

Words from the Earth: *Tia Seu Lupe* Proverbs

by John Enright

The two major sets of tools that historians use to try to understand the pre-written past are archaeology and oral tradition. Archaeology is the systematic recovery and study of material evidence remaining from man's life and culture in past ages. Oral tradition is the body of legends, tales, proverbs, customs, and beliefs that a particular culture has created, maintained, and verbally passed on through the generations.

After three millennia of human habitation the Samoan Islands are rich in archaeological evidence, much of it still to be recovered. Thanks to the tenacious love of the Samoan people for their culture much of their oral tradition has survived the ravages of contact and modernization. A prime example of how these two modes of study can conjoin is in the consideration of Samoan star mounds.

The man-made rock and earth mounds are known as star mounds because of the rays or arms extending out from them. They are found throughout the Samoan Archipelago. Archaeologists have already identified 190 star mound sites in the islands—74 in independent Samoa and 116 in Tutuila ma Manu'a—but they guess that there may be four times that number undiscovered as the *tia* are often located on ridge lines and jungle not yet surveyed. Star mounds are a distinctly Samoan phenomenon; their like have not been found anywhere else in Polynesia.

Star mounds were once used for the ritual Samoan sport of pigeon-catching, thus their Samoan name *tia seu lupe*. Using trained decoy fruit doves, the chiefly competitors would lure in wild jungle pigeons then attempt to snare them with nets on the end of a long pole. They camouflaged themselves in blinds on the arms of the star mound, which rose them up closer to the jungle canopy. We know from early missionary reports that the pastime was popular at the time of contact, because the missionaries railed against it. Entire villages would decamp to the bush for weeks to party and attend to the chiefs at their sport.

The cultural importance of the *seu lupe* practice is also attested to in Samoan oral tradition, as seen in traditional proverbial sayings still employed by orators today. Thus if a *tulafale* wishes to praise the first speech delivered at a meeting he might quote the proverb *O le lupe o le taeo* (the pigeon of the early morning), a polite *upu fa'aaloalo*

referring to the fact that to catch the first pigeon of the day was considered a special achievement.

The use of proverbial expressions in formal speech depersonalizes the observation being conveyed, subtly broadening the praise or politely softening a criticism. So if an orator does not approve of a speech just delivered he might use the proverb *Ua fa'atogito 'ia* (like the call of a stricken decoy bird), a disparaging *upu faifai*. Everyone present will get his meaning, but no one has been directly confronted.

At the end of a successful pigeon-netting day the leader would terminate the hunt by saying, *O le a gase manu vao, 'ae ola manu fanua* (the wild birds shall die; the tame ones shall live). This same proverbial phrase is used today at the conclusion of a speech or *fono*. The frequent references to *lupe* and to the protocols and practices of *seu lupe* in chiefly discourse tells us something about the importance that the *tia seu lupe* and what went on there once held in Samoan high culture.

The understood meaning of a proverb often drifts away from its literal meaning. One favorite Samoan proverbial expression—*E pipili tia, 'ae mamao ala* (the *tia* are close together but it is a long way from one to another)—is a good example of a proverb's broadened applicability. Referring to the geological reality that two *tia seu lupe*, built as they often were on neighboring ridge lines, might be within sight of one another, but because of the intervening valley the passage between them is a long ways, the original use of the phrase was applied to two villages or families who though proximate were removed from one another due to lack of kinship.

But as Dr. Schultz observes in *Samoan Proverbial Expressions*, "The introduction of Christian ideas has given it a wider meaning: Men are living together on earth, but whether they will ever meet depends on the will of God who may send sickness, storms or other obstacles." The proverb lives on, its roots obscured in the past.

A culture's continuing health relies on such tap roots connecting the past to the present. The more we learn about and honor our history, the stronger the culture becomes. Archaeology and oral tradition are two tools that can assist us in that task.