and the quote, which he has translated to English for them, reads: “when things go wrong as they sometimes will, and life gets tougher and seems all uphill, the Samoan will always find refuge in his/her identity and culture.”¹ Weeks later during a conversation he elaborates on this to me. “If they (the Samoan youths) only grow up as Americans living in the projects and have no wealth and stuff and they also don’t have their Samoan identity, well then they really have nothing.”

He senses their attention waning so he stops for a moment and then, ever the Samoan elder able to command instant respect and attention, says to them bluntly, “You need to know this information. You need to know who you are, what we are, where you came from, and where you’re going, ok? It will help to make you a better American. By becoming better Samoans you are also becoming better Americans.” He leaves it at that. Later in a conversation he elaborates. “It’s straight from Socrates really. Know thyself”
Nosce teipsum.

¹ “E ui ina tetele pesega, ae mapu lava i le o’o”

Back in the lecture he moves the idea along further. He breaks down fa'asinomaga into three component parts language (gagana), titles (suafa), and lands (laufanua). He explains that each one of them in the room, as Samoans, is tied to all of these titles through their family histories, whether or not such claims remain active, and that each of the titles controls the use of communal lands. Because it is the titles that own the lands and not the people, each of them sitting here in San Francisco technically has access to lands back in the islands. This knowledge, he stresses to them emphatically, should give them a confidence to dream bigger dreams and to take more career risks in American society than their neighbors would ever dare to. They need not to fear failure because they always have the fallback of an island home thanks to the traditional land tenure system.

He pauses for a moment and then, he says, "If we have this (gesturing behind himself to the overhead projection of the three pillars of the fa'asinomaga) and we take advantage of what America has to offer us then there is no ethnic group that has the advantages that you have."

This idea is clearly idealistic, and there are a number of practical deficiencies with it such as the scarcity of land back in the islands, the changing nature of communal rights to that land in light of recent trends towards individual ownership and privatization, and the fact that title claims are often hotly contested. Furthermore the issue arises about what the ultimate relevance of this re-enactment of cultural practices means in the public housing projects where many of the kids live. Does he really expect them to actively embrace this lesson or is it, to them, like another abstract history that they've learned in the classroom, interesting perhaps, but of little practical consequence. And yet, my underlying

conviction is that whether or not the lesson is immediately effective the message is still an important one and these kids are better off for having heard it. Follow-up interviews with many of them after the program's completion seem to confirm this.

Jump forward a few weeks to the dress rehearsal. There is a tangible excitement in the air; but our teacher friend's face looks intent as he tries to figure out the logistics of the fa'asinomaga skit's elaborate finale. It involves long wooden dowels that look like broom handles with hooks on the end that will latch on to loops around the waists of other actors. The twenty actors, collectively representing each of the three pillars of Samoan identity (language, lands, titles) will go from swirling about chaotically to an established order by hooking their poles (symbolizing Samoan proverbs perhaps) to one another to form an interconnected web. "You see," he is explaining, "this network of identities is it's greatest strength, they all depend on each other and all tied together they cannot fall apart. Do you get it?" "I think so," I thought, and this time I really meant it.

Conclusion

How apt a metaphor this identity web seems for the theme of diaspora in general. We see, in the Samoan example, how people and ideas move through the network, and how the network itself is increasingly becoming more of an interconnected web without a center than it is a cultural wheel hub with extending diasporic spokes. This changing orientation can't help but have a dramatic impact on issues, such as authenticity, that previously would have been the providence of the cultural point of origin.

However, many questions remain. Will these youth incorporate the lessons of fa'asinomaga, this lean, stripped down version of the fa'a Samoa, and make it their own? Beyond dramatic syncretisms like dance or fashion, will the youth be able to move beyond the rhetoric and pragmatically succeed at applying their identities? And is this minimalist basis of cultural pride, enough of a foundation to build a good life on that is successfully both Samoan and American? That, of course, remains the question.

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