A Pacific Perspective on Physical Punishment

Fa'amatuainu Tino Pereira

Abstract
This paper will challenge the myths around the acceptability of physical punishment as a way of disciplining Pacific children. It represents Tino Pereira's personal view, which may not represent mainstream Pacific thinking and practice.

An editorial in the Samoa Observer on 25 May, 1999 reported that:

On Sunday morning of 4 April 1999, one seven year-old girl could not make it to church. She was beaten up by her 36-year-old father with an i'oti [a Samoan cooking utensil made from the stem of a coconut tree leaf] while she was lying in bed, asleep. Later in the evening she died. ... For that little girl, that Sunday became not a day of hope in which to worship God, but one of reckoning. ... In the Supreme Court, the father pleaded guilty to manslaughter then dropped to his knees and cried. But such is the senseless brutality many young children are having to endure in the villages today.

A letter to the editor the following day said:

This has got to stop! Why isn't anybody doing anything about the abuse of our children today? Doesn't anybody care. ... The question is not why it happened, but what are we going to do about it. (Samoa Observer, 26 May, 1999).

Historical context
I think we have to answer both questions, beginning with why it happened. For some explanation of that, I want to trace a historical path in order to recognise some of the underlining issues in the use of physical punishment in the Pacific, especially as a dimension of child rearing practices.

In the late 18th century and early 19th century, Polynesia and Melanesia were visited by the messengers of a new religion in the name of Christianity. They brought a new God with a new set of rules encompassed in a book called the Bible, which missionaries claimed to be the ultimate source of authority and guidance regarding every aspect of human life.

Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, Polynesian societies had non-human (Atua) and human (Aitu) Gods. The great anthropologist Derek Freeman described it as a polytheistic religion, especially in Samoa. These new purveyors of a new morality were accepted. In the case of Samoa, it was made easier because Christianity and old Samoan beliefs were not dissimilar, and also because the Samoan God, Nafanua, had predicted the coming of a new religion which would be more powerful and stronger than the old gods. It was also made easier by the recognition of the hierarchical nature of the Christian message which resonated with an equally hierarchical Samoan system based on its Matai, or chiefly system of government.

In essence, the arrival of the new religion and the Bible, together with the insistence by the missionaries for the literal acceptance of the great book, transformed a people. There was rapid and wide-scale conversion throughout the Polynesian world as the colonial powers used Christianity as its marketing tool for the colonisation of the Pacific Islands, summed up by academic Dr Malama Meleisea as the 'Cross before the Flag'.

The eminent Samoan author and dramatist Professor Albert Wendt alluded to the impact of Christianity in Samoa in his essay called The Reefs Broke Open. With the introduction of the new God it meant the departure of many of our own gods and much of our indigenous art and culture, and, dare I say it, our carefree notions of rearing children.

Protestant domination
Unfortunately, when the reefs broke open, the sharks entered the safe waters of the lagoon. Embedded in the new Christian wave were the Protestant teachings guided by three theological tenets. The beliefs that:
1. the Bible should be interpreted as the literal word of God;
2. human nature is fundamentally sinful and corrupt, and
3. that persons who violate God's rules must be punished.

Fa'amatuainu Tino Pereira
A powerful combination in anyone's language or culture, a motivation and driver in others.

Now, I am no theologian, nor do I claim to be a scholar of the Bible, but we Samoans are the most church-going nation in the world and we have more church buildings per capita than most other countries, so I know a little bit about church and its teachings.

Let me indulge my Protestant upbringing and my Catholic schooling a little, shaded by the light of my own Fa'asamoa. From my limited experience and understanding, Protestant theology believes human institutions and relationships are shaped by the principles of hierarchy and authority from God, with God as the ultimate authority. This mirrored Samoa's own culture, as the ultimate authority in the family unit was the Matai, where the hierarchical system was just as rigid.

Research and analysis

In terms of child rearing, the Bible commands children to honour and obey parental authority as exposed in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:12 and in other scriptures through the old and new testament, such as Ephesians 6:2, Colossians 3:20, and 1 Timothy 3:4-5. Parents are told to transmit these values to their children.

Pacific and Samoan history will tell you that such theological beliefs became the tenets of new Pacific moralities from the 1840s. This is confirmed and borne out by the work of the acclaimed Samoan educationalist Dr Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop (2001, p. 220) who wrote:

The view that physical punishment (often to extreme levels) is the 'norm' for Pacific peoples – and that we are a 'brutal people who cannot control our emotions' used to be said by 'outsiders' and we used to ignore these. What is important, is that today we are saying this ourselves – through the papers, through television debate, through the stories of Albert Wendt and Sin Figele, and ... Ole Maiava ... Furthermore, Pacific Islanders are reaping the harvest of our child rearing practices in: the numbers of youth involved in anti-social behaviors and crime, youth who fear their parents and feel they cannot discuss issues with them, and youth who are coming to 'hate' the Fa'asamoa [The Samoan Way] because they associate this in their minds with physical violence, inflexibility and unrelenting calls to obey.

In her much publicised work on dealing with physical punishment in Samoa she noted that when Samoans were confronted with such reality, the response was: 'that's the way we are'; 'this is the right way to raise our children'; 'the Bible tells us spare the rod and spoil the child'; and 'that's the way I was raised' (p. 220).

Sparing the rod is supposed to spoil the child and research shows that most adults retain the curious belief that physical punishment somehow works on children in a way it would not work on adults – that it teaches children the understanding of their wrongdoing and changes their behaviour so that they are less likely to do it again.

Child rearing practice

So embracing and so comprehensive was the transformation to Christianity that when Samoa became independent from New Zealand rule in 1962, the newly-founded state officially declared itself Fa'asamoa, or founded on God.

It confirmed and accepted the legitimacy and paramountcy of the Bible as a torchbearer for all Samoan human interaction, including the way it raises its own children. You see, the Bible says children are to honour their parents, and children have to obey their parents. If they don't, then physical punishment is applied.

Whether implicit or not, the moral cloak of legitimacy of the Bible and its unchallenging force of authority imposed on Samoa's moral compass has had a fundamental influence on the way physical punishment has become a necessary tool for raising children. How extreme that use of physical punishment has become is a matter of debate by anthropologists, historians and sociologists.

I remain unsure about whether the advent of Christianity and the fundamental pursuit of the paramountcy of the Bible and its literal interpretation by the early missionaries lies at the heart of this culture of parental violence – the argument is worthy of attention however.

Personal perspective

When I first went public with my concerns about child abuse as a consequence of physical punishment, I told my story as a child and a teenager growing up in Samoa under the roof of a violent household.

I offended a lot of people. My siblings were ashamed and angry because to them my recanting of our violent upbringing at home was a family matter and should have never been aired, given my father, who was the perpetrator of the violence, had died several years before my so called 'brave revelations'. Some in the Pacific community were offended because they believed my story was anti-Pacific, anti-Samoan and therefore anti-Samoan culture.

But I told my story because I wanted our communities to look seriously at the issue. I wanted an open conversation, and I wanted to try open a taboo topic so we could allow for some light to shine in. Primarily, I told my story so we could find solutions to the continuing heartbreak caused by physical harm to our children. Because what I experienced in Samoa was, and still is, happening here in New Zealand.

We can't continue to beat our kids and then say 'It's because we love you'.

We can't continue to say 'It's the way it is'.

We can't continue to say 'But I turned out alright'.

We can't continue to say 'It's because that's what the Bible says'.

We can't continue to say 'Because that's our culture'.

Physical punishment and the beating of children is definitely not part of Samoan culture. There is nothing in Samoan mythology or in its genealogical make up that suggests, in any shape or form, the sanctioning of the physical punishment of children. There is also nothing in our pre-missionary history to suggest any evidence of physical punishment as a way of raising children.

Instead, we say in Samoa:

'E fofaga tama a manu i fuga o laau, ae fofaga tama a le tagata i upu ma tala e fiai ai le fai'ānangata. The young of birds are fed on fruits and berries, while the young of human beings are fed on words so they could grow strong and wise.

'O le a'u o matua fa'atu. 'The parental sense of humanity is with the children.

'O le l'iomata o matua'. Children are the whites of our eyes.

They are our treasures. They are implacably part of our nurturing ethos. They are the carriers of our heritage, and they define our sense of belonging.

These are positive and endearing values of a traditional society as voiced by its language and nuance. They are DNA blocks of a culture rooted in its key principles of human interaction.

They are

• the 'Tofa Mamao' or the long view,
which is at the heart of Samoan judgment;
• the ‘Fa’autautaga Loloto’ or profound wisdom which underpins the sense of judgment, and
• the ‘Va Fealolaao’ai’ which is about mutual respect.

These are foundation elements of a culture first sighted by the Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen in 1722 and the same people seen by the London Missionary Society Missionary John Williams when he sailed in to Samoa in 1840.

My point is that the culture around physical punishment as a child rearing practice is not fundamentally Samoan culture. It is part of a larger culture which, through one way or another, found its way to Samoa through the good missionaries of the Protestant churches in their haste to spread the gospel and colonise the region for both Queen and country. But over the centuries it has become so ingrained in our sense of ‘Samoaness’ that it has now become part of us, like our brown skin and frizzy hair and WE must together find a way to address it. I say this because most Samoans now live abroad, away from their natural home. There are more Samoans living in places such as Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Diego, Sydney, Brisbane, Auckland and Wellington than there are in Apia. They now call these places home as much as they do Upolu and Savaii. In fact, most would now call Samoa their second home.

What now?

Now I want to return to the second question, ‘what are we doing about it?’

There is a way forward in finding solutions, and they are found within our communities. The answers lie within the families, and, I believe, with our nurturing cultures. Our cultures are our strength and celebrating our cultures is a key. We need to celebrate our successes. We need to celebrate the good things that are happening in our families, our family role models. What about the family gatherings and the sharing? What about the linking up despite hardship and the tyranny of silence? We need to be open and sharing about the positive aspects of our culture, such as our sense of belonging and family-connectedness.

Our elders need to be encouraged to tell their stories to the young. Our young need to hear about the legends and family histories rich in ancestral folklore and genealogical prestige. There are messages to be developed, encouraged and shared. These are messages around taking responsibility, affirming our family values, and celebrating parenting by mothers and fathers. We need to share our aspirations, encourage our friends, talk with our neighbours, and work with people who want to help.

Conclusion

I started with Christianity and the church, and now I want to end with the church. I doubt if the Christian message of the 1840s has changed, but I believe that the church in the eyes of the Pacific community in twenty-first century New Zealand has changed. The church community here is operating in a contemporary world where God is a more forgiving deity.

Church leadership is less restrictive, less paternalistic and more inclusive. The parishioners are second and third generation New Zealand-born and they are less inclined to use physical punishment and more communal than ever in their attempts to preach social justice along with the new gospel. More poignantly, the churches in New Zealand are increasingly becoming the custodians of Pacific culture and nuance. You can only be greeted in Samoan in a Samoa church. You are truly Samoan in the church environment. Despite reflecting some of the all encompassing and unpopular elements of Pacific culture, churches still remain the places of comfort, of belonging, of being a Pacific person in Aotearoa.

It is to the churches I think we should begin in our quest for solutions. It is the place for the conversations around parenting.

It is the place for bringing together.

It is the place for social justice along with the new gospel. It is the place for leadership.

Women, mothers, men and fathers can find spaces in the church to begin to address the issues around parenting. Young women, young men, girls and boys can all come to the church as a place where we can begin to address our issues.

How remarkable it would be if the church, the government, the community, the non-government sector, and the experts would find time to give the church another opportunity. I think they should.

We having a saying in Samoa ‘E fofo Ie ala mea Ie alamea’. Within the alamea fish is also its antidote. A lesson for ourselves. Where the problem once started is also where the solution most probably is.

And please … why not ‘Spare the Rod’, and save a child.

Soifua ma ia manuia.

References


Tino Pereira is a former broadcaster and journalist, prominent Pacific community leader and a communications specialist who has long campaigned for the rights of children. He has made several public presentations on his belief that ‘culture is no excuse for abuse’.

New Video Resource for Parents: ‘Choices for Children: Childcare and Education Services’

This video is designed to assist parents in deciding what they like and what is best for their child and family when choosing and evaluating their early childhood education service. It takes parents inside fourteen different services including home-based and centre based and talks about the important questions to consider and what can be reasonably expected of any service. The video also shows what is reasonably rare in services, but may be considered by parents to be important, including contact with farm animals, male teachers, small group size, and support for mothers to continue breastfeeding.

Choices for Children is NZ-made and very reflective of what makes our services great. The video is presented by Dr Sarah Farquhar, a mother of four and a specialist in early childhood service quality.


The cost is only NZ$20.00 per copy plus $5 p&h.

(For overseas postage rates of this VHS video please email: sarah@childforum.com> sarah@childforum.com)