

E Sui Faiga, Ae Tūmau Fa'avae: **Practices Change but Foundations Remain**

Lafita'i Iūpati Fuata'i

INTRODUCTION

The Origins of My Story

At the time I was growing up in the village of Moata'a in the 1960s, there was a popular Sāmoan song composed by the well known composer Tole'afoa Talitimu which I could not help but took a natural liking to because it was about Sāmoa and the *fa'amatai*. In my own interpretation, the essence of the song is in the first verse and is as follows:

*Ua tōfia e le Atua Sāmoa ina ia pūlea e Matai
Auā o lona suafa ua vaelua iai
Tau nanā fua le tetea,
Ae manino lava o le mata o le vai
O le 'a'ano moni ua le toe iai ni matai*

God has designated Sāmoa to be ruled by *matai*
Because he has divided a portion of his name to them
Muddying a spring will not conceal its eye
The essence of the matter is, there are no more *matai*

I came to appreciate the song more during my college days as I was beginning to find out more about my own Sāmoan culture and the significance of political independence. I came to associate the song with Sāmoan Independence, which took place in 1962. I also came to the realization that it was part and parcel of the socialization process I was going through, and contributed to my values and beliefs of the *matai* system. I did not realize then how much Independence would affect me, until later when I went to University.

The Significance of Independence

Western Sāmoa, while still a New Zealand mandate under the League of Nations, had been granted internal self government until it became a fully independent nation on 1 January 1962. In the process of achieving political independence Sāmoa had gone through decades of political upheaval as a

result of dissatisfaction in the way the New Zealand colonial administrations were running the country. The most prominent of these was the Mau Movement, which according to Meleiseā (1987:154) was "a rejection of external control and systematic change, an assertion of Sāmoan capacity for autonomy within the sphere of traditional authority and the expression of a belief that that system was capable of accommodating any changes desired by the Sāmoans." There is no doubt that the *matai* system contributed substantively to Sāmoa's fight for independence. Historically, all those who played a prominent role in achieving independence for Sāmoa were *matai*. I have not read of an untitled Sāmoan who influenced the course of events towards independence. It is a fact of life then that the essence of the Sāmoan way of life revolves around the *matai* system.

Independence for Sāmoa is the culmination of many historical events that took place more than a hundred years back. The concept of *mālō* or government was always paramount in the Sāmoan psyche. It is said that one of the early Mālietoa titleholders went to seek the guidance of the well known prophetess and seer Nāfanua regarding this *mālō*. But the *mālō* as prophesied by Nāfanua was manifested in the coming of church missionaries to Sāmoa (Meleiseā et al 1987:57). The *matai* system had a lot to do with the acceptance of Christianity into Sāmoa. The first missionary, John Williams of the London Missionary Society, was accepted by Mālietoa Vaiinupō in 1830. Vaiinupō was probably the highest ranking *matai* in Sāmoa at that time. Christianity gradually took a foothold in Sāmoa after the arrival of Williams. Mālietoa was anticipating the new *mālō* based on a prophecy made to him by the war goddess Nāfanua. Leading by example his household was amongst the first of the new converts to this new faith and it made Christianity readily acceptable to all Sāmoans (Lambie 1979:141). It was a major landmark in the history of Sāmoa because from then on Christianity became an integral part of village culture, where the pastor or priest was given the highest form of recognition as a representative of the Almighty. Sāmoans no longer worshipped their traditional idols and gods, but now focused on the one supreme Deity introduced by missionaries.

Today, Christianity has more or less become synonymous with Sāmoan culture.¹ This can be recognized by the fact that for all major Sāmoan cultural ceremonies, whether it be the opening or closing of a session of Parliament, or celebrating Independence in June or Teuila Festival in September, these always start with an element of worship and thanksgiving to recognize and acknowledge the role of Providence in protecting and blessing Sāmoa as a nation and country. Thus the song I started this chapter with is a constant reminder of the fact that the values in

the *matai* system have been modified to conform to Christian principles.

Education as a Vehicle of Change in Sāmoa

The evolution and development of the Sāmoan educational system has acted as a vehicle to bring about changes in the country. Furthermore whether one accepts it or not, the education system and its evolution also had an impact on the *matai* system. The majority of *matai* titleholders in Sāmoa now, are people who have gone through the education system, either in primary or secondary school. For example in the early 1980s, when I was doing agricultural education surveys with my University of the South Pacific (USP) students in the rural villages, most of the farmer respondents had only been through pastors school or primary school. Today, most of the farmer respondents have been educated up to junior secondary level. Quite a large number of them have gone to senior secondary schools. A few have had tertiary education. This is largely due to the efforts of government over the last two decades to improve educational standards.

On a number of occasions I have noticed that quite a lot of *matai* who are now *tulāfale* or orators are those who have gone through secondary school and a few have had university education. There have been a number of courses and workshops over the past decade offered by staff of the National University of Sāmoa (NUS) Arts Faculty on oratory skills and current issues pertaining to occasions like provident purposes, which are cornerstone to the *fa'asāmoa*, or Sāmoan way of life.

The fact is that it has taken just over 150 years since the arrival of the missionaries in 1830 for Sāmoa as an entity and a country to establish education and develop it right up to university level. In the process, many Sāmoans have been exposed to varying levels of the education process. What is significant is that, in the face of all such changes that education has helped to bring about, the *matai* system in Sāmoa has maintained its basic principles and values. The implementation of a number of practices has varied with the times and economic status and/or welfare of people, but the basic concepts associated with them have still remained. A number of practices related to provident purposes or *fa'alavelave* can be used to illustrate this point.

The Sua

In the days when I was young, the most common type of *sua* presented to important people or people of rank was the pig. If it was a big pig, it was

carried on a wooden platform. Pigs were usually raised by people in their own backyards and were fed from left over food and other scraps. People did not spend money on buying pigs for provident purposes because they were raising their own pigs.

Another type of *sua* introduced was the carton of herring. It is now a common form of *sua* because of the convenience that comes with it. Compared to the pig the carton of herring can be stored for months and used again for another *fa'alavelave* if a family does not want to consume its contents. The pig however, cannot be stored again for another *fa'alavelave*, but has to be used once it has been given. Nowadays, it can be divided and the parts stored in a freezer for later consumption. The disadvantage of the carton of herring is that it costs money, over SAT80 per carton. It is a relatively expensive item compared to the quality of its contents, which in a lot of cases are not worth the money.

The other form of *sua* is the keg of salted beef. This is also expensive and does not last as long as the carton of herrings. But like the carton of herrings, the nutritional value of salted beef used for *fa'alavelave* is well below recommended food standards and is one food item that has contributed to dietary health problems in Sāmoa.

Sometime back a more massive and much larger type of *sua* made its way into the arena of *fa'alavelave*. This is cattle in the slaughtered form.² Cattle as a form of *sua* presentation are quite expensive. When a cattle is presented as a form of *sua* by a family, it shows the level of affluence of that family. Not all families can afford cattle for their *sua* presentation — only those who can afford it. But where it involves village or community ceremonial occasions, the presentation of cattle as *sua* is not an uncommon sight as village people pool their resources together to enable such presentations. This is a demonstration of reciprocity in answer to the kindness shown by invited families and guests gracing such occasions. The presentation of cattle as *sua* is often a common sight during large ceremonial occasions such as the dedication of church buildings, schools, weddings, deaths or title bestowal gatherings.

Items accompanying the *Sua*

The food items accompanying the *sua* are always presented first. These are in the form of *fa'atamāli'i* and *amoamosā*. In the traditional context, the *fa'atamāli'i* usually comes in the form of a coconut (*su'iga/vailolo*) and is presented by a lady with a long length of new cloth tied to her waist. The *amoamosā* is made up of a cooked chicken (*ta'ailepaepae*) wrapped in banana leaves and a cooked bundle of taro wrapped in breadfruit leaves. The second lot of items is presented by a *taule'ale'a* or young untitled man.

Nowadays, people have varied the forms of the items accompanying a *sua*. A small bottle of Coca Cola can substitute the coconut, a tin of corned beef the cooked chicken, and box of biscuits the cooked bundle of taro. So in essence, the *sua* has retained its conceptual form as *fa'atamāli'i*, *amoamosā* and the actual *sua* itself while the items to effect the presentation have been varied in content and appearance. Thus it could be said that there have been changes in the ways of effecting *sua* presentations but the actual manifestation of the concept of *sua* still remains.

These are some practical examples of changes that have come about with the changes brought about by education. The types of education brought about as a result of church missionaries and later government intervention have resulted in changes that have changed people's values and behaviour. This in turn led to changes in their economic status and level of affluence and consequently may have led to their varying some of the traditional practices.

A FAMILY WITH TITLES BUT NO TITLEHOLDERS

By the time Sāmoa became independent, I was staying with my grandparents at Taumeasina, a small peninsula jutting out westwards from Moata'a village. My grandfather was a retired pastor who had served in Ta'ū, Manu'a from 1953 up to 1957. He was forced to retire in his late fifties because of the loss of his sight in both eyes. My father was pastor of the LMS congregation there. We had just been there a year after spending close to two years at Nofuāli'i village where my father served as the Principal of Nu'uasala School, one of the London Missionary Society (LMS) schools in Sāmoa. Prior to that, my parents were church missionaries in Papua New Guinea from 1951 to 1957.

My grandparents raised me up until the return of my parents with two siblings from the mission field in Papua New Guinea. I joined them at Nofuāli'i and then Vaiala village near Apia Town. By this time my grandparents had settled at neighbouring Moata'a village and asked that I come to stay with them. Thus Moata'a became the village from which I looked at the world and helped shape my worldview as a Sāmoan growing up in a rapidly changing environment.

There were no *matai* in my family when I grew up. There were titles around for the taking, but the problem at that time was, there were no takers. I had three uncles, two of whom were overseas on scholarships, one in medicine and one in electrical trades. The third one had graduated from the Fiji School of Medicine and was working at the national hospital. But he was staying in town with his newly married wife on a quarter acre of land

they had bought. He had no inklings at the time for inheriting a *matai* title as he considered it a burden. We were living on land that was inherited from my grandmother's ancestors. This was land belonging to the highest ranked title, Tofaeono, in the Vaimauga district. Our neighbour to one side was a second cousin of my grandmother, who had moved to our land with his family when his in-laws banished them. My grandmother kindly allowed him to settle with his family near us. His name was A1³ and his wife was B1. He was an expert lagoon fisherman. He had a long canoe called a *va'aalo* on which he used to fish with his sons and other young men in his family. Because there were yet no *matai* in my grandmother's family she had decided that A1 was to be bestowed with one of our family's important orator titles. On March 11th 1961, A1 was bestowed the *matai* title V1. The instigator of the title bestowal was my grandmother. No people from the village or district contested the V1 bestowal or objected to A1 being the V1 titleholder. The title bestowal ceremony went smoothly without any parties from Moataa village contesting the *saofa'i*. According to normal procedure, a titleholder is required to register the title bestowed on him or her after the ceremony. So when A1 went to register his title with the Land and Titles Court he advised the registrar and made the claim that he was the instigator and also sole authority to the title V1. His word was taken at face value and put on record, which still stands today. Unfortunately, my grandmother was not aware of this unkind act by her relative. My grandmother and V1 both passed away in the 1980s. V1 passed on leaving no one to take on the title after him. Luckily, no complications arose from the action taken by V1. But what he did was unethical in that he did not inform my grandmother who still thought that the right to the title was still hers.

In 1999, members of our extended family with rights to the title V1 got together to decide on a *nofo* or the next titleholder to V1. There was no consensus as to who the next *matai* would be, so it was decided that the title would be split up into five holders representing the five factions in our extended family. My mother represented our faction of the family at this meeting. A week or so after the meeting, our immediate family had a meeting to decide on who the next V1 holder would be. After brainstorming over it, we decided that my youngest brother would be bestowed the title based on his characteristics and ability. He was also untitled. My brother was bestowed the V1 title the same year with three others in the extended family. The last faction bowed out with a claim that they were the sole heirs to the title and that they were going to contest the whole matter in court. Up to the present time, they have not been able to justify their claim in the Land and Titles Court and remain in limbo.

Today, the practice of title splitting is something that should be recognized as a potential problem in the future. There are implications regarding the integrity of a title and how meaningful it is after so many splits. An example of a title that has undergone a lot of splits is Namulau'ulu. Originally, this title found its place in the history books of Sāmoa because of the famous orator Namulau'ulu Lauaki. Today, there are so many Namulau'ulu titles that the power and prestige once attributed to it and characterized by one individual has been watered down because of the many titleholders with different characteristics; so much so that the power and meaning attributed to the title is no longer apparent.

The other important title in my family, which I will refer to as the T1 title was closely contested by more than 20 sides in a number of court hearings between 1970 and 1973. One of my uncles who graduated from the Fiji School of Medicine was counselled to take on the responsibility of leading my family's side to contest the title, something that he reluctantly agreed to. In matters involving an important title such as this one, it was vital to get the goodwill of many people with links to the same title, especially those whose words count in a the Land and Titles Court. Many of these people are extended families on whose support a family contesting the title rests. There are processes to go through in gaining favour from extended family members and it involves fairly intricate and complex negotiations, all within cultural boundaries.

To make a long story short, my uncle was appointed as co-titleholder of the T1 title in 1973 with another prominent *matai* from Moata'a. The other co-titleholder passed away three months after being appointed by the Court. That left my uncle as the sole T1 titleholder from 1973 to 1994 when he passed away. He upheld the responsibilities of the title for 21 years.

It was a great surprise to my family then when Court deliberations took place in 2000 to find a replacement titleholder and our side was deposed from the list of parties qualified to contest. Yet my uncle was the titleholder for 21 years. Apparently, my family's side was deposed on a technicality. That is, our side was disqualified by the court based on the premise that our claim did not include a family tree. The appeals are now pending and the conveyance of the outcome is with the Land and Titles Court. It is not known when it will be made public.

My perception of matters such as that seen in the T1 case is that anything can happen. My family's sole claim to the title is based on the fact that our side was the holder for so many years; that we are heirs to such a title. Yet, the reality of the matter is, anybody is at the mercy of the Court. This has been one institution set up by one of the foreign administrations to settle land

and title disputes. The Land and Titles Court is generally perceived to be a neutral institution by which the outcomes of court cases are made based on objective assessments by panels of assessors. Yet if one is to examine the backlog of appeals regarding current lands and titles claims at the aforesaid Court, it is apparent that it is overheating in its function of delivering justice to satisfy the claims and counterclaims of Sāmoan regarding lands and titles cases. It is a sad reality that we cannot get away from.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES IN THE *MATAI* SYSTEM TODAY

One of the trends taking place today is that Sāmoa has had a rapid population increase over the past 30 years. However, the number of *matai* titles based on customary norms has remained the same. Too many families that are eligible to the same few titles has led to the decision that, to satisfy all parties having access to a title, one of the best solutions is to split a title justly amongst stakeholders. This has been the solution with respect to the V1 title discussed above. This has led to some situations where there are too many titles that all have the same right to a small piece of land. This is a problem, which is finding no sensible solution at the current state of the art of bestowing *matai* titles. When factions such as the ones discussed above expand in numbers, the usual trend has been that they then split up into sub-factions and so on. Before long, a lot of *matai* titles of the same name start springing up. I have given the example of Namulau'ulu made famous by Lauaki one of the great orators in Sāmoan history. There are many other titles facing the same malaise like the Namulau'ulu title.

Another major problem is related to universal suffrage that was instituted in the 1991 general election in Sāmoa. Before, when only *matai* were voting in general elections, the alleged problem of corruption was limited only to *matai*. And they were quite tactical with the way they approached election candidates. Right now, with universal suffrage, both women and men hold that power of the voter over the aspiring political candidates. Subsequently there have been many demands by voters made in the name of promising to vote for a candidate. Even after elections have long finished, there are still those young untitled men and women going to a candidate's place asking and demanding money for cigarettes, beer, school fees, *fa'alavelave*, and the list goes on. The general feeling and consensus amongst my own baby boomer generation is that, there was more integrity during the time when only *matai* were voting. Right now, those in the above 21 years voter category are being perceived as people with no tact, no integrity, and a calculating group using their voting power to make unjustified

demands. This is of course a relative perception as values and beliefs which define each generational cohort varies from age group to age group. I am now a member of a conservative group at this point in time.

Another change that has taken place under universal suffrage is that a voter can change the place she/he votes in depending on the political candidate whom that person wants to vote for. In the days when only *matai* were voting, there was only one place in which to vote and that was in the *matai*'s constituency. And if a *matai* had more than one *matai* title, she/he could only vote in the place where she/he resided. Today, many voters are frequently changing the places in which they vote.

I hold the title Fonotī, which was bestowed on me in the early 1990s at the village Sālimu, Fagaloa by Talamaivao Niko, the paramount chief of Fagaloa. Earlier on in 1986, I was bestowed the title Siā'olua by Leilua Punivalu, paramount chief of the village Sāleilua, Faleālili. Both titles belong to the family clans of my in-laws. As I see it, these titles were bestowed on me, firstly because of the level of education that both my wife and I have achieved, and instead of bestowing the title on my wife by right of kinship, her family bestowed it on me based on the adopted biblical belief that the husband is the head of the family. Furthermore the titles are a form of reward because of the service I had provided to her family, church and village. In the traditional Sāmoan context, the passage to a *matai* title is through service within the family, as manifested in the old adage, 'O le ala i le pule o le tautua'.

This change of bestowing *matai* titles on those with educational qualifications (or some other type of achievement) has been going on since Sāmoan Independence. Allusion is made to it by Meleiseā in his book, *The Making of Modern Sāmoa*. It is a way in which the system in Sāmoa recognizes the importance of education. In a way educational status is an achievement as well as a service. Firstly, it takes years of sweat and toil to earn an educational or technical or some other qualification at a university or polytechnic. This in itself is a form of service. But it is also a privilege accorded to those who strive at school.

Secondly, an educated person's service today is channelled through the system in which she or he works; that is, it is no longer in the traditional village sector, but in the service sector, whether it be government or private. Such services in most situations nowadays benefit the rural areas too. Thus awarding a *matai* title through educational achievement is still within the principles through which service is recognized within the culture. Only the pathway is different this time, not in the village, but in the classroom. Thus the founding principles remain, but the means to manifest the ends

have evolved somewhat. Still, the other pathway of serving within the family and village also prevails and many a *matai* obtain their titles through this pathway.

Being a *matai* in Sāmoa is a privilege, but it also carries with it responsibilities and challenges. There are lots of decisions to be made, be it in family matters or village or church affairs. In the village *fono* or council, decisions are made by *matai*. In my village church, *matai* have a strong say in meetings, although non-*matai* also have as strong a say, as the church encourages this kind of equitable forum where everybody has a right to speak their mind. Therefore in matters of the village and church, the influence of *matai* prevails, whether strongly or less strongly, it is still there. Sāmoa is a country founded on God as alluded to by my favourite song right in the beginning of this chapter; or in other words God's authority has been designated to them.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to portray the *matai* of Sāmoa as not only leaders, but as an institution that has weathered the changes brought about as a result of the advent of Christian influence. Sāmoa, under *matai* leadership embraced Christian values and beliefs with the arrival of missionaries more than 150 years ago. Subsequently, the Sāmoan ethos with respect to what is 'good and should be' followed the lead of Christianity, a legacy that is still apparent today. But in many ways, the *matai* system has Sāmoanized Christianity to fit in with the cultural norms of Sāmoa. The gaining of political independence for Sāmoa reinforced the influence of Christian values, still under the leadership of *matai*. But even with Christianity in the midst of the *fa'asāmoa*, the *matai* system still holds its own and is unique as a system of governance in the village and in the church. Its functions fit in quite well in both the cultural and church contexts.

Secondly, the influence of education as a legacy of colonial administrations has not diminished the effectiveness or the functionality of the *matai* system. In fact the *matai* system has not only evolved, but has in many ways been reinforced in terms of its basic principles and values. Education has also strengthened the resolve of those in the system that the *matai* system functions well within the education milieu. There have been changes in the material presentation and observation of many of the cultural and ceremonial rites, but the underlying principles are still there. These changes are influenced by *matai*.

Another practice that has seen a kind of 'prostitution' of the concept

of *matai* is title splitting, in which some important titles which used to be held by single individuals were gradually split up during one or two generations. Today, there are so many titleholders for some of these titles that it is difficult to characterize a title because of the many titleholder; that is, the uniqueness for many of these split titles has been lost.

Lastly, the argument could be made that educational achievement is recognized under the *matai* system as a service that could be rewarded with the bestowal of a *matai* title within a family group that wants to recognize such an achievement. Today, many incumbents with university degrees and diplomas have been recognized for their enterprise and scholarship by being bestowed with *matai* titles. This is one way in which the *matai* system has evolved in that it has not only recognized the village (service) context but it has accommodated the educational achievement context. In the final analysis, the *matai* system will not only survive but will absorb and weather the adverse effects of many tides of change in the affairs of Sāmoans.

Notes

¹ According to Meleiseā et al (1987:69), Christianity changed Sāmoan culture during the 19th Century, but such changes were absorbed and 'Sāmoanized'.

² However I also saw a live heifer led along as part of *sua* presentations by an EFKS village church congregation in 2002.

³ These are not their real names which have been withheld.

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