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Gender –

The impact of western definitions of womanhood on other cultures

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This paper describes presentations given by Kiwi Tamasese and Luamanuvao Winnie Laban, of the Pacific Island Section of The Family Centre, at the 'Just Therapy' conference held in Duncan, B.C. Canada in November 1991. These presentations focused on gender issues, with an emphasis on the impact Western notions of feminism and womanhood have had on Pacific Island women. Their strong message was that no culture can avoid the discussion of the relationship between men and women.

This description of their presentations was written by Carmel Tapping.

Luamanuvao Winnie, in her opening of the discussion on gender and culture, called on the women and men present to ‘look into your own stories and you will find healing’. It was a poignant moment, as the invitation for people whose cultures had undergone colonisation to remember their own stories is an invitation into pain. Systematic destruction of culture and language, the forced settling of lands, the diseases that killed many, the massacres, the destruction of cultural values, and the imposing of structures, rituals and, more specifically, the gender arrangements of colonising cultures, are all painful issues.

The effects of this history – homelessness, alcoholism, underachievement in education, unemployment, and continual marginalisation through present-day government policies – result in daily lives of pain. The high incidence of violence in the home is a measure of the internalised violation which indigenous peoples have experienced in many countries throughout the years. Albert Wendt in *Ola* states the totality of this pain: *I know, yes, this person knows, that he is what he has lost.*

The pain is formidable, the losses immense. That response to Luamanuvao’s invitation can be reluctant is understandable. Yet in entering into their stories: *We are reminded of our courage, and that, despite the systematic decimations, we have survived. The pain has not finally broken us, neither women nor men.*

Luamanuvao Winnie recalled her own woman’s story (Falenaoti 1992). Before the missionaries’ arrival, the primary familial relationship in her own culture was between brother and sister. The sister, when born, is known as Tamasa or sacred child, and the brother, tama tane or male child. The relationship between the two is a covenant, in her language, *feagaiga*. The covenant relationship ensures the sister’s powers of blessing and cursing. In this arrangement, brothers were required to seek their sister’s agreement for any decisions relating to land or titles. Without that agreement he risked a curse which could become intergenerational. Likewise, brothers and their families were blessed when they kept to the sacred covenant relationship.

This provided an authentic structural balance between the genders in Samoan society.

However, the advent of the missionaries in her own country, beginning in the 1930s, declared this gender arrangement to be pagan: *Only God can bless or curse*, they said. The destruction of the covenant relationship between brother

and sister began the demise of Samoa's own gender arrangement at familial, village, district and national level.

The scripting of Samoan womanhood into images of Eve (the suffering temptress who is mother of all) and Mary (the pure virgin), fulfilled the conditions of the patriarchal gender system which characterised Christianity. This imposition on Samoa's own gender arrangement left her own people vulnerable to the gender definitions of the patriarchal structures embodied in the government administration and the cash economy. The three claws of colonisation – religion, administration, and cash economy – have their roots in Western patriarchal values.

While European religion and education have had major influences on Samoan traditional gender arrangements, memories and fragments of the covenant relationship still remain with her people. Thus Winnie's invitation for us to recover our cultural memories is pertinent. She stated that, as indigenous peoples, they are relegated to the periphery for survival. As women who daily live out the violent prescriptions of patriarchy, they need their own cultural anchors to light the way to liberating gender arrangements. Their daily struggle is to remember their own stories of manhood, of womanhood, and the gender arrangements which sustained them in the past.

Look into your own stories and you will find healing

Winnie pointed out that all our cultures have stories of womanhood and manhood. All our cultures have their own gender arrangements. But, as Waldegrave (1990) points out:

Men, almost entirely, have developed and controlled our modern market-orientated economies. For over two centuries they negotiated a path through scientific research, industrial invention, colonial enterprise (including the slave trade), industrial development, capital expansion, and post-industrial technology. They took control of public life, defining it for themselves, and assigned the private family sphere to women. This division of labour, driven by pervasive economic forces and patriarchal logic, soon became institutionalised. Exceptions to it arose during times of short labour supply, as for example in wartime.

Each colonial administration either subjugated or rescripted the gender arrangements of the colonised. The vertical gender arrangement characteristic of the colonists was the frame into which many people were forced. The resultant loss of status and power by women of many colonised cultures is mistakenly attributed to their traditional customs and, in this respect, the tendency of colonists to apportion blame to the colonised is clearly apparent.

The influences of dominant cultures and their prescribed gender arrangements are just as strong today. The media and their promotion of certain images of womanhood and manhood of the dominant culture raise expectations and initiate dreams.

The prevailing notions of womanhood and manhood in the dominant culture define lives for women and men of marginalised cultures. The power differences between the two genders in the dominant culture become a reality also for the marginalised. Western feminism, with its limited critique of cultural, class and religious difference amongst women, exacerbates this problem. The universalising of the analyses of patriarchy as practised by many European and North American white women, denies the different stories in other cultures.

An analysis of the Samoan story clearly indicates that it was colonisation which introduced the patriarchy of modernity. Now we all share that patriarchy, but our analysis and our solutions for the future draw on different traditions. *We draw on the liberative traditions in our culture.* In our case, the covenant tradition is central. As Audre Lorde says:

To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women, without awareness, against each other.

Kiwi Tamasese revealed that Samoan women continue to survive double deprivation in New Zealand. They are deprived because they are women, and deprived because they are Samoans. Economic survival for many Pacific Island families in New Zealand has meant mothers taking on two or even three lowly-paid menial jobs – commonly as night-shift cleaners in office buildings, and existing on only a few hours' sleep each day while also caring for their families:

Lack of statistical data on Pacific Island women is a loud statement of the disregard for our reality here in New Zealand: a reality usually lived through in silence; a reality of low-paid menial jobs; a reality of having to supplement the family income while also having to look after our children; a reality that, after doing the best we can, our children end up like us in menial jobs. We are the budgeters supreme; we are the organisers of many a community group; we are often your unpaid volunteers upholding your social equality myth. We have been pained by your dual forces of sexism and racism, yet we are undaunted, for in us is the richness of our cultural heritages that New Zealand badly needs. We are survivors and our children will survive. (Tamasese, Masoe-Clifford & Ne'emias-Garwood 1988)

Kiwi's observation that Pacific Island women have been pained by the dual forces of sexism and racism is an important one. They live in a dominant white culture, which defines normality within its own meaning system, yet to be a Maori or Samoan demands different attitudes and values. We need to be mindful of the painful distortions they need to practice in order to conform.

McGoldrick et al. (1989) make the point that cultural stereotyping often focuses on the physical characteristics of a group, this being much more problematic for women than men, since women in our society are still valued above all by their appearance. Such pressure to conform results in, for example, Jewish women changing the shape of their noses, black women straightening their hair, and those with dark skin trying to appear lighter. There is also pressure to conform to the Western ideal of unnatural slimness.

These writers acknowledge that since gender arrangements are transmitted through the culture, challenging the sexism of a family involves challenging its culture in a way that could be experienced as extremely threatening. The issue of gender in relation to culture is a very sensitive one, and it is often said that one of the most difficult challenges for family therapy is how to intervene clinically in a way that respects culture while at the same time challenges gender inequities.

Kiwi made the important point, however, that it is only people who belong to a culture who should make decisions about what is, or is not, oppressive or limiting for them. This is not the prerogative of the dominant

culture or its therapists. Luamanuvao Winnie Laban stated that every culture must ask who holds the power within that culture, and for what reason.

Luamanuvao Winnie invited women to ‘look into your own stories and you will find healing’ – that the stories of pain, poverty, hardship and racial oppression must be told. On this theme, Joan Laird (1989) writes of how, until very recently, women’s stories have been largely untold and unheard.

The history of anthropology, for instance, is a history of men. To learn about the cultures of the world is still, for the most part, to learn the stories of men and of male production. Women have always had their private stories, as both male and female anthropologists are discovering, but until recently we did not know how to listen to them, (p.428-429)

She relates, too, how women and their lives have been largely unsung, unstoried, unmythologised, while their accomplishments, if noted at all, are recorded in small and private ways.

Whenever men fulfil their duties creditably, they are lauded. In company they tell endless stories about their adventures, for their duties are always ‘adventures’; they hold stag feasts of religious importance after a successful hunt. Even the mythology occupies itself with the pursuits and rewards of men. The important visions, which men have been driven all their youth to pursue, bestow power for the masculine occupations. A successful hunter can parade this fact in ways licensed by his visions – songs that he sings publicly, amulets that are conspicuous and worn in public, charms that he can sell. Women’s work ‘is spoken of neither for good nor evil’ – at least in a gathering of men. Conventionally it is not judged in any way, it is simply not given any thought. (Landes 1971, in Laird 1989, p.438)

She argues that, as therapists, we need to know how to listen to the stories women tell, to search for and respect the ways in which they tell their stories, and to assist them to make choices about the ways they wish to story their futures. Luamanuvao Winnie emphasised that these stories take place in cultural contexts, which provide the space and differentiating aspects of the future stories.

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