

Speech at Heritage Week – Salt Lake City – 28 July 2001
BUILDING BRIDGES TO DIVERSITY

By Honourable Misa Telefoni, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance – Samoa

INTRODUCTION

“We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

Martin Luther King – Speech at St Louis, 22/3/1964

We have come together here today to celebrate our similarities by focusing on our differences. As Ralph Emerson once wrote, ***“The real death of the United States will come when everyone is just alike”***.

In celebrating Samoan culture during this Heritage Week, we gain a greater appreciation of all cultures. We cannot celebrate another culture without gaining a better appreciation of our own culture.

When the people of this world learn to appreciate their differences, rather than be prejudiced against each others’ unique racial and ethnic backgrounds, not only will there be peace throughout the world, but all mankind will live happier, more fulfilling lives.

THE “SULI” SYSTEM

We Samoans achieve racial harmony by our “suli” system. If you are a “suli” or an heir to a “matai” or chief’s title, it matters for nothing what your other bloods are. You could be part Japanese, Chinese, or African-American- as long as you have a Samoan connection to the clan, you can be made a matai. Let me illustrate with a famous son of Samoa, the “Rock”, Rocky Johnson. He is a “suli” through his mother of his clan, and can be made a “matai”, it is totally irrelevant whether his father is African-American, or another Samoan. In the July issue of Ebony Magazine, Zhondra Hughes writes (p.33) – “throughout his career, the Rock has managed to uphold and celebrate his Black and Samoan heritages simultaneously.” Not a bad achievement for a Samoan who now earns more than US\$15 million a year from movies, wrestling and other promotions! In our present legislature, our Parliament, we have many “matais” who are part European or part Chinese. I myself have three matai titles:

Misa from Matautu Falelatai
Lesamatauano’u from Malaela, Aleipata
Tugaga from Faletagaloa Safune

I am also proud to be part Irish (Purcell), German (Retzlaff), Swedish (Nelson), and a Bostonian (Moors).

If you are Samoan born and raised in this great country, by all means be proud of being a Samoan. Those are your roots. Be proud also of being a citizen of this Land of the Free.

Eric Fonoimoana won a gold medal for the United States in beach volleyball. If you could have witnessed our excitement! You would have been excused for thinking Samoan had won a gold medal. In our hearts, and that is where it matters, we had won a gold medal.

The next heavyweight champion of the world, David Tua, trains out of Las Vegas. The announcers say he is from South Auckland, New Zealand, but we all know he was born and raised in Samoa, and he has “100% Samoan” tattooed on his leg.

“TAUTUA” – HONOUR THROUGH SERVICE

If you are a “suli” or an heir- you are part of the clan. This alone does not entitle you to any honours! We Samoans consider being a “suli” without “tautua” or service, to count for nothing. We have a saying in Samoa – “O le ala i le pule o le tautua”. The path to high honour is through service.

This same “tautua” is the backbone of our economy, if I can be permitted to put on my Finance Minister’s hat for a moment. Our Samoan people worldwide, remitted back to Samoa in 2000, over \$147 million. This has a major economic impact on an island nation of 170,000 people.

SONS FOR THE RETURN HOME

Our famous author and poet Albert Wendt’s first book “*Sons for the Return Home*,” was about the burning desire of all Samoans who make a success of themselves overseas, to return home and share their success with us. Believe me, we are proud of all of you Samoans here today!

Samoans throughout the globe, we are proud of you! We thank you! We are proud of you-Samoan Council of Chiefs of Utah.

Thank you to this multi-racial and cosmopolitan state of Utah. Seventeen thousand Samoans have made Utah their home because they feel welcomed and are appreciated here. Thank you Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. With the church’s work in humanitarian service and education you have given so much to Samoa and our people.

Thank you all of you for the determination and hard work that has culminated in this successful Heritage Week.

*Ua malie le toa, Ua malo tau,
Ua faamalo fai o le faiva.*

These words of praise are from the famous speech of the vanquished King of Tonga, as he departed Samoa after being defeated by Tuna and Fata and their warriors in battle:

*“Ua malie le toa, ua malo tau
O le a ou alu, ou te le toe sau,
Ae afai out e sau,
O le a ou sau I le aoauli folau
Ae le o le aoauli tau.”*

From these poetic words, the title of our King, Paramount Chief Malietoa’s title is derived.

GLOBALISATION

We cannot celebrate our cultures without some reference to globalisation. We all witnessed the chaos in Seattle, and one person has been killed recently in Genoa Italy. These demonstrations are rooted on a very real concern that unchecked globalisation will not only benefit the rich and mighty and penalize the poor and weak, but it will erode away our individual identities and culture.

Samoa cannot allow itself to be left behind. We are committed to joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Let me assure you all here today. **Samoa will not sacrifice its national identity and culture at the altar of globalisation and the concept of a One-World-Economy.**

These are not empty words. In my Budget Address to Parliament on 31 May 2001, I had this to say on this topic:

“We need to continue to refine our economy for us to take advantage of the benefits offered by the process of globalisation, mindful of our paramount obligation to keep our national identity and culture intact.” (Budget-p16)

GOOD GOVERNANCE

There is another concept gaining global significance, which could have an impact on our cultures; good governance and transparency. I believe that good governance will not

harm, indeed it will benefit our customs and traditions. In the same way as the Gospel of Jesus Christ had a beneficial impact on our customs and traditions.

What is good governance and transparency? The World Bank (1992:1) defines good governance as *“the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources.”* As Lord Acton once said, *“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*

I have recently introduced legislation into Samoa’s Parliament, which will set the good governance agenda for the economic management of our country into the twenty-first Century. There is now no place for corruption in the management of our meager resources.

Recently, I was honoured by Maiava Visekota Peteru Kamu, and asked to deliver the Inaugural Luagalau Levaula Kamu Memorial Lecture on Good Governance. On 16 July 1999, an assassin’s bullet not only killed a Cabinet Minister, it became a baptism of fire, waking a nation from its apathy, raging in righteous fury against this heinous act.

In delivering this Memorial Lecture recently on 16 July 2001, I said:

“With all the hype and verbiage, one thing comes through as essential, in ever achieving good governance. You need honest people in positions of power”.
(Memorial Lecture, p2)

There is an excellent new publication, *“Governance in Samoa.”* (Edited by Elise Huffer and Dr Asofou So’o of Samoa’s National University). The various articles put our matai system, the role of women, the “pule” of Village Councils, the role of our village pastors, up to scrutiny. Not surprisingly, all are found lacking in terms of the good governance agenda.

I agree with the observations, but I find the logic of the conclusion to be flawed. I accept our fa’a Samoa is based on unquestioning obedience, and we all know such subservience is anathema to the good governance agenda. However, what the contributors of this publication have lost sight of is the basic truth: **the reason our fa’a Samoa has survived thousands of years is that authority, in most cases, has been exercised by people of integrity and honour.**

It is quite unfair to focus on the few exceptions referred to in this publication. If good governance cannot thrive without honest leaders, then the application of good governance principles can only refine and improve the fa’a Samoa, it can never have a detrimental impact on it.

THE MEAD-FREEMAN CONTROVERSY

There is a final matter I wish to discuss, since it relates to the very important role of our “feagaiga” – our women, in Samoa. Our country got caught in the cross fire of the academic battle raging between Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman. Both have been laid to rest, but the debate has not abated. I do not intend to enter into the personal accusations, or the nature versus nurture debate, I only wish to set the record straight on this important point. There is absolutely no place in Samoan culture for sexual promiscuity. Our women folk are our “feagaigas”, and they are highly revered in Samoan society.

I do not take issue with focusing on Samoa as the basis of academic contention, but I do take issue with the impact that argument has had on how the outside world perceive our women folk.

CONCLUSION

Nelson Mandela spent close to half his life in prison, yet he had the greatness to overcome his bitterness and hate. He not only forgave his captors, he preached reconciliation as the only means to achieve nationhood in South Africa. In his book published in 1994, “*Long Walk to Freedom*”, Nelson Mandela said:

“No-one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love come more naturally to the human heart than its opposite”.

This week, we have built a major bridge to narrow the gap between all our cultures. We have learnt to appreciate each other more through a greater awareness of Samoan culture. We have been taught to respect one another. We can now begin to love one another.

I now conclude as I began, with Martin Luther King:

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that”.

The light comes only with understanding and compassion. Love is the natural condition of the human heart.

Let us love one another, for this is Christ’s greatest commandment for us all, and we are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

Soifua and God Bless you all,

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