

### **The Legend of Vaea and Apa`ula<sup>1</sup>**

Long ago, in the islands of Samoa there lived the renowned warrior Vaea, a giant who was thoughtful as well as humble. When word of his phenomenal bravery reached faraway Tonga, the king's heirs – two brothers and their sister (Tatua, Tano, and Apa`ula) – set sail for Samoa to appraise the mighty Vaea's prowess. Arriving at Upolu island one evening after the long journey, they weighed anchor in Faleata lagoon, resolving to sleep in their va`a until daylight.

Meanwhile, Vaea had caught wind of the Tongans' unfriendly intentions, and proceeded to play a trick on the feckless brothers as they slept. Stretching out his mighty arms from inland, the wily Vaea lifted their entire va`a out of the sea and rested it in the tallest treetops of the forest canopy. When the Tongans awoke at dawn, they began bailing water from their boat, expecting to hear it splash into the sea. But instead, they heard water falling on leaves, then more leaves, then air. But what was this? Instead of a lagoon, they found themselves perched high in the air, their brows now shaped like question marks. Hmmm. Surely this mischief must be the handiwork of swift-thinking Vaea, whose terrifying power now filled them with wonder and dread about what he might get up to next.

Changing their tune sharpish, they begged, "Dear Vaea, if you will spare our lives, we can offer our sister Apa`ula to be your wife." So it was that Vaea and Apa`ula came together for a time, and soon her brothers were permitted to return to Tonga.

Awhile later, when Apa`ula's pregnancy was approaching full term, she sent for her brothers to take her back to Tonga so she could give birth in her home village. As this was the custom of the time, Vaea agreed and Apa`ula headed back to Tonga in her brother's va'a. Meanwhile, the honorable giant stood tracking their progress from a high place in Savalalo. Onboard the boat, one brother told the other they could now take their revenge on the enemy who had humiliated and defeated them. "Look back," he said when they reached the channel, "if the monster is out of sight, we can kill the baby now." But the vigilant Vaea kept his eyes on them until they were far out to sea.

When Vaea was finally out of sight, Apa`ula gave birth to their son in the ocean to be nursed by the fishes until they had arrived safely in Tonga. There he grew up to be a warrior, both strong and fierce, named Tuisavalalo to commemorate his father Vaea's noble bearing as he stood guard on the departure of his wife and unborn child sailing back to their homeland in her brothers' canoe.

Meanwhile, the vindictive brothers had continued plotting to kill the boy. Dispatching a messenger to Apa`ula, they instructed her to send Tuisavalalo to the royal meeting place where he must prepare the ceremonial Kava for the King, Tui Tonga. Knowing this meant they planned to kill her son, Apa`ula wept bitterly. But having no choice, she dressed Tuisavalalo properly for the important ceremony, warning him about possible danger ahead. "You must proceed with the plan and prepare Kava for the king, but I will be watching the ocean. If I see blood on the waves, I will know that you were killed."

So Tuisavalalo departed for the royal assembly, where he prepared the ceremonial Kava, fulfilling his duty in good faith as a King's heir. Whereupon he was killed and cast into the

ocean, despite obeying the orders from his ignoble uncles. As the ocean turned red with his blood, Apa`ula gazed upon the gory waves and realized that her son had been killed. Moved by a volcanic anger, she immediately set out “swimming”<sup>2</sup> back to Samoa, until she landed at Faleata Bay.<sup>3</sup>

When she finally arrived inland, she found that Vaea’s staggering grief at their son’s murder had transformed his body into a mountain, leaving only his head intact. When she beheld the terrible state of her beloved, Apa`ula fell at his feet awash with sorrow and wept so many tears, that they pooled into the source of a spring, which today is called “Vai o Loimata” (“The Source of Tears”)<sup>4</sup> continuing to flow from that spot on Vaea’s mountain and down to the ocean. When Vaea asked what had brought her back from Tonga, she recounted the tale of their son’s violent death, and her need for help to avenge his murder. “What a pity you have returned so late,” lamented Vaea, “as I have now become a mountain and am useless to help.”

“Nevertheless,” he continued, “you must seek out my brother Vaatausili in Savaii island. He is the one who can avenge our son’s death. When you arrive in Savaii, look for a boy with a lean build who goes about catching grasshoppers or butterflies. That will be Vaatausili.” When Apa`ula arrived in Savaii, she met a slender boy in Salelavalu who was busy catching grasshoppers. When the boy heard the message from his older brother Vaea, directing him to avenge the death of his son Tuisavalalo, he informed Apa`ula that they must first search for a “new, fine body” suitable for such a task. Thus, Apa`ula and her young brother-in-law walked west towards a special cave<sup>5</sup> where Vaatausili must first sleep in order to acquire a warrior’s body. While Apa`ula waited outside, the boy entered the cave accordingly until his body was transformed for combat. As he slept, Vaatausili’s body grew so large that it filled the cave

entirely until he awoke. Exiting the cave, his body had grown so huge, it broke off pieces of the stone entrance way, which he threw against a nearby hill.<sup>6</sup>

Vaatausili then tested his newfound strength by uprooting three coconut trees to build a raft for sailing to Tonga. When he and Apa`ula arrived, they killed all the Tongans on the island where they had landed. Then Apa`ula bid Vaatausili farewell, thanking him for his love and bravery in avenging the death of her son Tuisavalalo. Gratefully, she bequeathed her name, Apa`ula, to be his Taupou<sup>7</sup> title in Samoa. After bidding her farewell, Vaatausili returned to Samoa calling in at Falealupo and Tufutafoe in Savaii and receiving a gracious reception from the chiefs. Deeply thankful for their warm welcome, Vaatausili in turn bestowed the Apa`ula Taupou title on the two villages.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note on the text: Like all folk narratives across vast time and space, Apa`ula and Vaea's legend can differ in particular details – both major and/or minor ones -- depending on provenance and dissemination through the ages. This **rendering** is based on the version collected and recorded by Gataloaifaana Peseta S. Sio, a young school inspector in 1929, whose work entailed travel throughout Samoa where he talked with a great many people about their traditional stories. His resulting bi-lingual collection, *Tapasa O Folauga I Aso Afa – Compass of Sailing in Storm* was published in 1984 by the University of the South Pacific Centre, Western Samoa. It is one of the earliest, most detailed, compendia of Samoan legendary narratives collected by an indigenous scholar on record – a treasure of our ancient wisdom and philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> Swimming. In legendary language, a kind of magical travel across the ocean without any visible vessel.

<sup>3</sup> Enraged at “the Tongans” who killed her son, Apa`ula wept and kicked at the boulders in the area. Today, the seacoast of Faleata is dotted with boulders, attributed to Apa`ula's anger following her son's murder.

<sup>4</sup> Sio, 37.

<sup>5</sup> The cave is located between the villages of Tufutafoe and Falealupo.

<sup>6</sup> Since then, that hill is known as “Atofia,” which means “to be thrown at.”

<sup>7</sup> A Taupou is the female counterpart to a chiefly title (traditionally held by men). When Vaatausili passed on Apa`ula's Taupou title to the two villages, in effect he was extending his sister-in-law's sacred prerogative as a chieftain of her own lineage to the chiefs of Falealupo and Tufutafoe for posterity (Dr Maria Talaitupu Kerslake, personal communication, 14 April 2024).

<sup>8</sup> This is how the Apa`ula Taupou title came to reside in two villages in Savaii: Falealupo and Tufutafoe.