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# “Heaven and Earth” Samoan Indigenous Religion, Christianity, and the Relationship Between the Samoan People and the Environment

Grace Wildermuth

*SIT Study Abroad*, gwildermuth@middlebury.edu

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# “Heaven and Earth”

Samoan Indigenous Religion, Christianity, and the Relationship  
between the Samoan People and the Environment

Grace Wildermuth

Advisor Reverend Doctor Mose Mailo

Academic Director Jackie Fa'asisila

S.I.T. Samoa, Fall 2012

## **Abstract**

This paper examines Samoan indigenous religion and the relationship between Samoans and the environment before and after the introduction of Christianity. It looks at how Christian beliefs and the cultural perspectives of European missionaries affected Samoa's environment. It then considers Samoan indigenous religious values that may be helpful to combat current environmental problems. Primary and secondary sources were used, including interviews with both theologians and environmentalists. Samoan indigenous religion promoted a sustainable relationship with the land but Christianity and the cultural lens through which it was delivered had negative environmental effects. Samoa retains a deep environmental knowledge in the memories of its people, but acknowledging the Samoan indigenous religious concepts causes apprehension for many Samoan Christians. Only time will tell if Samoan Christianity will choose to again incorporate Samoan indigenous religious values and revitalize a relationship based on kinship with and respect for the natural world in order to move more constructively towards the future of Samoa and its environment.

## Contacts

Fauolo, Okenaisa. Director, the Samoan Studies Institute at American Samoa Community College.

**Email:** o.fauolo@amsamoa.edu

Mailo, Reverend Doctor Mose. Lecturer, Piula Theological College.

**Email:** mosemailo@yahoo.com

**Phone:** 726-4230

Meleisea, Malama. Director, Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Samoa, Historian.

**Email:** malamameleisea@yahoo.com.au

**Phone:** 20072 ext 114 (NUS)

Mo'a, Sister Vitolia. Lecturer, National University of Samoa.

**Email:** vitoliam@yahoo.com

Percival, Steven. Samoan Film-maker.

**Email:** steven.percival@gmail.com

**Phone:** 751-9273

Schuster, Cedric. Parliamentarian, Environmental Consultant.

**Email:** cschuster@conservation.ws

Thaman, Randy. Professor of Pacific Island Biogeography, University of the South Pacific.

**Email:** randolph.thaman@usp.ac.fj

Tui Atua, T.T.T.E. Head of State.

**Email:** hos\_sec@samoaoonline.ws (secretary: Logo)

**Phone:** 26400 (office)

Va'ai, Reverend Doctor Upolu. Lecturer, Piula Theological College.

**Email:** ulvaai@yahoo.com

**Phone:** 724-0961

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*“A great many people will live out their days without ever seeing such sights, or if they do, never gasping. My parents taught me this—to gasp, and feel lucky. They gave me the gift of making mountains out of nature’s exquisite molehills.”* (Barbara Kingsolver, High Tide in Tucson)

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## Introduction

In Samoa, Christianity is visible not only on Sundays when one can witness tributaries of white merging as they ascend the steps of the largest building in sight, but also on car decals and billboards, and in the Samoan Constitution. It is audible not only in church choir competitions aired on television, but in popular Samoan music, and at every gathering or ceremony, public or private. Christianity is almost seamlessly incorporated in the *fa'asamoa*, the Samoan way of life, making it hard to imagine a Samoa devoid of the Christian Church, but such a time did exist. As Lalomilo Kamu writes in his book, *The Samoan Culture and The Christian Gospel*, "It is impossible to speak of the history of Samoa without referring to the history of Christianity in Samoa" (2003: 1). It has been said that when the European missionaries arrived in Samoa in the 1830s to spread the word of Jehovah they were greeted by a nonreligious people, but this is not the case.

In his book, *Lagaga: A Short History of Western Samoa*, Director of the Center for Samoan Studies at the National University of Samoa and historian Malama Meleisea writes, "Religion, as it is generally understood, refers to a system of beliefs, the ceremonial and ritual activities that are associated with it, and the worship of a supernatural being or beings" (1987: 35). Samoans did, in fact, worship supernatural beings, refer to a creation story to gain perspective on their position in the natural world, and incorporate religious beliefs in every aspect of their lives before the arrival of Christianity. The Samoan indigenous religion promoted a sustainable relationship with the environment based on respect for and kinship with the natural world. As Denis Goulet writes,

In the past, major religions constituted human beings as the guardians and stewards of nature. These religions usually trace the origins of nature to a creating God, and in one way or another, they preach to humans a duty of being responsible stewards of nature's goods. In contrast, as the sociologist Peter Berger convincingly shows, modernity has now rendered the world of human knowledge secular, and the religious basis for responsible stewardship has been sapped (1993: 17-18).

Modernity found its way to Samoa on the wake of European missionary ships, and began to stifle the notion of responsible stewardship soon after its arrival.

Although Samoans effectively responded to the introduced beliefs and adapted Christian ideals to fit the *fa'asamoa* (Va'ai 2012: 77-78), the effects were widespread and not wholly beneficial for the environment. The introduction of Christianity and the cultural lens through which it was presented and interpreted in Samoa led to changes in environmental perspective in Samoa, in turn affecting resource management, the economy, and culture. As Samoa struggles to address issues such as environmental degradation and natural resource depletion, it becomes necessary to examine the fundamental beliefs shaping new environmental perspective among the Samoan people.

Similar investigations elsewhere in the Pacific suggest that religious values have indeed played a large role in recent environmental degradation. Sonia P. Juvik's case study in Morovo Lagoon in the Solomon Islands included an environmental attitude and awareness survey. The results suggest that, "the more traditionalistic religions may well be more environmentally sustaining than introduced Christian religions," and that, "the active participant's experience in a religion influences consciousness and attitudes toward management of natural resources." Juvik adds, "It is this very transformative potential that offers most hope that religion may become an important vehicle for rethinking our relations with nature" (1993: 151). Many around the world similarly acknowledge the importance of religion as a medium between human beings and the natural environment.

In Samoa, several theologians and intellectuals have begun to encourage a re-interpretation and re-invention of Christian beliefs regarding the environment. Some also encourage the use of Samoan indigenous religious ideals to encourage a sustainable relationship with the natural world. Many Samoans, on the other hand, hesitate to acknowledge Samoan indigenous religion and find it awkward to navigate the relationship between traditional beliefs and Samoan Christianity. However, progress is



being made. Reverend Doctor Mose Mailo of Piula Theological College suggests, “Christianity is moving into the right direction now after doing a lot of damage....Missionary Christianity is now becoming Samoan Christianity” (Interview 10/11/12). As Samoans look towards the future, questions of religious thought and environmental protection remained cloaked in uncertainty.

This paper seeks to provide a basic understanding of the Samoan indigenous religion, in order to better conceptualize the relationship between Samoans and the environment before the introduction of Christianity in the 1830s. Secondly, it explores the many ways in which Christianity and the cultural perspective brought by the European missionaries who delivered it, have affected the natural environment in Samoa. Lastly, this paper considers possible ways in which Samoan indigenous religious values may be helpful in the quest to combat modern environmental problems, and explores the relationship between Samoan indigenous religion and Christianity in Samoa today, in order to look constructively towards the future.

## **Methodology**

The first seed of this topic was planted in the mind of the writer more than three months ago, as she sat in a theatre at the University of Hawai'i and listened to Samoan film-maker Steven Percival answer questions about his most recent project, "Exploring the use of Natural Fibres in Samoa." He spoke of a time when Samoans had such a deep connection with the environment that before harvesting a tree, a ritual would be performed to ask permission and convey respect for the tree. The writer felt an immediate connection with the concept of this deep spiritual connection with the environment. She was fascinated and looked forward to further exploring the subject upon arrival in Samoa. When she arrived, however, she found that a majority of the experiences presented regarding religion in Samoa involved the Christian Church. She began to wonder what Christianity brought with its biblical teachings, and what may have been lost alongside the Samoan indigenous religion.

The research for this project was completed in Samoa from November 8<sup>th</sup> through November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012 using primary and secondary sources. The potentially sensitive topic is not often spoken or written about, which did initially pose as a challenge to the research. However, eventually various primary sources were found whom had reflected extensively on the topic and provided deep insights that have supported this project. Many of the secondary sources used were written by Samoa's Head of State, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Tupuola Tufuga Efi, who has used his influence as a leader to bravely approach these sensitive topics.

This research sought to explore perspectives on, and ways of thinking about, the topic at hand. Primary sources were for the most part used to gain insight into possible ways of thinking about indigenous religion, Christianity and the environment. Secondary sources were used to construct background information and to provide data to support the perspective gained through interviews.

One challenge to this research lies in the sensitivity preventing the voicing of honest and open discussion surrounding an issue of such great consequence. For this reason, this research represents those who have chosen to consider and vocalize their opinions on the subject. It must also be acknowledged that all of those interviewed have completed higher education and many have gone abroad to complete their schooling, possibly influencing their perspectives as a Samoan. Consequently, the research conducted represents variations of one perspective and should be expanded to include additional perspectives in the future. Additionally, because Samoan history and indigenous religion are based on the practice of oral tradition, some variations exist in the information collected. The time constraint within which this independent study project was conducted also limited the amount of information and research included. For this reason, further research should be conducted in order to include additional and varying perspectives on the topic.

Lastly, although efforts were made to remain as an objective researcher, the topic presented implies deep feelings and beliefs for many people, including the writer.

## Pre-contact Relationship with the Environment

### Samoan Indigenous Religion

In order to understand the relationship between Samoans and the environment before the introduction of Christianity, one must turn to the Samoan indigenous religion to understand how Samoans perceived their place within creation. Reverend Doctor Upolu Va'ai of Piula Theological College suggests that to better understand Samoan indigenous religion, one must start with their concept of God (Interview 11/20/12). The Samoan indigenous religion is based on a creation story which places God, *Tagaloa*, as ancestor of all living things on earth. *Tagaloa* (sometimes referred to as *Tagaloaalelagi* meaning, *Tagaloa* of the heavens) was the progenitor of humans, animals, plants, the cosmos, sea, and land alike. As Samoa's Head of State, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Tupuola Tufuga Efi explains, "In the *Tagaloa* mythology, earth and all living organisms, including humans, originated from a "Big Bang", i.e. the tumultuous separation of *Lagi* (heaven) and *Papa* (rock). This thesis is closer to the scientific explanation of the origins of the planet earth than to Christian biblical text," (2009b: 4). After the separation of *Lagi* and *Papa*, *Tagaloa* sent his messenger, *Tuli* to help germinate the lands on earth. From *Lagi* and *Papa* all other living things were born, becoming part of the genealogical family of *Tagaloa* (Tui Atua 2009b: 4-5).

The Samoan indigenous religion recognized two main categories of gods. *Atua*, or non-human gods, were considered the original gods and were believed to reside in *Pulotu*, the otherworld, or in *Lagi*, heaven. *Tagaloa* was considered the supreme *atua*. The other category of gods was known as *aitu*, those of human origin. Because Samoans did not believe that death meant the end of existence, ancestral spirits were

worshipped in the form of *aitu* (Meleisea 1987: 35-36). According to Kamu, “Each family had an *aitu* which was recognized by all of the members. These family, or individual, deities were supposed to inhabit a familiar shell. Similar to other deities, these were respected by other people who were not attached to the family” (2003: 24). *Aitu* were often represented in the form of animals, birds, plants, and other natural objects (Meleisea 1987: 36). The respect shown to a family’s ancestors was transferred to the natural objects in which they were represented, creating a *va*, or sacred relationship, between Samoans and the natural world.

### ***Va* (Sacred Relationship)**

According to Fanaafi Aiono- Le Tagaloa, “Between Creator and created and between all of creation is the *Va*. It governs all things and holds all things together....*Va* is relationship, connection, affiliation, boundaries, difference, separation, space, distance, responsibility, obligation, state of being, position, standing, and so much more” (2003: 7-8). The concept of *va* still persists in Samoa today. Le Tagaloa goes on to state that the concept of *va*, “continues to pervade Samoan life and living even today among all Samoans in Samoa or residing elsewhere” (2003: 7-8). Although the concept of *va* continues to be seen as a core value of the Samoan culture, some of its meaning may have changed as religious views were altered over time.

The belief of a shared genealogy between all living things created within Samoans a feeling of shared kinship with their environment. The Head of State Tui Atua explains, “In the Samoan indigenous religion all matter, whether human, water, animal, plant and the biosphere are issues of *Tagaloaalelagi*. They are divine creations connected by genealogy. They share the same biological beginnings” (2009a: 116). According to Samoan indigenous religion, the human being was the last in the sequence of creation, suggesting that the human being is the child of heaven and earth, child of the cosmos (Va’ai Interview 11/20/12). Tui Atua echoes this belief, stating, “The Samoan indigenous reference asserts that

while humans might be the most evolved and intelligent of all *Tagaloa's* creations, they are, nevertheless, the younger brother in Samoan genealogical terms" (Tui Atua 2009a: 116). He also adds that the mysteries of the physical world are beyond man, reinforcing the human beings' place in creation and necessity for a relationship based on *fa'aaloalo*, or respect, for the natural environment (Tui Atua 2010: 2-3).

According to Samoan indigenous thought, the human being is not an individual, but part of the cosmos, the land, the seas and the skies (Tui Atua 2008: 80). This is evidenced in the language used to describe the natural world. Many words used to describe the environment are also used to represent parts of the human being most associated with life. For example, *eleele*, meaning blood, is also used to describe earth or dirt. Similarly, *palapala*, which also means blood, can be used to describe mud. These examples both serve as linguistic evidence to support the Samoan indigenous concept of land and creation as a part of the human being (Va'ai Interview 11/20/12). Mailo adds, "The term for land in Samoa is the word *fanua*. But *fanua* is also the word given to the placenta, the placenta of a woman." Here, the idea of new life represented by the placenta is equated with land and the environment. Mailo asserts that the dual meaning of the word *fanua* is indicative of the traditional connection between man, life and land, positioning man as a *part* of the environment (Interview 10/11/12).

This placement within creation leads to a relationship with the environment very different from the modern Western world's concept. Va'ai summarizes: "So that's the orientation of Samoan mindset towards creation. It's part of us. It's part of our blood. It's part of our bodies" (Interview 11/20/12). Instead of feeling a sense of dominion over nature, Samoans recognize an inherent equality in all of creation. In his book, *Su'esu'e Manogi*, Tui Atua explains,

Harmony in Samoan life recognizes that all living things are equal. Human life is equivalent and complementary to cosmic, plant and animal life. In the balance of life, all living things share equal status and power. Man is no less powerful or

greater than the heavens, the trees, the fish or cattle and vice versa. In the organization of life, the relationship between man and the cosmos, man and the environment, man and man, and man and himself is, each and together, premised on the search for balance, peace and harmony (Tui Atua 2008: 104).

Samoan indigenous religion did not conceptualize man as having authority over or ownership of anything in the universe. Consequently, there was no thought that the natural environment was meant to serve human beings, suggesting the superiority of man. Instead, Samoans conceptualized a creation that was part of them. Their relationship with the natural world was based on *va tapuia*, a sacred relationship between humans and all things.

### ***Tapu (Sacred/Taboo)***

The Samoan phrase *va tapuia* includes the term *tapu*, which translates to mean both sacred and taboo and often refers to specific prohibitions. The Samoan indigenous religion includes many rituals concerning the natural world that are based on this concept of *tapu*. Samoans believed that one must seek pardon when breaking or killing a plant, in order to recognize the existence of *tapu* between plant life and human life (Tui Atua 2009a: 117). The Head of State provides an example of this ritual in his book, *Su'esu'e Manogi*. He states, "In the indigenous Samoan religion it was crucial that before a tree was cut that *fa'alanu* or a prayer chant was performed. The chant sought from the god of the forest pardon for taking the life of the tree or any of its member parts" (Tui Atua 2008: 107). The concept of *tapu* within Samoan indigenous religious thought affected all aspects of life, from agricultural practices to fishing methods, house structures, human interactions and societal organizations (Tui Atua 2009b: 5) One such societal organization based on the concept of *tapu* was pre-contact political organization in Samoa.

## ***Tapu* and Political Organization**

A close connection exists between the Samoan religious system and political organization. Samoan chiefs were appointed based on their ancestral connection to *Tagaloa* and the chiefs represented the ancestral gods of the *aiga* (family), village, or district (Meleisea 1987: 37). Village councils often instituted restrictions to ensure the preservation of the environment. The respect shown to chiefs based on their representation of the ancestral gods provided a platform on which to establish such restrictions. Tui Atua explains,

During times of re-growth certain trees and plants were prohibited from being cut or picked. Those protocols and the *tapu* associated with them provided a conservation plan that dictated what man could take from the environment, when and how much. Such a plan prioritized need rather than profit. In this context the taking of natural resources was never to go beyond what nature herself could not sustain in terms of re-growth (Tui Atua 2008: 107).

If one was to disregard such restrictions, it was believed that negative spiritual repercussions would follow (Meleisea Interview 11/12/12). These protocols, meant to ensure the preservation of the environment, were based on traditional knowledge that included a deep understanding of the natural world.

## **Ethnobiodiversity**

University of the South Pacific Professor of Pacific Island Biogeography Randy Thaman defines ethnobiodiversity as, “the knowledge, uses, beliefs, resource-use systems and taxonomies that any culture has for their biodiversity” (Lecture 11/1/12). The rich ethnobiodiversity of traditional Samoan society is evidenced by their deep understandings of their natural environment. Thaman goes on to assert, “In all traditional societies people knew their environment, they knew their ecosystems, they



knew the tides” (Lecture 11/1/12). Because of this deep knowledge, village councils were able to establish protocols to ensure a sustainable relationship with the environment. As Tui Atua explains, “Tasks associated with fishing, planting, harvesting and building were therefore coordinated in accordance with predetermined cosmic and environmental timings (Tui Atua 2008: 107). But Thaman warns that as societies become more urbanized, they tend to lose some of this knowledge (Lecture 11/1/12).

Samoaan indigenous religious concepts such as *va* and *tapu*, as well as Samoa’s political organization and extensive knowledge of the natural world led to an integrated conception of the environment. The Samoan people saw themselves not as above or separate from the natural world, but as an integral part of a larger system and therefore held an inherent desire to maintain, not exploit, the environment in which they lived. This concept led to practices that helped to promote a sustainable relationship with the natural resources of Samoa. Va’ai explains, “Religion for Samoa is not something abstract. It is an everyday way of life of treating the tree, treating the sea and the forest, treating the others in the community” (Interview 11/20/12). It was into this religious framework that new ideas from the West started to spread.

## **Introduction of Christianity**

Samoa had very little interaction with the outside world prior to the 1820s. For the most part, interactions were limited to near-by islands, inhabited by people with similar lifestyles to their own (Gilson 1970: 65). During the 1820s, Samoans visiting their close neighbors started to notice that change had come upon the Pacific. Wesleyan missionaries had brought Christianity to Tonga and Tahiti, Hawai'i and Rarotonga. As Samoans learned of changes taking place in neighboring Polynesian islands, some may

have begun to anticipate the arrival of missionaries on their own shores (Meleisea 1987: 53).

That arrival came on the morning of Friday, July 16th, 1830 when the *Messenger of Peace* anchored off of the south coast of the island of Savai'i, bringing with it the Reverend John Williams of the London Missionary Society (Hempenstall 2004: 244). Williams, having successfully spread Christianity throughout the Cook Islands in the 1820s, set sail towards lands untouched by missionaries. On the way to Samoa, Williams encountered a Samoan chief living in Tonga who offered to accompany the mission to his homeland and ensure a favorable reception (Morrell 1946: 111-112). Upon arrival in Savai'i, the Samoan was greeted as a chief. He explained to his fellow Samoans that the *Messenger of Peace* was a *va'a lotu*, a ship of religion or prayer, bringing the message of Jehovah. The Samoan chief promised that the acceptance of this new religion would ensure the arrival of an abundance of goods. The high chief of the village seemed honored to receive his guests, and an exchange of gifts ensued. Williams left a small group of Christian teachers under the care of the high chief. Under the condition that the high chief would protect the Christian teachers, Williams declared that the London Missionary Society would send European missionaries to Samoa. After anchoring for less than a week, the *Messenger of Peace*, carrying John Williams, sailed away, leaving the Christian teachers to spread the gospel in Samoa (Gilson 1970: 69-70).

Two years later, Williams returned to Samoa to find that Christian teachings had spread throughout the island group. Upon confirming that the high chief had kept his promises, he requested that missionaries be sent from Europe and in July of 1836, six English missionaries arrived in Samoa to spread the word of Jehovah (Hempenstall 2004: 244). By 1841, with a growing number of missionaries, teachers, and followers, the London Missionary Society had reached most villages in Samoa (Gilson 1970: 95,115). Eventually, missionaries from other Christian churches made their way to Samoa and found followings as well. As Kamu states, "Within a few decades of its introduction into Samoa in the

early nineteenth century, Christianity was generally accepted as the religion of the people” (2003: 1). Although European missionaries made many contributions to the Samoan people, it must be acknowledged that as things were gained, so too were things lost.

## **Influences of Christianity**

### **The Samoan Culture**

In his book, *The Samoan Culture and the Christian Gospel*, Kamu explains that in pre-contact Samoa, religion and culture were “integrated parts of one reality which [gave] mutual support to each other” (2003: 1). It was due to this interconnectedness that, as Christianity replaced Samoan indigenous religion, aspects of traditional Samoan culture were consequently altered.

Other Polynesian societies had symbolized their acceptance of Christianity by burning their idols and destroying their temples, but the Samoan indigenous religion had no temples or idols to destroy. Instead, Samoans symbolized their acceptance of Christianity by taking part in a public ceremony to denounce their ancestral, village, or district *aitu*. During this ceremony, attended by missionaries, the Samoans wishing to accept *lotu*, or become Christian, would prepare and eat the animal or plant that had represented their *aitu*. Meleisea explains that the ceremony, “so desecrated the spirit in each creature that it could never again be worshipped” (1987: 54). The missionaries also strongly discouraged many Samoan traditions that were considered to be of utmost importance to the culture, including tattooing and *malaga*, visits between villages that reinforced important relationships.

Many aspects of Samoan culture were weakened, but most were not forgotten. Samoans actively participated in the introduced changes, and accepted only what they saw as beneficial. Many believe that Samoans were able to apply the religious practices introduced by Christianity in a way that

made them part of the Samoan culture (Va'ai 2012: 77-78). Despite the drastic changes that have come to Samoa alongside modernity and globalization, much of traditional Samoan culture has endured the transformation and continues to serve as the foundation of the *fa'asamoa*. Mailo describes that traditional healing continues today using indigenous plants, such as the *nonu*, for medicine. He explains that there is a religious component to this healing process not found in the methods used by modern doctors or nurses, as traditional healers, or *taulasea*, act as mediators between the gods and those who are sick. Similarly, he tells of a traditional blessing referred to as *talomua*, meaning first taro or first fruit. While this tradition has endured the introduction of Christianity, it has not gone unchanged. Before the introduction of Christianity, a chief blessed the first harvest. In many villages today, a minister of the church plays that role in the *talomua* (Interview 10/11/12).

## **Spiritual Ecology Perspective**

Along with changes to the Samoan culture, Christianity and the missionaries who delivered it brought different perspectives to the Samoan people, including an alternate outlook on their relationship with the environment. In *Ethics, Religion and Biodiversity: Relations Between Conservation and Cultural Values*, Juvik writes, "it is possible to identify at least three dominant viewpoints concerning the relationship between humans and nature that imply differences which can affect the preservation of biological diversity and overall attitudes toward the natural world" (1993: 148). Juvik goes on to describe these viewpoints and corresponding religious practices. Samoan indigenous religion fits most accurately with the first viewpoint Juvik describes, an animistic religious viewpoint in which nature and creator are one and there exists a respect for the sacredness of natural objects. Similarly, Samoan indigenous religion suggests that all things are descendants of *Tagaloa*, and therefore must respect the *va* that they share. Juvik describes the third viewpoint as, "the dominant Judeo-Christian perspective which places human beings above nature and God above humans" (1993: 148-150). The latter viewpoint Juvik

describes is the viewpoint that found its way to the shores of Samoa in the 1830s. This shift in viewpoints, indicative of their corresponding creation stories, brought concrete changes to the lives and practices of the Samoan people.

## **Changes to the Concept of Land in Samoa**

Before the introduction of a Judeo-Christian perspective towards nature, the Samoan understanding of land was derived from their view of creation (Kamu 2003: 134). Samoans understood that they were the last creation of *Tagaloa*, the child of all previous creations. The human being cannot control the environment because the environment is “the womb [man] was from.” (Va’ai Interview 11/20/12). As Kamu suggests, “land is a gift from God; it is a sacred trust which was entrusted to the ancestors and from whom it has come to the present generation to use and to pass on to the future generations. It is communally held for the sake of the *aiga* and the community; it is for all people to use while they are in need of it” (2003: 134). To the Samoans, land was not to be owned or traded as a commodity. As National University of Samoa Lecturer Sister Vitolia Mo’a suggests, “the whole sense [in] Samoa about what land is, what the environment is, is the complete antithesis of the European Western perspective” (Interview 11/13/12).

The European perspective of land was brought to Samoa largely by Christian missionaries. Va’ai describes a theology produced by the Enlightenment period. The Crown of Creation theology posits that the human being is the center of creation and all creation is meant to serve the human being and his or her purpose. He explains, “That’s the kind of theology and that’s the kind of mentality which was brought into Samoa...and we usually use that phrase in our prayers, that we, the human being are crown of your creation” (Interview 11/20/12). This theology, now common in Samoa, is indicative of the Judeo-Christian perspective, which places human beings above nature.

It is also significant to note the spatial difference between the Samoan indigenous religion and Western Christianity. Before the arrival of the missionaries, Samoans saw God in their natural environment and used the environment as a space in which to worship him. No temples, churches or idols were necessary aspects of worship. European missionaries brought with them the concept of seeing God in man-made spaces. Today, Samoans worship God in *falesā*, church buildings, most of which are strikingly large. Samoans moved from associating God with the natural environment, to relating God with man-made structures and extravagance.

The introduction of Christianity also changed the scope of Samoa's religious views. Mailo believes as a Theologian that the idea of a universal God has had widespread effects in Samoa. "The idea of a universal God, it changes the way that people look at the world. The world is no longer small. Ideas are no longer small...that universality of God goes hand in hand with the idea that the world is big like God is big and everything has to be big." He suggests that before the arrival of the missionaries, there was no concept of a person owning their own land. Land belonged to the village, to the community. As missionaries put up fences and laid claim to what was theirs, the Samoans started to view land differently. "I think Christianity, in both its theology and its teachings of a universal God, has introduced these new ways of looking at land" (Interview 10/11/12). In the same way that the theologies and religious ideas of the European missionaries significantly affected Samoa's relation with the land, so too did their cultural perspectives.

## **European Cultural Perspectives**

When European missionaries arrived in Samoa in the 1830s, they had just departed from the setting of the European Industrial Revolution, and arrived in Samoa with a view towards the environment based on production and extraction (Mo'a Interview 10/11/12). As Kamu states, "Europeans think of land as a commodity to be bought and owned by a company or by individuals either

for a family or for commercial ventures to earn a profit” (2003: 135). The missionaries encouraged Samoans to share these ideas, by exemplifying habits of industry and the dignity of work (Gilson 1970: 97). The missionaries also promoted the production of exportable goods by introducing new crops and processing methods. According to Gilson, “[John Williams] envisaged the opening of secure harbors and the establishment of secure trading posts, regular shipping services and commercial plantations” (1970: 139). While these changes most likely improved the availability and variety of goods in Samoa, they also had negative environmental effects and significantly changed the way Samoans viewed their relationship with the environment and obligations to the Church.

## **Giving to the Church**

Along with the spiritual and social fellowship provided by a church comes financial obligation, often strengthened by considerable social pressure (Va'ai 2012: 92). Meleisea writes, “When a village decided to become Christian they built a church and a house for a teacher or pastor, and began to contribute to the church by supporting the pastor with food and services, and by contributing coconut oil to the senior representative of the mission in each district” (1987: 54-55). Mailo posits that in this way, Christianity brought about the beginning of huge plantations and mass production. He explains,

When the church introduced the offering...there was no money. What we valued were coconut oil, arrow root, and so people started to plant more than they used to plant: arrowroot for the church and arrowroot for the family, oil for the church and oil for the family....which means the amount of planting changed and the amount of land affected [was] expanded (Interview 10/11/12).

Eventually, the church collected the coconut oil and arrowroot, exported them to England for sale, and received the profit. This practice began the custom of donating money to the church (Meleisea 1987: 54-55). Va'ai explains how this practice has helped facilitate the change of production from subsistence to cash market plantations in Samoa. He describes a typical plantation before the practice of donating to

the church as “a small plantation at the back of the house just to serve the daily needs of the family. Now,” he adds, “we have that sort of plantation that takes up all the side of the mountain, because it’s for the market...so now we see it as a commodity, as a product, and when we get money from that we give [it] to the church” (Interview 11/20/12). Samoans began to compete for the honor of donating the most to the church, often resulting in a struggle to meet the needs of the family. The recent rise of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in Samoa has compounded this idea of giving with teachings of the Prosperity Gospel.

## **Prosperity Gospel**

The Prosperity Gospel views wealth as a sign of God’s blessings and believes faith and donations to the church will increase one’s material wealth (Mo’a Interview 11/13/12). In order to give to the church, Samoans must increase the size and production of their plantation and increase industry, which significantly affects Samoa’s natural resources (Va’ai Interview 11/20/12). Subsequently, the more money that is given by the congregation of a church, the more the church is blessed. According to Mailo, this has caused churches to turn their back on their responsibilities to the environment: “If we look at the development of churches these days, it seems that whatever helps the church to gain more money is what is important. They don’t really care about the environment” (Interview 10/11/12). Luckily, these views have started to change as the Christian Church begins to re-evaluate its attitude towards the environment.

## **Towards a Spirituality of Ecology**

Religious theologies and beliefs are often dependent on the cultural framework through which they are viewed. The religious teachings brought to Samoa were Christian ideas seen through the cultural lens of the European missionaries, coming from a society in the midst of an industrial revolution



and booming production period. For this reason, the opportunity exists to re-interpret biblical teachings through an alternative cultural lens or from a fresh perspective. Today, theologians and religious communities throughout the world, in response to the global environmental crisis, are beginning to re-think Christian teachings about the environment. Dualistic notions of spirit and nature, sacred and secular, are being challenged and replaced by holistic understandings of social-ecological systems (Engel 1993: 193). In Samoa, some theologians have started to re-interpret biblical texts, invite traditional knowledge to find space within Christian teachings, and view Christianity through an indigenous framework.

As Sister Vitolia Mo'a states, "there is a huge coming of theologians and scholars to counter or to provide new interpretations to some biblical texts: that man is not the center of creation, that man is part of creation, that instead of authority and all this power, is stewardship" (Interview 11/13/12). Va'ai maintains that Samoans have been wrongly interpreting the word 'dominion' in the Christian creation story. He explains that the word 'dominion' was written by the Israelites and found its meaning through a certain cultural perspective that provided an alternate interpretation of the text. The Israelites had just begun to rebuild Jerusalem, and a re-invigoration of agriculture ensued. Va'ai posits that the Israelites used 'dominion' as an agriculture term referring to the stewardship of their crops, not an authority over creation. He states, "We have to put that word in context or else we will wrongly interpret that term. And the Church right now is wrongly interpreting it in its theologies" (Interview 11/20/12). Luckily, others are also beginning to similarly question biblical interpretations of man's relationship with the land, and are turning to traditional knowledge to provide the answers.

Mailo speaks of the efforts of the Church to try to reaffirm traditional concepts of land as a part of the human being and his or her life, not as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Unfortunately, government bills and policies often support the idea that land is a commodity. Mailo explains that the

Church is trying very hard to go against government policies but suggests that Samoan people are receiving contradictory information: “We have Christianized how we relate to the environment. We have Christianized how we treat the plants. And now, people are confused. People are confused” (Interview 10/11/12). While government policies and a lack of cohesion pose challenges, the re-interpretation and revival of traditional concepts occurring in the Christian Church in Samoa today are viewed favorably by many. Parliamentarian and environmental consultant Cedric Schuster feels optimistic about the efforts of the Church, and stresses that in many areas, church ministers carry the most influence in the village. He believes that *faiifeau*, pastors or ministers of the church, can play a role in helping to promote the protection of the environment by encouraging sustainable practices. He states, “It’s very nice to see the pastors and the churches now changing the philosophy on being stewards of, custodians of the land and resources, rather than trying to exploit [them]” (Interview 11/27/12). Va’ai shares in Schuster’s optimism and feels Samoa’s beliefs will guide their actions towards the environment. He suggests that beliefs such as the Prosperity Gospel and Crown of Creation theology have to change: “Until we change that kind of belief, that kind of theology, we won’t change our attitudes towards the environment” (Interview 11/20/12). In order to encourage a transformation of these beliefs, Samoan theological institutions are encouraging the use of the Samoan indigenous reference as a contextual framework through which to interpret the Bible.

In his book, *Su’esu’e Manogi: In Search of Fragrance, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi and the Samoan Indigenous Reference*, Tui Atua commends efforts by Christian theologians to navigate towards traditional knowledge after much of it was lost with the arrival of Christian missionaries: “Christianity has effectively demonized the legacy of our Samoan ancestors to a point where their rituals, liturgies and beliefs have been rejected and spurned.” He goes on to add, “In the latter part of the twentieth century, Christianity has acknowledged the deep spirituality of indigenous religious culture and is strenuously trying to find an accommodation” (2008: 197). Some Samoan religious institutions, such as Piula

Theological College in Lufilufi and Malua Theological College in Maluapapa, offer courses on contextual or indigenous theology, during which students are taught to approach the Bible and its interpretation through the use of an indigenous reference framework (Va'ai Interview 11/20/12). Mailo agrees that Christianity in Samoa is making positive changes. "Christianity is moving in the right direction now after doing a lot of damage. And that's because Christianity has evolved. Missionary Christianity is now becoming Samoan Christianity" (Interview 10/11/12). The challenge for Samoa now may be deciding what Samoan Christianity *is* and how to achieve it.

## **The Future of Samoan Christianity**

### **"Culture of Whispers"**

The process of acknowledging and incorporating aspects of Samoan indigenous religion within or alongside Christianity in Samoa poses many challenges. One such challenge may be the sensitivity preventing the voicing of honest and open discussion surrounding an issue of such great consequence. Samoa's Head of State worries that the 'culture of whispers' surrounding the Samoan indigenous religion may inhibit progress. His Highness states,

Although the main instigator of the guilt and shame that is endemic within this culture of whispers can be traced back to the monocultural biases of early Christian missionaries, these biases have become, as in other places, 'indigenized.' Samoans now refuse, on what we perceive to be our own grounds, to entertain the thought that maybe our forebears had something useful and profound in their ancient religious beliefs and practices for our modern religious lives (2009b: 3).

Many Samoans may find it difficult to entertain concepts of Samoan indigenous religion while simultaneously remaining faithful to the Christian teachings that establish their spiritual guidance. But

Tui Atua does not share this belief. He writes of a debate suggesting that the God of Christianity and the God of pre-Christian Samoa were one in the same. He quotes Monsignor Etuale Lealofi's 2005 speech from the *Pacific Regional Interreligious Colloquium on Indigenous, Cultural and Religious Concepts of Peace and Good Governance*: "Is the indigenous religion of Samoa, which the Christian missionaries were supposed to have stamped out, really dead; or is it alive under the guise of Christianity" (Tui Atua 2009b: 21). Tui Atua suggests that difficulty arises in acknowledging both religious systems only if one is given more value than the other (Tui Atua 2009b: 12).

## **Additional Challenges**

Along with the "culture of whispers" that surrounds religious debate in Samoa, other challenges threaten to prevent progress in the search for the meaning of "Samoan Christianity." Va'ai offers one possible challenge: "We still have that conservative generation in the Church that wants to maintain what the missionaries brought into this country" (Interview 11/20/12). Younger generations of progressive Samoan theologians have written extensively on the topic of the possibility of uniting teachings of Christianity and Samoan indigenous religion, but few are willing to read such writings. Mailo states,

There are few academics who write theses and do research on how to preserve our traditions, but no one is listening, no one is reading them. They just stay on the shelf, unread. And that's the challenge: the challenge is how to publish those academic writings on how Samoan Christians can preserve our traditions and how to see God *in* those traditions (Interview 10/11/12).

However, Tui Atua advocates that it is imperative to consider the Samoan indigenous religion: "The Samoan indigenous religion is not to be ashamed of, and especially not by Samoans. It is core to our identity as Samoans. Without it the traditional foundations of Samoan culture become untenable and easily replaced" (Tui Atua 2009b: 4). The kind of incorporation spoken of does not require the denunciation of either religious thought, but rather the unification of Samoan ideas. Okenaisa Fauolo,

Director of the Samoan Studies Institute at American Samoa Community College, suggests that “Samoa ‘samoanized’ Christianity just as Christianity Christianized Samoa,” which leads her to believe that the two theological schools of thought are capable of interacting (Interview 11/20/12). And much is to be gained from the deep understanding of the environment associated with Samoan indigenous knowledge.

## **Traditional Knowledge System**

The religious ideals of pre-contact Samoans that created a deep connection with the natural environment based on kinship and respect led to an extensive traditional Samoan knowledge system. This close connection to the environment led to an impressive understanding of weather patterns that helped Samoans to most effectively produce their subsistence crops (Percival Interview 10/10/12). Tagaloa writes in *Va Tapuia: An Environmental Vision* of a time when “our sense of time related to the moon and the sun and their relative journeys throughout the year taking account the rain and the sun, wet and dry, and the need for soil replenishment. There was respect for this need so as to maintain balance” (2003: 3). Many environmental changes in Samoa may suggest that balance has not been maintained. Thaman urges people of the South Pacific to look towards their traditional knowledge systems in order to address the modern environmental crisis. He states, “We have an incredible wealth of traditional knowledge here in the Pacific and a lot of that is still there, but it’s in danger of being lost, so we need to get people to recognize that.” He goes on to propose, “To deal with modern problems, with increasing population, with new challenges, we have to marry that [traditional] knowledge with the most up-to-date science” (Lecture 11/1/12). Samoa must access the few remaining sources of their extensive traditional knowledge in order to understand and practice the ideologies that once sustained both human and environmental health in Samoa.

## Learning from the Past

A revitalization of traditional knowledge does not necessarily require a rejection of modern Samoa. Tagaloa states, “I am not advocating that we discard everything that we have done to go back to our traditional methods. Rather that we take on board what was there from our ancestors that is relevant in our question for direction for the future” (2003: 3). Although every culture is organic and inevitably undergoes changes, Mo’a believes, “there are some deep values that feed the soul of Samoa” (Interview 10/11/12). Tagaloa seems to agree as he speaks about the *Va Tapuia* between the person and his or her environment that has always been at the core of Samoan existence (2003: 3). Samoa’s Head of Sate once described the beliefs of the late Monsignor Ioane Vito, who suggested the following: “The wisdom of our forebears has just as much truth and relevance today as the wisdom of Christianity. And, just as our modern knowledges can learn from traditional knowledges, so too can our religious knowledges learn from each other” (Tui Atua 2010: 4).

## Conclusions

This paper looked at the Samoan indigenous religion in order to better conceptualize the relationship between Samoans and the environment before the introduction of Christianity in the 1830s. The genealogical characteristic of the Samoan indigenous religion creation story fostered a relationship based on kinship and respect between humans and the natural world. However, variations in stories based in oral tradition and knowledge held by the human mind more often than the pages of a book have placed restrictions on the research and therefore the presentation of information.

This paper also explored the many ways in which Christianity and the cultural perspective brought by the European missionaries affected the natural environment in Samoa. Primary sources discussed some negative environmental effects of the introduction of Christianity. They suggested that

European missionaries brought with them cultural perspectives indicative of the European Industrial Revolution which encouraged materialism and production, as well as the idea of ownership. They also suggested that theologies such as the Prosperity Gospel and the Crown of Creation Theology promoted the idea that the purpose of the natural world was to serve the human being and that man has authority over the environment. Many of these ideas were supported by secondary sources. However, the time period and scope of this research provided limitations and allowed the discussion of a limited number of perspectives. Therefore, further research should be conducted in order to gather additional perspectives.

Lastly, this paper considered ways in which Samoan indigenous religious values may be helpful in the quest to combat modern environmental problems. It explored the relationship between Samoan indigenous religion and Christianity in Samoa today, in order to look constructively towards the future. It examined a “culture of whispers” that surrounds the topic of Samoan indigenous religion most likely because Samoans are afraid to degrade their modern Christian ideals. However, as theologians around the world and in Samoa begin to re-evaluate their concept of and relationship with the natural world, many have begun to encourage the use of Samoan indigenous religious values in order to combat environmental degradation here in Samoa. Additional perspectives may provide a more complete understanding of Samoan perceptions of Samoan indigenous religion and Christianity and whether the two are able to communicate productively in order to preserve a traditional knowledge system that may be valuable in the face of present environmental uncertainty.

As an American, I feel deeply the anxiety of preserving traditional knowledge systems. The American people have long been largely cut off from their environment. Those who choose to spend considerable time courting Nature in an attempt to re-connect with her are placed in the category of other and labeled as “outdoorsmen.” Our food production system and busy schedule fed by the

Protestant Ethic and the worship of efficiency have disconnected us from the natural world from which we once found life. Although the natural environment continues to provide for us, we lack the opportunity to reach out and feel its grasp, know it. Instead, we drive in man-made cars to man-made buildings to purchase food that has been produced from an environment foreign to our eyes and absent from our consciousness. Americans have, to a large extent, lost their deep knowledge of the natural world.

Samoa, however, retains this knowledge system in the wisdom and memories of a few, but its association with the Samoan indigenous religion causes apprehension for many Samoan Christians who fear that learning from other religions will degrade one's own. Cannot Christians learn from Buddhist principles? Cannot Muslims learn from ideas of Jainism? In a time of such uncertainty, should we not be learning from any and all sources? We are not in a position to be slow and passive in our acquisition of knowledge when it comes to the environment.

The world faces uncertain times environmentally, and Pacific Island countries have begun to feel the frontline of damaging effects. Climate change, severe weather events, and accelerated sea-level rise threaten island nations such as Samoa. People around the world argue over the cause, severity, and even existence of environmental degradation. Those working towards environmental protection in the face of a global environmental crisis learn in university lecture halls, looking through the windows at the natural world outside. Tui Atua quotes Thor Heyerdahl, "both the wind and the people who continue to live close to Nature still have much to tell us which we cannot hear inside university halls" (Tui Atua 2008). Samoa has the opportunity to combine modern and traditional knowledge systems to create a stronger, holistic view of man, religion, and nature in hopes of protecting the rich and diverse ecosystem which sustains the Samoan people. Only time will tell how Samoan Christianity will choose to fuse its values with the Samoan indigenous religious values that guided the lives of their ancestors and



promoted a sustainable relationship with the environment in order to look more constructively towards the future of Samoa and the natural world.

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## Glossary of Terms

<i>aiga</i>	family
<i>aitu</i>	spirit
<i>Atua</i>	God (divine, godlike)
<i>eleele</i>	dirt or earth, blood
<i>fa'aaloalo</i>	respect
<i>fa'alanu</i>	prayer ritual
<i>fa'asamoa</i>	custom, Samoan way of life
<i>faifeau</i>	pastor, minister
<i>falesa</i>	church building
<i>fanua</i>	land, after-birth or placenta
<i>lagi</i>	sky, heaven
<i>lotu</i>	act of worship, church service
<i>malaga</i>	ceremonial visit paid according to Samoan custom, journey or trip
<i>nonu</i>	Indian Mulberry (shrub or small tree)
<i>palapala</i>	earth or mud, blood
<i>papa</i>	rock or earth
<i>Pulotu</i>	otherworld
<i>talomua</i>	presentation of first fruits (first taro)
<i>tapu</i>	be forbidden
<i>taulasea</i>	person skilled in the use of native medicines
<i>tuli</i>	messenger
<i>va</i>	relationship
<i>va tapuia</i>	sacred relationship
<i>va'a lotu</i>	ship of religion or prayer