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### A Personal Summary of Samoa's gifting custom

This is not intended to be an expert opinion on Samoa's customs on gifting. Rather it is a personal perspective based on my own learnings from other chiefs and orators, and from my participating in family ceremonies held both in New Zealand and in Samoa.

Mea-alofa is the universal term that Samoans use to mean a gift. Meaalofa literally means 'a thing of love'. Samoans use gift as tokens of appreciation, respect, love, acknowledgement, and affirmation of special relationships. While the term is synonymous with the kind of gifting that takes place within all cultures in New Zealand, Samoans see mea alofa as a physical embodiment of the giver's feelings towards the receiver. Samoans believe that there is a close spiritual, emotional and genealogical connection that takes place between the giver & receiver of the gift.

Mea alofa therefore is a generic or universal term that means any gift that is exchanged by individuals or by groups, for example, Christmas presents, get-well card, flowers, valentine day chocolates, birthday presents, house-warming bottles of wine or plate of food, someone shouting concert tickets, etc.

'Fa'aaloaloga Fa'aSamoa' literally translated means 'The Samoan way of showing respect or honour'. This is a term that encompasses what I would call as ceremonial gifts. Presenting or receiving ceremonial gifts is a Samoan customary ritual which is conducted openly and publicly.

There are several kinds of 'ceremonial or formal traditional gifts'.

Gifts are exchanged in the context of aiga potopoto or extended families facing each other (fa'afeagai paolo) as a result of a special cultural events such as funerals (tuuaoalemalo for chiefs, usugafono for orators), weddings (fa'aipoipoga), formal apologies (ifoga), welcoming of visitors (taliga malaga) or farewell to travelling parties (fa'amavaega), initiation ceremonies (o'o) into village affairs or faiga nuu, (including taule'ale'a - untiled men, or aualuma - the women's fraternity).

The gifting takes place within the framework of the 'faa'matai or the way of the chief' which is founded on the principles of fa'aaloalo ma le ava fatafata meaning respect or maintaining peaceful, respectful or cordial community or genealogical relationships. Some of the key elements of this framework include the following:

1. Transparency– Ia manino ma ia malamalama- let there be clarity and light...traditional gifts are conducted openly and in public. Ceremonies take place in the open malae or the village green area. Young men will shout & declare (folafola) who the gifts are from, who it is for, what the gifts are, and why they have been given.
2. Clear Purpose – (Autu) -there is a specific occasion or reason for the gift, who it is for, why the receiver is receiving it. The fundamental purpose is to show a higher form of alofa , affection or affirmation of relationships between the giver and the receiver;
3. Mana – (Paia ma Mamalu) -the mana & dignity of everyone involved must be protected, enhanced, acknowledged, and strengthened as a result of the gift. Thus speakers will acknowledge & recite the historical faalupega or honorifics of the people present.
4. Roles – every chief and orator will know their tofiga, tulaga, galuega, or their role, place or task to perform. The same goes for the fraternity of young people and women;
5. Language – gagana faaalalo or gagana faamatai or the language of the chiefs or the language of respect is protocol on cultural events.
6. Attire – the traditional Samoan attire or laei Samoa is protocol for cultural events. Protocol determines what is and what is not appropriate attire and behaviour for men and women, including speakers and other people doing specific tasks in ceremonies.
7. Seating – nofoaga, or tulaga or your place to stand or sit... every chief, orator, young man and woman and children will know their place, where to sit, where to stand, how to speak, how to walk, etc.
8. Family – aiga potopoto.....the priority of formal ceremonial or traditional gifts are for maintaining & strengthening the family bond & affirming or strengthening of genealogical relationships.
9. Spirituality – faamuamua le Atua....Samoans believe the first and best gifts are for God or his representatives on earth. Samoans also believe that the giver of gifts will receive greater spiritual blessings from the heavens than those who receive gifts.....thus there is the need to reciprocate gifts.

The following is a list of the different elements which constitute ceremonial or formal traditional gifts that Samoans give or receive during special cultural occasions.

- a. sua        This is the highest kind of ceremonial gift given to the High Chief or leader of a group. There are several components of the sua which are given in the order below.
  - i. Sua Talisua
    - Niu - substitutes are now used (drink with a note)
    - Siapo – substitute is now used (Roll of material)

- Taisi – substitute is now used (biscuits)
- Faailoaa/Taailapaepae – substitute is now used (corn beef)
- ii. Tofa
- iii. Sua Taute – large food gifts
- iv. Pasese
- v. Faaoso
- vi. Ie o le Malo – a state fine mat
- vii. Lafo

Depending on the occasion, and depending on a range of other cultural factors as decided by the family presenting the sua, different versions of the sua will be presented at different ceremonies. Some families will want to remain as pure as possible to tradition & old customs, other families will be inclined towards what is practical and easier for the extended family and will include the use of substitutes as gifts.

When Samoa's Deputy Head of State, Paramount High Chief Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, visited Turangawaewae Marae, during the Maori Queen's tangihanga, Tui Atua's Orator Chief & spokesperson presented amongst other mea alofa an Ie o le Malo, a State Fine Mat. Given the special circumstances surrounding this occasion, this was an appropriate gift by a King from Samoa and was received graciously and with gratitude by the whanau and iwi of the Maori Queen.

- b. tofa      This is a gift of a State Fine Mat to a High Chief
- c. pasese    This is a gift intended to assist in the transportation of the travelling parties on their journey.
- d. fa'aoso    A set of food gifts given to a travelling party to be used by their family or village
- e. o'o        This is a special presentation of gifts that are conveyed to a village council/group/family to formalise or seal the establishment of a new relationship
- f. lafo        This is a gift of a fine mat to an Orator Chief.
- g. aiava      This is a special presentation of gifts given by a host family/group to a visiting family at the end of a visit.

This paper is merely an introduction to the intricacies of the Samoan custom of gifting in the hopes that it would promote greater understanding and encourage

a desire to learn more. The custom is formal, it is separate and distinct, and takes place within a specific space or during a special cultural occasion.

Many families today now use substitutes as symbols of the different kinds of gifts I've outlined above. Despite the use of substitutes, the special nature of this Samoan custom, and the spirituality which underpin the purpose and intentions of gifting, still remain the paramount essence which is a foundation block for these ceremonies.

For a more detail explanation and for further information, one not only needs to talk to the elders of the Samoan community, especially the High Chiefs and Orators, but one must also experience it.

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