

## **Auē le oti:** Samoan death rituals in a New Zealand context.

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### **Abstract**

Given that dialogue relating to death and grief for many Samoans still remains in the realm of tapu (sacred) or sā (protected), few attempts have been made by researchers of Samoan heritage to understand whether the cultural contexts for enacting associated rituals might also provide avenues for healing. Psychological scholarship on recovery following death, particularly among men, is largely based on dominant western perspectives that continue to privilege both clinical and ethnocentric perspectives as the norm. This case presentation, which forms part of a larger doctoral research by the author, demonstrates that some Samoan end-of-life rituals opens space for greater consideration of recovery from death as a culturally-defined process. In many instances, instead of severing ties with the deceased person as is popular in clinical approaches to grief work, Samoan grief resolution strongly endorses continued connections through its mourning patterns. Their end-of-life enactment helps to transition the deceased from this life to the next, while drawing the living together. Critically, the performance and maintenance of such important tasks create space for heaving emotions to be calmed, where meaning is made, and where the lives of those impacted are slowly restored. Some of these familiar rituals offer therapeutic value, enabling Samoans involved in this study to walk hand-in-hand with their emotional distress, while transitioning them through the grieving process. Such mourning traditions are meaningful and culturally preferred, validating and celebrating Samoan cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Fa'asamoa, Grief recovery, Mourning rituals, Indigenous Psychology

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**Auē, ua māliliu toa, ua maumau ai āupega o le taua**

Oh, how the mighty have fallen, alas, the weapons of victory now lie abandoned  
(Samoa Proverb)

**Introduction**

The practice and expression of grief may vary between people and across diverse cultural groups, even if such symptomatology is assumed to be universal (Stroebe, Gergen & Stroebe, 1992). Mandelbaum (quoted in Ablon, 1970, p.215) suggests that “rituals for death can have many uses for life”. In fact, rituals relating to death can function in significant ways to help the living (Ablon, 1970). While death and bereavement is regularly experienced in Samoan communities everywhere, the topic itself communicates tapu (sacred) and sā (protected) – an unseen guardian in some way. Death has the uncanny manner of arresting people amidst the ordinariness of life’s journey, accompanied by an atmosphere of uncertainty. Disruptions happen. Transforming patterns become evident as changes are made manifest in the way regular routines and practices are brought to a halt. Distinct emotions, dress codes and behaviours that are considered appropriate become the unrehearsed norm until a specified time of observance has elapsed. In many Samoan communities, a collective responsibility to their departing beloved means everyone contributes to make sure the farewell is a memorable event. On the whole, Samoan people have mastered the art of addressing death’s presence with poise and elegance that elevates such occasions publicly, honouring both the departed and those remaining in the same occasion.

This article examines Samoan death and bereavement practices. The inadequacy of published material relating to Samoan death and mourning culture reflects the time lapse due to resources available to draw from. Despite this, many of the concepts discussed remain vital to many Samoan end-of-life rituals, especially in diasporic locations. In an attempt to reconnect traditional bereavement culture with the more recent ones, I engage an auto-ethnographic method to interweave into the discussion my own journey and narratives relating to death customs as a NZ-based Samoan counsellors and researcher. In particular, I highlight the passing of two family members to examine this connection more explicitly.

## Early Samoan death patterns

Account of traditional Samoan funeral patterns were observed and recorded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by early missionaries such as Stair (1883), Turner (1885), and Kramer (1901), who was a medical physician based on the island during the German occupation. Turner's observations describe vivid expressions where he writes:

Whenever the eye is fixed in death, the house became a scene of indescribable lamentation and wailing. "Oh my father why did you not let me die and you live here still?" . . . Oh what use is it for me to survive you; would that I died for you!" These cries might have been heard 200 hundred yards from the house; and they were accompanied by the most frantic expressions of grief, such as rending garments, tearing the hair, thumping the face and eyes, burning the body with small piercing firebrands, beating the head with stones till the blood ran, and this they called an "offering of blood" for the dead. (1984, p.144)

Stair (1983) reported similar responses.

On ordinary occasions the body was prepared for burial within a few hours of death, but if the deceased were of high rank . . . many customs and observances were attended to which were omitted at the ordinary funeral. Visits of sympathy were also made by persons from the surrounding district who came to pour forth lamentations both real and feigned. . . . in-front of the dwelling might be seen men and women wildly beating their heads and bodies with large stones, and inflicting ghastly wounds, from which the blood poured as an offering of affection and sympathy to their departing friend. (p. 179-181)

The physical acts of self-inflicting wounds by mourners were an attempt to appease the wrath of the gods and to avert the death. This type of lamentation was significant and meaningful, even if the person being lamented was still showing the faintest signs of life. While these endeavours continued, the voice of an appointed tūlafale (orator chief) could be heard calling upon the god of the family to cease from their evil undertaking. The tūlafale would entreat the demon of death known as Moso by calling:

Moso, what does all this mean? Give back to us our chief. Why do you pay no respect to us, faleupolu? (Stair, 1983, p.181)

The tūlafale would enhance his efforts by calling upon the god of the sufferer's relative to intervene as well. If all appeals were to no avail and the chief passed away, the tūlafale would change tack by proceeding to verbally abuse Moso, even challenging the demon of death to a duel. Stair (1983) writes of the tūlafale's changed response:

O thou shameless spirit, could I but grasp you, I would smash your skull to pieces!  
Come here and let us fight together. Don't conceal yourself, but show yourself  
like a man and let us fight, if you are angry. (1983, p.181-182)

Tui Atua (2011) has suggested that the imagery evoked by the tūlafale's change of behaviour from pleading to challenging the gods was a known traditional practice amongst early Samoans. The tūlafale's actions could be interpreted as sparring with the gods, linking to the underlying belief of shared divinity between Samoans and their gods. Further demonstration of this type of challenge is reflected in the gravesite ritual by the matai (chiefs) exposing their backsides and genitals to the grave (Tui Atua, 2007). This demonstrative act defiantly proclaims to the spirit world that the living still has some form of control over life, and that not all is governed by the domain of the eternal. The provocative exposure and stance communicates to the death realm that even as it takes the life and soul of one member, the displayed genitals assert that the living and humanity still have the ability to procreate and to continue on in this life (Tui Atua, 2008, p.210). These gravesite practices reinforce the triumph of life.

Stair (1983) also observed that immediately after the pronouncement of death, all the mats on the floor in the falelauasi (death house) were thrown outside. The thatched sides of the house were either torn down or beaten with clubs until the house was totally destroyed. The families and masses who had gathered would continue with increased fervor their lamenting, tearing their hair, and wounding their bodies by heavy blows from stones and clubs. As long as the matai lay dead in his house, a tapu (sanction) was instituted where the village could not receive guests, nor was anyone permitted to walk along the road. To do so invited punishment and contempt from the village and the family in mourning. Similarly, the sea and the lagoon of that village were declared off limits.

Even in the early years of the twentieth century, these death practices were still evident. Kramer, writing in 1901, observed that "the greatest tributes are paid a chief after his death, be it that he lost his life in battle or was assassinated" (Kramer, 1995, p.110). He commented that the people belonging to the chief's family and village would cut their hair short, beat their heads bloody, burn wounds in their skin, and even remove complete parts of their fingers to show their respect and devotion to the deceased matai.

Early reports also indicate that funeral obsequies of a chief of rank lasted from ten to fifteen days, whether he died of a natural cause, an illness, or warfare. Particular signs of mourning were displayed by the fighting men called *aosoga* (Kramer, 1995). During the period of mourning, the deceased and the death house were watched continuously by men appointed for this task. After the burial, and until the mourning period ended, the days were usually spent in sham boxing fights and wrestling-matches. The nights were reserved for dancing, jesting, and sexual procreation, distinctive to periods of mourning for the dead called *taupiga* or *valegase* (Kramer, 1995; Stair, 1983).

Many of these aspects of death and mourning culture have been largely phased out or replaced in modern times, particularly the blood offerings, the gravesite ritual of genital exposure, and the *tulafale* appeasing the gods. Many of the changes were strongly dictated by Christian influences and were replaced by more solemn behaviours by mourners that reflect Christian and *papalagi* (western or European) influences; that of the clergy performing the final rituals and pronouncing a biblical benediction to release the deceased person into God's care.

### **Samoa death rituals in New Zealand**

One of the most significant aspects of *fa'asamoa* that is carried out with ever-increasing vigour is a modified traditional pattern of funeral observances (Ablon, 1970). Not only do these observances reinforce community solidarity, but their ritualized patterns highlight the importance of reciprocity and of common support for Samoans. Even more profound is the degree to which many of these ritualized patterns are observed in adopted locations outside of Samoa like NZ.

In 2011, I was confronted with the intricate formalities involving Samoan funeral observance because of the death of a nephew, Kiwi. Although the end-of-life processes may vary from one family group to the next, they generally share similar patterns of address which can include: rallying together before the person passes away, the gathering of the family network and support once the person has died, providing funeral and burial church services, and reciprocating honour. In many instances, whether in Samoa or New Zealand, burying the dead, and honouring those who gather to mourn have observable patterns to recognise their status

within the family, church, village, or district of affiliation. Additionally, the patterns observed in urbanised centres in NZ might be different to those being practiced in Samoa itself.

Kiwi was diagnosed with cancer in 2010. He underwent numerous operations, scans, and rehabilitative treatments to combat the tumour. Later scans revealed that the cancer had spread and was aggressively attacking all his vital organs. The disease left a previously active young man, one who had won many rugby league awards fatigued and breathless, and needing constant physical assistance. A cancer specialist informed our family that no further treatments could benefit him, less than two months before he passed away. The specialist also suggested for Kiwi to be cared for at home, and to be assisted by his family instead of seeing out his last weeks in the hospital. The doctors' declaration was met with an urgent call by the family leader to the wider network for focused prayer for Kiwi's healing. His relatives also made it their task to encourage Kiwi, and that God willing, he would recover.

As a trauma-trained counsellor and researcher, I spoke to Kiwi about his journey with cancer and what he thought about the medical prognosis on his condition several weeks before he was admitted to the hospital. In response, he shared about his battle, and his love for his grandparents who he referred to as mum and dad:

I am ready to die, but I know mum and dad [grandparents] don't want me to give up. I don't want to disappoint them. I will keep on fighting for them but as for me, I am ready.

Kiwi's readiness to face death came as a surprise because those praying for and supporting him insisted that he would overcome the cancer, and live. Kiwi also acknowledged that he would keep on battling because this is what his family wanted him to do. But less than two weeks later, his ravaged body finally yielded to the cancerous invader, though not without putting up a good fight.

His deteriorating condition led to Kiwi being admitted to the hospital for close monitoring. He was now breathing through an oxygen mask around-the-clock which caused him severe physical pain and unable to lie down or sleep. Although the physical signs were ominously dictating his final moments, his community of supporters remained unwilling to accept that 'death' was his fate. They kept praying and hoping for a miracle, or a cure. Reflecting back to that period of time, it was not the fear of 'calling down' or 'hurrying death' (Te Awekotuku & Nikora, 2009) that rendered a discussion on the topic unapproachable; rather, the family's

steadfast desire for healing became their sole focus. Every visitor was ushered to Kiwi's bedside to echo encouragement and to pray. Kiwi was never alone in his battle or his final moments of life. His family and supporters were with him all the way through to his final breath.

The author's conversations with Kiwi provided the opportunity to speak with family members about the possibility of Kiwi dying. But after hearing this message, the family refused to give up hope and urged Kiwi - fa'amalosi, aua le fa'avaivai - encouraging him to stay strong, and not to give up. The family gathered close, sensing that with Kiwi's worsening state, there was little they could do but to pray, and hope. The atmosphere in the room was punctuated by prolonged silence, unwavering hope, and silent prayers. This was not the occasion for frivolous conversations, rather, a solemn presence pervaded the atmosphere, leaving those present grasping to the faint hope of deliverance. Slowly, some of the family were anticipating the unwelcomed yet familiar adversary, death. Not long after midnight on 13 November 2013, Kiwi drew his last breath while being held by one of his older brother's and surrounded family and friends.

### **Preparation for death**

Funeral preparation in New Zealand contexts usually begins immediately after the pronouncement of death. Matai members, close bilateral kin, and older respected relatives' fono (assemble) to make the practical decisions for burial arrangements, and for religious services (Ablon, 1970). Aside from various fono to gather and combine resources, preparation also means arranging space in the family home as a makeshift falelauasi (mourning house) for the deceased to lie in state. At the same time, a tarpaulin shelter is erected in the backyard for food preparation and other general duties while the family garage is converted into a fa'afaletui (meeting area), and the storage facility for si'ialofa (gifts given in love) items that are donated by visiting delegations, and additional resources that are collected by the family themselves (Seiuli, 2015). In diasporic urban locations, those who rally to support a family in crisis are not limited to one's extended family, but embrace other Samoans who may have been friends of the deceased through work, church, sporting clubs, and in other settings. Ablon (1971) suggests that relatives or close family friends will make an effort to visit the deceased at his house in order to make their presentation and offer consolation to the family.

The practice of fa'aaloaloga fa'asamoa (reciprocated gifting) is a significant process within death and mourning occasions for Samoan people everywhere (Seiuli, 2016). It is essential that one must reciprocate with those who support one's 'āiga in their times of need. Embree (1933) observed this practice in a village in Tutuila and commented that "exchange is the very essence not only of courtesy but of self-respect" amongst Samoans (p.566). To withhold the exchange or to be denied the opportunity to express themselves in the form of reciprocated exchange was in effect, to "seize their souls" (Embree, 1933, p.566). Such heartfelt exchanges are motivated by aga'alofa (compassion) that reflects Christian and community compassion.

In past times, the deceased person was buried relatively quickly, either on the day of their death, or the next day. A quick burial is a practice which was also confirmed by a number of my older research participants who grew up in Samoa (Seiuli, 2015). Rarely was the body of the deceased person left for longer periods because their remains decomposed quite quickly. Nowadays, embalming and refrigeration allow the body to be left for much longer periods before burial. The only exception was seen with the victims of the tsunami of 2009 who were buried within a short period because of the mass deaths involved (Wendt-Young, 2010). Embalming and preparation of the body of the deceased is a vital part of the grieving process of many Samoans, including my family. The advances in embalming practices have permitted more people to visit the deceased in their homes than would have been possible in earlier periods. Certain members of the immediate family, particularly the spouse and the children of the deceased, are assigned the task of dressing the deceased relative (Seiuli, 2016).

Of greater significance was the of the family home and in particular, the living room, as the central place for the deceased to lay in state while visitors came to pay their respects and to offer the grieving family support. Each and every family member had their time in the living room. At different stages, sobs, wailing, talking, and laughter could be heard echoing from the living room. The events that took place in the living room space seem to suggest that mourners were connecting with their departed beloved, while at the same time comforting each other in their collective loss (Seiuli, 2015). The strong sense of kinship prevalent in Samoan society does not end with death but endures and encompasses families and ancestors who have passed (Tui Atua, 2009b). In this regard, death simply marks the end of a physical existence, without precluding a real sense of enduring bonds (Harrison, Kahn & Hsu, 2005; Penwarden, 2009). The living room came alive. Its space was filled with loving memories,

tears, sorrows, and shared experiences that evoked both laughter and sadness. The space became so much more than just a room; it was literally transformed into a place that created 'le vā tapuia' -a sacred space to reconnect (Tui Atua, 2009). The space became hallowed in some way, shared by both the living and the departed. This way of celebrating life and death is a regular occurrence with many Samoan families in grief.

Therapeutically, the living room experience provides meaningful pathways in grief resolution for the many mourners who spent time there. It provided a physical and consecrated space for them to express cathartic emotions related to passing of their loved one. The physical space enabled bonding between the living relatives thus proclaiming – 'we are one in our loss'. Further evidence of this oneness followed once members gave their contribution and when they completed their 'living room' visit. They helped out wherever required or needed because their physical presence communicated their loyalty to the group (Seiuli, 2015 & 2016).

### **Family and community support**

Technological advancements such as the internet with the capability of instant graphic uploads to virtual cyber-network sites that allows progress updates, photographs, videos, and other information to be viewed worldwide in a very short time. Such forums enable families and acquaintances located elsewhere to become easily connected and feel closer during such sorrowful times. In the last decade, social network sites like Facebook have provided a semi-personal forum for sharing support and for encouraging family members both near and far. I include three comments from a Facebook page to illustrate the use of this medium for communication by Samoans connected with Kiwi.

Thanks to all who took the time to visit me in hospital. Seeing and being surrounded by my loved ones is always the best medicine. (Kiwi –August 2012)

To our nephew Kiwi, now you get to rest, no longer in pain, or struggling for air. You are now in the loving arms of your saviour, Lord Jesus. (Family, NZ - Nov 2012)

We are truly blessed to have your love and never ending support during this difficult time. Your love and kindness has eased the pain left by my brother's passing. Love you always my family. (Family – USA, Nov, 2012)

Many New Zealand-born and younger generations of Samoans find this type of social network forum convenient and familiar for connecting and for offering support to each other. The

availability of such avenues not only increases the profile of these important life events globally, but they also raise concerns about the use, maintenance, and confidentiality offered through such virtual spaces.

The physical manifestation of support and of loyalty described immediately above gathers momentum during the week of mourning. That is, soon after the death is announced to relatives and friends, a complex network goes into motion gathering resources (Ablon, 1970; Va'a, 2001). Ablon (1970) emphasises that there seems to be inherent prestige for the 'āiga of the deceased and the community to which they belong, in being able to raise as much support as possible to demonstrate their commitment and loyalty to their departed. Accumulating lavish support continues as a preference throughout many Samoan communities today, a phenomenon communicated by many research participants.

There is a Samoan saying: "*A e iloa a'u i Togamau, ou te iloa foi oe i Siulepa*" which means: "if you do me a good deed in Togamau, I will reciprocate in Siulepa" (Tui Atua, 2009, p.5). The reciprocal performance of customs is motivated by the knowledge that if performed with the best motives, then they will be reciprocated at some point in time. As Ablon (1971) suggests, there is prescribed expectation to offer help to other family members as a way of showing respect. The strength of such vital connections supports Samoan communities to better handle death and grief processes than the general population. Such network structure available in Samoan communities provides the stabilizing force for personal and social life challenges, which further enables the "extraordinary financial and moral backing" (Ablon, 1971, p.335) required to address cultural responsibilities. Such social support helps to alleviate emotional distress characteristically associated with bereavement. All contributors and their gifts are recorded in the api (a Samoan funeral recording system) for future reference.

In past times, customs and traditional practices associated with funerals were meant to provide relief (financially and emotionally), and do justice to the family and person deceased in terms of dignifying the memory and legacy of the deceased (Tui Atua, 2009). Some current Samoan funerals practices have become elaborate, expensive and stressful, and as a result, families are often left with financial debts associated with funeral expenses. Worse, residual feelings of resentment after the fa'alavelave can lead to a state of mental and spiritual exhaustion. Such ailments can cause long-term emotional stress and depression (Ministry of

Health, 2006; SPINZ, 2007). The social stigma of losing face is so great that matai are willing to do almost anything to avoid the embarrassment and shame associated with not being able to measure up to what is expected (Tui Atua, 2006). Furthermore, it would be discourteous to accept gifts from family members without some redistribution in return once the obligation to the fa'alavelave has been addressed. Left over resources are reallocated back to family members, which has to be managed with equity, integrity, and fairness. This is an enormous task; to ensure that each person receives a share of the remaining resources according to their level of contribution. To cheat members out of their fair share is to ensure disgruntled and non-compliant relatives on future occasions when their support may be required, but may not be forthcoming.

The financial commitment to bury a Samoan person in New Zealand is quite substantial, particular if that person is a chief title holder or a member of the clergy. For example, the funeral director's costs for embalming, storage, and transporting the deceased is normally around \$5000 (NZD), or more. A burial plot is also about \$5000, with additional costs for digging and refilling the grave. Another considerable cost is the catering of food during the week of mourning because food plays a vital role in Samoan end-of-life customs and are closely associated with upholding family honour (see Ablon, 1970 & 1971; Tui Atua, 1994; Turner, 1984). Va'a (2001) provides the following figures to show the costs for a funeral he attended in Sydney, Australia. These costs have indeed climbed since it was around 16 years since this data was provided.

**Table 1:** Costs for a funeral in Sydney Australia. (source: Va'a, 2001, p.168)

<i>Lauava</i> (food for funeral participants)	\$6,000
Gravesite, funeral parlour, casket, transport, etc	\$6,500
<i>Sua</i> (monetary gift to ministers and guests)	\$550
Gift for deceased's husband from Samoa	\$2,000
Total	\$15,050

Although there is a growing concern over the high costs in maintaining some end-of-life cultural rituals, many Samoan families have shown that they can take care of their responsibilities by pooling their resources together. These important cultural and religious

enactments demonstrate a way of honouring their deceased relative, their founding ancestors, and their community of support. Additional financial and material gifts are distributed to ministers, important dignitaries, church groups, and families who were present during the fa'aaloaloga ceremony. The outcome of such well-managed events ensured no outstanding debts, an accomplishment that is just as important, if not much more critical to the psychological and emotional recovery of surviving members. Aside from alleviating unnecessary debts, a well-managed funeral event can leave family members feeling satisfied and honoured.

### **Memorial church services**

Broadly speaking, contemporary Samoan spirituality can be described as a blending of fa'asamoa (Samoan way) with Christian customs and traditions (Taule'ale'ausumai, 1997a; Makasiale, 2007). This encompassing form of spirituality provides a strong supportive network for grieving communities in today's society. Since the arrival of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Samoa in 1830, and the later introduction of other Christian churches, there has been an effective integration of Christianity into the traditional social structure (Ablon, 1970). In places like New Zealand, the church continues as the centre of Samoan village life, playing a significant role for Samoan families when death occurs.

The way some Samoan families deal with death points to the "significance both of continuing tradition and of adaptive modifications" (Ablon, 1970, p.209). The continuing memory of those who have passed away can comfort the living, which makes the prospect of death much easier to bear (Treadaway, 2007), much like the visible presence of the gravesites mentioned earlier. In fact, some still believe that the spirit of the deceased may keep in touch after death to be a guide to the living (Penwarden, 2009), or to protect and be a guardian to the family (Stair, 1983; Turner, 1984). For some Samoans, on-going connection with those who have passed away is a vital part of their genealogical heritage.

The central role of the church in the lives of many Samoans has resulted in its increased role in providing comfort and support to grieving families. Memorial church services (lotu) remain prominent during the week of mourning and prior to the burial. Many Samoan communities have integrated their own style to memorial services where the host church works closely with the grieving family to honour the deceased person (Ablon, 1971). The deceased person

may be taken to a number of church gatherings before being buried, thus recognising their spiritual involvement. These church services also enable spiritual support and a ready-made community of physical and moral support to grieving families. Typically, there are two main church services to be held: the Family Service and the Funeral Service. A format for the church services is also drafted to outline the specific roles the family and church members are to perform during the church services.

The pattern of formal and informal services varies according to the church with which the family is affiliated (Ablon, 1970). Throughout the week, informal family lotu are conducted in the deceased person's home with family members and others who were visiting at the time. In some instances, particularly concerning the death of a parent, two memorial services will be held. The first service is held in the adopted country, followed by the deceased being transferred to Samoa for the final service and burial in the family burial plot. This can be very expensive for the family because of the extra costs involved.

Traditionally, the final night before burial was an occasion for an all-night vigil, where the family and villagers would congregate at the deceased's house to join in songs and prayers offered to the gods. These all night mourners are referred to as *osi lagi* (heavenly worshippers/priests). Throughout the night, the villagers' purpose was to remove the sadness of death and return the household to joy (Copp & Pula, 1950; Kramer, 1995). Activities such as singing took place while the family cooked and prepared for the next day's activities (Ablon, 1971).

In both Turner's (1984) and Kramer's (1995) reports, there was a real dedication by men to this all-night vigil practice in earlier times. The acts by the men were significant in showing honour and respect to the memory of the deceased *ali'i*. Men lit fires and keep them burning around the *falelauasi* and in the village *malae*, which was a designated open space for village gatherings. Fires were believed to have kept evil spirits away from the deceased person and the family. Fires also ensured that village warriors were ready to avert any attempts by enemies to steal the body of the deceased, who would then desecrate their remains. If this happened, it was a cause of greater grief to the relatives and shame to the village or district to whom the deceased belonged. Such vigils changed tone with the adoption of hymns instead of ancient songs under the influence of the missionaries. The old Samoan death chants had been displaced by Christian hymns (Mead, 1930). Additionally, Christian choirs

had taken the responsibility from the untitled men's and women's groups for the customary singing in shifts at the time of an important death.

Memorial services are generally held at the church venue provided by the host church. The availability of chapels at funeral homes or crematorium facilities has led to the use of these alternative venues by grieving families instead of a local church venue for a memorial service. The themes of both the family and the public service reflect important Christian values, of the soul being cherished and enhanced through one's Christian duties and virtues, as encouraged in the second song presented by Tui Atua (2011). These virtues and Christian examples are memorialised through a *molimau* (public testimony) in the presence of all who came to bear witness to the deceased person's faithfulness to their Christian call.

### **Tu'ugamau as the final resting place**

Customarily, when the family service finishes, those attending the church service file past the casket to say their final goodbye. From here, mourners retreat to their vehicles and follow the hearse to the cemetery in a convoy of vehicles with headlights beaming. This practice seems to be more modern than traditional. For Kiwi's funeral service, his family carried his casket to the awaiting hearse while his school friends stationed themselves at the church entrance, preparing to perform a *haka* to honour and to farewell their comrade. Upon exiting the church building, the rousing and emotional *haka* performance subdued the air, challenging death, celebrating life, and releasing Kiwi on his final physical journey. They chanted: *Ka mate, ka mate, ka ora, ka ora, 'Tis death, 'tis death, 'tis life, 'tis life* (Seiuli, 2015).

The graveside service is usually brief and many people from the church service are also in attendance. It is contrary to Samoan customs that only immediate family members are present at the gravesite service. Samoan gravesite rituals in New Zealand display many similarities with non-Samoan funerals. The casket is brought to the resting place near the grave while family, friends, and supporters gather for the last words by the officiating minister. A bible verse is read, followed by a farewell benediction and a prayer. A final hymn is then sung by the crowd assembled around the burial site. Family members gather close, generally around the open grave, while supported by friends and their church community (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The gravesite: community gather to mourn (Source: Author)

Kiwi's casket was wrapped with a siapo (tapa) before being lowered into the open grave. Also visible in the photograph (Figure 1) are the many aspects of Samoan funeral culture such as the embroidered cross symbolising the church; the use of a video and digital camera to capture footage; and the closeness of the community of mourners to one another and to the casket of the deceased person. Such elements demonstrate again the unique relationship that exists between Samoan culture, its people, and their Christian faith with death and grief. A Samoan love song was spontaneously started by a member of the family as Kiwi's casket was lowered into the grave. Those who knew the words joined in the chorus. There was no specific order or rehearsal for this moment. It just happens. At the completion of the officiating minister's final benediction, relatives and all those who have gathered drop flowers or dirt on the casket symbolizing the proverbial 'dust to dust'. Ablon (1970) and Braginsky (2003) both observed that flowers and the gloves worn by the pall bearers were also lowered with the casket. As the dirt and flowers are tossed into the grave, sentiments of - ia manuia lau malaga; 'fare-well in your journey' - are echoed by mourners as they release their beloved member.

Samoan people maintain the essential belief that death is not a final ending. The strong sense of kinship prevalent in the Samoan community does not end with death, but endures and encompasses family members and ancestors who have gone before. Death is an integral part of the continuum of life (Harrison, Kahn, & Hsu, 2005). Death only transitions the deceased between this world and the next (Barrett, 1998). Therefore, verbal sentiments echoed by

family members and grieving communities when they declare 'ia manuia lau malaga' reaffirms on-going connectedness between the now and the eternal.

The final gravesite ritual is the refilling of the open grave with soil (Figure 2). Personal observation reveals that Samoan families always ensure the grave is refilled before they leave the gravesite. The sentiment here is more than just casting dirt into the grave that signifies the ashes to ashes and dust to dust symbolism. Time and again, families, particularly the men, will not leave the grave site until the task has been completed. This particular practice does not seem to have been recorded in the writings of Ablon (1970), Braginsky (2003), or other commentators who have observed Samoan funeral customs in contemporary settings. The young men of the 'āiga, equipped with spades, began the process of filling the hole where the casket lay. Even though there were appointed grave diggers from the cemetery present, the men refused to hand over the shovels.



Figure 2: Filling the grave: The final act of honouring. (Source: author)

What do these actions mean? One argues that such an act is symbolic and is a vital part of Samoan men's instrumental way of grieving (Doka and Martin, 2010). That is, attending to this physical task is their way of expressing their grief in practical ways that also communicates tautua (service). Regrettably, media reports of rumoured graveyard robbery and the detestable practice of dumping bodies into dirt graves while the caskets are resold have served to strengthen the resolve of the men to remain present and ensure the grave is filled. If such abhorrent acts were to happen to their beloved, they would be left feeling partly

responsible for not attending to the final part of the gravesite custom. This could then lead to possible acts of retribution by family members. By completing this task themselves, they ensure there is little chance of such an incident happening. Refilling the grave completes their gravesite rituals. Finality displays responsibility similar to those duties performed by the *auosoga* in traditional Samoa as mentioned earlier. Significantly, this type of responsibility is synonymous with loyalty and honour.

### **Fa'aaloaloga fa'asamoa traditions**

Earlier in this article, I pointed out that Samoans, in contrast to western society in general, tend to view death as an aspect of the natural cycle of life. This perspective allows the funeral rites and accompanying activities to provide a positive platform for social interaction (Ablon, 1970). Indeed, the occasions provided by death reinforces cultural and social identity for families and church communities. Additionally, these occasions aid in the on-going practice of Samoan and Christian traditions to meet the demands and challenges of life in western locales. Fundamental to Samoan life are the ideas and practices of generosity, hospitality, reciprocity, and helping one another (Braginsky, 2003). This applies to strangers, as well as the relative in one's home; hence the importance of the ritualized presentations involved with *fa'aaloaloga fa'asamoa* (reciprocal distributions). The full occasion of *fa'aaloaloga fa'asamoa* involved in funeral presentation normally takes about an hour from start to finish, depending on the amount of people present during these exchanges. Such cultural exchange provides a forum for the grieving family to show their appreciation to their honoured guests. Generosity becomes a measuring rod for the donor to honour both himself and his 'āiga, aside from the obvious benefits for the recipient of his gift. Such hospitality involves an elaborate dinner that is a requisite ending to the funeral ceremonies, over and above the redistribution of material goods following the meal.

The reciprocal feature of *fa'asamoa* cultural rituals is vital because it is often seen as the final opportunity to showcase family members' genuine love for their departed member. The many events throughout the week of mourning find their climax and fulfilment in this traditional exchange. It is generally for this reason that ritual performance attributed to Samoan funeral culture is both awe-inspiring, and expensive. If the death is of a family chief, or a minister, ensuring these processes are performed with "*all of your might*" (Seiuli, 2015),

become more compelling. The formal address and exchange of gifts (fine mats, food, and money) is always dependent on three components: the status of the person who has passed away, the status of those who are in attendance, and, the reputation desired by the family performing the exchange rituals. At the conclusion of cultural exchange, formalities lighten and guests leave carrying both food and items received from the distribution ceremony. The whole occasion brings honour to the memory of the deceased member whilst solidifying the status of the 'āiga as: *e fai mea mafai* or a family who is able to 'walk the talk', with particular reference to taking care of their Samoan cultural obligations (Seiuli, 2015).

### **Concluding thoughts**

Specific rituals and funeral practices of Samoan people highlight important traditional processes enacted when a family member passes away. Many of the associated rituals illustrate the duality that exists within Samoan culture and Christian beliefs. This union, which can sometimes be seen as an uneasy alliance, proves helpful in releasing the deceased from this world and into the next. Such connections resonate with traditional Samoan beliefs that they are simply continuing the *malaga* (journey) begun by ancestors (Seiuli, 2004; Tui Atua, 2009; Webber-Dreadon, 1999). Death and the subsequent processes of mourning provide pathways that reunite Samoan people with their origin, reflecting the circle of life.

It must be acknowledged that this account does not necessarily describe all funeral rituals of Samoans living in urban localities. It does, however, represent patterns that are commonly observed during times of death and mourning. Importantly, the various rituals explored in this paper provide opportunities for the bereaved and their communities to unite in their collective journey through grief. The displays of solidarity allow them to share the burdens associated with death. Additionally, they provide avenues for reconnecting their life histories and for enacting cultural rituals such as *fa'aaloaloga fa'asamoa* (honouring), while simultaneously supporting each other emotionally and financially. All of these rituals indicate a people who are active in their embrace of life and death realities, not simply existing in a shared space. The enactment of their cultural traditions portrays their belief that death is a natural part of being alive, and preparing for death impacts, as well as mourning as a collective unit, has intrinsic value that offers support to one another, that also aide in their overall recovery.

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