

Chapter 8

POWER DIFFUSION AND INTERSECTIONS: VILLAGE, CHURCH & CIVIL SOCIETY

I wish to begin this chapter with the assertion that apart from the state, Samoa's power relations also need to be understood at other levels, the village, church, and the broader civil society. Understanding this helps to unravel the complexity of power and the way it works in the Samoan society. This chapter will look at five major sub-sectors, the village, the church, the media, pressure groups, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some of these have been noted earlier, like the village authority and the church. To get a closer look at local governance, I decided to use a genuine village setting as my subject of observation.

This overview of village authority is treated as part of a continuous discussion that is spread out across the chapters. The reader will have come across references on *aiga*, *faamatai*, *tautua* in Chapter 4. As noted, Samoa's traditional authority is synonymous with village authority that is vested upon the village matai council. This authority is founded on the philosophy of *faamatai* and core values of *faaSamoa* (Meleisea, 1987; So'o, 2007).

Samoa's local government refers primarily to village government system where authority is vested in the council of matai (*fono a matai*). Technically there are two types of local governments at the village level. First the political council of matai which is secular. Second, the church through its various denominations, which is religious. The two authorities are distinguished by their specific purposes, characteristics, and political constitutions. Both share the same space, that is, the village⁶⁴. As argued earlier, 'civil society' is part of today's political order; understood as 'third sector' of society, distinct from government and business (World Bank)⁶⁵.

⁶⁴A village is a basic unit of political authority and local government in Samoa, defined by geography, ethnohistory, etc. The concept civil society is used by other researchers in its inclusive application, that is with the traditional village authority as well. I have used it here solely to differentiate a space for introduced institutions such as the church, the Media for example, as opposed to the indigenous government, vested in the *faa-matai* and village *fono*. There is no intention to implicate or contest other interpretations.

⁶⁵The World Bank. Civil Society page IBRD.IDA

Included are non-governmental organisations and institutions which are independent of the government. The independent media included. While many of these organisations are supposedly apolitical, or professed to be so, their influence on society or state policy can be huge, depending on their status and type of service in the world, therefore can impact local politics indirectly or even directly in politics (Allard & Martinez, 2008; Espesor, 2019). The World Bank (WBG) refers to civil society as “a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (quoted from The World Bank, IBRD-IDA. Online Website). Literature affirmed that the term became popular in political and economic discussions in the 1980s, when it started to be identified with non-state movements that were defying authoritarian regimes, especially in central and Eastern Europe and Latin America. Understandably, how civil society is discussed in those parts of the world may be different from the case of Samoa. Civil societies in developed countries cannot be compared with their poorer counterparts, though the institutions are more or less similar by name and general goals, the key aspirations very much shared.

8.1 Village government

Meleisea (1987a) traced the political economy of the Samoan village from an ethnographic perspective. His account provided a fuller understanding of its complexity at the family, village district and national levels. Primarily, village authority revolves around the village matai council. While each village has own protocols to follow when meeting or deliberating, the essentials are shared. First, a village salutation is important; this is power relations expressed, when the who's who of the council are formally saluted/ acknowledged. The order of speaking is important, so are the rituals attached to. Every member is aware of the principle of *soalaupule*, that is, the consensual approach by which deliberations are conducted. An opinion is always conveyed in the spirit and tone of deference to one another.

To elaborate, I wish to refer to the village that was my operation base while collecting data in Samoa. This village I will call *Lau*. In *Lau*, there are two titular chiefs (*suafa/ tapa'au*) and two principal orators (*tulafale tāua*). The two titular chiefs are seconded by a cohort of other chiefs of lesser ranks (*aiga*). The same with the two principal orators, they also are supported by other orators of secondary status. For my purpose I

called these orators, *Sula* and *Male*. The two principal orators, by virtue of their designations, convene the council meeting.⁶⁶ They operate by mutual deference as of who speaks first, though as P15 affirmed, the younger of the two will defer to the older and senior. The senior will return the favour in the next meeting. It is uncustomary in the culture to claim your right as first speaker and proceed. Courtesy has it that you always ask your peers for their endorsement. While members of the two principal groups may be proactive in the discussion, there is room for other matai of lower ranking status to express own views. A consensus is arrived at after all possibilities (pros) are assessed against the risks (cons) and weighed.

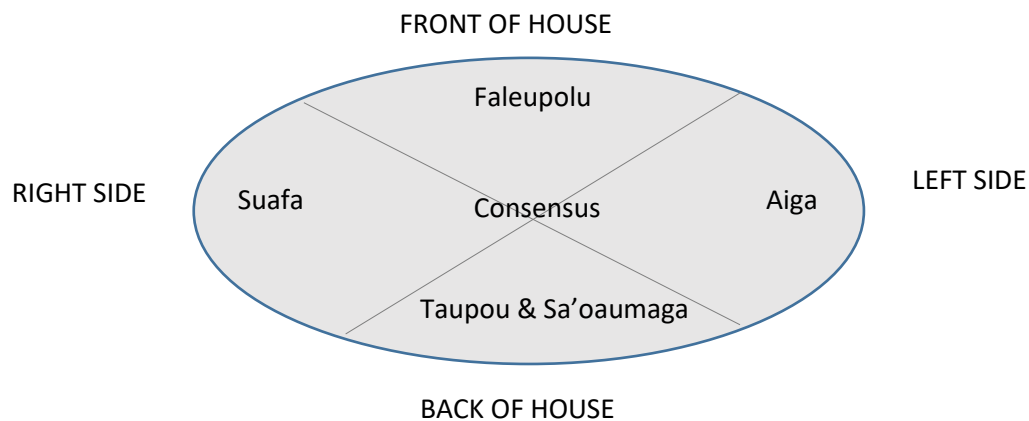
In the traditional political sphere, *fa'amatai* has placed own system of checks and balances to counter abuse of authority by a member or a faction. Having two principal orators in *Lau* for instance was a political manoeuvre, designed by the environment⁶⁷ to provide checks and balances, according to P15. Many villages have more than one or two principal orators, which means no one holds monopoly of power. The same with the high chiefs cohort. *Lau* has two titular chiefs, *Pale* and *La'ei*. Each of equal status, meaning authority is shared. The orators' group, regardless of their political clout in village politics, is subject to the counsel of the high chiefs. The high chiefs on the other hand, which own *mana* and *tapu* systems are maintained by the orators, normally use own power leverage with tact and restraint (See also Tui Atua, 2001).

Principles of reciprocity, deference, due consideration, have moulded power into a tolerant force, and along with a clear, well-defined prescription of authority and roles, there is a prevailing sense of order and tolerance among the community. Balanced power relations then are understood in that sense of harmony. As a political continuum, extreme order means extreme measures of discipline which can only produce authoritarian communities. Conversely, extreme tolerance makes for anarchic communities. The balance lies in the tact and restraint of wise counsel - part of which is the influence of the Christian message on leadership (Tui Atua, 2018, 2001). The village power hierarchy and dynamics is observed in the seating arrangements in a village council as shown in Figure 3 (next page).

⁶⁶ For practical reasons, a member upon whom both 'principal orators' factions agreed, can perform this task on their behalf.

⁶⁷ Participant 15 disclosed in confidence the lineage and rationale of having two principal orators for *Lau*.

Figure 3. Power Relations: Saofa'iga a le Nu'u Samoa: The seating of the village authority in council



The Samoan *fale* on its four flanks has been reserved for each of the four groupings of power brokers. Using *Lau* for example, the *Suafa* are seated on the right flank. The *Aiga* (including *Usoalii* or the brotherhood of chiefs) acknowledges their presence from the left flank. On the front are the *Tulafale* (also known as *Faleupolu*) led by the two principal orators and cohort of orators. From the back flank sits the *taupou*, she is a symbolic representation of the *sa'otama'ita'i* (first chiefly daughter) and village women; with members of the *sa'oaumaga*, also known as *malosi o le nuu*, protectors of the village. They represent the *manaia* (first chiefly son) and cohort of untitled men called the *'aumaga*.

As mentioned earlier, the orators group does most of the deliberations, when upon reaching own consensus on a matter, call on the counsel of *Suafa* and *Aiga*. By then each cohort must have decided on own collective stance. A *suafa* (member) will speak on their behalf to either endorse or advise for the matter to be deferred for further discussion (*moe le toa*). Where deliberations among the three are thorough and reflect quality, then Samoans will use the phrase, *ua sa'ausi le tofa*. The opposite is, *ua leai se tofa* (there is a lack of the deep view); or *ua sola le tofa* (the deep view slackened) (cf. Tui Atua, 2018). All of these allude to the crucial role of deep reflection in the process of Samoan decision-making, which activity is personal, subjective and ongoing. Such activity occurs mostly during a restful repose in the night; hence the orators' contemplation is given the name *moe* (sleep). The titular chiefs are given the same in its polite version *tofa*. *Moe manatunatu* is contemplative sleep for an orator while *tofa saili* is the search

for wisdom by a titular chief in such moment of deep repose. *Tofa liuliu* according to Tuisugaletaua (2011) refers to the process of continuous deep contemplation and cautious consideration. The outcome is *tofā liliu* when consensus is finally achieved.

While the *taupou* and *sa'oaumaga's* role in the discussion is largely symbolic; their temporary presence is nonetheless impacting. In fact, they represent the hidden dimension of village power relations that is subjective yet quite substantial. This is understood in the power relations of *feagaiga*, a pledge by a brother to be his sister's protector and provider while a sister would also attend to mending relations among her brothers (*o le pae ma le auli*). This role is embodied in the figure of the first chiefly daughter (*sa'otama'ita'i*) at the village level. Hence by virtue of this sibling covenanting, women, in the form of matai spouses (*faletua, tausi*) wield a lot of influence in village politics. Thus, when a matter is deferred, it is an opportunity for matai to seek counsel with their spouses. As part of the fourth invisible powerbroker then, the 'backbenchers' in women can be quite as engaging in the process of influencing relations of power indirectly.

8.1.1 The Village Fono Act 1990 and implications on power

The village authority as vested in the village *fono* is very much part of Samoa's political order. The Village Fono Act 1990 was designed for the purpose of empowering local authority. The rationale behind the empowerment was to do with the state's own, according to the leader of government at the time.⁶⁸ The law reinforced its status and role first, as a major stakeholder in modern power distribution; secondly, its autonomy to run own affairs. Since the HRPP consolidated its rule, government's relationship with the village authority has been duly established. Government has own representative in each village council, which selection is made by the council and formally endorsed by the government minister. Called *sui o le nuu*⁶⁹ (representative of the village) the primary role of a representative is to inform the council about government's business in relation to village development and so forth; at the same time relay the demands of the council to the government. Like other new relations of power, most village councils have managed to incorporate *sui o le nuu* into its system of government successfully. (Refer to a micro case study of the office of *sui o le nuu* in Chapter 9)

⁶⁸ Politically the government saw the merits in the move though the support of village authority has been there apparently.

⁶⁹ Formerly pulenuu. It can mean governor, hence the change to *sui o le nuu* (village representative).

Due to the nature of the relations however, government is blamed now and then for using *sui o le nuu* in its own propaganda (Riddle, 2006). Instances of discrimination and high-handed treatment of which government is accused by a *sui o le nuu* are reported by the local media now and then. Government always denied the accusations. In one instance, the *sui o le nuu* was removed from his role for what government called, tampering with national politics; this clearly implies government's intention of the role as apolitical, or to be seen as such (Samoa Observer, Issue March 1, 2009). For the majority of those who toe the line there are benefits to be had in terms of their village development.

There are benefits too for the government; particularly the support it needs behind its national programmes and rural development policy. Perhaps most importantly, the psychological impact government has on the minds of the general populace, by means of proactive engagement, making the role of *sui o le nuu* - and other state roles - ever more relevant in the life of the wider community. Good works (projects) plus positive engagement can only produce trust that is translated to votes, in the end perpetuate a party's grip on power.

8.1.2 Challenges to village authority

The challenges to village authority are due to a number of factors that are social, economic and political. Social changes pertaining to lifestyle, choices, social mobility, and new cultural demands that come with globalization have impacted village authority hugely. Traditional lifestyle that is considered the norm is faced with other alternatives; the gaps of generations in leadership is a threat to the status quo, as the young ones imposed own styles and manner of doing things (Personal communication with Participant 15). New cultural demands affect power relations which influence on the whole community is felt individually or collectively. But the most pressing challenges are political, as the following practices will serve to point out.

8.1.2.1 Splitting matai titles

The practice of splitting matai titles among multiple holders has become the new norm. It has raised new issues with the village authority, some considered critical, for example, how to accommodate all these new power relations into the political structure. For families, the risks in social capital are both economic and cultural, especially the fact that such practice goes against Samoa's core values of status, roles, property rights,

and so forth. A principal matai of families is accused of short-sightedness, greed and materialism (Tuimalealiifano, 2006). Participant 15 called it monetization of the matai system, the irresponsible selling of family heritage for cash.

8.1.2.2 *The power of money*

The challenges brought about by the power of money on village community relations are transformative. As noted earlier, new relations of power are drawn, especially by somebody who has money. Family titles are bestowed on a candidate who has academic clout or wealth over a candidate who served family and village though under resourced. As one participant put it, ‘Matai titles are dished out like food as long as a candidate can afford the amount asked for’ (Communication with Participant 15). The practice of transferring titles from older candidates to their children caused government to intervene, limiting eligibility age to no less than 25 years old.

From individual to family, the power of money has changed human perception on traditional ideas about family reputation and gaining prestige. Today money has raised the bar in terms of enhancing old reputations and forging new ones. This is expressed mainly in the three most basic events in the life of a Samoan community – the funeral, the wedding, and the bestowal of a matai title. Family reputation comes before the individual, upholding the *mana* of a deceased high chief demands the rallying of the clan or village with as much resources as possible. Apart from fine mats the most sought-after commodity is cash. A funeral of a parent is viewed as the last bid to honour them in the presence of the living. With access to money, an extended family⁷⁰ can raise a considerable sum. Well-to-do families can manage, but for many ordinary families it can be a struggle. The embarrassment of not being up to the standard has led to all sorts of problems for individuals or families affected.⁷¹

Money has forged new types of symbolic relations; families with not so much political stature in the village hierarchy can establish own reputation this way. An individual with money can buy social influence according to Bourdieu, and thereby manoeuvre power relations for own purposes. As noted earlier, the conception of family is inclusive.

⁷⁰ Made up of all members of a clan or sub-clan. Lack of research on the costs of faalavelave though anecdotal evidence put the estimate at tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands. The higher the status the higher the expectation; which can also be said of a large family and the expectation for them to provide more.

⁷¹ Anecdotal evidence abound though the majority usually prefer not to discuss such things openly.

Church is family therefore its maintenance is of top priority due to the symbolic risks involved. Village is family because of the strong bonding of place to identity and sense of duty. When the call for help comes, the *tamafanau* ‘children of the village’ will respond in kind.

Literature affirmed the negative impact of such impulse on the marginalized of society (ibid.). While most large scale *faalavelave* are sponsored by family members in New Zealand and Australia, the question of their sustenance long-term only time will tell.⁷² The Samoan government has attempted to intervene by own measures, the purpose of which is to alleviate the financial cost to ordinary families at least.

8.1.2.3 *Alleviation measures*

A few initiatives regarding poverty need to be noted. There have been a few that came up now and then in this alleviation enterprise. The *faatofamamao*⁷³ was a brain-child of the late Cardinal Pio Taofinuu; a social strategy informed by the Gospel message, which gives a leeway to the less fortunate of society. The late cardinal once explained his strategy as both Samoan and Christian. The Samoan value of *alofa* and Christian compassion cut across the boundaries of cultural taboos and fears, to propose a most common-sense approach to doing family funerals. Another initiative, matai-led, which called themselves *Faleula o Fatua’iupu*, promoted a similar message under the slogan *faamama avega* (easing the burden).

A few villages have followed in this pathway. Not to be outdone was the government’s own initiative, such as the directive to repackage cartons of tinned fish into smaller packages, so that the distribution went further. The government also encouraged the restoration of Samoa’s fine mat and doing away with the coarse *lalaga*.⁷⁴ The message was quality above quantity. In some church parishes similar initiatives have been reported; for example, a Samoan parish in New Zealand which work policy of *fai i le*

⁷² The Covid-19 has provided a new perspective re the long-term maintenance of such practices for all parties involved.

⁷³ *Faatofamamao*. Doing it the deep long view is a strategy that is attributed to the late Cardinal Pio Taofinuu. The traditional presentation of fine mats and monetary gifts etc is not part of the funeral ritual.

⁷⁴ *Lalaga* is a name given to a coarse type of fine mat that used to be a commonplace in customary exchange of goods; they were not displayed as their larger and finer counterparts but in greater numbers (quantity) they made their presence felt. The Samoan government discouraged their use and initiated the restoration of the genuine ie Samoa (Samoan fine mat) as alternative.

lotomalie (give as one pleases) has proved a success with raising funds for its projects.⁷⁵ While these measures may be modest in appeal, they somehow contribute to the new consciousness of reimagining culture to suit the people's socio-economic situation.

In the matter of title splitting, those who support the practice argued that this will ease the burden for families. More matai in a family means the load is shared hence easing the burden.⁷⁶ The irony as Participant 15 pointed out, it only makes matters worse for some families. Intense competition among members who have the resources sometimes leads to rivalry as of who contributes more or otherwise loss of face for those who contribute less (Communication with P15). The outcome could not justify the good intention in the first place. Due to the threat of the Covid-19 on lives, a Samoan village council has put a ban on *la'uava*⁷⁷ altogether.

8.1.2.4 Partisan politics affect village relations

The village site has also become the hub for aggressive electioneering during the election season. Literature abounds with evidence of their impact on village council stability; some councils have split into two authorities as the consequence of differences due to partisan party politics (Samoa Times, Issue April 14, 2016).⁷⁸ Cases of matai council versus individuals are not uncommon, for instance, a council endorses own candidate, causing a row with an individual who decides to run against the council's choice. A number of these cases have found their way up to the Supreme Court, which usually upholds the democratic rights of an individual. It has caused fractures in the relations of power at the village level. The consequences for some have been extensive (Meleisea, 1987). Partisan politics is blamed for the unrest.

⁷⁵ The EFKS church Satauro o le Manumalo in Christchurch, with its facilities, were established largely on the basis of this policy. It is still its standing policy according to incumbent church minister.

⁷⁶ The popular rationalization of title splitting.

⁷⁷ Lau'ava is Samoan for a funeral feast wherein goods (fine mats, food, cash) are distributed among the village leadership.

Read also Samoa Observer Issue April 16, 2020 Report: Villages adapt to life in lockdown.

⁷⁸For example, a long squabble that involved a late MP from Anoamaa who took issues with the village and assumed own proxy village authority. Samoa Times Issue 14/4/2016.

8.1.2.5 *New churches*

One of the pressing issues faced by village councils is to do with new churches and the dilemma of trying to accommodate them into an already crowded space (Personal communication with Participant 5). The appropriation of churches by a village community comes with the moral claim of exclusive loyalty to the predecessor(s). While the traditional three⁷⁹ can live side by side, the inception of newcomers is never an easy task for those involved (Ernst, 2006) (See next discussion, under ‘Church.’)

8.1.2.6 *Gender and power in the village*

Gender relations as propagated and practised in the village is the preserve of the culture. A female is born and bred in a village that gives her a cultural identity on the basis of her family status. For instance, females whose fathers are principal chiefs have their own special roles assigned for in the conduct of village protocols and rituals. Wives of matai are given the designation of counsellors to their male spouses. The rest of the village females, mainly the young unmarried, belong to the *aualuma* group, whose own roles have also been assigned by custom. For the fact that Samoan social organisations are structured and hierarchical, the line of command is always vertical.

Traditionally the women through their own organisations have been the backbone of village social and economic development. Well-known was the *komiti tumamā* in which women have been proactive in the nurturing of their own village health and well-being. Since the institution of the National Council of Women in 1966, from which a realization of women’s contribution to the country’s social and economic development was noted, the government has become more involved. Literature attested to the evolution of this partnership since 1962, in the political interest, which culminated in the establishment of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in 1991. The empowerment of women has become the business of the Ministry since, in terms of new skills and knowledge to become able providers of their own families; more so, understanding their political rights as citizens. In village politics, women have also made an impact directly or indirectly. While only a few have become matai and sit in village councils; their representation in parliament is symbolic of the great strides they have made so far since Independence.

⁷⁹Refers to the EFKS, Metotisi, Katoliko Roma. The Latter-Day Saints (Mamona) has been around since 1888 and is considered the fourth stakeholder of church power relations; its membership has been on the rise.

The country's constitution upholds the rights of women to equal opportunities, though in positions of power their male counterparts still hold the monopoly. Women matai of note in village and national politics are looked up to for leadership, on women issues such as domestic violence, equal employment, entrepreneurship, and empowerment through political participation (Simanu-Klutz, 2020). Through education, women have carved own pathway to power, slowly but surely, manoeuvring power relations in their favour.⁸⁰ However, there is still more to be done in the effort to unpack the hidden power relations between the two genders, in terms of deeply held beliefs, perceptions behind the violence and abuse, the visible manifestations of inequality (Meleisea et al, 2015).⁸¹

8.1.2.7 Rights-based values and fundamental rights

Last but just as significant is the place of rights-based values in society or the challenges posed by the power of human fundamental rights in village power relations. While such rights are well safeguarded in the constitution, they prevail ultimately though oftentimes at the cost of cultural cohesion and such values upon which *faaSamoa* depend. This concern is very much at the core of the power relations dilemma. To give more power to the village council or the newly proposed LTC authority will likely jeopardise human rights of an individual or family. On the other hand, a village council without power may lose its credibility and political clout and which has a direct bearing on matai authority and influence. This concern is expounded in the overall discussion.

⁸¹A 2000 study found that about 46.4 percent of Samoan women had experienced some form of abuse by their partners. See Samoa's Journey 1962-2012 Aspects of history (2012). Meleisea, et al., page 170.