

# Reconciling Modern Knowledge with Ancient Wisdom

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This paper is about an academic as well as cultural journey of (re)affirmation. Imbued with Western knowledge, I was nearly swayed to alter my beliefs and core assumptions towards a modern world view. I was referred to an article by Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese (hereafter Tui Atua) which significantly assuaged the tensions of seemingly opposing values rooted in two different world views. I realized now that in many ways, Tui Atua's publications on Samoan wisdom, culture and philosophy had the effect of a gentle wind tapping my shoulder. The articles reaffirmed my sense of heritage and strengthened my resolve to sustain, perpetuate and be guided by my Samoan values of *alofa* (love, compassion) and *faaaloalo* (respect). I am committed to apply them in all that I do. This is my story.

## Introduction

From my first year as a faculty member at the University of Hawaii, College of Business Administration, a lingering dilemma, engendered during my post-graduate studies, continued unabated until years later when I became an Associate Professor with the Management Department. The cause of that dilemma was the friction between culturally based values and the learned perspectives of classical scientific management and organizational development. The question was whether there was any compatibility and relevance in the application of US business material values and rational theoretical models with the social values, sharing systems and intuitive dimensions of Pacific island cultures.

I had learned about Newtonian physics, which had developed during the Age of Enlightenment (17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe) and of its influence in the development of the mechanistic worldview (the predominant philosophical paradigm for the next four to five centuries). The Newtonian influence on business management and theory was unquestioned, according to Alvin Toffler (1984) in his classic work, *The Third Wave*.

The mechanistic rational blueprint of Newtonian physics defined understandings of how the universe operated. The intellectual contrast between the notion of a mechanistic universe motivated by a rational process, and an organic universe genealogically connected, became an unrelenting point of intellectual and emotional discomfort for me. The prevailing assumption in modern science was that modernity favored rationality and the mechanistic design. However, the preponderance

of research and literature attesting to that perspective, though compelling, was not entirely convincing to me. To embrace that viewpoint creates a context whereby non-mechanistic worldviews that privilege intuition, dialogue with ancestors and kinship ties among all living things is relegated to a status I found unacceptable.

These two seemingly opposing perspectives were recurrent and not reconciled until I read a paper authored by Tui Atua in 2005. The first sentence attracted my attention and riveted me into reading the entire paper. The subsequent papers I sought and read were to impact and resonate within me and have affected all that I have done and become since.

Peace in the Samoan religious tradition equates with harmony. A search for peace is a search for harmony. There are four key harmonies that hold the balance of peace for Samoans. These are: harmony with the cosmos; harmony with the environment; harmony with one's fellow men; and harmony with one's self. When all four harmonies come together there is peace (Tui Atua, 2005, p. 2).

Through Tui Atua's papers, I was introduced, in a remarkably fresh and understandable way, to Samoan perspectives that have helped me mitigate and eventually reconcile the tensions engendered from my education and training in Western knowledge. He has helped me to understand what I have known intuitively; what I have deeply felt but poorly understood, rationally-speaking. Equally important was the internal peace within myself and the restoration of that inexplicable sense of balance and harmony one experiences when

things are in alignment. Tui Atua's lucid discussions in his papers included a thorough overview of core cultural assumptions underlying Samoan thinking and behavior; an understanding I intuitively recognized, but until I read his explanations, did not fully comprehend.

Tui Atua shared Samoan legends and stories that explain Samoan culture, psychology, and spirituality. His use of metaphor is not only meaningful but also gentle and benevolent. Tui Atua's papers were like a gentle wind that swept away the shroud of false and often negative assumptions attached to Samoan beliefs specifically, and indigenous beliefs generally. My earlier frustrations were transformed into a quest for deeper understanding, seeking connections in a place no other than my back yard.

Tui Atua's (2005) concept of peace is rooted in four key harmonies: harmony with the cosmos, harmony with the environment, harmony with one's fellow man and harmony with one's self. From my own vantage point, as a student of management and business, these provide me with a context for the following comments on emerging dimensions of philosophy in quantum mechanics, on indigenous science, capital, wealth, and the fading mechanistic paradigm. As I endeavor to engage this rather ambitious topic, in as succinct a manner as possible, I cannot help but be overwhelmed with the parallels and congruencies of ancient wisdom and modern scientific knowledge.

#### **Harmony of the Cosmos and Quantum Physics**

I can not help but feel a deep sense of familiarity to the new science that is rapidly replacing the previous scientific theories and assumptions of Isaac Newton and Newtonian physics, which have defined the universe in mechanistic terms for over half a millennium (Capra, 2004). Leading this shift are the works of David Bohm (1989, 2007), Fritjof Capra (2004) and Margaret Wheatley (2006). These emerging new paradigms have a scientific basis in quantum physics, chaos theory, and in the science of living systems. Each has made several breakthroughs, among which is included the observation that energy, and not matter, is the most fundamental material in the universe. These insights are changing from the inside-out our perceptions of the fabric of human existence. What captivated my attention was the assertion that in this new quantum worldview, the analytical substance of value is more energy-based relationships than individual matter (Wheatley, 2006).

The fact that there are no independent entities anywhere at the quantum level and that it is

all relationships is perhaps astonishing to cultures that emphasize individualism and reductionism, but not surprising to people from collective societies where people see relationships in all things. The sense of connectivity that Tui Atua pointed out in his articles, between the heavens and the environment, has long been respected by Samoans, like other seafaring peoples, whose livelihood depended on their cosmically based navigational knowledge. Harmony with the cosmos involves an acknowledgement by man of the sacred relationships between mankind and the heavens. All important activities of life, like fishing, planting and sailing, were determined by a cycle of life and heralded by the position of the constellations. Calculations and measurements of time and space for the appearances of the moon, the location of the sun on the horizon, and the changes in the position of key stars determined actions, behaviors, and rituals. The dynamic relationship cycles that underscore cosmic harmony is what balances life on the planet; to tamper with this balance is to tamper with the forces that control life itself.

The assertions of this new science that there are no independent entities anywhere at the quantum level, and that everything is connected (Wheatley, 2006), echo indigenous beliefs and associations of balance and harmony between man and the earth, man and the heavens, man and nature, and man with man (Sahtouris, 1989). This connects with Samoan stories and beliefs of genealogical links between man and his external universe. Tui Atua pointed out that the term *eleele*, meaning earth, and *palapala* meaning mud, are also the words for blood. *Fatu*, meaning rock, is also the word for heart. And *fanua*, meaning placenta, is also the word for land. It seems that the metaphor of *eleele* and *fanua* draw the obvious biological link between the womb and birthing, thereby naming the relationship between Papa and Mother Earth. The relationship between man, *papa*, and *eleele*, earth, as pointed out by Tui Atua, is further referenced by the ritual burial of the *pute* (umbilical cord) and *fanua* (placenta) into the land or earth. The ritual of burying the *pute* into the *fanua* is a reminder of symbolic birthing; the birth connections between newborn, human mother and earth mother. It is reaffirmation of man's origin in his two mothers – the biological birthmother and earth mother. Tui Atua pointed out that what this birthing metaphor invites is recognition that the environment, the earth, has life, it lives, shares pain, grows, and dies in a manner and form similar to humankind. Indigenous Samoan religion recognizes the suffering caused by the cutting of trees in

the ritual prayer chants, thus, seeking permission and forgiveness when about to cause pain. Once the tree has been cut down, a ritual prayer of thanksgiving is offered recognizing and respecting the gift of life provided by the trees to his kin. Man shares a kin relationship with the earth and this underscores man's seamless obligation and responsibility for the health of the planet.

Ancient Samoan protocols, developed to assure natural resource conservation, underscored the wisdom of balance, harmony, and mutual sustenance, where one gives back in full measure what one takes. Balance, harmony, and mutual sustenance are, incidentally, the core principles of the modern use of the word, sustainability (Lovelock & Sahtouris, 2000). These underscore the spiritual dimension of capital wealth – a dimension increasingly voiced as valid and paramount in contemporary global economics and planetary health.

Modern societies have for the past fifty years defined progress in terms of growth in the economic market – that is, the accumulation of capital wealth. Since 1970, economic output has tripled. This has made a great deal of money for a few people (Korten, 2006). There is, however, another measure of progress and wealth. The Living Planet Index is a measure of the health of the world's fresh water, ocean, and land based eco-systems. The condition of the life support system of the planet is arguably the only real measure of wealth. If there is no life support system there is no life and if there is no life, the very concept of wealth loses its meaning. This index of planetary health has declined by 30% since 1970, which means that in spite of what GDP growth is telling us, we are, as a species, growing poorer (Leape, 2006).

Within the context of Tui Atua's explanation of the relationship between the cosmos and man, the concepts of quantum balance, harmony, wealth, profit, and capital take on new meaning. Tui Atua's stories of kinship ties between man and all things, animate and inanimate, offer a Samoan account of quantum connectedness. These stories are part of Samoa's scientific heritage. They underscore the importance of balance, harmony and mutual sustenance to progress and/or wealth accumulation and are a central part of Samoa's indigenous science.

### **Indigenous Science**

The idea of a Samoan science has often been rejected by conventional Western science and scientists because of the lack of quantifiable or measureable outcomes associated with its largely intuitive wisdom. Non-Western

indigenous knowledge and inventions are said to spring more from hunches or intuitions, rather than rigorous and systematic study. The scientific worldview of the conquering industrializing cultures (the West) held that the universe is fundamentally lifeless, with life happening by coincidence. According to indigenous Samoan insights the universe, the cosmos, and nature, are in fact alive and evident through what Tui Atua (2007) suggested is something that he called genealogical evolution. The origins of regeneration, according to Samoan indigenous thinking, are sacred. This sacredness is represented by the circular symbol of the *tanoa* (the 'ava bowl) representing the circle of life and its divine origins.

*The American Heritage Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defined science as "the observation identification, description, experimental investigation and theoretical explanation of phenomena." While indigenous scientists do not do science in laboratories, they can and do systematically acquire scientific knowledge through observation, experiment, and theoretical explanation. The indigenous man leaves what he studies in nature in place or replaces what he takes. He seeks knowledge that will permit him to live harmoniously with nature. Western science has a propensity to remove phenomena from their natural context without replacing or allowing for appropriate regrowth. Moreover, studies are conducted in laboratories in order to gain better control over the learning process (Lovelock & Sahtouris, 2000). In the laboratory the pursuit of knowledge is systematized, privileging abstraction and rationality.

The emphasis of Samoan indigenous thinking, as reaffirmed by Tui Atua, lies in maintaining spiritual balance. In the indigenous Samoan pursuit of knowledge there is respect and dialogue between humans and nature. Respecting and dialoguing (with nature or anything else) is taught in the language of *alofa*, in calmness and gentle persuasion; it is not something learned within the walls of a classroom, but as a lifelong enterprise through the dynamics of relationships – especially relationships with stewards and specialists, elders of *aiga* (or family), through observations and interactions with *alii* (high chief) and *tulafale* (orator chiefs). Most who share the breath of ancestral wisdom – breathed upon them during their appointment into chiefdom – seek an affinity with nature, society, and the sacred contexts of culture.

Industrial era science has consciously and carefully divorced itself from religion by reason of historical conflict with the church. Efforts to resolve this conflict are being made by scientific theologians

such as Thomas Berry (1914-2009) and Matthew Fox (b. 1940), who have integrated the modern scientific story of cosmology, planetary evolution, and ecology, with religion. Berry was concerned with eco-theology and Fox integrated creation spirituality and science. For myself, Tui Atua opened a door into what one might call the scientific richness of Samoan stories, legends, and beliefs. He offered a place where spirituality and scientific wisdom and knowledge can connect; where despite being separated on the surface like islands within sight of each other, he showed how they are actually connected, but in the deep.

### The Art of Prediction

The machine metaphor of rationalist science is rooted in the process of quantification. Measurability is essential to predictability, control, management, and the validation of reality by those subject to its paradigm. "If it cannot be measured, it doesn't exist," is a common quip associated with societies holding rationalistic values. Statistical processes are promoted assiduously in education, and their value often unquestioned. Yet as much as statistics may reveal, they can also blind. Tui Atua's stories and insights into Samoan philosophy and wisdom open a dimension into life's relationships that does not lend itself well to quantification nor statistical analysis. It is the realm of the spiritual; one that engages the intangible, dreams, intuitions, whispering winds, and the gentle undulations of senses.

Undoubtedly many indigenous scientific discoveries were initially based on intuition, dreams, and hunches, as are many modern Western discoveries today. Intuition is arguably a critical part of science. If knowledge based on hunches, intuitions, and lightning bolts of inspiration is to be thrown out, where does that leave organic chemistry? Freidrich August Kekule von Stradonitz's (1829-1896) dream of a snake biting its own tail enabled him to visualize the structure of the benzene molecule, a discovery that gave birth to the field of organic chemistry. We can forget about neurochemistry too. A dream showed Nobel Laureate in Medicine, Otto Lowei (1873-1961), that the chemical messengers we now call neurotransmitters are responsible for the flow of information in the human brain. And, while we are at it, we can also dismiss the importance of the discovery of pasteurisation, penicillin, and hundreds of other inventions. Inventor Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) reportedly spoke of intuition as "a conquering force within," a force he used to invent the telephone. All this seems to confirm that, as Henri Poincaré (1854-1912)

the mathematician, who created the science of topology, reportedly said: "It is through science that we prove, but through intuition that we discover."

Special abilities such as *'iite'*, meaning a prescience common among Polynesian wise men, navigators, and *tufuga* (house-builders) suggest that intuition, dreams, and sensing, like the undulations in the atmosphere, are more common than one might think. Scientific quantification is relative and within the context of modern statistical analysis the art of prediction is not much different to that practiced by the traditional *taulasea* (specialist artisan or priest), who base some of their predictions on an examination of the entrails of a seabird. Reading for the predictive qualities of mists, visions, dream images, sounds, sensations, and attunements was a skill that formed a very real part of the scientific worlds of ancient Samoans.

The New Zealand economist Gareth Morgan, when writing about the limitations of the cultural metaphor in describing organizations, cited an essay on the use of statistics published in 1954:

British economist Ely Devons drew parallels between decision making processes in formal organizations (sic) and magic and divination in tribal societies. He noted that while organizational decision makers would not normally think of examining the entrails of a chicken or of consulting an oracle about the fortunes of their organization or the state of the economy, many of the uses of statistics have much in common with the use of primitive magic. In primitive society, magic decides whether hunting should proceed in one direction or another, whether the tribe should go to war, or who should marry whom, giving clear-cut decisions in situations that might otherwise be open to endless wrangling. In formal organizations techniques of quantitative analysis seem to perform a similar role. They are used to forecast the future and analyze the consequences of different courses of action in a way that lends decision making a semblance of rationality and substance. The use of such techniques does not, of course, reduce risks. The uncertainties surrounding a situation still exist, hidden in the assumptions underlying the technical analysis.

Devons's critique points to the exaggerated faith we often tend to place in such techniques, and hence the lack of reflection and critical awareness that accompanies their use. Like the primitive magicians,

all kinds of experts are encouraged to engage in their mysterious calculations, and are allowed to preserve their credibility even when events prove them wrong. (Morgan, 1986, p. 134)

Major global and human events continue to occur with complete surprise in spite of the incredible statistical data accumulated through analytically refined methodologies and expertise driven by unprecedented computer technology. Financial experts the world over were literally caught by surprise by the market crash of 1987 (and the more unexpected recovery), the massive economic decline of 2008, the spread of the Internet, and of course the terrorist attacks of 9/11. We predict 30 year projections of social security deficits and oil prices without realizing that we cannot even predict these for the next summer (Taleb, 2007). Yet the imperfections of predictability may be more an issue of world view and related values rather than data collection and processing.

Howard Gardner (1983) in his classic study of brain functions and intelligence successfully dismantled the myth of a single IQ and established the accepted new reality of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). Among these intelligences is social intelligence, that is, natural talents towards socializing, networking, and befriending others. These are critical skills for ambassadors, diplomats, and leaders. Athletic intelligence is another, which is extraordinarily demonstrated by Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. And, third, is attunement intelligence. Physicists are able to detect energy rhythms using attunement devices that measure energy outputs from all material things. What was considered an absurd story of old navigators talking to trees to determine their suitability for a voyaging canoe is not now so nonsensical. Trees, like all organic things, emanate their conditions, much like an empty home or building has a certain feel. As you enter, one can sense warmth or a chill associated with the facility. The old navigators seeking suitable trees by sensing their emanations were doing the same. Young, old, or sick trees emanate energy that can be detected by the navigator's attunement intelligence, an intelligence whose capacity is heightened through years of use and refinement/attunement.

Open ocean navigation by Polynesian ancestors without instrumentation continues to be heralded as one of the greatest achievements of mankind. Pedro Fernández de Quirós (1563-1615), the Portuguese navigator, who served as Pilot on the ill-fated 1595-1596 expedition headed by Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira

(1542-1595), declared that Polynesian voyaging into the east, against predominant winds, was impossible. In his arrogance he could not imagine how Polynesian navigators could navigate without his "instruments of navigation and vessels of burthen, two things of which these people are destitute" (cited in Brower, 1993, p. 24). What de Quiros did not know was that that part of the Pacific, Marquesas, was a major staging area for the greatest voyages of exploration the world had ever known up until Ferdinand Magellan's (1480-1521) circumnavigation of the world, or possibly the Chinese voyaging exploits. De Quiros had met the Oceanic compass and astrolabe without recognizing it. In Oceania the instrument of navigation was the navigator himself (Thompson, 1993). The indigenous Polynesian navigator and his felt knowledge was, and could still be, his wealth and capital.

### Capital and Wealth

Wealth and capital, in Samoan indigenous contexts, unlike the narrow economic definitions of Western business schools, do not necessarily have any relationship to money or anything material. Tui Atua pointed out that the indigenous Samoan concept of wealth and capital is far broader and encompasses the prioritization of need rather than profit. In this context the taking of natural resources was/is never to go beyond what nature herself could/can not sustain in terms of natural re-growth. Tasks associated with fishing, planting, harvesting, and building were/are, therefore, coordinated in accordance with predetermined cosmic and environmental timings. Wealth and capital here are considered the core elements of eco-business.

British Enlightenment philosophers were inspired by Newtonian physics. For thinkers like Adam Smith (1723-1790) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), men who admired Newton's work and in their turn contributed to Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1856-1915) paradigmatic Scientific Management theory, the idea of capital referred solely to material capital, capital measured by money (Marshall & Zohar, 2004, p. 25). In the Oxford English Dictionary, capital is defined as, "That which confers wealth, profit, advantage or power." Capital is not explicitly money *per se*. My assertion is that *alofa* (love) is capital. *Faaaloalo* (respect) is capital.

The crystallization of capital to mean money and wealth, to mean material profit, sets into motion an impetus for goods accumulation that is ultimately self-destructive. But this is only one interpretation of capital and wealth. Another perceives wealth and capital as

*faataualofa* – the business of love. The first interpretation portrays a materialistic, amoral culture of short term self interest and profit maximization, emphasizing profit-margins and encouraging isolationist thinking. Long-term consequences are overlooked for short-term gain. The second is that of spiritual capital.

Spiritual capital portrays a values based business culture in which wealth is accumulated to raise the common good and nurture the spirit of humanity. Spiritual capital nourishes and sustains business by nourishing and sustaining the human spirit (Marshall & Zohar, 2004). Tui Atua (2000) stated in his paper, “*Faasamoa* speaks to my heart and my soul” (p. 2), that the principles of *faataualofa* are “reciprocity, love, respect, service, and courtesy” (p. 2). *Faataualofa* embodies spiritual capital and wealth.

### Conclusion

I will always remember my mother’s gentle advice as a young adolescent: “*Ia e alofa i tagata, e te manuia ai*,” meaning, “be good to people and you will be blessed.” She would implore: “May you always treat others with love for you will always be wealthy for it.” It would seem that my dear mother had a better understanding of spiritual capital and wealth than her university graduate son.

I conclude with her memory and a word of gratitude to Tui Atua for articulating so wonderfully to me what Mom and all mothers pass on to their children: their spiritual wealth and capital that nourish and sustain our hearts and guides our journeys as children. Tui Atua through his writings has reaffirmed what I knew in my heart. He has opened my mind to emerging and new possibilities and warmed my soul by affirming the strengths of the old. Tui Atua’s cultural explanations provided for me a vital link to the wealth and capital of my Samoan values. My thoughts, which were guided as much by spirit as by research and study will continue to embrace the spiritual dimensions of my Samoan heritage – a heritage that remains my source of harmony and peace...for *faasamoa* speaks to my heart and soul.

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