

***Fetausia'i* (Reciprocal Caring) as a Relational Hermeneutical Approach for Gender  
Equality in Pacific Churches  
Prepared by Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko  
for  
Pacific Council of Churches (PCC) Conference, Suva, Fiji (June 2016)  
mercy.maliko@otag.ac.nz**

**Introduction**

My initial reaction when asked to speak on gender in light of the theme of this conference, “Relational Hermeneutics and the Reshaping of the Pacific from the Ground up,” was ‘Why does a gender perspective have to come from a woman, when gender refers to the cultural construction of both femininity and masculinity?’ While reflecting on this question, my own curiosity revealed certain truths about gender relationships in Pacific churches and societies. Embedded in our understandings and interpretations of gender roles is the reality that ‘gender equality’ is a controversial issue in Pacific churches and societies. The African woman theologian, Nontando Hadebe, affirms this reality in her observation that “...when challenged with the issue of gender equality, the initial reaction is fear of loss which comes whenever the status quo is challenged, the feeling that ‘we will lose everything that we believed in’ ... the fear of change which comes when people are conscientised and realise that things have to change, which leads to the fear of the unknown – ‘what will happen next?’” (2007). Hadebe pinpoints three types of fear: the fear of loss; the fear of change; and the fear of the unknown. These fears are rooted in social constructions of power. Indeed, the gender question is “one of the oldest power struggles of humanity,” according to the African woman theologian, Mercy A. Oduyoye (1995, 9). To initiate dialogue on gender, therefore, we need to critically reflect on how our cultural and faith traditions have construed gendered notions of power.

I want to focus on my own context in terms of my Samoan culture and Christian beliefs, to communicate the realities experienced by individuals and groups as a result of gender. Since storytelling is a common tradition practiced in almost all Pacific cultures, I would like to start by telling two stories. These two stories will inform us of gender roles in Samoa, which may also find parallels in other Pacific cultures. The first story is a dialogue between Ana and Sina:

**Story 1: Ana and Sina**

**Ana:** Sina! How are things in your church?

**Sina:** I am not quite sure. I think it is best for me to stay home, because I am not able to work for the church. As trained women theologians, we are seldom given a chance to share our God-given gifts to help our church. Aren't we part of the Pentecost-empowered community? After all, both men and women were present when the Holy Spirit came upon them as the church was born at Pentecost.

**Ana:** Actually, I feel the same. That is why I am enjoying working in the secular sphere. There are fewer gender divisions there. One's status in the workplace depends on what a person offers in terms of qualifications and experience.

**Sina:** Well.....! I'm still drawn to the church because it is supposed to be the 'Body of Christ' and the 'Community of Faith,' where all are one in Christ. But it is far from that in terms of how it is organised. It discourages me from sharing what God has gifted me with. I don't really know where to start. But I thank God for using me in mysterious ways. I am working in a freelance capacity for some of the women's organizations overseas. They have given me the opportunity to use my gifts through writing. And this has really lifted my spirit!

**Ana:** Isn't that a blessing! I think we should continue studying and writing about the ministries of women. I am also interested in the stories of women's ministries, especially in the context of the early church.

**Sina:** I think the approach is not to fight too directly against the existing patriarchal system, because we have gone past that stage. We are not going to waste our energy in doing that! But it is time to bring on board a new and appropriate approach that suits our context but also acknowledges our global connectedness ... an approach that can demonstrate our inevitability. This can be done through our being in solidarity with others and especially our continued efforts to express our passion through 'women's theologies.'

**Ana:** Why don't we prepare a bible study on women in Acts, perhaps beginning from women who are mentioned as aside references, then to

women who are particularly named in relation to their ministries? This would help a lot in enabling women [and men] to understand that we are also called to serve God, no matter what (Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko 2012, 161)!

### **Story 2: My Story**

Speaking from a gender perspective is part and parcel of my own journey as a Samoan woman, a pastor's spouse, and a theologian. I was born and raised in Samoa within my Samoan family, their culture, and the Christian faith. My first language is Samoan. I was nurtured from infancy to believe in and engage with Samoan cultural values and Christian principles. Both informed my sense of self and communal relationships. I remember being taught from a very young age basic manners such as saying *fa'amolemole* (please) when you want something, *fa'afetai* (thank you) when you receive something, and *tulou* (excuse me) when you walk in front of people. Such basic values and practices of courtesy and respect are part of the *fa'asamoa* as practiced today in Samoa. Growing up in Samoa my beliefs and behaviour were heavily influenced by both Samoan cultural values and Christian beliefs. My time living and working in Fiji and New Zealand also came to have a significant influence on my perceptions of Samoan values (by drawing comparisons) and the place of the Christian faith, and in particular theology, within this value system. I was introduced to ways of critiquing Samoan values and the Christian faith, from both insider and outsider perspectives.

My husband is an ordained *faiifeau* (pastor) of the Methodist Church in Samoa. Before I married in 1994 I was a member of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ), and I was in the process of becoming an ordained minister of the PCANZ. After I married I decided that I was not cut out to be a *faiifeau*, although I continued with my theological education. After graduating from theological schools in New Zealand and Fiji I returned to Samoa with my husband and children. I discovered when I sought employment as a theology teacher at Piula Theological College (PTC), where my husband had joined the faculty, that it was not possible for a woman to be employed in this role. Only a very few women, including myself, had pursued careers and gained qualifications in theology. Those who taught at Piula were all men and *faiifeau* of the Methodist Church. However, when Piula experienced a teacher shortage, as a pastor's wife I was finally able to take up a non-theology teaching position. Before I was given this position at Piula Theological College, I found employment at the National University of Samoa (NUS). My time at the National University of Samoa stimulated an interest in the capabilities of both

men and women, as well as boys and girls, something like an inclusive agenda. This resonates with my understanding of the Christian value of inclusivity for all people, regardless of gender or any other factor, which has ramifications for the role of the church in Samoa and the Pacific (Ah Siu-Maliko 2015).

### **Gender Analysis in Pacific Churches and Societies**

From the story of Ana and Sina, we are able to identify the problem: The two women are marginalised because of their gender. Their contextual story is an eye-opener to the patriarchal attitudes and actions hindering gender equality in Pacific churches. Ana and Sina have the potential and gifts that could enhance the spirituality of people in their church. Nevertheless, because of assumed cultural norms and church policies on women's prescribed gender roles, this is not possible. My own story echoes these same assumptions about gender roles in the church. This situation leads us to unmask how gender is viewed in our respective societies.

One of the vital factors in any society's structural system is its taken-for-granted norms regarding gender relations between men and women. The power relations between women and men are evident in the gender-specific roles they play in their families and communities. Our societies assign roles that keep men and women in these prescribed roles. For example, in Samoa we have a saying, '*O Samoa ua uma ona tofi*' ('Samoa is already defined'). Every individual know his or her place and role in Samoan society. On the surface, this functionalist view of gender roles conveys a picture of a society where everything seems fine and men and women exist in mutually beneficial and loving relationships. Yet, "when the situation is examined through the lens of gender equality we find that beneath the surface of niceness is a system that favours men at the expense of women. It is a socio-cultural system that is characterised by inequality..." (Hadebe 2007). In general, this system often places women in a vulnerable situation compared to men.

In the Pacific, gender relations are traditionally guided by a patriarchal construction of social relations in family, community, and culture, further influenced by external factors such as economic and political power (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2013). It is in the light of this gender power imbalance that identity politics becomes pertinent for women in Samoa [and the Pacific]. Despite their pride in and loyalty to their [cultural] identity, which they share with men, [Pacific women] need to gain greater awareness of the inequality which plagues the gendered construction of their [respective Pacific] identities” (Ah Siu-Maliko 2015).

Regina Scheyvens claims that in the post-colonial period, it has often been asserted that the status of women in the Pacific declined as a result of colonization through the interplay of indigenous and colonial patriarchal values, especially through the institutions of the mission-era churches, which advocated for women to be domesticated; this had implications for gender power dynamics and the status of women in both church and society (2003, 24). However, this view has at times conveniently placed the focus on a ‘blame the missionaries’ mentality, painting a rosy picture of pre-contact gender equality that obscures our island cultures’ acceptance of the gender inequalities assumed by the churches in the missionary era. This simplistic view does not do justice to the sophisticated entanglements of both formal and informal institutions which came to be normative in the practices of the churches in the Pacific. The fact is that patriarchal principles came to be embedded in the churches across the Pacific, and our cultures accepted those principles (Bronwen Douglas 2002).

Societies typically use mutually exclusive categories to define gender. In so doing, we tend to divide everyone rigidly into one or the other: female or male. For example, in the Pacific and generally, when a baby is born, the first question asked is “What is it?” This question requires a response regarding the sex of the baby. Is it a boy or a girl? The sex of the baby then determines the culturally and socially

ascribed roles for that child in his or her stages of human development. The commonly accepted understanding of the roles assigned to men and women in the Pacific is that these roles are different but complementary. Men deal with physical and heavy labour, and decision-making in the public sphere, while women are located within the domestic sphere, in terms of cooking, cleaning and child rearing. This 'separate spheres' understanding of gender is also evident in the roles assigned to men and women in Pacific churches. Women are assigned roles as helpers and keepers of church buildings and kitchens, while men are ordained clergy and leaders. The relegation of women to the domestic sphere has mostly contributed to their being oppressed and at times even abused. Their presumed inferiority explains women's lack of power in both the public and private spheres, a reality not fully addressed by international human rights law (Ah Siu-Maliko 2015, 282).

Gender relations in Samoa, as in other Polynesian and Pacific contexts, are "characterised by inequalities of power, opportunity and access to resources, (and) these relations are closely linked to cycles of violence that maintain low levels of status and high levels of victimization of women and children" (UNDP 2003). Akuila Yabaki has claimed that gender roles in the Pacific are premised on a natural law argument, stating that "Traditional gender roles in Pacific societies have been premised on women's biological capacity to bear children, and a division of labour believed to be dictated by nature and divine decree"(2003). Arguably, these gender roles have power dynamics embedded within them, such that roles played by males are regarded as more praiseworthy than those assigned to females. Hence, while many Pacific societies have claimed that gender roles are 'separate but equal' because women are valued for their domestic roles, in reality it is only the male roles that are aligned with power. In this power imbalance, women are 'less-than' men. Hadebe argues that "In a situation of inequality, women experience exclusion as they are kept on the margins of society or marginalised... It is this exclusion that

keeps the majority of women at the margins of society and leads to a situation where they are dependent on men” (2007).

What is obvious in gender relations in Samoa and the rest of the Pacific is that this power imbalance between men and women contributes to a lack of reciprocal caring, even though reciprocity is a relational value greatly prized in Pacific societies. This creates an ironic paradox, in which one of our most cherished moral values is not always applied to gender relations. I would like to offer a reconsideration of the Samoan concept of reciprocal caring, known as *fetausia'i*, as a potential resource that might enable us to better understand and practice gender equality not only in Samoa, but in other Pacific churches and societies.

### **What is *fetausia'i*?**

The Samoan concept of *fetausia'i* consists of three linguistic components: *fe*; *tausi*, and *a'i*. *Fetausia'i* is derived from the root word *tausi* ('to care for' or 'to nurture'), and it is attached to *fe* as a prefix and *a'i* as a suffix. *Fe* is “a prefix to verbs, and *a'i* a suffix. *Fe* usually denotes reciprocal action; but in some instances it only forms a plural” (Pratt 1862, 138). *Fe* suggests the interaction between two or more people. As a prefix to *tausi*, *fe* highlights the fact that *tausi* is an ongoing relational process. To nurture or to care is an ongoing horizontal dynamic of relationship. The suffix *a'i* points two or more people toward one another. It strengthens the external flow of ongoing caring and nurturing within relationships. The word *tausi* is the root word that articulates the kinds of actions that are to be practiced.

*Tausi* highlights the essence of “*tausi va*” (caring for the respectful *space* or *va* between others) for the purpose of maintaining the well-being of everyone in the group and community, even though conflicts are sometimes impossible to avoid. The focus is on the fact that *fetausia'i* is intended to maintain stability and harmony within the *aiga* (which embraces both the nuclear and extended family) and the *va-i-*

*fafo* (external relations), including the *nu'u* (village). This web of relations is enacted and held together through the practice of core Samoan values, all of which have Christian parallels. I have identified these core Samoan-Christian values as the following: *alofa* (love), *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *tautua* (selfless service), *soalaupule* (dialogue), and *amiotonu* (justice). All of these core values are deeply embedded in the *fa'asamoa* and also illustrated in Jesus' teachings and witness. It could be argued that all of these values work best when there is a spirit of *fetausia'i* or reciprocity. Reciprocity has an obvious and genuine application, and positive associations of mutuality. It suggests openness to change and new realizations in response to dialogue with and awareness of the views of the other.

### ***Fetausia'i* as a relational hermeneutical approach for gender equality**

*Fetausia'i*, then, could be appropriated as an inclusive approach for building gender relations in Pacific churches and societies based on a loving give-and-take among equals. This value of reciprocal caring is a life-giving concept that resonates with Jesus' words, 'I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly' (Jn.10:17). The apostle Paul also confirms the radical equality implied in the abundant life offered by Jesus when he states, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal.3:28).

*Fetausia'i* or reciprocal caring as a relational hermeneutical approach to building gender equality is also a sign of God's relational character. Ours is a God who relates to all people and to the world in love. At the very beginning of our biblical story, we learn that both males and females were made in God's image. The Gospels remind us that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life' (Jn.3:16). Gender equality in our churches and societies should reflect the *fetausia'i* attributes of God, a God who is always in an ongoing relationship with us. The churches and communities in the Pacific are challenged to reflect this inclusive and unconditional love of God in equal

responsibilities, opportunities and recognition of both males and females on the basis that they are relational people created in the image of and unconditionally loved by God.

### **Conclusion**

As Pacific Islanders who claim to be Christian people, our roles and behaviours are intended to be based on Christian values, as well as our own cultural values that enhance the flourishing of both men and women. We find in the New Testament that Jesus consistently related to women with respect and inclusion. He included women in his trusted inner circle; he took them seriously and engage in dialogue with them. Jesus' teachings give all of us, men and women alike, a model to follow as we reflect on how we relate to each other in our everyday life and in the ministries of the church. Luke's gospel in particular portrays Jesus as someone who both understood and respected women, bestowing on them trusted positions that went beyond their customary gender roles. We see Jesus in his mission engaging in reciprocal caring as he empowered and reached out to the marginalised and outcasts in society.

Mosese Mailo "...calls for a critical evaluation of roles and relationships within churches so that they may not be determined by sex and gender, but by faith in God alone. Relationships in this case are crucial, for it is the fibre of communal living. The church as a community of faith can never be a transformed community as long as there are barriers between men and women" (2009, 60). If gender is the cause of inequalities in our churches, then the churches in the Pacific are called to look at Jesus' own life and mission, as well as within our own cultures, for values that promote equality and inclusivity for all.

## References

- Ah Siu-Maliko, Mercy. 2012. "Women in Acts and in Oceania." In Yon Gyong Kwon, *A Commentary on Acts*. London: SPCK, 160-168.
- 2015. "Public Theology, Core Values, and Domestic Violence in Samoan Society." PhD Thesis, University of Otago.
- Douglas, Bronwen. 2002. "Why Religion, Race, and Gender Matter in Pacific Politics." *Development Bulletin* (59): 11-14.
- Hadebe, Nontando. "Gender, Gender Equality, and the Church" Institute for Contextual Theology, Durban, South Africa, 2007. <https://ecumenicalwomen.org/theology/academic-articles/gender-gender-equality-and-the-church-by-nantondo-hadebe/> accessed 31 May 2016.
- Mailo, Mosese. "An Exegesis of John 2:1-11: Jesus' Attitude to Women" *Pacific Journal of Theology* 11, 41 (2009): 47-61.
- Oduyoye, Mercy A. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- "Overview of Efforts to Eliminate Violence Against Women in the Pacific." 2003. In *Strengthening Pacific Partnerships for Eliminating Violence Against Women: A Pacific Regional Workshop Report*. Suva, Fiji: Commonwealth Secretariat, UNDP/ UNIFEM/Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.
- Pratt, George. 1977 [1911]. *Pratt's Grammar and Dictionary of the Samoan Language*. Apia, Samoa: Malua Printing Press.
- Scheyvens, Regina. 2003. "Church Women's Groups and the Empowerment of Women in Solomon Islands." *Oceania* 74: 24-44.
- SPC (Secretariat of the Pacific Community). 2013. *Training Manual to Mainstream Gender into Energy and Community based Adaptation Projects*.
- Yabaki, Akuila. 2003. Paper presented, Pacific Regional Workshop on Strengthening Partnerships for Eliminating Violence Against Women, Pacific Forum Secretariat, Suva, Fiji, 17-19 February.