

## The pathway to leadership is through service: Exploring the Samoan tautua lifecycle

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### **Abstract**

The popular Samoan adage ‘o le ala i le pule o le tautua’ (the pathway to leadership is through service) is commonly understood by Samoans around the world as an important life value. Writings about tautua (service) have chronicled traditional understandings of the term (Tavale 2009, Tavale 2013) and more recently with personal experiences of tautua in Samoa (Filisi, 2018) and transnational matai in their communities (Falaniko 2020, Fetui 2020). Being able to trace the links between these understandings of tautua leads to considering ways in which tautua is enacted and enabled in Samoa and transnational societies. Tavale’s four stages of tautua (Tavale, 2013) and his collection of proverbial expressions that focus on tautua (Tavale, 2009) form a natural foundation for its application in Samoa and internationally. Through the eyes of matai with Samoan language fluency, we use our multiple service roles with the intent of privileging interdisciplinary Pasifika research. We introduce the three intergenerational spheres of service - tautua ia tautua (serve to serve), tautua ia pule (serve to lead) and pule ia tautua (lead to serve) - that show what tautua looks like in a lifecycle. Samoan indigenous knowledge pertaining to service foregrounds the shared experiences of tautua by the authors. The oscillation of the spheres speaks directly to service, positioning our own individual experiences as matai, as Pasifika tertiary students (Pilisi, 2020) and how we negotiate our journey of tautua within our collective contexts through the conceptualisation of the “tautua lifecycle” model – to explore the pathway to leadership through service.

**Keywords:** Tautua, indigenous, leadership, transnational, matai, service, Samoa, Pasifika

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## Introduction

Enacting tautua (service) is one of the key fundamental tenets of being Samoan, both in traditional village contexts of the (mother)land and diaspora communities in transnational societies. Acts of service in a traditional village context centres on tasks and ways of being that show respect, obedience and diligence in honouring elders and families. These notional values are also transplanted and enabled in diaspora communities (Fa'aea and colleagues, 2021). The extent to which tautua is conducted outside of Samoa is dependent on the strength of 'āiga (family) to honour it in their interactions of fa'a Samoa (the Samoan way). The distinction and nuances between village articulations of tautua in comparison with transnational enactments, include nuances that affect the pragmatism of sending remittances to support family and village projects. Engaging in online discussions to make decisions from afar has now become the norm, more so in a post-COVID era (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). This article explores our stories of how tautua has been taught from Samoa and continues to be upheld outside of Samoa.

Current Samoan literature classifies four specific types of tautua fa'a Samoa inspired by Tavale (2013: 6-12) - tautua tuāvae (serving with abundance of provision), tautua matalilo (protecting and honouring the family name), tautua malele (fundraising for building projects) and tautua upu (oratory skills). According to Filisi (2018: 382-383) - these concepts of tautua are associated with daily activities that serve the matai (chief). Filisi discusses how tautua fosters relationships through tautua tuāvae (provision) and tautua matalilo (honour, respect and protection). These ways of showing tautua are expected to be carried out by matai as part of their commitment to serve their families - nurturing the connection between 'āiga, (family), nu'u (village), Atua (God) and atunu'u (country). Tominiko (2020: 115) provides an additional variant to tautua tuāvae, with the inclusion of tautua matavela (serving with burning eyes), which suggests that one will 'slave over a hot umu (traditional Samoan oven) until their eyes burn'. Tominiko also includes an additional variant with tautua malele, by adding tautua mamao (serving from afar). The shift from the indigenous understanding of tautua mamao which originally meant to move from rural villages to work in the city centre in Apia, now extends to include migration beyond Samoan borders to other transnational countries.

## 'Alagāupu tautua (proverbial expressions about service)

There are both negative and positive perceptions of tautua, that allow elders to judge your behaviour and ability to serve. Tavale (2009) has a succinct definition for the most well-known service proverb - 'o le ala i le pule o le tautua' (the pathway to leadership is through service) - he responds with "O le upu e fai ma ta'iala i tagata uma e ola i le 'āiga ina ia latou iloa le tāua o le tautua." (This phrase is used as a guide for all people to live by in their families so that they may know the importance of service). Samoan families continually seek to improve their life situation, and honour their birth-right if there are expectations and obligations. Tavale attests to this assertion when he explains that "o le tautua o le ala lea i le fa'aeaina". (Service is the path that leads to elevation). This notion of fa'aeaina (elevation) is inextricably linked to the traditional views of rewarding service through saofa'i – the title investiture ceremonies with suafa matai (chief titles). However, there are other considerations that are more prevalent in transnational societies of matai, which may include alternative reasons for being bestowed a title.

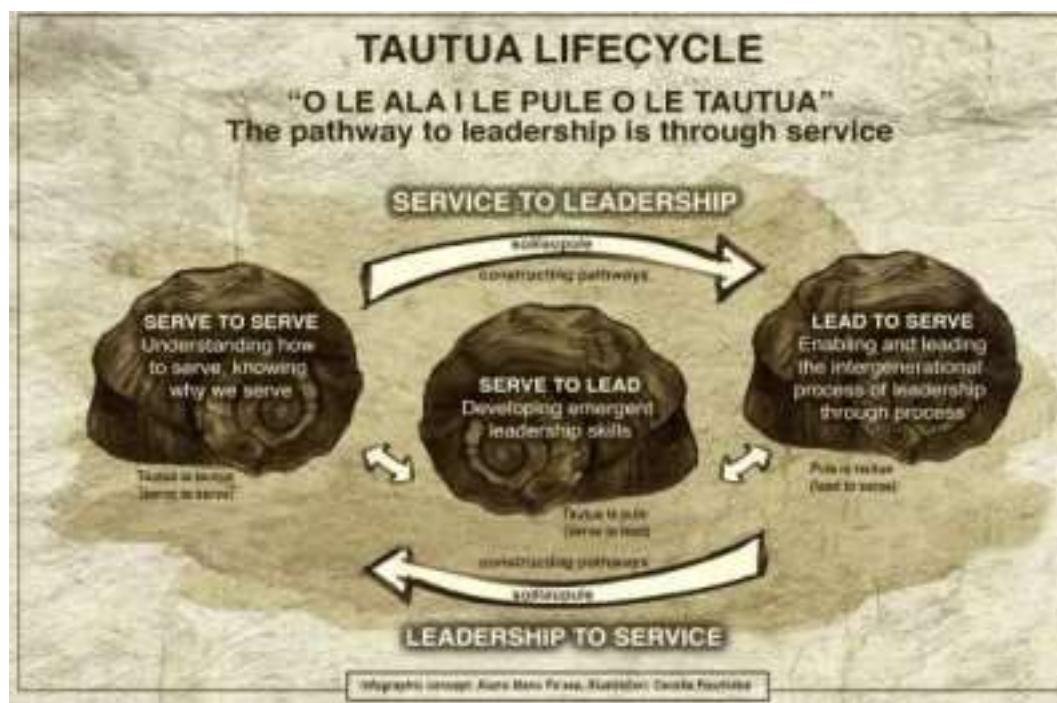
The entire premise of tautua is based upon serving your family, village, God and country. Tavale explains "A fia matai, ia muamua tautua" (If you want to be a chief, you must first serve). Another 'alagāupu (proverbial expression) is "O le tagata e le'i tautua e lē malamalama i totonu o lona 'āiga ae sili ona pogisa i tulaga o le nu'u." (A person who has not served will not be recognised inside their family but will be plunged into even further darkness with regards to their village). Samoan individuals may become matai if they serve their family faithfully or if their parents were faithful servants to their respective villages and families. However, there is often an increasing demand for individuals who do not engage in the proper protocols to gain favour with their families and respective villages through genuine service, to gain titles rather, by using pecuniary advantages. Such discrepancies amongst families when deciding title holders can prove problematic with court

cases being lodged at the Land and Titles Court in Samoa when disagreements arise. Being able to serve is challenging when there are competing priorities (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). The decision making process that goes into the selection of a matai may be fraught with obstacles - even from one's own family. Tavale notes this in the use of this 'alagā'upu: "E lē o se mea faigofie o le tautua" (Service is not an easy thing). Pilisi (2020: 20) further alludes to the complexity facing Pacific tertiary students and the service demands of their family "as there appears to be no strengths-based research looking at how Pacific youth have been able to successfully manage competing expectations of service, cultural obligations and leadership."

Whilst emerging research continues to shine light on the youth voice in relation to their feelings about service, the passion with which service is considered is encapsulated in this proverbial expression: "E lē o se mea e fa'atagā faia ae matuā tu'uina atu 'ātoa le ola e fa'atino ai le tautua." (It is not something that is conducted lightly but to invest your entire life to carry out the service). To reach a level of service that shows the ability to honour, respect and protect the family name, is to arrive at tautua matalilo (words and actions seek to elevate the family). Tominiko (2020: 120-121) explains his personal experiences as a 'reluctant matai' and a 'backup matai' with a clear mastery of tautua upu, and knowing when to lead and when to serve. "Fa'afetai tautua matalilo, ua fo'i mālō ma le malie 'ātoatoa ona o uiga tausa'afia. E lē fia 'a'ai tagata ae fia va'ai pe fa'apefea amioga, upu ma foliga". (Thanks to the service actions, guests return with wholehearted satisfaction because of their joyful demeanour. People will not want to eat but instead will observe to see one's conduct, words and appearance).

## Intergenerational spheres of service

The three intergenerational spheres of service relate to the family groupings of grandchildren, parents and grandparents and are conceptually based on tautua and designed to show a process through which tautua is learned. Part of the rationale for being explicit in this way is to also be mindful of our future generations of Samoans who may lack the language fluency of Gagana Samoa to fully engage in fa'amatai or matai protocols.



While each sphere is distinct and can be isolated, there are multiple directions in which connections can be made and strengthened. The arrows that are positioned both above and below the second sphere, reflect the special reciprocal connections that sphere one (grandchildren) have with sphere three (grandparents). It is in these early connections that the seeds of soalaupule can be sown to foster and develop their emergent leadership skills by constructing pathways. The tautua lifecycle model provides an opportunity for Samoans to take stock of how they live their lives. How Samoans progress on their service leadership journey is founded on the essence of being Samoan.

### **Sphere One: Tautua ia tautua (Serve to serve) – grandchildren**

Young Samoan children are taught that service is important. From a young age concepts of obedience, loyalty, respect and love are emphasised and practiced. They will be given opportunities and platforms through which to learn service at family gatherings, church events and village fundraising activities. Learning about our Samoan values in practice allows us to continually refine and hone the skills required to master the tools of service. In this sphere, the young are expected to observe closely, listen carefully and speak when spoken to. Within this sphere, children would be taught to develop language fluency so that they could one day become relied upon to tautua upu (orate).

### **Sphere Two: Tautua ia pule (Serve to lead) – parents**

The two smaller arrows on either side of this sphere reveal the challenges that emergent leaders have in protecting the children and youth in sphere one, and honouring the elders and grandparents in sphere three. Being able to support both spheres while still maintaining their own sense of equilibrium, is part of the challenge in putting others before yourself. This next sphere enables more opportunities for Samoans to put their service to the test, to gain valuable experience on how to represent the family at communal gatherings, especially through tautua upu (service through oratory). Within this sphere, a focus would be on tautua tuāvae, highlighting provisions and ensuring that the family both in Samoa and transnationally were given support when needed.

### **Sphere Three: Pule ia tautua (Lead to serve) – grandparents**

The elders of the family are tasked with sharing their knowledge with their children and grandchildren, as part of their legacy building. Teaching their children and grandchildren about the important types of tautua and how to apply and respond to situations that require honour and protection of the family name. The reciprocal learning that occurs between elders and their grandchildren is another opportunity for the young to treasure the old, while the elders learn about the modern realities of what it means to be Samoan, while still responding to the Western world of work and school. With the new threat of COVID-19 and the backlash of being identified with positive cases, Samoans are galvanising their communities to ensure that their service results in distribution of food parcels and caring for one another. It is a chance for individuals to take a closer look at their situations and note any changes that could jeopardise livelihoods and living conditions.

In the next section, we follow Tominiko's lead and use our personal narratives of what it means to carry out tautua in our families. We believe that continuing to contribute our own individual experiences of being matai helps to form a collective experience expressed by transnational matai with close links to the (mother)land. This oscillation is what continues to shape our enactment of tautua and how we can continue to engage in it, irrespective of natural change through time and contexts.

### Aiono's positionality



**Figure 1: Left to right – Fa'alogo Tana Umaga, Aiono Manu Fa'aea, Dr. Edmond Fehoko and Leon MacDonald, MIT Pasifika Cultural Intelligence workshop with Auckland Blues Management, 2020.**

As a Samoan female matai, I was given an ali'i (high chief) title by my father's maternal āiga potopoto (extended family) in 2016. I was recognised for my service to my parents and family through my academic pursuits, work in Pasifika education and musicianship in my Samoan church. I regularly engage in soalaupule (which I define as 'decision making conversations') with my father (paramount chief and lay preacher) for our entire family.

A succinct definition of soalaupule can be found in a Master's research project on Samoan A'oga Amata (early childhood) teachers and ICT (Kesi, 2014: 32-33) - "Soalaupule has three components (soa/lau/pule) that can be used separately in a sentence as each contains a different meaning; nevertheless, together they provide a powerful message that Samoan people understand when they gather to discuss matters. Soa literally means partner, in twos, and the notions of peer discussion in small and large groups are emphasised. Lau means you are where the notion of individual knowledge and voice becomes critical. Pule means authority or the right to share. The combination of these words form soalaupule and can be translated and interpreted as sharing your authority with one another."

Identifying that I engage in a soalaupule process, is one way in which I respond to Tominiko's (2020) call for matai to discover "other ways that we can use language and words to render service in the transnational context" (p.123). Utumapu-McBride and colleagues (2008) discuss soalaupule as "reaching and making at a high level of interpersonal communication including problem solving skills with the people, for the people and by the people". It is through my own experiences of tautua that I continue to learn about the value of soalaupule, because without it, we cannot help to make key decisions and to co-construct pathways with the elders.

### Lefaoali'i's positionality



**Figure 2: Lefaoali'i Dion Enari during his saofa'i (matai investiture ceremony) with Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi.**

As a matai who now resides in Australia, I reflect often on my matai journey. Growing up, I had many opportunities to receive a matai title. I had previously turned them down because I felt I was not ready. I thought I needed to stay longer in the ‘serve to serve’ sphere. It was only when my parents (who are both matai) asked me again in 2017 that I felt compelled to accept. Members of my ‘āiga potopoto and around the world also believed I was ready (Enari & Faleolo, 2020). I wanted to honour my parents’ sacrifices for leaving their beloved Samoa and honour their legacy (Enari & Taula, 2021). Through my extensive service in family events, academia and professional work, I was equipped with the tools to ‘serve to lead’.

Since my title bestowment I treasure my role in strengthening family ties. So'o (2007) believes matai provides the “focal point” that brings together all members of families, villages, as a nation and globally (cited in Motusaga, 2017, p. 54). Tuia (2013) also acknowledges the important role of matai as he believes family matai is a Samoan way of upholding the family together. It is the responsibility of the matai to oversee, protect and look after all family members (Enari & Rangiwi, 2021, Motusaga, 2017). As I traverse this journey, I continue to gain a deeper understanding of the tautua lifecycle model, the nature of its intergenerational landscape and my position within it (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Enari & Matapo, 2021).

### Summary

Matai are able to engage in tautua from their respective countries of residence. Matai in Samoa oversee the land and village affairs while transnational matai are called upon to provide tautua mamao to our villages in Samoa via fautuaga (advice) or financial assistance (Tominiko and colleagues, 2016). The matai system today allows matai in Samoa and matai overseas to support village affairs (Van der Ryn, 2012). It also allows for matai residing overseas to tautua other transnational family members, and continue the tautua lifecycle. When the older generation is gone, how can we ensure that tautua survives? Tautua is an essential part, a critical component of being Samoan, irrespective of where one is in the world. Enacting a life of service is a code of power that we learn so we know how to participate in society. Through constant participation in our family

and cultural events, we continually marinate in its intricacies as it is a natural part of our being.

Drawing from the works of Tavale (2009, 2013), Filisi (2018), Tominiko (2020), and Kesi (2014) helped to consolidate and solidify the perspectives of the tautua lifecycle model. Being aware of how we embody different kinds of tautua and where one fits in, should be a testament to the training and growth that one has received. The three intergenerational spheres of service are intended to be used as a tool for Samoans who are trying to (re)connect with their heritage language, or non-Samoans who would like to know more about the aganu'u (culture) that underpins tautua.

A key component within tautua that resonates with the well-known saying of 'o le ala i le pule o le tautua' (the pathway to leadership is through service) is to be aware of the soalaupule that needs to be cultivated through the three spheres of service, with matai oscillating between the spheres. When the time arrives, Samoans can confidently reach a consensus to make decisions that help families stay connected to each other, by recognising and living the importance of tautua and foster pathways to leadership through service.

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**Authors' biographies**

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Dion Enari is an Aotearoa/New Zealand born Samoan and a current PhD candidate in the Faculty of Society and Design, Bond University, Gold Coast, Australia. He is the Bond University 2018 ‘3 Minute Thesis’ winner and holds the ali'i tulafale title (high talking chief) Lefaoali'i from Lepa, Samoa. His research areas include mental health, Pacific studies, decolonisation, transnationalism and indigenous studies. He hails from the villages of Lepa, Malaela, Safune, Vaiala and Nofoali'i.

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