


Fall 12-1-2014

Lighting Young Lights: The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program in Samoa

Nicholas Muccio

SIT Study Abroad, nmuccio@bates.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Polynesian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Muccio, Nicholas, "Lighting Young Lights: The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program in Samoa" (2014). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. Paper 1978.

http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1978

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

Lighting Young Lights:

The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program in Samoa

Author: Nicholas Muccio

Advisor: Nina Tu'i

Academic Director: Jackie Fa'asasila

S.I.T. Samoa, Fall 2014

SIT Study Abroad

a program of World Learning



Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)

(To be included with the electronic version of the paper and in the file of any World Learning/SIT Study Abroad archive.)

Student Name: Nicholas Muccio

Title of ISP: Lighting Young Lights: The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program in Samoa

Program and Term: SIT Samoa Fall 2014

1. When you submit your ISP to your academic director, World Learning/SIT Study Abroad would like to include and archive it in the permanent library collection at the SIT Study Abroad program office in the country where you studied and/or at any World Learning office. Please indicate below whether you grant us the permission to do so.
2. In some cases, individuals, organizations, or libraries in the host country may request a copy of the ISP for inclusion in their own national, regional, or local collections for enrichment and use of host country nationals and other library patrons. Please indicate below whether SIT/World Learning may release your ISP to host country individuals, organizations, or libraries for educational purposes as determined by SIT.
3. In addition, World Learning/SIT Study Abroad seeks to include your ISP paper in our digital online collection housed on World Learning's public website. Granting World Learning/SIT Study Abroad the permission to publish your ISP on its website, and to reproduce and/or transmit your ISP electronically will enable us to share your ISP with interested members of the World Learning community and the broader public who will be able to access it through ordinary Internet searches. Please sign the permission form below in order to grant us the permission to digitize and publish your ISP on our website and publicly available digital collection.

Please indicate your permission by checking the corresponding boxes below:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I hereby grant permission for World Learning to include my ISP in its permanent library collection.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I hereby grant permission for World Learning to release my ISP in any format to individuals, organizations, or libraries in the host country for educational purposes as determined by SIT.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I hereby grant permission for World Learning to publish my ISP on its websites and in any of its digital/electronic collections, and to reproduce and transmit my ISP electronically. I understand that World Learning's websites and digital collections are publicly available via the Internet. I agree that World Learning is NOT responsible for any unauthorized use of my ISP by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.

Student Signature: Nicholas Muccio

Date: 27/4/2014

Abstract

The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP) is a program inspired by the Baha'i Faith offered all around the world to those between the ages of 12 and 15. Due to its widespread implementation, it is likely that the practice of the program is in accordance with the cultural norms of the society in which it is practiced. The present study examines influences that the JYSEP has had on Samoan culture, and the influences that Samoan culture has had on the JYSEP. It has been found that the major values of the program are not in agreement with the traditional conceptions of Samoan youth, but are in agreement with the changing conceptions. It has also been found that Samoan notions of community have altered the ways in which the Junior Youth Group meetings are carried out. Lastly, other religious institutions of Samoa have both received, and denied the program. Despite this, the program has been found to be one of many emerging opportunities for the youth being provided by religious institutions of Samoa.

Key Words:

Religious Education, Religion

Contact List:

Nina Tu'i 685-779-1786, ninatui9@gmail.com

Baha'i National Office 21353

Acknowledgements

There is so much in this world that needs to be improved. I am fortunate enough to have met people over the course of this project that have taken upon themselves a moral obligation to make this world a better place for everyone who happens to be inhabiting it. For that I am very grateful.

Nina, you were approached about this project out of nowhere, but have always been more than willing to provide any help that I have needed. Your passion for providing opportunities to the youth of this world is evident in all that you do. You have truly been an inspiration to me.

Le'uta and Kapeneta, I showed up at your office once, and then started showing up everyday for a week. Every time you welcomed me with open arms and a smile, always asked how my work was going, if I needed any help. The way I hear both of you speak of the good that the JYSEP has done for you, your children, and your whole families is heart warming.

Karen, it was so good to feel so welcomed as a guest at the temple. More than that, you have always been willing to provide any information you could that pertained to my topic. I admire the way you speak so passionately about what needs to be done so that all the youth of the world are given the opportunities they deserve to be given.

...and when you're finally finished,
I want you to go down the block
to where those two kids
are packing up their peanut butter enterprise
because somebody told them they'd fail,
and I want you to hand them Tomorrow,
make sure they know
how important it really is...
because the truth is,
I think we need those swing sets most
on the rainy days. I'm happy
going to sleep after just a goodnight kiss,
and I believe that beauty can be as simple
as two kids, with crew cut and pigtails,
handing me a scoop of peanut butter ice cream
that tastes so good
you'd think it was a dream.

~Eric Darby

from "Scratch and Dent Dreams"

“Every child is potentially
the light of the world.”

-Abdu'l-Baha

Table of Contents

Introduction	8
<i>A Background of the Baha'i Faith</i>	8
<i>Social Action of the Baha'i</i>	9
<i>The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program</i>	11
<i>Conceptions of Samoan JY</i>	13
<i>The JYSEP in Samoa</i>	15
Methodology	15
The JYSEP and Samoan Society	17
<i>The Empowerment of JY in Samoan Culture</i>	18
<i>The "Samoanization" of the JYSEP</i>	20
<i>The JYSEP and Other Churches of Samoa</i>	23
Conclusion	27
References	30
Glossary of Terms	32
Appendix A	33
Appendix B	34

Introduction

This study seeks to examine the implementation of the Baha'i inspired Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP) in Samoa. Widely known for its affiliation with religion, churches of Samoa have, and continue to offer a variety of community development programs. Whereas many of the major religions of Samoa are affiliated with Christianity, the Baha'i Faith stands out as unique among the religions practiced in Samoa as an independent religion. The examination of the Baha'i inspired program, the JYSEP, will allow for a greater understanding as to how the program interacts with both traditional, and changing Samoan customs. This paper will first provide a background on the Baha'i Faith in Samoa. It will then delve into background information regarding the JYSEP as it is practiced around the world. This background information will provide the basis for understanding the major analysis of the paper concerning the JYSEP, and its interactions with aspects of Samoan culture.

A Background of the Baha'i Faith

As of October of 2014, an estimated 925 people were followers of the Baha'i Faith in Samoa (See Appendix A). The Faith does appear to be gaining followers, as this a significant increase from the estimated 658 followers found in a survey conducted in 2006 (Va'ai, 2012 p. 83). Although growing, the population of Baha'i is dwarfed by other religions in Samoa, as in 2006 the estimated number of believers of the Congregational Christian Church (at the time, the most popular church in Samoa) was 52, 661 (Va'ai, 2012 p. 83). Nonetheless, the Baha'i population has a strong following. The temple of Samoa holds services every Sunday from 10:00 am

to 10:30 am, which are quite well attended (Baha'i Temple visit Observation 08/11/2014).

Founded by a man known as Baha'u'llah (meaning The Glory of God), in 1863, the Baha'i faith's origins lie in Persia (Baha'i Teachings.org 2014). Born into quite a wealthy family, Baha'u'llah "declined the ministerial career open to Him in government, and chose instead to devote his energies to a range of philanthropies which had, by the early 1840's, earned Him widespread renown as 'Father of the Poor'" (Baha'i International Community, 1991 p.3). Baha'u'llah's teachings were of justice and equality, which posed a stark contrast to "Persia's profoundly unjust and corrupt society" (Baha'i Teachings.org 2014). Baha'u'llah was imprisoned because of his progressive teachings, and remained imprisoned until his death in 1892.

The Baha'i of today follow the teachings of Baha'u'llah and his successors. Some of the main Baha'i beliefs are of the oneness of God and religion, the oneness of humankind, the importance universal education, and the equality between women and men (Baha'i Teachings.org 2014). Baha'i believe that all the major religions of the world are in fact worshipping the same God; they acknowledge the significance of figures from all major religions such as Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed, understanding these and others to be manifestations of God, with Baha'u'llah being the most recent of these manifestations (Baha'i Teachings.org 2014). Inherent in these beliefs is an appreciation of the harmony of all religions of the Earth.

Social Action of the Baha'i

The Baha'i understand all people to be interconnected, to be citizens of the world and thus to have a responsibility as citizens to promote the wellbeing of humankind. One of Baha'u'llah's most well known quotes is that "Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Baha'i Temple visit Observation 08/11/2014). From this and other of Baha'u'llah's proclamations, the Faith has gleaned a moral obligation of service to the world. The following excerpt from a Baha'i policy review captures the essence of this obligation quite well:

"To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Baha'u'llah's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers." (The Universal House of Justice, 2013 p. 5).

To be a follower of the Faith is to be one who spreads the wisdom Baha'i believe to be inherent in their many writings. This spreading of wisdom has manifested in many ways, social development for the entire world being one of them.

The Baha'i Faith has looked to educational opportunities as a way to fulfill their obligation of service, and achieve equitable empowerment for all individuals. A Baha'i organization known as the Ruhi Institute offers many educational opportunities for individuals of a variety of ages. The Institute is an "educational institution, operating under the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i of Colombia, which dedicates its efforts to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of the Colombian people." (The Ruhi Foundation 2008). However, the programs of the institution have recently been applied in areas all over the world. The purpose of the Ruhi Institute is to empower all people to "contribute to the establishment of a new world civilization" in which people acknowledge the significance, and equality of all people on Earth. (The Ruhi

Foundation 2008). To accomplish this goal, numerous educational programs have been established.

The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

The Ruhi Institute has created the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP) to serve as one of the programs to accomplish their goals. As with many programs of the Baha'i Faith, this program emerged out of a bout of experimentation. The Faith has offered literacy promotion programs throughout the world for many years. The Faith is also quite keen on regular assessment of the progress of many of its programs. As such, "in 1994, the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Baha'i World Centre invited a number of individuals to come together and analyze Baha'i experience in the promotion of literacy to date" (Lample, 2009 p. 135). Based on these results, the Faith enacted pilot projects in various countries of the world to see if they create more effective literacy promotion.

"When in 2002 the results of efforts through which over 2000 facilitators had been trained and over 10,000 students had been reached were analyzed, one feature stood out: the contrast between the extraordinary receptivity of junior youth to these programs and the difficulty of maintaining effective projects of adult literacy which did not have some other dimension, microfinance for example" (Lample, 2009 p. 135).

In lieu of these results, the Faith changed their approach regarding the implementation of these projects:

"The focus shifted from mere literacy to the empowerment of junior youth—an effort to endow them with the capacity to conquer the word and unravel its meaning, both for their own spiritual upliftment and as a basis for social action" (Lample, 2009 p. 135).

After a few years of alterations to projects that started as mere literacy groups, the JYSEP was created.

The JYSEP, among many other things, seeks to shake the world of its notions of junior youth (those between the ages of 12 and 15). Popular opinion of this age group in many countries would have people believe that Junior Youth (JY) are too lost in the throes of adolescence to be given significant roles in society. Benjamin Leiker, a scholar who has studied the JYSEP, has noted that notions of adolescent behavior are not necessarily inherent in this age group:

“...the rebelliousness and apathy often associated with adolescence can often stem directly from the contradictions they perceive in their social environment, their dissatisfaction and desire to change the causes of these problems, the assumption that they are powerless to make changes, and the ways in which they are perceived by peers and adults” (Leiker, 2011 p. 2).

The JYSEP aims to create youth who embody attributes quite opposite to those of powerlessness, rebelliousness, and apathy:

“Inherent in the aims and purpose of critical youth empowerment [...] is the need to support and foster youth contributions to positive community development and sociopolitical change, resulting in youth who are critical citizens, actively participating in the day-to-day building of stronger, more equitable communities” (Leiker, 2011 p. vii).

The program works to spiritually empower the youth through a variety of activities. Junior Youth Groups (JYG) meet at least once a week for about an hour with their animator. The animator, who has undergone educational training guided by materials of the Ruhi Institute, serves as a facilitator of group meetings. The animator is ideally a youth themselves, older than the JY, but not of an age where JY may associate him/her with the authority of a parent or teacher. During meetings

the JYG discusses possible service projects it could carry out in its community. Some examples of projects that have been completed by JYGs around the world include picking up litter, protecting trees from disease, and asking healthcare providers to provide volunteer hours (Baha'i World Centre 2013). The JYG also work through exercises in books compiled by the Ruhi Institute.

“The core of the programme consists of a series of textbooks studied by the groups. We understand that, at present, seven of a projected eighteen textbooks, exploring a range of themes from a Baha'i perspective, though not in the mode of religious instruction, are available” (The Universal House of Justice, 2013 p. 78).

An example of an exercise from one of these books is in Appendix B.

The purpose of the program is not to convert JY to the Baha'i Faith, but rather to examine themes that it believes are common to all people of the earth through the lens of the Faith. In doing this, the program seeks to spiritually empower the youth, making them aware of the ability they have to positively contribute to their communities. The materials of the program accomplish this in part by featuring quotes from major religions of the world that advocate the importance of service-oriented thinking. JY are instructed to memorize these quotes, but are not made aware of who it was that have said them unless an animator decides to attribute the quote herself.

Conceptions of Samoan Junior Youth

As has been noted, JY are not typically given significant voices in most societies around the world, and Samoa is no exception to this observation. JY certainly have a significant role in Samoan culture, but that role is not typically one that involves voicing one's opinions on matters of importance to the *aiga* (extended

family) or the *fono* (village council). Instead, “Samoan children... must run errands, perform household duties, feed chickens, [and] fetch water...” (Ritchie, James & Ritchie, Jane, 1979 p. 66). Inherent in the practicing of these chores is obedience to authority that stems from the Samoan elders, the child is expected to fulfill the role that is imposed on them. Jane and James Ritchie ascertained the following from interviews with youth of Samoan culture in their study, *Growing Up in Polynesia*:

“Chores are a bind, but they are also explicit, so that once you have done them, you are free of them, at least for the time being. You do not need to think about them. You just do them. Therefore, the additional hidden message in the allocation of chores is the acceptance of that which responsible authority imposes. If you meet these obligations, you are free” (Ritchie, James & Ritchie, Jane, 1979 p. 67).

While the children are entrusted with these daily tasks that are important but seemingly mundane, it is the elders who are entrusted with carrying out significant decisions, such as allocating *matai* (chief) titles. In *Democracy & Custom in Samoa: an uneasy alliance*, Asofou So’o notes the following:

“Younger members of the family do not contribute equally to the selection of their *matai*; the family decision-making council (*aigapotopoto*) usually only comprises its titleholders, other distinguished members such as church ministers, and women and men from the oldest generation” (So’o, 2008 p. 19).

JY, then, are not to concern themselves with the affairs of the adults, and indeed, the adults traditionally do not concern themselves with the affairs of children:

“As long as parental demands are met and no interference is created with the world of adult concerns, adults are simply not very interested in what children are doing” (Ritchie, James & Ritchie, Jane, 1979 p. 76).

This traditional conception of the responsibilities of the JY seems quite opposite to the conception of the JY that the JYSEP is seeking to create.

The JYSEP in Samoa

The present study seeks to analyze the implementation of the JYSEP in Samoa, in doing so shedding light on the interactions between the JYSEP and Samoan culture. Aspects of the JYSEP at a surface level, do not appear to mesh very well with traditional aspects of Samoan culture. The JYSEP works to spiritually empower, and give a significant voice to JY. However, in traditional Samoan culture (and indeed, other countries of the world), JY are typically ones whose opinions are not held with the highest regard. This paper will seek to examine interactions between the major tenants of the JYSEP and the Samoan culture such as the one previously mentioned, along with other interactions that have become apparent over the course of this research. Such examination will shed light on how these interactions have contributed to changes in the JYSEP, and the Samoan culture.

Methodology

Information for this study was gathered using personal interviews, and participatory observation. Interviews were conducted with a variety of persons affiliated with the JYSEP. The variety of persons interviewed enabled comparisons of insights from people involved in different aspects of the program. People who were interviewed included parents of JY in the JYSEP, animators of the JYSEP, supervisors of the JYSEP, and those who conduct behind the scenes work affiliated with the program, such as those involved with funding.

The majority of interviews took place in the National Baha'i office in Lelata on the island of Upolu. Most of the animators interviewed conduct JYGs in the greater Apia area, which creates limited the variety of experiences gained from interviews. The mitigation of this constraint was attempted by interviewing animators who have conducted JYGs in more rural villages in Sava'i before coming to Upolu.

Participatory observations were also used in this study. Observations consisted of a self-directed tour of the Baha'i temple grounds, and also participation in a Baha'i devotional service. Both of these observations enabled a deeper understanding of the practices and beliefs of followers of the Faith. Observations also included participating in a JYG held near Lelata, and participation in the Children's Conference held at the Baha'i temple on November 22nd, where many animators directed activities for children mostly between the ages of 7 and 12. Both of these observations allowed for a cross examination between what had been stated by animators during interviews, and what actually occurred during sessions with children and JY.

There were significant limitations to the observation of the JYG and of the children's conference. Firstly, the time of information gathering for this study was held largely during a period of time when many students of the JY age were in school examinations. Many JYGs postponed their meetings until after exams, limiting that amount of JYGs available for observation. Furthermore, the majority of conversation taking place at both the JYG and the conference was in Samoan. The author's minimal comprehension of the Samoan language allowed for most

information to be ascertained through translations by animators and what could be observed without the necessity of language. The practice of translating for a visitor is not a typical occurrence during these meetings, and is liable to have altered events from their typical nature. Lastly, in the case of the Children's Conference, the Conference itself did not include JY, but rather a younger age group (aged 7 to 12). Despite this, the observation enabled another layer of understanding concerning how animators interact with youth of Samoa.

Whenever conducting research in proximity to children, it is necessary to exercise certain precautions as not to violate ethical standards of research. It would, for example, provide more information if one was to directly interview Junior Youth of the JYSEP, but it would also be unethical. This dilemma was addressed by directly interacting with animators, who are of adult age, and are able to offer insights regarding the experiences of the JY. It is with these interactions with animators, and all other previously mentioned data gathering techniques, the research question of this project was investigated: how has the JYSEP influenced, and been influenced by the Samoan culture?

The JYSEP and Samoan Society

Over the course of this research, certain themes regarding the interactions between the JYSEP and Samoan culture became evident. This section will first present an examination of the interaction between the major theme of the JYSEP, the spiritual empowerment of the JY, and the traditional roles of the JY in Samoan culture. This will be followed by a discussion concerning how Samoan culture has been integrated into certain aspects of the JYSEP. Lastly, this section will conclude

with speculation regarding how the JYSEP has elicited reactions from other religious institutions of Samoa.

The Empowerment of JY in Samoan Culture

Whereas contradictions between the values of traditional Samoan society and the JYSEP seem evident, the JYSEP still manages to reach out to approximately 305 JY of Samoa (see appendix A). Indeed, none of those interviewed expressed that Samoan elders were displeased with changes in their children after these children had taken part in the JYSEP. When asked if they felt as though their children were behaving disrespectfully since joining the program, parents stated that the opposite was true:

“I don’t need to scold my children anymore. I’ve seen this change in other children, too. They used to sit, or roam aimlessly doing nothing, waiting for me to scold them for not helping out around the house. But after partaking in the program, I don’t even need to ask them anymore. They just help out on their own now. They are very respectful” (Purcell, Personal Communication 18/11/2014).

In fact, some parents were so pleased with changes they perceived in their children, they have converted to the Baha’i Faith:

“The kids are doing better in school, they are not tempted to be involved with drugs or alcohol. They are good kids. I saw the good this program did for my children, and I became interested in the Faith. It has largely contributed to my decision to become a Baha’i” (Tuiletufuga, T, Personal Communication 13/11/2014).

Whereas it may be expected that a program seeking to empower JY could not be effectively employed in a society where the JY are traditionally passive, the JYSEP has been received quite well by many Samoans.

When asked how they reconcile some of the cultural barriers that could possibly inhibit the acceptance of the program, animators have stressed the

importance of talking to the parents of the JY. One animator stated that, “It’s important to make a connection with the families. The parents must fully understand the program in order to allow their children to attend” (Tuiletufuga, L, Personal Communication 13/11/2014). Another animator expressed the same sentiment:

“If JY are not allowed by their parents to come to the group, it’s usually because the animator did not explain the program clearly enough. It is very important that the parents know exactly what the program is trying to accomplish. I try to visit the parents of the JY in my group twice a week. I know I must be respectful when I do this, so I dress how you see me now (he is wearing a button-down, floral shirt and a formal *lavalava* (a formal piece of attire worn to cover the legs)). The parents see that I do this, they see this respect, and they appreciate it. They see me coming and they wave, they say ‘hello, pastor!’ how are you today?” (Pele, Personal Communication 17/11/2014).

This animator’s comments shed light on an important consideration when examining the interactions between the JYSEP and Samoan culture. He notes the importance of maintaining respect towards the elders in the society, as is expected in Samoan culture. An animator himself, he believes in the empowerment of the JY, but also stresses the need to maintain a respectful relationship with elders of society. The elders do not appear to view the changes in their child’s behavior as disrespectful. In fact, through their interactions with animators, parents have expressed that they have come to realize that they should change how they interact with their children:

“We are starting to realize that the whole family can participate in group activities. Before, we didn’t realize the significance of what the youth was doing; their activities were not seen as important. But now we know we can play with the kids. We should join the kids in their activities” (Tuiletufuga, T, Personal Communication 13/11/2014).

This change in the perception of how JY and elders can interact was borne out in interactions observed at the Universal Children’s Day Conference held at the Baha’i temple. During this conference, hundreds of children were participating in a variety of activities, singing songs, dancing, acting out plays, and playing games outside. Right alongside these children the entire day were both older youths, and adults (Universal Children’s Day Observation 23/11/2014).

The Samoan government has acknowledged the traditional role of JY in Samoan culture, and has taken recent steps to change this role through actions outlined in the National Youth Policy for Children of Samoa for the years 2010 to 2015. Regarding Samoan children, Fiame Naomi Mutaafa, the Minister of the Ministry of Women, Community, and Social Development (MWCSD), stated that, “as active participants in all matters affecting their lives, they must be given the space and time to have their views heard and acknowledged” (Division for Women, 2010 p. 2). The following is later noted in the policy:

“When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. This does not mean that children can now tell their parents what to do. This convention encourages adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making...not give children authority over adults...” (Division for Women, 2010 p. 10).

The need for children to be given a more significant voice in Samoa has been acknowledged not only by the JYSEP, but also by the Samoan government itself. The culture is moving away from its older beliefs concerning the status of the JY. This newer conception has allowed for the JYSEP to coexist in a changing Samoan society.

The “Samoanization” of the JYSEP

The JYSEP is a program that has been implemented in nations all over the world. However, it is unlikely that the program looks exactly the same in practice in every location that it exists. The major tenants of the program may be the same, but the culture in which the program has been implemented is liable to seep into the practice of the program.

What are immediately apparent about the practices of the JYSEP in Samoa are the locations in which the meetings are held. They are, for the most part, held in locations that are open to the public eye. The group meeting that was observed for this study took place on a front lawn in front of an open *fale* (Samoa style house) of an animator. All the JY gathered in a space that was about 20 feet from a gathering of elders who were chatting in plastic lawn chairs. With this chatter in the background, the JY and the animators sat with their legs crossed, all in *lavalavas* atop a Samoan mat that was spread out over the grass (JYG meeting Observation 19/11/2014). Evident in many aspects of Samoan culture is the extent to which communal values run deep. This sense of openness creates a much different conception of privacy than someone from the West may know. This sense of openness and community made evident in the observed JYG meeting.

Although the significance of community may be something that both the Baha'i Faith and Samoan culture would emphasize, it could at times be detrimental in a meeting meant specifically for JY. The meeting began after five out of the ten JY of the JYG showed up (many could not attend due to it being exam week), and after about 15 minutes had passed, a younger sibling of one of the JY had situated himself on the outskirts of the group, sitting on a plastic chair (JYG meeting Observation

19/11/2014). While the boy was a quiet observer, and did little to distract from the meeting, the age of those involved in the JYG meetings is seen as very important.

Indeed, after the meeting, one of the animators stated that,

“The program is based on the idea that this age is a significant time of development in a person’s life. The JY need to be able to interact with each other without feeling like other obligations are present at the meeting, like caring for a younger sibling.”(Rotamina F, Personal Communication. 19/11/2014).

Despite these wishes that meetings will be limited to JY only, it seems as though the openness of the society has made it difficult for animators to convey the importance of keeping the JYG limited to JY.

Indeed, the little brother was not the only non-JY attendee of the meeting. The animators were in the middle of reading from a book when one of the elders from the circle that was chatting nearby quietly joined everyone on the mats. However, unlike the little brother, the elder was much more vocal.

After reading through a passage, it is common practice in JYGs for animators to ask the JY questions from the book. The animators did this, after a short silence, one of the JY spoke up, and responded to the animator’s question. After a short discussion amongst the JY ensued, the elder began to speak. In respectful silence the entire group listened as the elder launched into a lengthy response to the question that was being explored. While what the elder was saying was in agreement with what had been voiced by many of the JY, after the elder was finished speaking, none of the JY said anything but nodded their heads in agreement (JYG meeting Observation 19/11/2014).

After the meeting, one of the animators expressed her dismay with the presence of elders at JY meetings. While they are respected, their presence could interfere with the freethinking of the JY.

“I’ve heard this from other groups, too. It is not uncommon for an elder to join the JYG. You think about whose home while everyone else is out working or doing chores; it’s the elders. They sit at home, and they want to take part in what we’re doing. We don’t want to turn them away, we don’t, but we try very hard to explain to them what we are doing in our group. We try to explain to them that this is a time where the JY need to be free to speak without elders exercising the authority they have over the JY. The thing is, they can do this without even knowing it, because that’s just how a lot of the JY here understand the words of the elders. We do our best to let them know, but sometimes we have to have our meetings in places where they won’t come... like under a tree or something...” (Rotamina E, Personal Communication 19/11/2014)

While the animators have done their best to notify elders of the significance of allowing the JY to have their own time to discuss with each other, many groups have to learn how to hold meetings with more than just JY present. Whereas the hopes of the JYSEP may be that the JY learn how to do this first in the presence of themselves and the animator, this is proving to be quite difficult in Samoa. JYGs have to figure out how to create spiritually empowered JY in the presence of more than just the JY.

The JYSEP and Other Churches of Samoa

Openness and unity are key values of the Baha’i Faith. These values are expressed in Baha’i programs, as the JYSEP does not turn away any JY who wish to take part, and also has the consent of his or her parents. This openness extends to those of other religions as well. In Upolu, for example, 250 out of the 295 estimated JY taking part in the JYSEP are “friends of the Faith” (those who take part in Baha’i

programs, but are not themselves Baha'i). As of October 2014, there was an estimated 48 JYGs practicing regularly in Samoa (See Appendix A). Understanding that many of these JYGs are taking place in public places, these meetings are becoming to be well known by the people of Samoa, including Congregational members and pastors from other churches. The JYSEP, and indeed, many other programs Baha'i offer to the community, have been received with mixed feelings by some pastors of other religions in Samoa.

In Samoa, it is sometimes necessary for one to talk to people of high rank in the villages if one desires to implement a program such as the JYSEP. Many animators have stressed that *matai* or elders need to be consulted in village decisions.

There have been times when animators have had to accompany board members from the National Spiritual Assembly to talk with the *fono* about the program being implemented in the village. It usually is received quite well, as long as the animators and anyone else representing the Faith do a good job of explaining what the program is about (Tuiletufuga L, Personal Communication 13/11/2014).

This animator expresses what many animators have stressed: it is paramount that there be a clear dialogue with parents, and those of rank in a village regarding the purpose of the program.

“When this doesn't happen, when there is not a clear understanding of why we are there, what we are doing, then the kids stop coming to the group- their parents don't allow them anymore, especially if the pastor discourages their attending.” (Tuiletufuga L, Personal Communication 13/11/2014).

Indeed, being a program that is affiliated with the Baha'i Faith seems to be what initially creates concern in those who are approached about the

implementation of the program in villages. There is often initial suspicion concerning the possible ulterior motives of the JYSEP.

“There is always the concern that we are trying to convert people to the Baha’i Faith... Pastors have told JY from their congregation not to go to JYG meetings, they feel that the programs are a threat to their congregation” (Tuiletufuga B, Personal Communication 13/11/2014).

This fear parents have of the program trying to convert their children into Baha’i was something that many animators experienced. However, in the face of this adversity, animators spoke of times when they would investigate the cause of disbelief.

I heard this, and I knew what I had to do. I went to speak to the pastor, and I explained to him what we are doing. I told him that we are not looking to convert the JY, we are looking to create better people; we are trying to show the JY that they have the power to positively contribute to the community. He asked me to give the same explanation in the church to all the children who wished to attend the program. When I did this, the parents of all the children were also present at the meeting. But after I had explained myself, and the program, all were in agreement. They would allow their children to join the JYSEP (Pele, Personal Communication 17/11/2014).

Most animators who were interviewed expressed that it is interactions such as this where the program is clearly explained that makes people of villages receptive to the program. In fact, in some villages, pastors have even agreed to have the JYG meetings take place in their own homes (Tuiletufuga B, Personal Communication 13/11/2014). That being said, not all pastors have accepted the program even after it has been explained.

Animators spoke of a few instances where in some villages where the pastors unconditionally refused the program. (Tuiletufuga L, Personal Communication 13/11/2014). However, this rejection of Baha’i programs is not limited to the JYSEP.

One Baha'i in particular spoke of an instance where a pastor made sure children from his village did not attend the Universal Children's Day Conference held at the Baha'i temple over a weekend (Te'o, Personal Communication 12/11/2014). Some pastors distrust the program and feel it overshadows some of the programs that are offered by their own congregations.

In the years before the widespread implementation of Baha'i development programs in Samoa, churches were quite involved with the education of the children. In fact, the churches "provided the only education in Samoa before governmental educational services were introduced" through the schools that they established (Va'ai, 2012 p. 86). However, those who are well versed in the history of these programs note a noticeable decrease in educational assistance offered by the church occurred until relatively recently, the reason for this decrease being unclear (Perelini J, Personal Communication 8/10/2014).

One pastor commented on the programs he wishes to develop.

"It's important to give the kids these opportunities. You see the things that they could be doing otherwise, roaming the streets, getting into fights; it's not what we want to see. That's why I do my best to get programs out there to the kids. We do have choir practices; we are offering homework help to the children multiple times a week. You know, eventually I want to have a multi-purpose complex built just down the street; a place where the children can play sports, where the parents can meet" (Pastor, P, Personal Communication 5/10/2014).

This pastor in particular seems to have similar goals as some of those of the JYSEP: to keep the kids out of trouble, to give them something in which they can be proactively spending their time.

In some instances, other religions used the JYSEP as a model to start their own youth programs.

“They say, ‘we’d like to see what this program is about.’ They send JY from their own congregations to take part in our program, and then after they’ve completed it, they go back to their own churches and start a similar program... as long as it is helping the children and benefitting the community, I see nothing wrong with that (Purcell, Personal Communication 18/11/2014).

It is this acceptance of other programs that seems to qualify the Faith’s claims that the JYSEP really is not attempting to turn JY into Baha’i. While the obtained information is not sufficient to suggest a causal relationship between the implementation of Baha’i development programs, and development programs of other religions, the opportunities offered by all religions seems to be on the rise.

In addition to the programs similar to the JYSEP that are being created, and to the opportunities spoken of by the previously mentioned pastor, congregations are beginning to offer academic assistance programs. Recently, the Congregation Christian Church of Samoa opened a Study Centre in October of 2014 in the village of Nu’u. This Study Centre provides “computers and other materials” to students in an effort to assist them with their studies (Fanene, October 6th, 2014). Regardless of whether or not these increase in programs being offered is due to church’s perceptions of programs offered by the Baha’i Faith, it is promising to see progress in the amount of opportunities being offered to the youth of Samoa.

Conclusion

The JYSEP is a program that has been implemented in numerous countries around the world. While the content of the materials provided may be the same, the practice of the program is liable to look quite different depending upon the cultural context in which the program is implemented.

The spiritual empowerment of the JY of the world is one of the major goals of the JYSEP. In Samoa, the JYSEP faces the adversity of the remnants of traditional views of JY being rather passive figures in the family unit, unable to contribute to significant familial matters. However, recent policies concerning the youth of Samoa that have been implemented by the MWCSD are in alignment with some of the goals of the JYSEP. The JYSEP is one of the forces that are supporting the change of Samoan mindset in alignment with the wishes of the government.

However, the JYSEP of Samoa is striving to achieve these goals in ways that have been influenced by the Samoan culture. The strong sense community in Samoan culture has caused JYGs of Samoa to be practiced in ways that are different from other countries of the world. What is particularly challenging about this fact is the presence of elders at many of these meetings. Despite this challenge, JYGs in Samoa continue to be carried on, and parents and communities have expressed happiness concerning what the outcomes of the program have been.

The JYSEP in Samoa has also experienced significant interactions with other churches of the nation. Village pastors have for the most part, expressed initial concern about the program, but many have come around to accept it. In addition to this there are pastors who are curious as to how the program could be used and implemented in their own congregations. Because of this, some congregations are starting programs similar to the JYSEP in their own churches. In addition to this, pastors of other religions are speaking of social development programs that they are currently offering, and programs that they are hoping to offer in the future. The JYSEP is one of the many opportunities that will be provided to the youth of Samoa

by religious institutions as these programs develop. This increase in opportunities in the future suggests a positive development in the way of the success of the youth in the future.

This paper can only speculate about the relationship between the growth of the JYSEP and that of other programs being offered by other religious institutions in Samoa. Future studies could further examine the extent to which the Baha'i social development programs are influencing the programs of other religions.

References

Personal Communications

Pastor, Parry (pseudonym). Pastor. Congregationalist Church of Samoa. Personal Interview. 5 October 2014.

Pele, Rahmat. Animator. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 17/11/2014.

Perelini, Julie. Head Teacher. Kip McGrath Education Centres. Personal interview. 8 October 2014.

Purcell, Kapeneta. Parent of JY in JYSEP. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 18/11/2014.

Rotamina, Ellie (pseudonym). Animator. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 19/11/2014.

Rotamina, Leslie (pseudonym). Animator. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 19/11/2014.

Te'o, Karen. Member of Baha'i Faith. The University of the South Pacific, Alafua. 12/11/2014.

Tuiletufuga, Bernadette. Animator. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 13/11/2014.

Tuiletufuga, Lizzy. Animator. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 13/11/2014.

Tuiletufuga, Telesia. Parent of JY in JYSEP. Baha'i National Office, Lelata. 13/11/2014.

Observations

Baha'i Sunday Service. Tiapapata, Samoa. 9/11/2014.

Baha'i Temple visit. Tiapapata, Samoa. 8/11/2014.

Junior Youth Group meeting. Lelata, Samoa. 19/11/2014.

Universal Children's Day Conference. Tiapapata, Samoa. 23/11/2014.

Secondary Sources

Baha'i International Community. (1991). *Baha'u'llah*. Auckland: National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of New Zealand.

- BahaiTeachings.org. (2014). Baha'i Faith. *Bahaiteachings.org*. Retrieved from <http://bahaiteachings.org/bahai-faith>.
- Baha'i World Centre. "Frontiers of Learning." DVD. 2013 ed.
- Division for Women. (2010). National Youth Policy for Children of Samoa. *Ministry of Women, Community, and Social Development*. Retrieved from www.mwcsd.gov.ws.
- Fanene, D. (2014, October 6). A bright new dawn for Nu'u students. *Samoa Observer*. Retrieved from <http://www.samoaoobserver.ws>
- Lample, P. (2009). *Revelation & Social Reality*. West Palm Beach: Palabra Publications.
- Leiker, B. (2011). Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program: toward a critical framework of community peacebuilding; individual and community transformation through service and discourse. *Capstone Collection* paper 2515, 1-54.
- Ritchie, James & Ritchie, Jane. (1979). *Growing Up in Polynesia*. Auckland: Berne Convention.
- The Ruhi Foundation. (2008). Overview. *The Ruhi Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.ruhi.org/materials/list.php#jy>. So'o, A. (2008). *Democracy and Custom in Samoa: An uneasy alliance*. Suva: IPS Publications.
- The Universal House of Justice. (2013). *The Five Year Plan 2011-2016: Messages of the Universal House of Justice*. West Palm Beach: Palabra Publications.
- Va'ai, E. (2012). *Religion*. In Meleisea, E., Meleisea L, & Meleisea, P. (Eds.), *Samoa's Journey: 1962-2012 Aspects of History* p. 77-96). Wellington: Victoria University Press.

Glossary of terms

Acronyms

JYSEP: Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

JYG: Junior Youth Group

JY: Junior Youth

MWCSD: Ministry of Women, Community, and Social Development

Samoan Terms

Aiga: The extended family

'Aigapotopoto: Family decision making council

Fale: A Samoan style house

Fono: The village council

Lavalava: A garment of clothing meant to cover one's legs

Matai: Akin to one's conception of a chief

*Appendix A**

CLUSTER GROWTH PROFILE: SAVAI'I

TABLE 1: CORE ACTIVITIES

Date as of	Junior Youth Groups	Total # attending	# of Friends of Faith attending of total
Oct 2014	Total # of groups		
	3	14	5

TABLE 2: BAHA'I POPULATION

Date as of	Total # Believers
Oct 2014	219

CLUSTER GROWTH PROFILE: UPOLU

TABLE 1: CORE ACTIVITIES

Date as of	Junior Youth Groups	Total # attending	# of Friends of Faith attending of total
	Total # of groups		
Oct 2014	45	295	250

TABLE 2: BAHA'I POPULATION

Date as of	Total # Believers
Oct 2014	706

*Reconstructed with permission of Regional Baha'i Council of Samoa.

Appendix B

Activity 7

Here is a song Rose was singing. Your tutor will help you learn it.

Prefer your Brother

Chorus:

F	G	C	Am	
				It is a blessing to prefer your brother.
F	G	C	Am	
				This is the way you show you care.
F	G	C	Am	
				It is a blessing to prefer your sister.
	F	G	C	G C
				You are richer the more you share.

C	G	Am7	C	
				I am thirsty, I am thirsty,
Dm	G6	C	Am7	
				But my brother, he comes first.
F	Em	Dm	C	
				So I offer him the water
Dm	G	C		
				That will quench his thirst

(Chorus)

I am hungry, I am hungry,

And my sister, she is too.

So I give her some of my food,

That's what's best to do.

(Chorus)