



DEAR READER

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Talking about culture and gender

An interview with **Kiwi Tamasese**

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Over many years, the voices of those from marginalised cultures have challenged the professional world to listen to their alternative descriptions of life and to come to terms with issues of cultural privilege. Within the field of family therapy, The Family Centre of Wellington New Zealand - Kiwi Tamasese, Warihi Campbell, Charles Waldegrave & Flora Tuhaka - have invited therapists to engage with issues of culture and have provided an inspiring example of the possibilities of building partnerships across issues of culture and gender. The following interview, which took place in Samoa, covers some of the more challenging aspects of talking about issues of gender and culture.

DCP: *Often, in discussions about issues of culture and gender, people might ask, 'Is this a circumstance in which we need to privilege gender over culture?', or alternatively, 'is this a situation where we should be privileging culture over gender?'. Your approach to these issues seems to be coming from a different place altogether, one in which you are trying to create a context where the complexities of women's experiences and men's experiences can be acknowledged, including the ways in which their lives are shaped by culture and gender relations. Is there something about the language that we use to think about these issues that limits our options? Are there alternatives?*

Kiwi: The English language is a language of disjuncture and this is very useful in some contexts. We are able to be very direct and precise in English about certain boundaries, and we can define certain areas in great detail. The English language itself influences our understandings. Just as it offers certain possibilities, it also poses considerable constraints when it comes to speaking about relationships and people's experiences of life. For instance, gender and culture can be constructed in the English language as if they exist separately and independently of one another, which they cannot. The ways in which 'gender' and 'culture' are sometimes talked about seems to lift both these concepts out of relationship. In some conversations it seems as if gender is in some way separate from the general ways in which people live their lives, as if gender resides within individuals. Similarly, the ways in which 'culture' is sometimes spoken about makes it sound as if it is a fixed entity. This is especially true when people speak about 'true culture' – as if the only true culture is that elusive entity that existed pre-colonisation. These constructions of gender and of culture are problematic, particularly for women from subjugated cultures who wish to address issues of gender. If our gender and our culture are constructed as somehow separate from each other, as soon as we attempt to take any action in relation to either issues of gender or culture, we find our identities called into question. For instance, when I return to Samoa with other Samoan women we must take great care to ensure that we are not perceived as white feminists. However, back in New Zealand, in trying to ensure that issues of culture are considered in all projects, white feminist women may believe that we are 'privileging culture over gender'.

As women from subjugated cultures we have tried to point out that gender and culture cannot be separated. Our ways of living as women and as men are always influenced by the symbols, rituals, language and relationship structures of culture. Recognising that gender cannot be separated from culture does not mean that we are privileging culture *over* gender. It means that whenever we are talking about gender, cultural considerations are relevant, as are other considerations of class and sexuality etc. Similarly, wherever we are talking about culture, relations of gender are relevant.

We have tried to create an alternative way of approaching issues of gender and culture. This is a framework which focuses on the liberative traditions within all cultures. Within all our people's histories there are non-liberative as well as liberative stories, traditions and practices. As we have written about elsewhere, the principles of belonging, liberation and sacredness, and their inter-relationship, inform every aspect of our work. We're interested in playing our part to contribute to the traditions of belonging that are liberative, and that we could call sacred. Many sacred traditions are not liberative - so we do not make these our focus. And some liberative traditions don't emphasise belonging, so similarly we do not concentrate on these. We believe in creating contexts to further those traditions and practices in which belonging, liberation and sacredness meet. And we believe that this is a challenge for all people's within our own cultures

What this has meant in terms of issues of gender and culture is that in order to address issues of gender justice we do not need to take an oppositional view of culture. Instead we are interested in tracing the liberative gender arrangements within a particular culture and finding ways that these traditional arrangements can inform our work. Let me describe this process in relation to Samoan culture.

In order to find ways of grounding our current work on issues of gender in history, we thoroughly researched the traditions of gender arrangement within Samoan culture and by doing so unearthed liberative traditions. Specifically, our analysis of pre-colonised Samoa revealed a covenant relationships (feagaiga) between brother and sister that had the capacity to equalise the relationships between women and men. We learnt of traditional gender arrangements of partnership, and of the positions of respect that women had been held within Samoan culture. This research was an involved process that we took very seriously. The fact that we can identify traditions within the culture that promote the sorts of gender relations to which we aspire has made our work in the present considerably easier. It has gone on to inform a range of projects within the Samoan community on issues of gender and culture that do not bring the two into opposition (Tamasese 1998). And it has meant that as Samoan women we have been able to work on issues of gender without having our cultural identity questioned.

DCP: *I am interested then in how as white women, and as white people in general, we can take care not to place women of other cultures in this sort of bind, that invites women of other cultures to have to choose between their culture or their gender. Do you have any thoughts about this?*

Kiwi: Refraining from talking about issues of culture and issues of gender in ways that seem to place them in opposition to one another is a key consideration. The other key action that white people in general, and white feminist women in particular, can do is to take some leadership with other white people in relation to addressing issues of cultural marginalisation. Over the years I have always taken the risk to stand up, or to create a space for somebody else to stand up, to raise an issue over gender marginalisation, be it within the theoretical realm or on the level of practice within the family therapy community and beyond. I have recognised that as a Samoan woman, I have responsibilities to raise issues of gender and cultural inequities. Generally speaking though, I have not always felt that this has been reciprocated by white feminist women. The issue is that white feminists have not often shown much leadership in deconstructing their own cultural and socio-economic privilege. I think the ways in which ‘gender’ and ‘feminism’ have been constructed has constrained the vision of many white feminists. This has meant that, for many years, issues of culture were seen as separate or peripheral to the feminist struggle. Over the last twenty years there have been many occasions when I longed for white feminist women to take on a leadership role in relation to issues of culture. I do think that this is beginning to happen more regularly now, and I am very pleased about this, but it has taken a long time.

DCP: *I think what you are saying is so important for us as white feminist women to address. I wonder if the reluctance of many white feminist women to take leadership on these issues has to do only with issues of privilege, or if it also has something to do with the feminist critique of certain concepts of leadership. Perhaps some white feminist women have remained quiet in their reluctance to replicate masculine forms of leadership. But the feminist movement is full of examples of white women creating alternative forms of leadership – from speaking out oneself, to supporting others in speaking out, to calling a meeting, to creating a newsheet, to forming partnerships. One of the avenues for leadership and action that your work has opened up has been the importance of forming partnerships across genders and across cultures. Can you say more about these partnerships and their significance?*

Kiwi: Elsewhere we have written about the ways in which we have developed partnerships across issues of culture and gender within the Family Centre (see Tamasese & Waldegrave 1996; Tamasese, Waldegrave, Tuhaka & Campbell 1998) and so I won’t go into this in any detail here. These are partnerships that are based on values of humility, respect, sacredness, reciprocity and love. They are also based on structures of accountability through caucusing, and leadership within these caucuses, that seek to protect against gender and culture bias in our day-to-day work. The Maori and Pacific island sections are self-determining, while the Pakeha (white section) runs its own affairs but is accountable to the other two sections. Similarly the women

and the men caucus separately at times to address their own issues. As with the cultural work, we have found it helpful to agree to creative forms of accountability that address our gendered histories and consequent biases. The women's work is self-determining. The men manage their own responsibilities but are accountable to the women.

What I will mention here is what these partnerships, these relationships, mean to me. Our partnerships and the structures of these partnerships have meant that we are not constantly locked into an oppositional frame. The partnerships provide space for separate men's and women's discussions, and for separate cultural caucuses. In these separate spaces groups are actively involved in the deconstruction and the reconstruction of gender and cultural traditions. The caucuses are also places where sustenance and support can be found in ways that further the partnerships.

For me to be able to spend my life working on issues of gender and culture requires these long-term relationships. I need the ongoing relationships with men and with people of other cultures at The Family Centre in order to be able to move into the outside world and address issues of culture and of gender. These relationships sustain me. Sometimes there are difficulties but we all know that these are long-term committed relationships to one another. We know that in time the difficulties will be sorted out.

DGP: *One issue we haven't touched upon so far is that of violence towards women. This continues to be a crucial issue for women of many different cultures. I also know that at times the ways in which some feminist women have spoken of violence in communities other than their own has at times caused considerable confusion, heartache and even conflict with women of colour. At the same time, I know of white women who spend their lives caring for women of many cultures who have been the victims of men's violence, who don't see a cultural aspect in this violence, only the commonality that it is men being violent to women. Can I ask your thoughts about this?*

Kiwi: I think the work of feminist women around issues of violence in New Zealand has been of great importance. I am thinking particularly of the work that has gone into setting up of safe places for women to go, safe places that have been made available to Maori and Pacific Islander women. This has been very significant to many Maori and Pacific Island women. I will always acknowledge the work of white feminist women in establishing these places and I will always be grateful for their hospitality.

What became problematic was when Pakeha (white) received Maori and Pacific Island women into these refuges and saw that they were experiencing some of the worst manifestations of women's oppression, physical, sexual and/or psychological violence, they assumed that this meant that all women - Maori and Pacific Islander and Pakeha (white) - share these forms of oppression equally. This is a dangerous juncture of thought for us as women of non-dominant cultures. It is very problematic. The refuges began to be equated by some white feminists as *the* liberative space for all women generally and this equation is also seriously problematic.

What was most unhelpful in relation to feminist work around the refuge model in New Zealand at the time was that it did not consider the construct of culture. While articulating the gendered nature of systems, relations and structures (which was a significant development for the time), this work assumed that we all lived in a cultural vacuum. The work was blind to the cultural specifics of our gendered lives. There is no doubt that Maori and Pacific Island women share some elements of gender relations with Pakeha women, but this does not mean that our experiences can be equated with those of white women.

Our experiences as women are very different and with an acknowledgment of this difference, and the relations of power inherent in this difference, we can then seek to build equitable partnerships. I will never deny the significance of the work that has been provided by white feminists in New Zealand in all disciplines including our own, and I am hopeful that in coming years increasing partnerships can be built between people of different cultures to address issues of culture, issues of gender and other forms of marginalisation.

These partnerships are urgently needed. Throughout the world, women and men from Indigenous cultures and from less developed countries are creating lives severely restricted by the effects of racism and grossly unjust distribution of resources. Women from these cultures are also affected by marginalisation on the basis of their gender. It is the responsibility of every discipline to address these injustices, and the responsibility of each of

us within them to play a part. Creating working partnerships across culture and gender is one way forward.

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