

## MANUIA

how people live on a very small island

(1978) 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 needs modern sanitation: flush toilets. The island is small and very rocky. In fact it is difficult to land there because there are no beaches, Our boat will stand off shore and the local people will ferry us ashore, one by one in their canoes. We leave tomorrow morning. Very early, before daybreak, she added. 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 people allow 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 have an unnatural horror of human waste and that they would imagine they were bringing "progress", the keyword of 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 toilets on one side of the island. *Is there a village then, I asked? No, the people live quite scattered around the island.* Our discussion was frequently interrupted, but went something like this. *How about people who live on the other side of the island? Well, they would see how wonderful this new system will be and demand more toilets to be installed on their side — maybe? The first 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 four toilets had been placed side by side at the little beach where we landed; not been used much by anyone, but it 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 14 ft Boston Whaler, the kind of small boat often used for one day trips all over the Pacific. This one had a tiny cover over the middle. 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 drove 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 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 tiny 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 her or him, loudly proclaiming *manu'ia* (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 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. 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 most certainly is not. At a typical ceremony, such as the one we attended, the effect of the kava is minimal because the amount we consumed is 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 almost 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 another 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 a short embarrassed silence. My speech had been too short, I knew. But the ceremony continued, perhaps two more people made also short speeches. Then 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 Pacific, and that I was interested in learning what people do to stay healthy. Of course I knew, I said, 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. A trip to Pago in their small canoes 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. In Hawai'i there are many different kinds of kahuna, from healing kahuna to priests who are thought to "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 sat on a rock between visits so that I could make a few 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 — nobody made, had, or needed money)

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, soaked in sea water for at least a week, then dried in the sun, then cut in strips. Often half an inch wide, but almost on all islands there are those who can cut very thin strips, a mm or less. Mats made from fine strips are "fine mats" and are like cloth almost. On Samoa and other islands they are given to express honor and appreciation; Samoans were famous for making fine mats.

My guide came running down, waded into the ocean to where I sat in the tiny canoe. *This is not a fine mat, my guide said, and smaller than tradition requires, but it is all we have.* He wanted me to have it.

***"You first palangi tell some we is worth,"*** he said. *You are the first white person who tells us that some of what we are/have has worth.*

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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. (Officially the capital of American Samoa is called Pago Pago, but now most people call it just Pago (pronounced Pango))

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.

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This is where the chapter in the book ends.

My visit to that little island was, as far as I can remember, probably 1978. I filled out the story a few years later, in the early 80s. I edited it and added some words to put it in the book I was writing then (1989), published many years later. It is the first chapter in HA'INA MAI KAPUANA; LET THE STORY BE TOLD.

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Now, again many years later, I want to remind us of what my guide said. It was true then, and to my shame it is still true, that we look and see others, particularly if they are – in our eyes – simple and poor, as less, worthless. We think so highly of ourselves that anybody who does not believe as we do is not, or has no, "worth."

In the years that I spent learning and teaching in American universities it always struck me that psychologists do fancy research with American students assuming that these students are representative of all humans. Nothing could be further from the truth. Americans, particularly university educated Americans, have very different ideas, beliefs, certitudes even, than people almost everywhere else.

Having had the privilege of knowing, sometimes intimately, all kinds of other people, particularly so-called indigenous people and aboriginal people (who I think of as First People) I know how much wisdom we have thrown away as worthless, not worth even listening to.

What I did not include in my story, for instance, is that at some point I asked my guide how 100 people on a very isolated island lived together. Everybody knows everybody intimately. They did go to other islands nearby to find a wife or husband, but most of the time the same people see each other daily, or frequently. At first my guide did not understand my question. I do not speak Samoan, but know enough Hawaiian, and there are similarities. His English was very limited.

The words I wrote are not an exact quote of what he said to me as he stood in the water, giving me that precious mat. I had to add a few words to make it understandable. But the word "worth" was his, and the meaning of the sentence in broken English was all too clear.

During our walk about the island I said a few words about Samoans in Hawai'i. Here Samoans are considered large and strong fighters; they are that. He looked at me with surprise. *Fighting? On this island we never fight, how can we?*

In between visiting interesting people we also talked about festivals, dancing, parties, how to celebrate a birth, how to mourn the dead. A rich culture; of course. And open to additions and adjustments. Visitors from other little islands sharing a new dance, a word, a concept.

A few years later I saw Head Nurse and casually reminded her of our trip to Aunu'u. She laughed her loudest laugh.

*Of course by the time we had been able to make a sort of water tank on top of the island, the money had run out, so all we could do was put four flush toilets, in four of those narrow boxes you Americans like, next to each other on the little beach where we landed. Of course nobody from the other side of the island came to poop there. At first a few nearby did for the novelty of it. Now, for the first time in history, the island has flies. Oh, you Americans...!*

And that is a very cleaned up version of what she said.

Wish I could share the **worth** I found in so many other people. People who cannot imagine fighting. Who are healthy and happy without money, without all the trappings of our western so-called civilization. Theirs is a good life. In many ways better than ours. No worries about money, mortgages, unemployment. No poverty, no racial, ethnic, religious prejudices. A close, warm, relationship with a group of people. In Hawaiian there is a word 'ohana, which is sometimes translated as "family." It does not mean blood- or marriage-related family, Not even extended family including grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews. 'Ohana is people who are close. My 'ohana here, for instance, includes my children, grandchildren, my (ex)wife, unrelated others who "belong" with us.

Here, in America, we have endless political conflict, we fight about gay marriage, human rights, women's rights, family values, now unmentionable but very alive racial, religious, ethnic prejudices. Forgive me, but it seems to me that compared to many indigenous and First People cultures our culture seems a shame, a sham.

January 2012