

## Manuia

On a trip back from somewhere farther south I stopped at Pago Pago, the capital of American Samoa. At that time Pago (pronounced Pango, without sounding the 'g'), its unofficial name among travelers, was the end of the line for Pan Am (then the flag carrier of the U.S.). From there you had to take other, usually small, airlines if you wanted to go further south. Pago was not my favorite place to overnight — it was hard to escape the bars, the noise and the fierce traffic on such a small island — but I had no choice. Fortunately I had made friends with some wonderful Samoans, one of them chief of nursing. She was a high-ranking Samoan chief in her own right, and was married to the High Chief of the American part of the Samoas. Here, in Pago Pago, the title was perhaps largely ceremonial, in Western Samoa, an independent country, the High Chief is the ruler. Americans have a love-hate relationship with aristocracy; they are endlessly curious and at the same time always loudly proclaim that, of course, they do not believe in 'that sort of thing'. In Samoa one does not make fun of a Samoan Chief! The Chief Nurse was large, with a larger voice. When I sauntered around the hospital she saw me from two hallways away, laughed loudly and yelled: "Eh Doc, wanna go on a field trip with us?"

Sure; where are you going?

A small island, Aunu'u, not too far from Pago, with little more than a hundred people. The public health department decided the island needed modern sanitation: flush toilets. The island was small and very rocky. In fact it was difficult to land there because there were no beaches, Our boat would stand off shore and the local people would ferry us ashore, one by one, in their canoes. We were to leave the next morning. Very early, before daybreak, she said. We did not actually leave that early, of course, but we tried. There were a hundred and one last minute instructions to leave, things to bring with us, and we had to wait for fuel for the boat.

While we waited I asked Nurse what the people on Aunu'u were doing about their sanitation now? Well, what they do on all small islands of course. The local people allowed the ocean's tides to wash away human and other waste products twice a day. That seemed eminently sensible. The ways of modern man are inscrutable, however.. I knew well enough that Americans, who have an unnatural horror of human waste would imagine they were bringing "progress", the twentieth century! Relying on the ocean to remove untreated feces was, of course, altogether too natural.

As we were waiting for one more thing to be loaded, I heard some of the details of the plan. Flush toilets require a reliable water supply. There was no water supply 'system' on the little island of course: every household collected rain water, as I am doing here in Hawai'i. The public health people planned to make a storage lake somewhere high

on the island, with pipes leading down to the toilets. Because all this required considerable resources, mostly money, they had decided to make the planned first four toilets side by side, on one side of the island. Is there a village then, I asked? No, the people live quite scattered around the island. How about people who live on the other side of the island? Well, they would see how wonderful this new system was and demand more toilets to be installed on their side — maybe? The four toilets might serve the few people who happened to live nearby; the others would do what they had always done. Some months later I heard that the four toilets had not been used much by anyone, but had attracted flies they had never had on the island before. I hope the islanders knew to dismantle the toilets...

We took off in a Boston Whaler, the kind of small boat often used for one day trips all over the Pacific. Beside the Chief Nurse there were four or five others, including the driver of the boat, and myself. The seas ran quite a bit higher than our boat, so we ran at an angle to the waves, which made the boat make the most disconcerting circular dipping and waving motions. I remembered someone's advice to always look at the horizon in rough seas, to have a fixed point to focus on, otherwise you get seasick. Our horizon was never horizontal, it moved and dipped at sick angles and was often completely invisible behind yet another mountainous wave.

Samoans are quite used to small boats and large waves. Chief Nurse sat on the roof of the cabin of the little craft, facing aft where we swayed, huddled in the spray, holding tight to the sides. She led us in vigorous singing. We sang at the top of our voices, although not much could be heard over the crashing waves. I sang as well as I could, keeping my eyes riveted on Nurse, who swayed easily with the violent movements of the boat (that is where the movements of Polynesian hula comes from, I thought!). But it worked: the singing got us to Aunu'u and nobody was sea sick.

A sea anchor held us, bobbing and lurching, a hundred feet or so from what did not seem like much of a beach. Local people came out in small canoes, delivering us to the rough, pebbled beach one by one.

Samoans are hearty people; they are also formal. Every project — certainly such an important one as this one, sponsored by the Government! — must start with a kava ceremony. We sat on mats in the open air near the beach with the local chief and a few people from the little island. A bowl of kava was placed in the middle of our rough circle, and a young girl handed half coconut shells of the muddy brew to each person in turn. There is strict protocol, of course. First the highest ranking chief of the hosts, then the highest ranking chief of the visitors, and so on down the line. Each person drinks the kava offered, pours a little of the dregs on the ground in front of him or her, loudly proclaiming *manuia* (a toast), and then gives a lengthy, flowery speech. Everyone expressed delight at this new project, brought by such illustrious visitors,

which would surely live on in history. Every one also mentioned at least three times how honored they were by our visit, which was the most important event that had happened on this little island since...

Kava (for some reasons westerners call it kava kava), is used in all of Polynesia. It is made from the root of a pepper plant. In the traditional world young girls (westerners say "virgins" although I do not think Polynesians ever valued virginity as we do) would chew the root until pulpy, spit the mess into a large bowl, add a little water perhaps. The resulting, often slightly fermented brew is indeed muddy looking, not very tasty, but has an almost immediate effect. Kava dulls the tongue, and some people feel it tingle. Some text books call it a 'narcotic', which of course it is not. At a typical ceremony, such as the one we attended, the effect of the kava was minimal because the amount we consumed was also minimal. Today it has become one of those fads for people all over the world who search for yet another substance that might get one "high". Kava does not create a high, it relaxes.

Perhaps it was the kava, but I believe it was the honor and praise that was passed around that made people feel good. This was a small group, but people made long speeches, so all in all the ceremony lasted at least an hour, I remember. No doubt the island received few visitors and this was an occasion to cherish, to tell stories about to children and grandchildren.

Eventually the kava cup came to me. I drank, I poured some on the ground, saying, *manuia*, and gave a speech. Officially, of course, I had no part in this project. I was a visitor not only to this island, but to American Samoa. But I was connected to the University of Hawai'i, and the University of Hawai'i was perceived by many to be a sort of door to the modern world. I had had enough time to think about what I would say, but even so my speech was certainly the shortest. Not good! As everyone else, I said I was honored, I was pleased to be here and get to know even a little about this island. I explained that I had no official connection with this particular project, but I had worked with Chief Nurse and others in public health projects elsewhere. I ended by saying that I would be very grateful and honored if someone would be kind enough to show me around the island. I was passionately interested in "native healing", I said, and while the important visitors would do what they came to do, perhaps I could meet some people on this island who were "native healers."

There was what I imagined to be an embarrassed silence. My speech had been too short, I knew. But the ceremony continued and eventually we all stood up, stretching to get the kinks out.

An elderly man came up to me and asked me what did I mean when I said "native healing?" I explained that I had been traveling to many other islands of the South Pacific, and that I was interested in learning what people did to stay healthy. Of course I knew that when people live, as on this island, for perhaps a thousand years, surely

they must have learned ways to use local plants for healing, or perhaps seaweed, or even sea water. Certainly someone must help women deliver when it was their time. Perhaps someone on this island knew how to set a broken bone, because a trip to Pago Pago was quite long and it would not be easy for people of this island to travel so far, certainly not when they had a sickness.

“Oh that,” he said, “yes we do have some people who are good at that sort of thing...” After only a moment’s hesitation he said he would be happy to be my guide. Later I would wonder what his role was in this small society. I imagined he might well have been what in Hawai’i would be called a kahuna, a priest. In Hawai’i there are many different kinds of kahuna, from healing kahuna to priests who “control life and death.”

We walked around the island. The island is not very big and we did not walk very fast. He introduced me to people along the way. At first I made notes, but it was clear that my note taking was inhibiting people, so we rested between visits so that I could make notes between visits. My guide and I talked.

We visited an old woman who knew herbs, who made teas and infusions. She also knew how to make very effective poultices to draw out infections, she mentioned after a moment’s hesitation. A man on the other side of the island knew how to set a broken bone so that it would heal straight. Two middle-aged sisters, living together almost at the top of the island, after some hesitation admitted that they were usually consulted for births, and sometimes deaths. When I had assured them that I would not say anything to the “authorities,” whoever they might be, one of the sisters added that sometimes they also healed by laying on of hands. I assured them that many people, all over the world, do that. Many people on the island knew massage. In contrast to other islands I had visited, we did not talk to anyone who knew the healing values of seaweed, perhaps because the ocean almost everywhere was barely accessible. Where the island met the ocean there were rocks, not sand; sea weed might be hard to get. My guide became more friendly with each visit. He took me to meet his wife and a grown son, the son’s wife and their young son. The family shared what food they had with dignity and love (no Coca Cola on this island, or Spam — very unusual!)

It was late afternoon before I joined the other members of our little expedition again, having walked all around the little island. I was the last to get into a canoe. Just before we were to be pushed into the surf, my guide rushed back with a mat, tightly rolled, in his arms.

On many islands of the South Pacific mats made of flattened strips of a reed, are given to express honor and appreciation; Samoans were famous for making what was called ‘fine mats’, mats so fine they feel soft, almost like cloth.

This was not a ‘fine mat’ my guide said, and smaller than tradition required perhaps, but it was all he had. He wanted me to have it.

*"You first palangi (white person) tell things we have is worth,"* he said.

~ ~ ~

The ocean usually calms around sunset. On our way back the seas had only the long, flat waves of the open ocean. Chief Nurse again led the singing, but now she chose quiet, reflective songs, more appropriate for the rapidly falling darkness through which we sped back to Pago.

I did not sing. I listened to the whisper of waves caressing the boat, the harmonies all Polynesians sing, the mat clutched to my heart, feeling deeply ashamed of how my fellow westerners relate to the world's non-western people.

robert wolff © 1989