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Manono: An Experiment with Community Based Eco-tourism

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[Submitted Paper]

Manono is a small island about one mile square lying in the channel between Upolu and Savaii in Western Samoa. It supports four subsistence villages and a population of about 1200, living from small plots of taro, banana, breadfruit and coconuts, a few pigs and chickens and fish from the lagoon around them.

200 years ago, Manono's double canoes conquered all four highest titles of Samoa in great double war canoes, but today the excitement centers on Apia with jobs that earn money, stores that sell goods from everywhere, and a new central government in Apia. Many of its youth have followed the action but their elders in Manono's small villages have continued their traditional family and village organizations and customs reminiscing of the past. Two hurricanes in the early nineties wiped out their plantations and their houses. Timber and roofing irons to rebuild them must now be purchased from Apia – and they need to pay the motor boat and bus to get there. No one can enjoy the new government improvements without paying school, hospital, electric and phone fees. Subsistence was once a fine and hospitable way of life but unfortunately it was never designed to earn money. For the first time the villages in Manono felt poor.

The chiefs discussed building a hotel but that would take even more money. If they borrowed it they would risk losing their land. The tour office suggested the family with the best house become a “bed and breakfast.” But that could cause trouble in these tightly-knit villages too. That family might get rich, showing tourists about village life, but how about everyone else? As any chief knows that is a sure recipe for trouble. Villages rise or fall together.

Their member of parliament suggested another possibility. He knew an elderhostel organizer in Honolulu who was organizing a three week tour for American and Canadian senior citizens through Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. They were interested in experiencing life in a typical traditional village for a week-end. Why not offer them a traditional “So'o.” In Samoa a So'o refers to two villages who become friends and exchange visits every so often – not as individuals but as a group. It is a time to

get acquainted, gossip, find spouses, compete in sports, exchange gifts and honors, and provide each other reciprocal entertainment, organized in a series of hospitality ceremonies. Manono was well acquainted with such ceremonies and a So'o was fun for everyone in both the host and visiting village. Every family shared in the work, but also in the feasting and distribution of gifts.

No one had ever heard of a So'o with a small group from America, but why not if they were interested in Samoan culture? They might not bring tapa, fine mats, and roast pigs as gifts – but why not something they were good at – money – to be shared later among village families? With the help of the MP and the elderhostel organizer in Honolulu the traditional hospitality ceremonies were arranged with guests to be assigned to different families in So'o style. They were to be:

1. Greeted at the boat by their host family with flower garlands;
2. Taken to the village meeting house for a kava ceremony and honored by title;
3. Participate with the chiefs in their "kava refreshment" (fono o le 'ava) prepared by the women's committee;
4. Invited to watch the women weaving mats;
5. Learn the basic Samoan dance steps for the evening entertainment;
6. Taken to their homes to meet the family and given a tour of the premises and facilities;
7. Given lunch with the family and a chance to rest;
8. Offered a chance to take the village boat around the island, swim, visit a school, and walk or ride home through the villages;
9. Given fresh water for a bath;
10. Taken to the church hall by 7 pm for the evening where they would:
11. Participate in village prayers (lotu);
12. Be feasted by the women's committee;
13. Participate in an exchange of gifts (aiava) – crafts from the hosts, and a check from the guests which both would distribute among themselves next day;
14. Exchange items of entertainment with the village band, and girls and boys dance groups;
15. Be escorted home for the night by family members.
16. Shown how food was prepared for the earth oven next morning;
17. Then to church with the family for Sunday service;

18. Join with the family or the pastor for the traditional Sunday meal (to'ona'i);

19. Fawelled at the wharf for their return boat and bus ride to Apia.

The elderhostelers came with their leader who interacted with an the village elderhostel committee composed of the village mayor and a woman chief who were completely responsible for organizing the villagers for the visit. The ceremonies were familiar to everyone and posed no learning problem, but there were still plenty of adjustments to be mastered since people of a different culture were involved and they had requirements of their own:

- Elderhostelers must be supplied with lifejackets whenever they go by boat so the village had to purchase these.
- Wharves had to be built since it was too difficult for older people to wade and climb the rocks. The government gave the supplies and the village provided labour.
- Elderhostel required flush toilets and showers in every household. These were new to most families. Public works provided a design complete with a septic tank, and Australia provided a revolving fund sufficient to buy six families the necessary appliances. The families built them. The outstanding problem was water which is short on the island particularly at certain seasons when even roof-tanks run out. At such time buckets had to be brought from another island and carried up to the tank on top of the shower.
- Traditional so'o ceremonies require a visiting chief of a status commensurate with that of the host chief and Americans do not have titles. The village solved this by giving the elderhostel organizer in Honolulu a Samoan title. Each group thereafter had a different leader but they were seen as her representatives.
- At a kava ceremony all visiting chiefs (not just the leader) are also greeted by title. Since the elderhostel guests were all seniors, the village decided to present the kava to each of them in turn using as their titles the name of the occupation from which they had retired. This was a good decision since the ceremony is meant to introduce chiefs and their ranking order to each other, and occupation gave them clues as to these guests.
- There are important customs about dress, postures, seating, and responding, that are important in traditional villages but of which Americans are completely unaware. (eg. Don't point your feet across the floor at a chief, shoulders and knees should be covered at all times, no one eats before grace, tip the cup and say "manuia" when served kava etc.) These are important in maintaining respect. It was decided that the MP and his wife would provide an orientation for guests in Apia, before they left for the village.
- Many elderly Americans are uncomfortable eating on the floor and lose their appetites when faced with the head of a pig or raw fish which are guest food in Samoa. When hostesses saw this they bought canned spaghetti from Apia believing this was American food while the guests were actually craving salads which are considered "grass" in Samoa. The upshot was a lesson in local

greens, and the introduction of a buffet table at which each could select its own.

- The most sensitive issues involved money. The village decided how to divide the guests check, (after deducting for the bus, boat, administrative costs, and rotating fund). 20% was divided among the host families (which took turns) and about 10-15% to village group that participated (chiefs council, women's committee, girls group, boys group, school, craft demonstrators, pastor etc.) which redistributed it their own way. This allowed everyone something even though they were not hosts? Americans assumed it was divided only among hosts, and soon inquired what their own was getting, unaware that the families was also benefiting from the shares given their chief, wives, girls, boys from their various organizations. The result was accusations of stealing even though the check and distribution was public knowledge. But at least everyone got some introduction to the idea of administrative costs, bank charges, exchange rates etc. even though some hosts and guests never completely understood it.

The island agreed to have the village of Lepuia'i host the elderhostel tours first since its homes were least damaged by the hurricane and it has been going there once or twice a month since February 1994. Many guests have shown their satisfaction by sending photos and continuing to correspond with their host families. Four children are now in school thanks to elderhostelers who have paid their school fees, and two primary schools, and the preschool now have libraries, educational toys and school supplies provided by visiting groups. Those who interact with guests in the families have noticeably improved in English though there are always complaints from visitors about "why don't they sit down and chat with us." The easiest relationships seem to be between grandmotherly type Americans and small children who do not seem to depend on language to relate to each other. The village wants groups to come oftener and during the week, but the MP has discouraged this lest they neglect their plantations and begin to rely only on money. This could be risky since tour groups fluctuate in response to their own economies over which villagers have no control. Another benefit has been the return of adolescents who have gone to Apia, at least on Elderhostel week-ends. They have considerably improved their skill at Samoan traditional singing, dancing, and serving and substantially assisted their families because of their better command of English.

Things, even in Samoa, however, are subject to change. The most noticeable change to impact the elderhostel was the arrival of electricity on the island last year. This involved cutting of many shade trees along the path around the island (no cars) and the installation of posts through the center of each village. The first purchase of every family after purchasing a florescent light was of course a television with inevitable complaints by elderhostelers that "they are watching TV instead of chatting with us."

It has also resulted in a sudden influx of small resorts along the shore and increasing numbers of visitors on the paths and beaches where elderhostelers used to feel they had "discovered a unique place." Most troubling of all was the sudden clearing a few months ago of a scenic point in the middle of Lepuia'i by a son who had been dancing in nightclubs in America. With funding from a businessman in Apia he

erected an outdoor bar complete with colored lights, a boom box, and a pleasure craft to bring tourists from the hotels in Apia for a “night of fun and frolic.”

This is not what most elderhostelers have been coming for and may introduce problems a traditional village never had to cope with before. The church pastor and MP have voiced their concern about the future of their once genuine hospitality but too many influential chiefs see this as progress, “now finally we too can make some money.” It may be time to move it to another village.

Leiataua, Vaiao, is founder and president of KAMA and former member of parliament from his district. He was educated in the US and has served the country variously as: public service commissioner, and minister of public works and justice. Leiataua is the highest title of Faleu village. Fay Ala'ilima, his wife, is a liaison officer for KAMA and has written several books on Samoa. They have 7 children. Both are interested in sustainable development and have Permaculture Certificates.