

Taking issues with the Pi Faitau: A relook at the Samoan Alphabet Chart in the 21st century

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Abstract:

The Samoan Alphabet Chart, the Pi Faitau, widely known by the name Pi Tautau, has been the bedrock of the Samoan language literacy development for a span of a century and a half, and still is, today. It was the most favoured tool that spearheaded the literacy campaign for Samoa, and which transformed its linguistic landscape overnight. No other tool has done so in terms of impact, as George Pratt testified, in less than two decades, almost every Samoan adult can read the Samoan Bible fluently. Hence the question, if the ends have justified the means all these years, then why take issues with, now?

This short review seeks to pursue Le Tagaloa's critical comments about the formation of the chart. Her argument is, that there is an incongruity noted in the letter sound relationship, which results in a misrepresentation of the Samoan sounds by default. Part of the argument is to do with the tenacity by which the vowel sound withstood the effect of such incongruity all these years; compounded also by the ongoing challenge of an alternative sound, the k register. How this can be explained, and why such an odd compromise may no longer be sustained, are central to this review. Most importantly, the impact of all these on the pure Samoan sound and its retention at this day and age, hence the urgent need for clarity for the sake of its users, the Samoan people.

Keywords: Alefapeta – Alphabet, Pi - Alphabet

Introduction:

The Samoan Alphabet chart, *Pi Faitau*, widely known by the name *Pi Tautau* since its early days, still resonates in today's discourses, though reference to *Alefapeta*¹/*Alefapeta Samoa* has become more popular as a contemporary substitute in the task of resource making (Aukuso, 2021). *Pi* is Samoan for Alphabet. Contemporary Samoan lexicographers assumed its place and role, although its origin is unclear. Not much can be made from the corpus of early record, even from the missionaries themselves. For example, Pratt (1893) has no reference to *Pi* the alphabet in his dictionary, with two entries on homonyms only. Milner (1996) on the other hand did acknowledge *Pi* as identical with the Samoan alphabet, he also noted four other homonyms, three derived from English: letter p (language symbol), bee (insect), pea (plant).

Both lexicographers have been discreet in terms of making any remarks concerning its etymological origins. Based on this lack of evidence, particularly from Pratt, the most likely hypothesis to draw is, that *Pi* was introduced basically for the purpose of adding a new meaning to a familiar old sound. Phonemically, *Pi* is a Samoan consonant /p/, which also stands to represent both /b/ and /p/ of the English, or Latin for that matter, in the translation activity.

Also known by two other aliases – first, *Pi Tautau* (hanging Pi), second, *Pi Nofoa* (chair Pi). Both words *Tautau* and *Nofoa* refer to the spatial position of the chart as 1. hanging in front of a classroom for all children to see; 2. Placed on a small chair for a small group of learners only (see Le Tagaloa, 1996).

From this understanding, a strong hint is drawn, that is, *Pi* is more likely a conversion from the word 'bee' in the context of Spelling Bee, which term has been introduced as far back as the late eighteenth century. Spelling Bee generally refers to a linguistic activity in which English speaking children come together to demonstrate their skills in spelling (Encyclopaedia Britannica). The word 'bee' is said to have been derived from the old English 'bene,' which meanings are prayer, favour, help from the neighbours. No reference whatsoever is made that connects the word 'bene' with the

¹ From Greek *alpha*, *beta*, the first two letters of its alphabet (alpha – alefa, beta – peta)

English alphabet as identical (Ibid.). Hence this argument of a sound transfer seems logical for the Samoan language, strictly speaking.

Samoan renowned linguist, Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, rightly argued that the Samoan language never had an alphabetic chart, which implies that the concept of ‘alphabet’ or formulating a written code was introduced from outside through the missionaries (1996).

So the story of the *Pi Faitau* goes back to the renowned London Missionary Society (hereafter LMS), and their investments in the Pacific languages. With a strong sense of pragmatism, the Pacific languages became the focus of interest, knowing very well the impact they had in approaching their mission fields successfully (Lovett, 1899). Indeed, the main objective of the LMS mission was religious, but language was the medium first and foremost; the Samoans were more impressed with the missionaries’s talking in their language than any display of their spiritual zeal (Ibid.). So, from the missionaries’ stance, the Samoans need to be introduced to a full literacy in their own language, in order for an effective conversation to take place.

The Samoan Alphabet Chart was created quickly, using Latin phonemes that best match the Samoan sounds, laying the foundation for the development of modern Samoan literacy (Le Tagaloa, 1996). *The Pi Faitau* became the most useful tool in spearheading the Samoan literacy development from the outset, which effectiveness was proved by the speed that the Samoan population became literate overnight (Tanielu, 2004, Pratt, 1893). As Pratt testified, in less than two decades since the missionaries arrived, almost every Samoan adult can read the Samoan Bible fluently (Ibid.).

Since its induction, not an issue was raised with regard to the validity of its original design. For many years the *Pi Faitau* has been one of those few documents, which privileged status was almost guaranteed, thanks to the pedigree of its sponsor, the Samoan church, through its various denominations, who’ve been proactive in the promotion of Samoan literacy among the people. The A’oga Faife’au, for instance, has been synonymous with the *Pi Faitau*, which has become a symbolic representation of this pastoral activity.

Until some 160 years later, when a Samoan scholar revisited the alphabet and commented on some of the discrepancies she found in its design. We will come back to this later.

The success by which the LMS mission to the Samoa Islands, after a visit by John Williams in 1830, would soon become the hallmarks of a literate Pacific in generations to follow. For Samoa, the success was to do mainly with the willingness of both sides to facilitate contact, more so the keenness in the missionaries to delve into the Samoan language in order to appropriate as much as they could (Lovett, 1899). The missionary corpus testified to this achievement, attained over a very short period of time in quite a remarkable way. Under the auspices of the LMS mission, the Malua Theological College was established in 1844, Leulumoega High School in 1890. Papauta, a school for girls was founded in 1892. Other schools followed to cater for the eastern islands. By 1905 such investments in the language have become well organised, solidified from the grassroots through the *A’oga Faife’au* (Tanielu, 2004).

Though the main LMS mission stations were on the islands of Upolu and Savaii in the former Western Samoa and Tutuila in American Samoa, their outreach to other islands had been significant. The Gilbert Islands [Kiribati] became part of the Samoan mission in 1870, and together with the Ellice Islands [Tuvalu] were known as the North-West Outstations of the Samoan mission (Lovett, 1899). The LMS had varying degrees of success in other islands, including Niue (formerly Savage Island), Tuvalu (formerly Ellice) and Tokelau (Lovett, 1899). All of these Islands were introduced to the Samoan language through instructions in the Samoan *Pi Faitau*.

Other missions also played their part, the Wesleyans, once re-established in 1857, became active in Savaii, the largest island, and like the LMS invested strongly in the language. The Roman Catholic mission also, and the church of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) as well. All of them upheld the Alphabet Chart which was introduced by the LMS mission from the start.

The South Seas islands, and the missions, were certainly deeply affected by the events of the Second World War, which obliged the LMS and its administrators in London and Sydney to reassess its policies, budgets and programmes in the

post-war years (Lovett, 1899). Such events surely impacted the course of history that followed, particularly the change in the vanguard when indigenous leadership took over the helm finally. In sum, the transition of leadership from the old guard to the new marked the end of an era, when the indigenous Samoan church became the guardian of Samoa's literacy landscape, and onus of own future development.

Samoan literacy under colonial rule continued to prosper due largely to the predominant role of church missions, of which the pastor's school was the premier instrument. Even so when Samoa regained its independence, the transition from church to state government taking the lead could only be described as highly mutual and facilitatory (Tanielu, 2004). The *Pi Faitau* continued to hold its prime position as a resource of first contact in all government classrooms. Such position still remains unchallenged to date.

Le Tagaloa Observations:

The Samoan scholar, in the person of the late Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, has been a product of the *Pi Faitau* and the pastor's school (A'oga Faife'au). Her achievements as an educator have been exemplary, more so in her role as an advocate of the Samoan language as a priority. Hence, its promotion as a primary medium of instructions in government schools, when she became the first Samoan to hold directorship of the Ministry of Education. The first Samoan to hold a doctorate degree in Education - majoring in bilingual education, nurtured in an intellectual home environment (her father a renowned language translator), an intellectual pursuit that she too followed, hence her interests in the Samoan sounds and grammar were evident from the start.

Her publication on the Samoan language and grammar, *O la ta gagana*, was part of her repertoire as a professor of the Samoan language. So in reference to the Samoan alphabetic chart, *Pi Faitau*, Le Tagaloa noted that there is an obvious mismatch between the Samoan sounds and their representations in terms of associated images (1996: 34). For example, the vowels: /a/ does not match the image of the basket ('ato) which onset sound is a glottal. The same goes with the /e/ ('elefane) and the /o/ ('ofu) which onset sounds do not match the pure Samoan vowel sounds. Only

the /i/ and the /u/ match the onset sounds of their associated images in *ipu* (cup) and *uati* (clock).

For vowels, Le Tagaloa would most likely substitute the images of a *ata* (picture) or *afi* (fire) for the A vowel. Both images' onset sounds match the Samoan vowel sound correctly.

Le Tagaloa also noted another lapse in symbol representation of Samoan sounds. For example, while 'letter A' stands to represent one sound (e.g. *ata* – picture), there are other sounds according to Le Tagaloa that need proper identification. From Le Tagaloa's assertion, we suggest one such sound; the exclamatory response 'A!' (yeah!), which closely mimics the /a/ as in the words *hat*, *that*. This particular sound is not represented or even formally acknowledged in the Samoan phonological system. As mentioned earlier, Le Tagaloa would have other sounds in mind, apart from our own example.

For the consonants, Le Tagaloa pointed out a similar dilemma as noted with vowels already. There is an obvious mismatch in letter names and their sounds, she contended. For example, the letter p, which Samoan name is *Pi*, is viewed as poorly represented by the image of a cat, or its corresponding sound /pu/-/si/; the same with *solofanua* (horse) for /sa/, and *taavale* (car) for /ti/. From her assessment, we can safely infer that what she meant was, that the sound of the letter name must take first precedence, as in this case of matching letter sounds and symbols or selecting image representations for that matter. Thus, deducing from Le Tagaloa's analysis, the image of a 'pili' (lizard) would have been a better match for the 'p' consonant than the choice of 'pu-si' (cat), for example.

Le Tagaloa's observations would form the basis of a first ever critique by a local scholar of the *Pi Faitau* after 160 years since its inception. Her stance would further affirm past observations, such as those of Pratt (1859), Brown (1916) and Churchill (1908) fundamentally, on the nature of the Samoan sounds. So, for an able and local scholar to verify some of the past claims, as well as critique its shortcomings, are considered very opportune at this stage of the conversation, when it is very much needed.

Latest Observations:

A paper by Tavita & Aukuso (1999, 2022) entitled, *The Samoan vowel shift: A phenomenon in phonetics and phonological awareness*, mentioned *Pi Faitau*, as part of an entangled dilemma. Such dilemma refers to the question of how adequate the written transcriptions are in representing Samoan sounds. The writers came to the same conclusion that Le Tagaloa had posited two decades earlier, that is, Samoan sounds are misrepresented due to such constraints posed in its orthographic system.

The phenomenon which the writers referred to pertains to a shift in the vowel pronunciation. The writers have noted through observations a new trend in the overseas-born Samoan speakers glottalizing the Samoan vowel sounds. This is clearly evident in the onset sound of a word that begins with a vowel. A number of factors were discussed, including the likely impact of resources and their designs on the new habit. Hence the attempt to revisit the *Pi Faitau*, leading to Le Tagaloa's observations (1996). As the premium resource in Samoa's literacy development kit, it is perhaps the most important to begin with. This paper attempts to address the concern with more clarity and detail.

A study by Aukuso (2021) on Samoan sounds was conducted in Samoa in 1999. A total of 100 participants from four schools were tested. The findings attested to the Samoan born-children's overall competency in their articulation of the vowel sounds. Thus, compared with their New Zealand born peers, the problem seems to be identified strongly with the latter. In saying that, more research needs to be done for Samoa alone, especially in the Apia area, so that any claims in favour are well substantiated.

A pressing concern:

Given the clarity of Le Tagaloa's observations and subsequent implications on the *Pi Faitau* and its future, there hasn't been any action on the part of the education regime or the authority for that matter, to review the alphabetic chart. Assumedly two basic reasons for the dispassionate response, first, such task seemed fraught with difficulties. The standard chart as gifted by the LMS mission those many years past, is still the benchmark for resource producers and designers to emulate. Second, there might have

been the thought at the time that the matter lacked urgency for the authority to act.

Now with the challenges posed by modern shifts such as mentioned, within a bilingual/multilingual landscape, a growing transnational community, and the colossal impact of the Internet and social media, there is urgency in the call for a review. First, because the concern involves the global Samoan community, from children who are nurtured in the Samoan sounds in classrooms, to adults who are able role models for their children and community. A standard is needed so that a language can be sustained collectively and effectively. Secondly, because it is opportune time, given the shifts and turns referred to, hence a strong call for clarity on a number of issues pertaining to. The writers believe that a review of the alphabetic chart is a great start in this reprogramming activity.

Indeed, while our sounds have been sustained for generations within a closed-knit community, today our modern global *aiga* has broadened its horizons rapidly, and that comes with challenges also. The most effective defence is to set good standards, first, in the basic components of the language. For example, the writers in their 2022 paper pointed out the intricacies of the dilemma at hand. First, the phonological issue in terms of language transfer errors, from English to Samoan for example. Second, the orthographic issues such as letter sound-symbol relationships, such as the one Le Tagaloa pointed out, where one symbol could not suffice for two or more sounds (Le Tagaloa, 1996).

Thirdly, the emerging threat on the Samoan vowel sounds due to the predominant influence of English (Tavita & Aukuso, 1999, 2022). The *Palagi* missionaries, as much as they were proficient in the language, still found it difficult to articulate the onset vowel sounds, thus the phrase, '*tautala faa-Misi; speak like Mister.*' Le Tagaloa referred to this elemental skill as a distinct mark that sets apart a native speaker from a foreign student (Le Tagaloa, 1996: 35).

Fourthly, the question about the role of the diacritical marks in the Samoan orthography (Hunkin, 2016; Tualualei et al. 2015). Proponents of the diacritical marks argued in favour of their maintenance. There are others who've questioned their relevance; opinions are polarised hence it's an

ongoing conversation. We have pointed out the issue of the errors in the transfer of sounds between English and Samoan. For students whose first language is English, they are much more prone to the habit of transferring the English glottal in their naming of Samoan vowels. Hence, with or without the glottal stop, students are much more likely to follow the English. Unless of course they are well instructed in the phonetics, the difference between the glottal English vowels on one hand, and the aspirated vocal Samoan on the other hand (Tavita & Aukuso, 2022).

Even the Chart does not appropriate the diacritical marks as much. For an example, the normal practice of spelling a word leaving out diacritical marks, would not help in the cause of its claim as a phoneme of equal status.

Thus the key question, how can this dilemma be resolved? A paper by the writers (2016) contends that this can be fixed by appointing a new symbol for the Samoan vowel - the circumflex mark. The rationale is that this will normalize the glottal sound for Samoan to align with English, without recourse to the glottal stop symbol to differentiate sounds entirely (Tavita, Fetui & Aukuso, 2016). Also, an idea about assigning the glottal sound own letter symbol has been entertained publicly, now and then, though it hasn't been seriously pursued. Both ideas however, easy as it sounds, may not be in practice, as we have experienced in the case of applying the glottal stop symbol.

Otherwise, there are local scholars who tend to argue that the sole purpose of diacritical marks is to assist students with their pronunciation. Le Tagaloa (1996), with Taumoefolau (1998) tend to agree that the diacritical marks were meant to serve the literacy interests of the missionaries at the time, basically. It is not surprising therefore that Le Tagaloa was not a proponent of diacritical marks. Her observations of discrepancies in letter sound symbol relationship would have been part of her non-conforming stance. We can only conclude that her position was to do with her conviction of the primacy of sounds over symbols, upon which her observations were anchored.

In sum, the somewhat polarizing nature of the discussion, such as highlighted in the role of the diacritical marks in the Samoan orthography, which these writers referred to as an 'entangled

dilemma,' must be viewed as invigorating rather than an impediment on the ongoing discussion. To have a transnational template is a first step to unentanglement and part of moving forward for this conversation.

Conclusion:

This short review of the Samoan Alphabet Chart, *Pi Faitau* (aka *Pi Tautau*), sought to pursue Le Tagaloa's (1996) argument that there is a linguistic incongruity noted in the formation of the chart. That there is a mismatch in letter symbols (introduced from outside) and Samoan sounds. Such mishap has caused for a misrepresentation of the Samoan sounds. Part of the argument is to do with the tenacity by which the vowel sounds withstood the effect of such incongruity all these years; compounded also by the ongoing challenge of an alternative sound (k register), which is another discussion. How this can be explained and why this peculiarity need much attention now, were central to this review. Most importantly, the impact of all these on the pure Samoan sound and its retention.


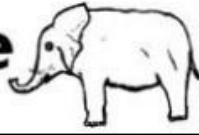








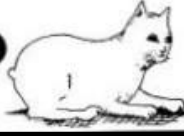
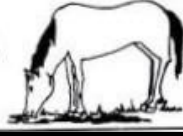





In total, all of the above underscore the urgency of a review of the Alphabet Chart, given its primacy as a resource of first contact in literacy development. Unreservedly, the writers would strongly recommend a new chart. This will serve the urgent need for quality resources, particularly at this stage in time when online resource producers seem to take advantage of the Internet and social media to sell their wares and promote the language. Notwithstanding the industrious spirit involved, some of these resources/promotions would not be the best to recommend, when critically evaluated in the context of the concerns voiced above.

Finally, we hope that we have presented the argument well and strongly, based on the strength of observations offered, first and foremost, by an eminent local scholar, in the late Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, whose bold approach to inquiry, undoubtedly, deserves due acknowledgement. Most importantly, it will serve the higher purposes of the Samoan language, by having a more robust and responsive Chart that takes us through the 21st century and the next.

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O LE PI TAUTAU

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