Organisation for Teachers of Samoan in Aotearoa

***‘Tapena sou ōso mo lau malaga’***

***‘Prepare yourself, a gift for your travels’***

Travelling for Samoans has always been purposeful. There have always been destinations, end points and main purposes behind any travel. Travelling, be it on land, water or in the air are planned and well provisioned. There is often food to take to have on the way, and food for the hosts which is called ‘ōso.’ You must also prepare yourself for the journey ahead and its purpose. To go to someone else’s home or village without a ‘ōso,’ and you are ill prepared, is socially unacceptable. Those travelling must be well-prepared and, in many cases, there are practices and rehearsal for the main purpose of the trip, before departure. Presenting the ōso to the hosts is often elaborate and likewise the host, when receiving it, would make sure she or he is clearly heard, and the appreciation is well communicated. The acknowledgement is audible and very public.

In the exchange, the integrity of the one presenting the ‘ōso’ and the sincerity of the one receiving it, adds much to the occasion. In Samoa, it is often said that the eyes, ears and the heart taste the ʻōso’ well before the taste buds. Hence the character of the person presenting or gifting the ‘ōso’ and how it is presented is just as important, if not more so than the ‘ōso’ itself. The words used in this exchange are well selected. In formal occassions, the associated oratory in this exchange is something to behold.

In distant history, the presentation of a person as a ‘ōso’ was associated with seeking royal suitors, sought after bloodlines or desirable gene pools for families. This was and, in most cases, is still the practice among Samoan families. To marry someone of integrity and status is desirable. Wedding ceremonies are very grand occassions in Samoan culture. Both the bride and groom would be presented to each other with much fanfare and cultural exchange.

**O Samoa e Saili Malō**

‘Saili malō’ is a concept where Samoans are to be at their very best in whatever they do, to bring pride and honour to their families and villages. Traditionally, Samoans are to take their parents, ancestors, land or land marks, traditional house, extended families and villages with them wherever they go. This is similar to the Maori world view of taking their whanau, marae, maunga, awa and moana to name a few, with them. There is a belief that if you leave them behind, you do so at your own peril. Taking your total self with you is a constant reminder that any legacy you create, is not for you alone but that of your ancestors, families, village and Samoa. It is a major motivation to do yourself, your family and Samoa proud. Many will sacrifice a lot in search of that.

The theme challenges each child to see herself or himself worthy of any community, work place or career. Each child is born with unique characteristics, strengths and inherent greatness that they can choose to be. This is far greater than any material or food ‘ōso’ they can have. Samoans are reared on community and family values, and many are committed to extended families and villages. They have values, sense of commitment, collaborative skills and aptitudes that will be of value to any community. Their sense of service to others and community is very much part of their upbringing.

Samoans in New Zealand who left the comfort of their homes to seek better life opportunities for their children, had to be bold. They are more likely to bring vision, aspirations, values, unique skill sets, collaboration, a sense of family and team work that will benefit Aotearoa New Zealand. Most are likely to be bilingual, bicultural, confident and greater commitment to the collective good.

**Constraints**

This is at odds with the prevailing New Zealand mind set that ‘when in Rome, you do what the Romans do.’ This attitude often surfaces, when Samoans appear to traverse the socio-economic and academic boundary prescribed for them. There appear to be anxieties when Samoans are visible and audible outside the stations they are to occupy. This has become a barrier for many Samoans to fully participate in education, have better career prospects and be fully functional in New Zealand society. The increased exposure of subtle messages from the media and the wider public often lower Samoans’ expectations of themselves. The self-fulfilling prophesy of mainstream education in New Zealand society conspires to be a barrier to many Samoans achieving their true potential.

**Benefits to New Zealand.**

Preschools, schools and tertiary institutions that have been receptive to what these students bring to their learning environments, have enjoyed the benefits from incoporating things Samoan to the life of the institution. Students most often make the best of such environments. Parents would become supportive and do anything to ensure their children achieve the best they can. Samoans in these learning places achieve better results and most aspire to be the best they can. In workplaces, professions and organisations where Samoan culture is marginalised, Samoans often fail to reach the pinnacle of that workplace or profession. In contrast in organisations, professions and clubs where things Samoan are part of the lived life of the organisation and profession, Samoans thrive.

**Alignment**

**i. Mental wellness**

We continue to have concern over the total wellness of New Zealanders of all ages especially our youth and especially our young men. After years of neglect, the mental wellness of many students is at a low ebb. It is commendable that the 2019 finance budget acknowledges the need to address the mental well-being of New Zealanders. Money alone cannot fix this national concern, but ongoing conversations, and practices to address young people’s sense of worthiness, will. The theme for Samoan Language 2020, will help address that.

**ii. Covid 19.**

In a twist of unwanted fate, Covid19 visits New Zealand shores just over a hundred years after the Spanish Influenza virus. The deadly impact of cruise ship that carried the Covid19 virus from Australia to New Zealand was a similar story, but a far lesser impact than that of the SS Talune in 1919. The SS Talune, with the deadly Spanish Influenza virus on board, was allowed by the New Zealand government to sail for Apia. The Spanish Influenza virus infected 90 percent and killed between 22% and 30% of the Samoan population at the time. The stories passed down from one generation to the next differ markedly from the recorded death toll and associated narrative. The death toll was much higher. The said flu killed 16 percent of Nauru, 13 percent of Tahitians, 8 percent of Tongans and 5 percent of the Fijian population. The impact on New Zealand, was just as devastating with 6,400 fatalities. The Maori fatality rate was ten times higher than that of the Pakeha population.

The Spanish Influenza lasted for two years, infected 90 million and killed a generous estimation of 50 million of the world population. Other estimations suggest it was closer to 100 million.

New Zealand has been spared the heartaches through decisive leadership where the priority was on people ahead of profits. It is the hope that the death toll from Covid19 will be nowhere near 6,400. The Samoan Language theme for this year aims to avoid the repetition of the first time a virus of a similar nature visited our shores. The heartache that Samoans, New Zealanders and other Pacific nations experienced with the Spanish Influenza is the ideal motivation to avoid a repetition at all costs, with Covid19.

**iii. Commitment to the Community**

The commitment to community across New Zealand was one of the positives from our national fight against the spread of Covid19. Many New Zealanders have a strong sense of whanaungatanga and care for others. There has been a call to be neighbourly and be deliberate in expressing consideration of others. The unity against the spread of the virus and our expression of kindness to others was something we can all be proud of. The Samoan language theme for the year asks people to prepare themselves, parents prepare their children, school communities to prepare their students to be worthy of a career, workplace and community.

**Conclusion**

In a fast-changing demographic, Samoans can enrich Aotearoa New Zealand with their unique brand of being. The values, aspirations, knowledge and skills unique to being Samoan, will add to the cultural richness of Aotearoa New Zealand.