Sāmoan Heritage in the 21st Century

Richard Moyle

Out of curiosity last week, I did a Google search for ‘Sāmoan heritage’. The result, more than two million sites were identified. Globally, heritage is a big issue. Today’s culture becomes part of tomorrow’s heritage. Today’s musical performances become tomorrow’s musical heritage. But what musical heritage has emerged from Sāmoa this week, this month, this year? And how do you know? And if you don’t already know, how might you go about finding out?

It seems to me that when we talk about Sāmoan culture now, we virtually need to differentiate on a sub-level of geography and ask the question: Sāmoan culture where? Sāmoa? Auckland? Honolulu? Are the boundaries becoming more blurred and is a kind of global Sāmoa spreading around the world? Or are distinct and identifiable colonies of Sāmoan culture now scattered around the Pacific and beyond?

Here’s an even broader question: Is culture necessarily linked to a single geographic allocation, for example, Sāmoan music is defined as the music of Sāmoa, or is culture linked to the behaviour of a group of people regardless of where they are, for example, Sāmoan music is defined as the music of people calling themselves ‘Sāmoan’ wherever they happen to be located. Culture is something of a slippery word, but most people would agree that it is the thing that a group of people believe and think and do together.

Historical records and oral tradition tell us that one feature of the island of West Polynesia (Sāmoa, Tonga, ‘Uvea, Futuna, Tokelau, Niue, Tuvalu) was the migration from one island group to another of specific types of dance. Of all the islands in West Polynesia, the one group producing the greatest number of distinct dance forms which were learnt and taken to neighbouring islands; that island group was Sāmoa. Just why Sāmoan dances were so popular, just what made them different and desirable we do not know and probably never will.

In that era, migration (‘borrowing’ if you like) depended on four actions: travelling to another country; attending a performance of a local event; memorizing it and bringing it back home.

Successful migration required one more element, arousing local interest so that the dance form not only survived but also developed a new identity, separate from the original but related.

Here in the 21st century, what actually migrates now? One answer is that digital technology allows virtually anything to migrate, but the process has changed a little. Now there is no need to memorize, no need even to view live performance. Machine has replaced man, and we can clone dance performances almost as perfectly as we can clone sheep. The human element in the migration process has become less important, almost superfluous, and we seem to care more now about the product (Sāmoan song) than the process (Sāmoan singing).

If someone came up to you after your own group had performed at Teuila and asked you, “Was that a good performance?” And suppose you answered yes, and then they asked, “And how do you know?” How would you reply?

Let us suppose that a song has inspirational poetry and a melody that is memorable and original, and that it is performed free of errors, is it then automatically a ‘good’ song?

There’s a long Sāmoan song which starts:

O le aso lualuvalu o Tesema,
O le aso fanonoa i le Mao a Samo.
Sa solo ma le iiafa i le taotaga i Apia,
Fia feileia i ko mai le malaga a Simaika ma Lilomalava.
Although it was composed and first sung 77 years ago, it was banned from broadcast in 2000 soon after I repatriated a copy of the original recording to 2AP, and as a result of heated exchanges between the descendants of pro-Mau and anti-Mau groups. But let us not think that it was the arrival of radio or the broadcasting of these Mau songs that stirred up public feelings. There is something special about singing, with or without dancing — that arouses human emotions like no other activity. After all, there is no reason to sing words if you can make your same point by merely speaking those same words. Instinctively or deliberately, you sing what you cannot say in mere speech.

And there is a 150 year old precedent for the broadcast ban. The first book published in the Sāmoan language appeared in 1846 and it was a collection of the poetry for 16 hymns composed by an un-named Sāmoan. Here is a striking example of the 19th century missionary world realizing how significant and useful and persuasive to the missionary cause in Sāmoa was the power of the sung word. And there is more. Soon after publication, the publishers withdrew the unsold copies and destroyed them. Why? Apparently, and I have not found any contemporary written explanation — the poetry combined Christian views with traditional Sāmoan religious beliefs, and that mix of Christian and pagan was unacceptable to the dominant denomination of the time, the London Missionary Society (LMS). But what we can reasonably deduce from the ban is: the written word in Sāmoa (in the form of this book) would have had broad appeal to Sāmoans; the written word would also have been persuasive in Sāmoan thinking and belief and the combination of Christian and indigenous beliefs expressed in those lyrics would not have been helpful to the missionary cause in Sāmoa. Fortunately for posterity, a few copies survived. And fortunately also, only very few early publications about the Pacific were banned or destroyed.

But let us not think that the existence of a book is always useful, even though our education systems might stress the primacy of the printed word. Sāmoa and Niue formalized links in 1845 when Mālua Theological College started to accept candidates from Niue. In 1926 the anthropologist Edwin Leob wrote an ethnography called History and Traditions of Niue. When I went to Niue in 1984 on a UNESCO funded survey of traditional song and dance, my research assistant; Fifita Talagi, and I visited one old man who was dozing in his deck chair who told us he was busy at the time but could see us the following week. When we returned, he started telling us about his childhood recollections of singing and dancing, and I was struck by the close resemblance to the material in Leob’s book. I marvelled at the apparent accuracy of oral tradition. The old man became quite animated as he spoke and waved his arms about to make a point and out from under his shirt dropped a copy of Leob’s book that he’d been reading just before we arrived.

The point of the story? For that man, ‘heritage’ was fixed, it had solidified into what had been observed and recorded two generations earlier. And that was it. For that man, tradition was a thing. But there is more than one way to view tradition. Personally, I take the view it is not a product, it is a process by which a group of people agree to behave consistently over time in a particular way and in predefined circumstances. But if you want to reify tradition — that is, treat it as a product — then you can allocate elements from the past that are more or less fixed as representing the ‘old tradition’.

In the case of performing arts, songs and dances of the Old Tradition might include the sake, the  ula, the pōula and a host of others recorded only in name, for example, the vila, fitu, talalo, soa, sufi, fiti, muluai. And as for the other performance practices that are part of contemporary formal occasions and which are part of what distinguishes Sāmoa for the rest of Polynesia — practices like the ‘ai‘ao ali,  mā‘ulu‘ulu, siva, tauakga, ta‘alo — it is useful I believe to consider these kinds of events as belonging to the ‘contemporary tradition’. They are in a state of constant evolution and constant development in response to various kinds of social pressure.

All these dances, whether old or contemporary, came into existence as national art forms as a result of general acceptance of how they sounded, how they looked and how they
satisfied aesthetic expectations. And the people who introduced these dances as forms of artistic innovation were in effect challenging the status quo, putting pressure on society to let them be admitted into the active repertoire.

From my own experience it is apparent that there are various kinds of pressure affecting the performing arts here and now: pressure from within Sāmoan society to be 'different' (for example, so as to give one group a better chance in a competition, or to sell more compact discs than another group); and ironically, pressure also from within Sāmoan society to be the opposite, that is, to be 'the same' (for example, to meet the expectations of a sometimes conservative host at a formal function). There is pressure from outside Sāmoa to be 'different' (for example, so as to attract visits from tourist groups who think all Polynesian dancing is the same), and ironically, pressure from outside Sāmoa to be 'the same' (for example, to conform to established stereotypes so as to attract repeat visits from tourist groups wanting to see what they are told is 'authentic' or 'traditional' or 'ancient' — to use terms from promotional brochures).

To me as an outside observer for 40 years, one of the more obvious strengths of Sāmoa culture — one part of its musical heritage — is that, for at least the past 150 years it has been possible to take elements from outside the culture, incorporate them into an existing system, and produce something which is new but at the same time still distinctively Sāmoan.

Two examples:

Perhaps the humblest of stringed instruments, the ukulele. Developed in Hawai‘i in the 19th century but now an international instrument. But here in Sāmoa, a distinctive solo playing style evolved and stayed popular until a couple of decades ago. Tonga has its specialist player, Sione Àleki. Sāmoan has, or rather, had until his death, Bertie Mann. We might think of the ukulele as a kind of toy, but Bertie used to boast that he was the first professional player to join the Hawaiian Musicians Union with the ukulele as his designated instrument. It is a matter of personal regret that only a few of his solos were recorded, not enough for commercial compact disc.

For more than a hundred years, composers have been creating new songs containing European stylistic features: harmonies, instruments, even whole melodies. Let me use a crude analogy: you can mix coloured dye into a weedkiller to spray on weeds. Any outsider can immediately see where you have sprayed, but the dye is simply the vehicle for the weedkiller, and for you it is the weedkiller and not the dye that is more important. In the same way, any outsider can immediately identify foreign elements in Sāmoan music, but the music is merely the vehicle for the poetry, and it is the poetry and not the music that is more important. It is all part of the power of the uttered word, which is a prominent feature of Polynesian culture in general. But even today, international record companies may hesitate to accept material from the Pacific unless it has got a 'new' sound, a 'non-European' sound. They are not really interested in the quality of the lyrics or the historical significance of the event that generated the song in the first place. Sounds sells. New sounds sell better.

With the exception of Tokelau, Pacific Island homelands have their own radio and television services. But performances of Pacific singing and dancing, as broadcast on radio and television, essentially remove the communal nature of a live audience. It seems that the faster that Pacific communities embrace Western technology, the faster they will contribute to the weakening of the sense of community. Whereas once they were a single large audience gathered at the same location and interacting among themselves and also with the performers, now they are split up into family units each watching or listening from a separate house, and unable to interact among themselves and unable also to communicate with the performers.

So, in a sense, technology is not just changing New Zealand and Sāmoan society, it may also in fact be eroding society as we know it. How? Performing in a radio or television
station in front of a camera or microphone is very different from performing in front of a live audience. Performing for a live audience is essentially a communal activity which changes performers and audience into a single functional social unit, interacting with each another in rituals which help promote their own ongoing existence, and celebrate the social values of group identity and conspicuous generosity and reciprocity.

Music is taught here at the National University of Sāmoa (NUS), but in its purist form. Music is not notes on a page or melody inside a singer's head. It is performance, and the notes on the page and the melody inside the head exist solely in order to give performers something to perform. And so, until the arrival of recording, the event and performance were one and the same thing. But in our technologized society, we have partly eliminated the live performer from our perception of music. Our digitized encoding on an audio tape or compact disc or videotape or dvd all exist solely to be played back, but they all represent mechanical recreations of past events, and they portray only two aspects of performance — sight and sound — and the elements of taste, touch, smell, and the ability to interact with the performers and with one another are all missing. What was once were ritual statements of personal identity and reciprocity and affirmations of idealized society are now a piece of two-dimensional theatre. You might be able to achieve acoustic perfection from your hi-fi, but the ritual still dies in a recording.

I am aware that, in some discussions about culture and identity, the distinction has been made between Sāmoan-born and NZ-born Sāmoans. Regardless of that distinction on a personal level, it is obvious that there are significant differences in the two regions in terms of performance practice. There is an established movement of new ideas and innovations in Polynesian dance generally and Sāmoan dance in particular both into and out of New Zealand. In New Zealand itself, the more influential players are: schools, churches, cultural groups (with financial assistance from the Government) and individuals teachers.

On the one hand, New Zealand's community television programmes periodically include dance performances from Teuila. And on the other hand, Television New Zealand (TVNZ) programmes, which may include Pacific dance performances are regularly screened in Sāmoa. Parallel situations exist for Tongan and Cook Island performances. The results of this two-way traffic in terms of dance migration are that you can view the performance immediately after recording it and you can preserve it indefinitely on the digital media, with a view to imitating it. The influence of a group of performers, perhaps even a single dynamic choreographer, can be felt out of all proportion to the numbers of original performers or the significance of the original event.

In the case of Sāmoan performances in New Zealand, the situation has resulted in the rise to prominence of two very different kinds of individuals: the creative choreographer striving for innovation in a competitive event; and the conservative competition judge insisting on keeping to what he/she calls, but does not define 'tradition'. So the scene is set for potential tension and conflicts of purpose. The results are seen most clearly at Polyfest.

Polyfest is an annual dance and drama performance competition held in Auckland. In 2005, there were 59 secondary schools, 178 performing groups, more than 9,000 performers and an audience over the three days numberig more than the total population of Tonga. Three of the 2004 Sāmoan dance judges at Polyfest were interviewed separately on camera by TVNZ. The interviews were not broadcast, but the original tapes were deposited in the Archive of Māori and Pacific Music. Each judge was asked the same two questions: 1) “How did you go about judging?” The typical answer: “We followed the organizing committee's guidelines.” But that committee had asked the judges to consider essentially verifiable facts, such as everyone singing in tune, dancing in unison, and having the same uniform. These are all verifiable facts, with no room for individual value judgements. But judges exist purely to make judgements, and that fact emerged when the second of the two interviewer questions was asked: 2) “What were you looking for in particular this year?” And here are the exact words of their replies:
Judge 1: “I’ve been judging for twelve years, and I’m looking out for new actions and new skills.”

Judge 2: “This is my third time at Polyfest; I think we need to uphold and keep and maintain traditional performance levels, because of the influence of hip hop and foreign performing groups.”

Judge 3: “I’m a first-time judge and I think we need to have a balance of the traditional and the new.”

Here is the question to ask yourself: If the judges cannot agree on their priority for judging, how can the results be fair? (I have to add that Polyfest judges are not supposed to confer among themselves before awarding marks; they each score independently.) This style of judging, and the kinds of singing and dancing that are designed to attract the attention of judges — what do they tell us about Sāmoan culture? How do they contribute in a positive sense to Sāmoa’s musical heritage?

With an ever-shrinking global society, thanks to ever-advancing technology with sound-bytes and video clips of world cultures just a few keystrokes away on your computer, with television being able to place other people’s dancing and singing groups inside our own homes to watch, record, playback, learn, practise and perform. Some big questions must be asked: What exactly is Sāmoa’s musical heritage? Should it be pese fa‘enanua only? If so, how should we define them, for example, on the basis of musical style or lyric or performance date? Should it include pese lou? These represent the most numerous of all song types in Sāmoa, but what about hymns whose musical style is European and whose lyrics are a translation from English or some other foreign language? Anything composed by a Sāmoan? Anything at all in the Sāmoan language, regardless of the ethnic identity of the composer?

If heritage has cultural value, then who should be safekeeping it? Who ought to be the guardians? The performers themselves, so that items are discarded and forgotten when they are no longer performed? Curators of audio archives? If so, who should have access, and for what purposes? Record companies (thus including only material having commercial value)? Whose heritage is this cultural property? Descendants of the composers or performers? Sāmoan government? All Sāmoan residents? All ethnic Sāmoans?

Or perhaps Sāmoan heritage is part of the global heritage of us all, a shared privilege and responsibility we inherit on behalf of a shared humanity. If we recognize cultural difference and we respect the right of culture-bearers to practise that difference — and surely that is the implicit moral obligation of any university — then don’t we all have some kind of role to play in the upholding and protecting and preserving of universal human rights?

Look at the performing arts, our creative talent pool of poets, composers, choreographers and costume designers. And look at our practitioner pool of singers, dancers, teachers, leaders, administrators and organizers. All these people come together at a performance event and contribute in ways that may be visible or unseen, audible or silent, on-stage or back-stage. But the talent and hard work and dedication of all these types of people, these cultural transmitters, will come to nothing if there are no cultural receivers, no audience. And the entire human encounter that constitutes the performance event will become nothing more than a shared memory when the last applause ends if technology has not provided an enduring record.

So there is indeed a valuable and unique preservational role of technology in the performing arts, and professionally and sensitively administered audiovisual archives are already the treasure chests for future generations. Together, the caretakers of the past and the culture-bearers of the present form the twin pillars of heritage — yours and mine, your country’s and my own country’s — for the benefit of our respective futures. And together, we now have the cultural artifacts and the technical means of preserving them indefinitely and duplicating them and propagating them anywhere in the world.

It is now a matter of human choice whether we want to do this. And in ways that may be indirect and initially small-scale. Your decision and my decision will surely impact on our own cultural heritage.

Heritage needs people like you and me with the ability to step back and see beyond our own personal needs and desires, and to see beyond our own personal location and
present circumstances. Heritage needs people with the ability to see ahead and make provision for future generations. And those future generations will not thank us if you and I — who have the technical means, the time and the motivation to cherish and preserve and maintain our cultural heritages — choose not to do anything. The future of our heritage is very much in our own hands, and now.

Soifua.