# LE FUIA, LE FUIA, E TAGISIA LOU VAELAU "STARLING, STARLING, WE PINE FOR YOUR NIMBLENESS": TOWARDS A SAMOAN INDIGENOUS FRAMING OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR "CLIMATE CHANGE"

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OVER A CENTURY AGO AUGUSTIN KRAMER RECORDED A SAMOAN SONG with the line: *le fuia*, *le fuia*, *e tagisia lou vaelau*. I have translated this into English as "Starling, starling, we pine for your nimbleness." The references to nimbleness and to the *fuia*, or native Samoan starling bird, are literal and metaphorical and were chosen deliberately for their ability to make visible an indigenous context. The line reminds that, with skill and dexterity, one can find in nature balance, hope, and support despite the potentially harmful effects of gravity. This address uses this phrase and its Samoan indigenous references to frame an indigenous contribution to current conversations on what to do about the effects of climate change. It argues that for the island Pacific to have a say in how its islands are to survive, we must take the time and space necessary to openly dialog in the manner and style of the fuia.

We, Pacific Islanders and Europeans alike, today more than ever before, live in an integrated world. In the space of only four days, I have been able to travel 16,000 odd kilometers from my home in Apia, Samoa, to be here today to give you this address. In terms of the mechanics of doing this took a lot of human "know how" (i.e., a lot of industrial and engineering prowess). It also took the existence of an integrated world economy. I cannot help but marvel at the human genius behind such technological advancements. But equally I cannot help but wonder at the price we have to pay for having, and indeed still wanting to have, these advancements.

The issue of climate change is very much at the forefront of world issues and is one that is particularly felt by those of us living in small island countries. I have followed the debates closely and have been intrigued by the different lines of argument put forward. I have noted that beneath the technological scientific argument there lie pressing moral and ethical questions about responsibility. These questions are rising to the top of high-level conversations about climate change and are staying there refusing to be resubmerged back under.

In this address, I wish to visit the question of an ethical responsibility for protecting our environment and wish to do so from an indigenous Samoan perspective. In this instance, I wish to use the image and nature of the fuia to frame my talk on the indigenous, on responsibility, and on climate change.

The fuia is the Samoan starling bird. It is not the common, plump, shorttailed, oily black bird originally found in Europe and considered a pest, driving out native birds and destroying fruit crops (Natural History Guide n.d.). It is the brownish-black starling unique to all of Samoa. The Botany Department of the University of Hawai'i states that "... if the fuia became extinct in the Samoas, there wouldn't be a single one left in the world. . . . Fortunately," they say, "there is little danger" of that. "It is a survivor, a real Samoan success story. It is the most adaptable bird we [in Samoa] have, equally at home in [the industrial towns of] Pago Pago [and Apia], in small villages, in plantations, and in the rainforest. . . . The secret to its adaptability," they say, "is its eating habits—a *fuia* will eat almost anything. They gobble down a wide variety of fruit, from the hard seeds of the mamala tree to the big stinky fruits of nonu bushes, from the leathery fruits of lau pata to the soft figs of the mati. They also love insects, including big stick insects, caterpillars, and even eat lizards, and indulge their taste for sweets with visits to lick up the nectar of [coconut] and gatae flowers. Because of their broad diet, fuia can always find food, and can live almost anywhere there are trees" (Natural History Guide n.d.).

The University of Hawaii botanists also note that: ". . . As [with] most Samoan birds, male and female *fuia* look almost the same. [They] nest in all months of the year.... [Their] nests are usually placed in hollows in trees, [and] snapped-off coconut trunks are favorite nest sites. They will also nest among the dense fronds in the top of a coconut [tree], and even use man-made nest sites, like cracked telephone poles" (Natural History Guide n.d.). The Samoan fuia bird, in other words, is a bird that obviously wants to stay around and has been given, it seems, the wherewithal to do so. In Samoan oral history the fuia is a bird celebrated not only for its uniqueness to Samoa but also for its nimbleness as a bird.

In researching for an address I did in 2009 for the Fifth Parliament of the World's Religions, I came across a chant that was sometimes recited by my cultural mentors or older family folk when I was young, especially when they

wanted to tease, be flirtatious, and/or provoke arousal.¹ Now I tread carefully in speaking of this chant because, even though I have already written and published on it, its specific subject focus still provokes, even for me, discomfort and self-consciousness (Tui Atua 2014b), not necessarily because I am embarrassed by the topic, but more because I am very aware of the hang-ups we, Europeans and Pacific Islanders alike, have about it.

Dr. Augustin Kramer described this chant as a "kava song" and suggested that it was an "obscene song." <sup>2</sup> So much so, it seems that he, or perhaps more Dr. Theodore Verhaaren, the English language translator of his *The Samoa Islands* volumes, could not bring himself to translate the song from Samoan to English. He (or they) chose instead to translate it to Latin. <sup>3</sup> An English language translation of it was not published for wide academic consumption until Dr. Richard Moyle's 1975 article titled "Sexuality in Samoan art forms" published in the *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* journal.

If it was indeed a song sung during an 'ava or kava ceremony as noted by Kramer, then it would most likely have been an 'ava ceremony involving an aualuma (an untitled women's guild) and aumaga (an untitled men's guild). This is because the one stanza that is cited sings both playfully and graphically of a pining, not only for sex, but, and perhaps more importantly, for playful arousal. In Samoa at this time sex and/or the naked body were not things to feel guilty about in the way we do today. They, in the appropriate context, were celebrated and flaunted. They were part of us, part of our humanity, part of what connected us to God. For ancient Samoans, it was God that made life and God that took life. Through sex, humans can make new life and because of this can share in some of God's divinity. The blatantly sexual fuia song chant when understood in this context was, therefore, far from obscene.

The first line of the one stanza of this fuia song reads: *le fuia*, *le fuia*, *e tagisia lou vaelau*. I translated all six lines of the stanza into English in my paper for the Fifth Parliament of the World's Religions (Tui Atua 2014b: 34–6). In that translation, I was explicit about the reference to *vaelau* as "leg": "Starling, starling, we pine for the nimbleness of your leg."

In my morning observations of the iao (or wattle honeyeater) birds that frequent my residence in Vailele, I note how playful they are and how sometimes, while in a passionate embrace and falling from the top of a tree, they, instead of letting go of each other or stopping their furtive mating, would deftly perch their feet (or *vae*) to what looks like a flimsy leaf (or *lau*) and somehow miraculously find balance on that leaf. Not only do they keep themselves from falling further but are also able to continue their mating. I marvel at this spectacular display of dexterity and balance. This gravity defying image of deftness and nimbleness is what I see in my mind's eye when I read or hear the word vaelau in the line le fuia, le fuia e tagisia lou vaelau.

In the title of my address today, I have left the reference to leg implicit in the idea of nimbleness. One cannot be nimble without assuming balance. One (whether bird or human) cannot assume balance (especially when falling) without some suppleness in the legs, literally or metaphorically. And whenever one is falling, one must be able to find firm support to gain or regain balance. In the current context of taking responsibility for the care of our planet, like the fuia, we must exercise deftness and nimbleness in our search for balance and support in our conversations on what to do and why we should do it.

In November last year, at the Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development in Aotearoa New Zealand, I had the privilege of engaging in a conversation with a group of approximately fifty (in total) environmental specialists, academics, and tribal leaders about laws, ethics, and responsibilities for environmental public goods, especially water. In this conversation, there was an emphasis on opening up "a new paradigm of responsibility and guardianship or stewardship of water". The symposium organizers saw a paradigm "different from rights and ownership approaches" and suggested a "trusteeship system" to accessing, managing, and using water.

Sir Taihakurei Eddie Durie provided a paper at this symposium titled "Maori proprietary interests in water" (Durie 2014). Taihakurei is a Justice of the High Court of New Zealand and cochair of the Maori Council. He is regarded as a leading legal expert on the Treaty of Waitangi. In his paper, Taihakurei points to indigenous custom as the basis of Maori proprietary interests in water. This interest, he argues, although perhaps less than full and exclusive ownership, is more than merely a management interest. This something "more" is orientated in the spiritual and ancestral. Taihakurei points to the role of animal *kaitiaki* (protectors/custodians) as key directors for indigenous Maori in how best to manage and use the natural resources of their environment. For Taihakurei's family, this was the *ruru* (morepork) bird on one side and the *kotuku* (white heron) bird on another (Durie 2014: 1–2).

In Samoan traditional culture, there is a similar belief in a shared genealogy and spiritual affinity between people and animals. In this ancient spiritual affinity, there exist four harmonies: the harmony between people and the cosmos; between people and their environment; between fellow people; and between people and their inner selves. When these four harmonies are in balance, there is in life a state of sacred balance. When these harmonies are disturbed, indigenous Samoans, like indigenous Maori, are reminded by their kaitiaki or *tapu-a-fanua* of the need to restore balance. Like kaitiaki, tapu-a-fanua are custodians or protectors of the sacred boundaries (or *tuā'oi*) that hold our worlds, living and spirit, in balance.

Tapu-a-fanua mostly take animal form, mainly as birds or fish. They are manifestations of family or village ancestors or gods. For some villages or families, the lulu (or owl) is their tapu-a-fanua. In the district of Aana the fe'e (or

octopus) was their tapu-a-fanua. In Asau, the *atule* (or mackerel) was considered their sacred fish, and if it did not appear as expected, the fishers and villagers would reflect on their fishing and consumption practices in an attempt to discern whether they had breached a tuā'oi (or sacred boundary). If they had, they might then engage in a *tulafono* (law making) process to work out what to do about the breach.

In my contribution to the Waikato Law, Ethics, and Responsibility symposium, I spoke about tuā'oi and tulafono (Tui Atua 2014a). I raise comment on them here to reemphasize their importance to an indigenous Samoan framing of responsibility. It is important to retain these Samoan terms as Samoan terms in global conversations so that some, if not all, of what is uniquely Samoan is retained in the overall narrative. As with all translations, there is always a loss of nuance and context. Having the original word(s) remain visible with the appropriate translation(s) alongside, however, can help minimize this and is something that ought to be encouraged as standard practice for an integrated, multicultural world such as ours, a world that has really only one or two truly global languages.

Like many indigenous Samoan words, tuā'oi is a term that came about through the abbreviation of a phrase. As I have said before, it is an abbreviation of the saying: *i tua atu o i e le au iai lau aiā po o lau pule* ("your rights [aiā] or authority [pule] do not extend beyond this point"). Tuā'oi is generally about boundaries. It is a concept that assumes the existence of a relationship or what Samoans call the va.

Albert Wendt, Samoa's most internationally well-known novelist and poet, describes the va as "the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships/the contexts change" (Wendt 1996). Then in ending his brief description Wendt asserts: "We knew a little about semiotics before Saussure came along!" (Wendt 1996).

Samoans believe that, within all human experiences, there exist relationships, and within these exist boundaries or tuā'oi (secular and sacred). These tuā'oi or boundaries mark the point at which one's rights and responsibilities either begin or end. This includes human relationships, rights, and responsibilities to the environment. It also includes the assumption that the ultimate boundary or tuā'oi that must not be transgressed is that between us and God.

There are a myriad of different concerns within the concept of tuā'oi, but especially important are those relating to how to determine where boundaries begin and end and, once determined whether they can be negotiated, who can negotiate them, how, on what grounds, and so on and so forth. These concerns gave rise to a process for rule-making and dispute resolution that Samoans traditionally

called *tulafono* and to its outcomes, also called tulafono. Today the word tulafono is understood to refer more to the outcomes of this process (i.e., to the resulting rules, customs, laws, and/or foundational principles) than to the process of making them itself. However, the word does itself offer some insight into its broader meanings. Literally, the word tulafono means a meeting (*fono*) of wise heads (*tula*).

In the traditional tulafono (law-making) process an understanding of tuā'oi as inclusive of the secular and sacred was/is presumed. As cited in my Waikato paper (Tui Atua 2014a), there are six general steps or stages:

Step 1: Tuvao fono (lit. to step into the forest/meeting). This is the stage when a tula (lit. wise head, referring to a chief, leader or knowing person) would raise an issue for discussion.

Step 2: *Loʻu fono* (lit. the bending of a branch—*loʻu* is "to bend"). This is the stage in the fono when an issue is being explored and the right to critique or raise question is given to members of the fono.

Step 3: *Lauga Togia* (lit. to give a speech; the act of speaking in accordance with fono tradition and custom). This is the stage where those who according to fono tradition and custom had the right to speak and make interventions on an issue were given the space to do so.

Step 4: *Faa'iu Fono* (lit. to end or conclude the meeting). This stage involved giving those who by fono custom or tradition had the right to conclude the meeting to do so or to postpone concluding the meeting if they wished to revisit an issue.

Step 5: *Faaola Fono* (lit. to give the meeting life). This stage involved reviving a meeting, in the sense that the meeting may be experiencing problems moving forward and require some positive intervention. If so, this intervention was usually sought from the *tamālii* (high chief) as opposed to the *tulāfale* (orator chief). The tamālii was consulted for his skills in and responsibility for discerning the bigger picture and knowing what might be most appropriate in the long-term. It is hoped that the tamālii would give new life to the meeting.

Step 6: Tulafono (lit. the rules or laws made by the consensus or coming together of *tula* or chiefly heads). This is the final stage and involved the actual making of rules or laws. It assumes a level of consensus among all fono participants (i.e., a coming together of all chiefly heads in agreement) and producing the principles, rules, and/or laws (tulafono).

In each of these stages, the va and tuā'oi between them (i.e., those involved in the tulafono process) as people and as leaders and between them and God is respected. In this tulafono process, the influence and respect that Samoans held for the environment as teacher and family is assumed. This is implied in the naming of the first two stages of the process.

I recall speaking with my elders about these stages. They have all passed on now. But I can still feel the pining in their voices as they shared their thoughts

and experiences with me. A pining, I assumed for a time, for a way of living, being, and knowing now gone. As I reflected on my time with these elders, I also remembered how, when answering my questions about the tulafono process, they would speak, like they did when they were explaining the fuia chant, in somewhat hushed tones. By this time, the cultural biases of nineteenth-century Christian European society had taken root in the Samoan psyche. A key challenge to introducing indigenous Pacific concepts and worldviews to the world beyond ourselves is the ability to make this world feel that such concepts are worth knowing. In this point, I am always reminded of Maya Angelou's words: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". A Samoan indigenous ethics of responsibility that can speak to the world is one that must not only hold its own uniqueness, its indigenous logic, flavor, and integrity but must do so in a way that can touch the hearts and minds of people such they can feel its worth.

In the Samoan indigenous reference, people share a responsibility to care for all that God has created, including the earth and cosmos, because all are kin. Samoans honor and remember this in language: *fanua*, for example, is the Samoan word for both land and placenta; *eleele* is the word for earth, mud, or dust but also for the blood of chiefs and for menstrual blood. Here, there is equivalence between humans and the environment. We share a common origin, a common need for protection and survival, and a common destiny. If we care for each other, as is the responsibility of kin, we (both humans and the environment) stand to survive.

Within this belief that people share a kinship, a genealogy, with their lands, seas, skies, moon, sun, trees, rivers, animals, and so forth, sits the *feagaiga*. The feagaiga, like the va, assumes the existence of a sacred relationship. The term has been translated by Reverend George Pratt to mean: "1. an established relationship between different parties, as between brothers and sisters and their children. Also between chiefs (*tamālii*) and their *tulāfale* (orator chiefs); [and] 2. An agreement, [or] a covenant" (Pratt 1893, 153). Usefully, the verb *feagai*, which sits within the term feagaiga, is also defined by Pratt, and as he writes, refers to the notions: "1. To be opposite to each other. 2. To correspond. 3. To dwell together cordially, to be on good terms; as a chief with his people, or a minister with his flock" (Pratt 1893, 152). More recently, as Pratt points out, the term feagaiga has been used to describe a sacred relationship or covenant between a church minister and his congregation. The point here is that the feagaiga assumes a kin-like relationship, with all its attendant assumptions about origins, rights, and responsibilities and furthermore assumes a feminine quality and status.

The feagaiga demands, in theory and practice, nurturing and peace-keeping skills and qualities, those believed special to women, especially to sisters. The role of the feagaiga is to keep the peace within the family, to ensure that conflict does not brew into all-out war, to ensure that decisions made on behalf of

the family by family chiefs are wise and good. The feagaiga works in tandem with family *matai* or chiefs to ensure that the *aiga* or family is safe and well. In Samoa, the feagaiga system works alongside the *faamatai* (chiefly system) to ensure that Samoa's resources and inheritances—its people, environment, lands, language, and ethnic culture—are protected. Both systems are founded on a philosophy of family—on the idea of aiga and fanauga. It is within this *faasamoa* (Samoan) framework, with its concepts of feagaiga, *matai*, tulafono, va, tuā'oi, and tapu-a-fanua, that one will find Samoan ideas of responsibility for the care of the environment.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, last week released his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato si*—On care for our common home (Francis 2015), and opens his letter by first acknowledging his namesake Saint Francis of Assisi, who had an especially close and spiritual relationship with animals and nature. He then acknowledges that our common home, which we call earth, "is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us" (Francis 2015, 3). He reminds all his followers that "we ourselves are dust of the earth (*cf.* Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshments from her waters" (Francis 2015). There is room for reading within the Holy Father's words the spirit of fanauga, feagaiga, va and tuā'oi.

In drawing from his predecessor's 29 June 2009 Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Francis acknowledged that "the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence" (Francis 2015, 6). Currently this culture, he suggests, is dominated by "new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm" that threatens to "overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice" (Francis 2015, 39). Like Professor Hans Küng, who ten years ago called for the declaration of a Global Ethic and Human Responsibility to address what Küng termed a crisis of orientation,9 Pope Francis has declared not only an environmental crisis but also a crisis in global leadership. The Holy Father states:

The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this [environmental] crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable, otherwise the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice.<sup>10</sup>

Not everyone will be happy with what the Pope is saying here. But all will agree that our climate has been changing dramatically over the last half century.

These changes have affected the health of our planet, and many in the Pacific are experiencing the negative effects of these changes (rising sea levels, increased soil erosions, floods, cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and typhoons) right at our door-steps. All must agree that something needs to be done. Taking responsibility and cooperating together is the only way to move forward and survive.

The hard work of all who are advocating for global togetherness in this issue of taking responsibility for the care of our planet can only mean something if we are willing to listen and learn from each other. Attending constructively to our environmental crisis requires a collective change in paradigm, orientation, culture, leadership, and behavior. All of which sees us taking care for our planet together. This can only happen if we can dialogue together as coinhabitants and only if our dialogue is held in a way that makes us feel that our different cultural values and approaches are given due respect. Finding balance among the different perspectives and ways of doing requires the skill, grace and dexterity of the fuia, who even when falling can still manage to make love.

I wish to end my address by making two reflections. One is about your conference theme; and the other is about a movie I watched on a flight over. The theme for this tenth meeting of your society is *Europe and the Pacific*. In reading through your present and past conference programs I see a slow but sure movement towards "talking with and alongside" rather than "talking about" and "talking down to" the Pacific. When I was younger I was sceptical of people who "talked about" Samoa and Samoan culture. I was sceptical of academia and academics because, when I read their work on Samoa, it made me feel like I was being talked at and talked down to. But times have changed, thankfully, in this regard, mostly for the better.

In talking to anthropologists, Epeli Ha'uofa urged many years ago that: "We must devise ways or better still, widen the horizon of our [academic] discipline, in order to tap instead of suppressing [its] 'feel' and [its] subjectivity" so that we can "humanise our study of the conditions of man in the Pacific" (Hau'ofa 1975). Although Epeli Hau'ofa was appealing specifically to anthropologists, it is an appeal that given our current environmental crisis, we can all do well to bear in mind.

My final thoughts are about a movie I was watching on a flight over. This movie was about the life of Stephen Hawking. His was a life of sacrifice, achievement and love, notwithstanding. The movie is called *The Theory of Everything*. In one of the scenes Stephen Hawking is sitting in his wheelchair, the mother of his children standing beside him. He is looking out to a beautiful garden. His children appear and they start running happily toward him. He looks at them and smiles, then turns to their mother and says: "Look at what we produced."

In my meditations on what I wanted to share and leave with you today, I remembered this scene and I saw the many faces of the people and environment I love. I saw lush greenery, light blue skies and deep blue seas. And I heard the

birds. I heard the birds welcoming in a new morning. In this prayerful moment, I couldn't resist saying: "Please God, make us worthy of this beautiful planet." *Soifua*.

#### NOTES

- 1. I read this chant first in Moyle (1975, 235) and then in Kramer (1995, 48).
- 2. See Kramer (1995), supra fn. 4, p. 47.
- 3. See Moyle (1975), supra fn. 4.
- 4. For more detailed discussion on these four harmonies, see Tui Atua (2009).
- 5. For another indigenous perspective on the notion of a sacred balance between the environment and humans, see Aroha Te Pareake Mead's paper titled "Sacred balance" written for inclusion in the *Global biodiversity assessment: Cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity*, United Nations Environment Programme. Online at: http://d3n8a8pro7bvhmx.cloudfront.net/ubcic/legacy\_url/1533/sacred.pdf?1426351324. Accessed 20 June 2015.
- 6. The term *tapu* refers to the sacred; the term *fanua* refers to land.
- 7. Originally published as Wendt (1996). Also available online at University of Auckland's New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (NZEPC) site: http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/wendt/tatauing.asp. Accessed 17 October 2015.
- 8. Quote taken from Good Reads website online at: https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/5934-i-ve-learned-that-people-will-forget-what-you-said-people. Accessed 20 June 2015.
- 9. See Hans Küng, "Global Ethic and Human Responsibilities," online at: http://www.oneworlduv.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/hkung\_santaclara\_univ\_global\_ethic\_human\_resp\_2005.pdf. See also declaration discussed at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, online at: http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/\_includes/fckcontent/file/towardsaglobalethic.pdf.
- 10. Holy Father, Pope Francis (Francis 2015, 39) supra fn. 19.

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