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# Mormonism in Samoa: Cultural Dialogues

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# **Mormonism in Samoa: Cultural Dialogues**

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SIT Samoa, Spring 2006

## Abstract

The following study delves into the contemporary presence of the Mormon Church in Samoa. Several informants were interviewed to uncover the perceptions of both Mormons and non-Mormons alike, as to why the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had such success in Samoa and what that means for the people here. More specifically, informants were asked to discuss where they saw the Latter-day Saints coming into conversation with Samoan culture and then how they saw this process happening. The result is a look into how Mormons, both Samoan and American see their presence in Samoa in contrast with how non-Mormons see the LDS presence. Cultural dialogues abound with complex results and hopeful implications for further study.

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## **Dedication**

For my father, without whom my intellectual development would be very distressing, expensive and useless. Thank you for all the assistance, the guidance, the talks, the advice and being a bottomless well of information. A million thanks for teaching me how to think for myself and most importantly, for letting me.

## Acknowledgements

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I would like to extend my thanks to Ben Luia'ana, historian and professor at Malua Theological College for his time and knowledge. He is an extremely knowledgeable man. Also, thank you to the ordinates at Malua who assisted me with my research and also shared their opinions.

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Last but not least, I extend my thanks to all the other anonymous contributors who were interviewed, surveyed or otherwise consulted for this project.

*Fa'afetai tele lava.*

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## **Introduction and a Note on Methodology**

Today, to be Samoan means to be Christian. Even the nation's motto, "*Fa'avae i le Atua*," means "founded on God." Being a Christian and attending church is considered almost an essential part of Samoan identity and for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the country was predominately Congregationalist, Methodist and Catholic. However, religious minorities have been growing exponentially, especially in the last few decades. This is a movement in Christianity that has been paralleled elsewhere in the world, especially in the United States. As a Religious Studies undergraduate, interested in the rapid rise of the current fundamentalist and minority religious factions, especially Mormonism, Samoa seemed to present the perfect research opportunities.

In the last 20 years (1986-2006), the Mormon population in Samoa has *more* than doubled (Ernst 165, Liua'ana). This impressive growth rate is not unique to Samoa either. Mormonism has been growing at rapid rates all over the world as the Church continues to send more and more missionaries across the globe with every year. However, Samoa presents researchers with an interesting case study. A Pacific Island Country that is called the "cradle of the Pacific," and prides itself on its traditional way of life (*Fa'asamoa*), Samoa claims that it has preserved its traditions better than in most, if not all other Pacific Islands. Within this context of strong cultural tradition, how does an American born religion, founded and run by peoples of European descent operate in an evolving third world/Pacific Island context and what are the effects? The current

research sought to understand the Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and its relationship with Samoan culture.

For this particular study, as a researcher, I had to step out of my normal academic bounds. Little research has been done on Mormonism in Samoa, or Mormonism in general for that matter (especially in comparison to other religions). This is perhaps partially due to its being a relatively new player on the religious field and the highly secretive reputation and practices of LDS. However, this is a tragedy in the realm of religious studies. Mormonism, founded less than 200 years ago, is one of the most recent major religions in the world. A vast amount of resources lay untouched and unstudied by scholars. Jon Krakauer utilized many of these lesser known resources (such as court records and now rejected revelation documents written by Joseph Smith and other key players in the early life of the church) for his 2003 best seller, *Under the Banner of Heaven*. The results were astonishing to LDS members, religion scholars and the common readers alike. It is my interest to further push open the doors to the academic study of Mormonism in the realm of religion by identifying areas of interest for study in Samoa.

Obtaining information in a country where it is not common practice to check books out of libraries proved a bit difficult. Thus, I had to collect a large portion of my information from primary resources. Participant observation also proved difficult with respect to the Mormon operations because the majority of missionary work and services are conducted in Samoan, which I have a very limited knowledge of. Therefore, to understand the cultural aspects of LDS in Samoa, I chose to interview many different types of informants, many of whom wished to be kept anonymous to varying degrees.

These informants included LDS members in and around Apia, missionaries (current and former), and higher officials. Both men and woman, Samoan and American were represented, although not completely equally. The majority of missionaries the LDS mission office allowed me to interview were Americans (they claimed not many of the Samoan missionaries could speak English well enough to interview). Also, the vast majority of missionaries are males, as all able bodied males are highly encouraged to serve a 2 year mission for the church. It is the hope of the church that young women will be finding husbands and starting a family. If they are not married by the age of 21, they have the option of taking a 1 ½ year mission (missionaries). It was attempted to balance these issues as much as possible by interviewing more non-missionary LDS Samoans and women. Non-members, Samoan men and women, were also interviewed and included members and ministers of the Catholic, Methodist, and Congregational churches.

These interviews sought to gain insight into several connected themes. First, why did Christianity have such success in Samoa? And second, why is LDS having such success there now? After a basic understanding these issues from LDS and non-LDS alike, comes the larger and much more difficult question; how and at what sites are Samoan culture and LDS affecting each other?

### ***Fa'asamoa***

In order to understand any of the cultural interactions occurring between LDS and the Samoans, it is first necessary to briefly explain the *fa'asamoa* (Samoan way). The *fa'asamoa* is the pervasive structural and organizational force that comprises Samoan culture or way of life. It includes important concepts such as the *aiga*, which is the

extended family network. The *nu'u*, or the village, which operates as a more or less self-governing body run by the village *fono* or council of chiefs who keep things operating smoothly and make all important decisions. These chiefs are called *matai*, and are chosen (by consensus) to represent the family and look after their interests. Part of being Samoan, especially a *matai* means dealing with *fa'alavelave*, which translates as “much trouble,” but refers to the family obligations that are involved with any big event such as a wedding, funeral, title bestowing ceremony or any other important event. Usually, these responsibilities involve generous gift giving of items ranging from fine mats to money and everything in between. Furthermore, the general translations of these concepts cannot do them justice, but suffice it to say that the system, as evidenced by the concepts of *nu'u*, *fono*, *matai* and others, that family, consensus and conformity are of utmost importance. These cultural norms have a significant part to play in religious dialogues in Samoa.

### **Pre-Christian Religion**

Prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries, Samoans had their own religious beliefs and practices that revolved around the worship of multiple gods of varying importance. Individuals were assigned their own personal guardian spirit or *aitu* at birth. Families then worshiped particular family associated *aitu*. Still, villages and larger governing units also had their own *aitu*, which they paid homage to. There was a multiplicity of gods and they, like the human society at the time, were organized into categories or classes relating to their status (Sevaaetasi 12). There were many classes of *aitu*, one of which included departed relatives. The notion of a heaven (*Lagi*) and Hades

(*Fafa*) were also rather well developed and localized (the entrance to Hades was off the western most tip of Savai'i in Falealupo) (anon).

In addition to these lesser gods, Samoans universally believed in a supreme creator deity, *Tagaloa i Lagi* (*Tagaloa* in heaven) also known simply as *Atua* (Sevaaetasi 12, Liua'ana). The creation myth most of the informants in this study retold involved *Tagaloa's* daughter Sina, who changed into a bird to fly over the watery and empty earth. After flying for awhile, Sina became tired and asked her father to create a bit of land for her to rest on. This land was the Samoan archipelago. Then Sina requested that her father make mountains, plants and animals to inhabit the islands, and so it was done. Last Sina requested that something be created to rule over the land all on it, so *Tagaloa* drew man, in his image, breathed a "soul" into him and bestowed upon him the authority to rule over and care for the land (Sevaaetasi 14).

Other important aspects of religious life included the religious roles in ceremonies and daily life. These roles were often filled by the heads of the family, the *matai*, whose titles were thought to be bestowed upon them by God (Sevaaetasi 12, Liua'ana). Ceremonies often involved the ritual exchange of gifts and the drinking of kava (made from a root used all over the Pacific, it acts as a slight sedative). Ceremonies were performed for marriages, deaths, and various other events. Welcoming ceremonies for visitors, an important aspect of the *fa'asamoa*, were performed quite often and still are (Sevaaetasi 16). Thus, pre-Christian religion in Samoa was ritualized and believed in a creator deity, creation story and an afterlife that included a notion of heaven and Hades. These and other beliefs and practices would facilitate the transition to Christianity.

## ***Nafanua and the Rise of Christianity***

There are several reasons why Christianity took such great hold in Samoa. The most commonly cited reason revolves around a native Samoan warrior goddess, *Nafanua*. The legend of *Nafanua* and her prophecy is well known by Samoans and is seen as the primary reason that Christianity has grown such deep roots in Samoa.

The first Christian missionaries to arrive in Samoa were those of the London Missionary Society (hereafter referred to as LMS, also known as the First Christian Congregational Church, or CCCS). John Williams and 24 others from the LMS arrived on the vessel, *The Messenger of Peace* in 1830 at Chief *Malietoa Vainu'upo's* home in Savai'i. *Malietoa* accepted Christianity and promised the missionaries protection (Garret 1982, 84). His acceptance of Christianity was in large part related to the prophecy of *Nafanua*. *Nafanua*, when in battle, would remove the chiefly titles of her enemies. *Malietoa*, who was a high chief and well respected man, once asked her for one of these titles. However, *Nafanua* had none to give him at that time. Instead, she told him of a vision she had had, in which a new and great religion would come to Samoa. When the missionaries arrived at *Malietoa's* doorstep it was seen as the fulfillment of *Nafanua's* prophecy. One informant remarked "it was the natural thing for Samoan's to accept Christianity, and now it has become part of what it means to be a Samoan." Not only would this decision elevate *Malietoa's* chiefly status, but it would open the floodgates of Christianity into Samoa and fundamentally alter the identity of the peoples.

Other reasons for the success of Christianity in Samoa were cited. Economic or material factors also came into play. The missionaries had nice clothes, fast ships, and guns, all of which enticed the Samoans. News of missionaries showering converts with gifts spread to Samoa from other Pacific Islands and furthered the desires of many to convert. Samoans began to think that if they converted, they would be blessed with material gifts. Missionaries quickly realized this and used it to their advantage by giving generous gifts (Watters 394, Liua'ana).

The Samoan word for people of European descent also contributes to the understanding of the initial interactions between the Samoans and the missionaries. *Papalagi*, or simply *palagi*, literally means “burst from the heavens.” For Samoans who had never seen white skinned people, these missionaries, who fulfilled the prophecy of *Nafanua*, must have seemed heavenly (anon).

Theological and liturgical similarities abounded, but many were elaborated on after Christianity had been established. Similarities included the notion of a heaven, where a supreme creator deity dwelled and the notion of an underworld, where the dead retired to. Connections between the creation myths have also been cited, such as: the earth being made by a creator deity, man being made in God's image and man being given dominion over all of the creation (Sevaaetasi).

The Samoan practice of *ifoga*, could be related to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. *Ifoga* involves repentance for wrongdoings such as murder. Even if the crime committed was committed by an individual, often the entire family would participate in the *ifoga*, sometimes the whole village. In the *fa'asamoa*, an individual's actions reflect on the entire family, therefore when an individual commits a wrong, it is the responsibility of

the whole family to respond. This act involves sitting on the lawn of the victim and covering one's self with a fine mat, an act of repentance and a plea for forgiveness. This act of asking forgiveness for one's own, but most often other's sins bear many similarities to the act of Jesus' crucifixion for the forgiveness of all humankind's sins (Sevaaetasi).

After the initial success with conversion, more ships were sent to Samoa's shores and by 1838 over 23,000 Samoans were participating in LMS activities (Watters 392). The missionaries began to work out a written form of the Samoan language to translate the Bible (previously there was no written language, and traditions and stories were passed on orally). Shortly after that, in 1835, the first Methodist missionaries arrived, and then in 1845, the Catholics arrived. These three churches battled for members in the early years, but before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all three denominations had strong membership enrollment (Ernst, 171, 169).

Today, these mainline churches are still strong in Samoa, however, they are feeling the pressure from the growing evangelical churches. Seventh Day Adventist, Assembly of God, and Jehovah's Witnesses congregations are growing and threaten the monopoly that the three mainline denominations have had on Christianity (and therefore all religion) in Samoa (Ernst 177-8). In addition, the influence of Samoan culture on Christianity (and vice versa) has been beyond significant. Many aspects of Samoan culture have been incorporated into the Christian life, such as the use and symbolism of kava. However, many mainline churches discourage belief in *aitu* or other traditional aspects of Samoan culture.

Resources on Samoan religion in general are not very numerous, however, resources on the newer denominations like LDS and particularly how they are in conversation with Samoan culture are even more scarce at best, and non-existent at worst. It is the interest of this paper to begin to rectify this problem and identify major areas of interest for future study in the area of LDS's role in Samoa.

### **A Brief History of the LDS Church in Samoa**

Unofficially, the first LDS missionaries arrived in Samoa in 1862 only about 30 years after the church was founded. Two missionaries, Kimo Belio and Manoa, both Hawaiians, set sail from Hawaii under the guidance of their mentor, Walter Murry Gibson. Gibson had recently been excommunicated from the LDS church for calling himself "President of the Islands of the Sea and of the Hawaiian islands for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" and engaging in heresy. His vision was to convert and spread the LDS faith, or his particular version of it, all over the South Seas. When Belio and Manoa arrived in Samoa, they had little success. They only managed to convert between 60 and 70 Samoans. As time passed Belio fell ill due to his old age. Once he died, the members of the LDS community in Samoa began to fade back into the mainline denominations (6-7). Eventually, after the LDS community had more or less disappeared, Manoa sent a letter to the LDS administration asking for official missionaries to be sent to Samoa. Years later, in 1888, the first official missionaries, Joseph Dean and Harry Moors arrived (Harris 8-9). At first, there was an explosion of them. Building churches, school houses and administrative buildings, as well as proselytizing, kept their hands full. They met again with relative success, although they

often clashed with mainline churches. Villages banned LDS, *matai* publicly condemned their aggressive conversion tactics, as did Christian leaders of other denominations, and violence occasionally became an issue (Harris 20-21).

After WWII, LDS missionary work in Samoa experienced a great resurgence. After half a century of slow gains, the number of missionaries rapidly increased and became more consistent. The first sisters arrived in 1953 (Harris 77). Almost every year since then, the number of missionaries sent to Samoa has grown. As of April 2006, around 140 were active on Upolu and Savai'i (Richards). The first, and (currently) only Samoan LDS temple was built and dedicated in 1982, on site in Pesega, near the capital city of Apia. A much larger and rather magnificent temple replaced it almost immediately after it burned down during some renovations. This newer temple was dedicated at the same site in 2005 (Samoa 82). Estimates of the current number of LDS in Samoa are very varied (between 9-33%). As of 1992, Manfred Ernst published that there were well over 20,000 members, which would be about 9% of the population (180,000) (Ernst 39). However, this number has surely grown in the last 15 years. Ben Liua'ana, a church historian at Malua Theological College estimated that the current membership was around 25% and the Mormon elders interviewed all quoted 30-33%. Actual figures are difficult to find, considering the LDS often leaves members on their roster for life, even if they convert or become inactive (Barker 219, Liua'ana).

### **Mormon Beliefs and Practices**

At this point, it is necessary to describe a little bit of what distinguishes Mormons from the mainline Christian denominations, in terms of belief and practice.

The religion was founded by Joseph Smith in 1830, in New York. Smith claimed the angel Moroni came to him in a vision and told him about some golden plates with sacred scripture written upon them. Smith dug up the places and began translating them using the help of a peeping stone. Once finished, this became *The Book of Mormon*. The book contains the history of the ancient inhabitants of what is now the United States (American Indians), who the Mormons believe were members of the Biblical lost tribes of Israel. This book is *very* important to LDS practice and is seen as inciting the restoration of the one true church, as Jesus Christ established it when he was alive (Missionaries).

Mormons also consider the Old and New Testaments to be Holy Scripture. However, they place particular emphasis on 3 texts unique to the Mormon Church: the aforementioned *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants* and *The Pearl of Great Price*. *Doctrine and Covenants* (or simply D&C) is a series of revelations, received by Joseph Smith and some of his successors as presidents of the church. *The Pearl of Great Price* is the book of Abraham, which Joseph Smith claimed he found among some Egyptian documents and translated himself. Topics covered include the plurality of gods, populated stars and the creation of earth out of existing material. Joseph Smith even began to translate his own version of the Bible, based on the Mormon belief that the book as been grossly mistranslated in the past. This translation is called The Inspired Version of the Bible, but the project was abandoned before completion (Kaiser 44-5).

Mormon doctrine claims that God was once a man, and ascended to his god status through righteous living. As “spirit children of god [faithful human practitioners], have the potential to become like him, even a god” (Otterson 59). Their knowledge of this

special relationship is what drives them to be one of the most ambitious and successful churches in the world. An individual Latter-day Saint's aim is at perfection, no less. Thus, they have many business interests, and many social services that cater to the full spectrum of needs of their church members (Otterson 23-4). It seems that LDS is the only church in Samoa to have really captured Weber's protestant ethic.

This doctrine of "eternal progression" is one of the most distinguishing beliefs within the Mormon Church. Part of achieving this god-like status, is choosing the Mormon path, getting married and attempting to produce as many offspring as possible. After death, if a male has followed the Mormon path and live a righteous life, he can ascend to godhood. Woman cannot become gods, as god is a man. They can only take secondary and supportive roles in the afterlife, as in life (women cannot hold either of the two LDS priesthoods. See pg 13) (Otterson 19). Thus, there are multiple gods in Mormonism, making it polytheistic and not monotheistic, *much* unlike all mainline Christian denominations. The holy trinity is accepted but conceived of very differently. Commonly thought of as 3 aspects of the one Christian God in LDS doctrine, each aspect, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, comprises an individual god with unique characteristics. Their unity, toted in scripture, is "only a unity of mind, purpose, knowledge, wisdom, goodness and glory" (Otterson 17). All this makes LDS *fundamentally* different from Christian denominations, all of which they consider to be apostates. However, LDS believes that they are the one true Christian Church, descended from the church established by Jesus Christ himself, and thus, other churches are not at all Christian, but mislead (missionaries).

Other unique practices include the baptism of the dead. This practice allows living members to stand in as proxy to baptize dead family members so the deceased family will have the opportunity to ascend in the afterlife and choose the Mormon path. This practice demonstrates that family is a central value, and families are eternal. LDS doctrine states that families can be together forever in the afterlife. Thus marriage ceremonies in the Mormon temples are considered to “seal” individuals together for all eternity, even if the marriage is not legally recognized, it is believed that the involved parties are family and will be together forever after death. Men can be sealed to more than one woman, but women can only be sealed to one man. This practice stems from the Joseph Smith’s revelation that men should have many wives. Joseph Smith and many of the churches early practitioners were polygamous. However, due to persecution and legal issues within the United States, the practice was removed from the list of LDS requirements to becoming like God (Kaiser 48).

There are no professional theologically trained clergy in the Mormon Church (Kaiser 47, missionaries). However, they have 2 priesthoods that most active LDS men hold at least one of. The lesser of the two is the Aaronic priesthood which includes social and secular responsibilities. This priesthood includes 4 offices: deacon (12-15 yrs), teachers (16-17 yrs), priests (17-18 yrs), and bishop. The more prestigious priesthood, that of the Melchizedek, is more concerned with the spiritual aspects of LDS service and has 6 offices: elder (19 and up), Seventies (concerned with spreading the gospel), high priest (this is the source of all higher church officials), Patriarchs (give blessings), apostles (the 12 men who regulate LDS) and the presiding high priests (this is the source for the Quorum of the president of the church) (Kaiser 32). Although they are not

professionally trained and only the higher positions are paying positions, most LDS members are very confident in their knowledge of their religion. The missionaries study every day before they go out into the world to preach and are very well trained orators. From a very young age, all members of the Mormon Church are indoctrinated with church history and theology so they can move up in the Church to higher standing and thus become closer to being a god (missionaries). This is a very simplistic outline of a very complex hierarchy.

### **Issues of Hostility**

Despite their current success, LDS has not always had an easy time establishing itself in Samoa. When they first arrived, the LDS missionaries were shunned by many of the mainline denominations for their aggressive proselytizing and unique theology. Leaders of mainline churches would publicly condemn the Mormon presence (Garret 1992, 150). *Matai* would often ban LDS missionaries from the village. It has even been argued that those *matai* that did allow LDS did so only to irritate the mainline churches in their community when they felt the need to reestablish their chiefly authority (Garret 1997, 408). The term *Mamona ma le ato pa'u* (Mormon with a suitcase) became a popular shout out to missionaries walking past in their typical uniform: a pressed and collared white shirt, dark slacks and a briefcase for carrying scriptures and other documents. For their first 60 or so years, the Mormons in Samoa made very slow gains with respect to membership (Liua'ana).

Many of these issues are ongoing today. Missionaries will almost always not be able to enter at least one village in their assigned area, because it has banned LDS. This

occurrence is more frequent on Savai'i than on Upolu. Non LDS interviewees recognized that there is still a fair amount of conflict over the Mormon presence in Samoa and all either had friends or family that were members of the LDS church. Mormons, they said, are accused of worshiping the LDS founder, Joseph Smith, instead of Jesus Christ. A young Samoan woman claimed she always argues with her cousin about the theology, especially the fact that "they do their own religious thing, instead of the Christian thing." But this same informant also noted that she thought the hostilities were easing up. With the arrival and rapid growth of other more evangelical and/or fundamentalist religious groups like 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Assembly of God, the negative attention is being shared. Although many Samoans seem to have qualms with even the three mainline churches (with particular respect to the high amount of giving that is required), it seems that much of the teasing and hostility is now being focused on the new and often "louder, crazier, singey and dancey" religious groups. The Samoan people want to worship quietly, several informants said. The newer religious factions are too radical.

Elder Richards, a young missionary from Utah, commented that "missionaries in Samoa have got it easy though. They'll [Samoans] always invite you in because it's part of their culture. The worst response you'll ever get is they'll tell you they're busy." Other American missionaries also commented on the relative ease of working in Samoa as opposed to other countries where the people are not so hospitable to LDS. In fact, all the missionaries spoke with *great* joy of their work in Samoa and many expressed anxieties about the return to America.

## Perceptions of LDS Success

### LDS Perspectives

Why has LDS recently become so successful here in Samoa? The American LDS missionaries had a one-word answer: faith. One young man said, “the faith of the people is so strong here, much stronger than many other places. It’s awesome.” This faith is so strong in fact that the missionaries called Samoa “the land of miracles” and claimed miracles happen in Samoa more than almost anywhere. They cited several miracle stories they believe the people witnessed and recognized because of their undying faith to the church. For instance, the missionaries claimed that the last few hurricanes to sit off shore of Samoa changed course to miss the islands at the last minute due to faith.

As much as faith was the initial answer and the favorite of American missionaries, they cited a few other factors. One American missionary cited the story of *Nafanua* and the similarities between the Christian God the pre-Christian creator *Tagaloa*, saying “it’s rooted in the history...they respond well to the truth because it rings a bell.”

None of the Mormon Samoans interviewed cited faith as a factor in the success of the church. One woman spoke at length of the “high values” like discouraging child abuse and spousal abuse. Both she and others cited the benefits of charity and social organizations run by the LDS members like the feeding of the poor, the employment center and the LDS created jobs within the church, in church owned companies and abroad. The same woman who spoke of “high values” also noted, “we don’t have to pay a penny for any of it [the social services]. It all comes from the church.”

Another factor in the success of the church seemed to be the educational opportunities. The Mormon Church provides is notorious for operating some of the best-

funded schools in the nation and students (and their parents) must be LDS members to enroll. These schools, as well as providing a good education, also grant scholarships to many students to attend their universities in Utah (Brigham-Young University or BYU) and Hawaii (BYU Hawaii). Particularly in Samoa, the universities recruit hard for football players. Shaun Nua, who recently appeared on TV, is a player on the Steelers (the recent super bowl champions) who was recruited from American Samoa to play football for BYU, where he was drafted into the NFL. Not only does the Mormon educational system allow many Samoans to get a good education, but also it could provide them with a ticket out of the country and perhaps a ticket to fame, or at least better employment opportunities.

### **Non-LDS Perspectives**

Many of the above-cited factors reappear in the opinions of the non-LDS informants, but in different contexts. Social services, education, travel and such are considered big incentive to convert by many non-LDS. However, the opinions of the non-members clash greatly with those of the American missionaries, mainly in that “faith” seems to play little part in the perceived success of the LDS church.

Taranaki, a young Samoan woman has several friends who took the entrance exams for BYU and has heard that they are “easy.” She claims several of her friends have been baptized solely to get scholarships to attend otherwise unaffordable American Mormon universities like BYU. Taranaki’s story is not unique. Many other informants had family members or friends who had converted for educational benefits. A young Samoan college student, formerly an LDS member, said “the young Samoans like it

because they like the more American things. They want to go there and live like the people with computers, nice clothes, nice churches. I don't think most of them actually believe in it [Mormonism]." The prospect of a good education and the opportunity to leave Samoa and find a higher paying job is seen by some as too good to pass up in a third world country where the majority of families receive a large portion of remittances from relatives abroad and looking after the family is seen as a top priority. Although missions provide another opportunity to travel to other countries, they are not as promising, as the missionaries might very well end up stationed in Samoa.

Another factor that seems essential to the equation and one that ties together most other factors that were cited during interviews with non-members is tithing. It is common practice in Samoa to donate 10% of one's annual income to the church, as stated in the Bible. Since a large portion of Samoans are subsistence farmers, it can become quite difficult to keep track of their (often *very* low) annual income and thus they must donate little to nothing. However, many of the Samoan churches receive much more than 10% of their member's incomes. Many Samoans donate generous amounts of money for the building of churches, pastor's homes, gifts, and even their pastor's phone bills. The Mormon Church however does not require such large donations. The Samoan Mormons do not pay directly for the building of their chapels. They do not have paid clergy that they must lavish with gifts (*Liua'ana*). In addition, as LDS and non-LDS alike said, Mormons receive millions in infrastructure, scholarships and social services without paying nearly as much as their mainline peers.

It seems then that the Samoan people, both Mormons and non-Mormons, do not see faith as an important factor in the success of Mormonism. While the American

missionaries stressed the ultimate “Truth” of LDS as the original church of Jesus Christ, most of the Samoans interviewed cited economic and other factors. In fact, one man, who had lived in America for 10 years of his life but has now returned to his homeland of Samoa, stated that the Samoans tend to see the denominations as more “fluid” than Americans:

It does not surprise me that as long as the title says Jesus, some Samoans will join. As long as you believe in Jesus Christ, our savior, you are a Christian. I’m LMS but I attend Catholic services when I go to visit my Catholic relatives or Methodist services when I visit my Methodist relatives. Most of it’s the same.

### **Attitudes towards Samoan and Mormon Cultures**

If theology is not the primary source of LDS success in Samoa, what does that mean? Ben Luia’ana, a historian and professor at Malua Theological College, echoes the aforementioned issue of fluidity when he notes the tension between the missionaries upon arrival in Samoa regarding the separation of religious groups, all claiming Christian heritage. Even today, the differences between the churches are “more cultural than theological,” he says. Thus, informants were asked to discuss how they see LDS and the *fa’asamoa* coming into conversation.

### **LDS on Cultures**

The American missionaries cited “a few little things that conflict” between LDS and *fa’asamoa*. Perhaps the most mentioned issue was that of the *matai*. *Matai* have banned LDS in several villages, but “that’s just their culture, I can’t argue with that” said

one American man. The missionaries were confident that the *matai* were slowly coming around and that once they learned what LDS was “really about” then they would not ban them from their villages.

Another issue the Americans mentioned revolved around the conflicting hierarchies of LDS and Samoan culture. Missionaries claimed that sometimes these two highly organized and respected systems of authority clash, like when *matai* try to assert their chiefly authority in the LDS system. Resolution of these conflicts lies in submitting to the LDS standards. When you join the church, they said, “sometimes you have to change things about yourself that aren’t pleasing to God.” Therefore, members are encouraged to assimilate to the strict LDS doctrine, no matter what their cultural background.

The American missionaries also had many very positive feelings to express about Samoan people and culture. Several stated, “I love the Samoan people, I really do.” Especially when it comes to going out and proselytizing, the missionaries said appreciated the Samoan’s hospitality. Some expressed thankfulness that they were doing their service in Samoa where “that’s their culture, to let you in” as opposed to other places where you “have more doors slammed in your face.” Missionaries said that even if the Samoan family does not want them to proselytize, they often invite them in for food, tea and other conversation. Again, the missionaries also noted the “faith” of the Samoan people. Practices such as the *Sa* (evening prayer time), and the tendency to close all shops on the Sunday (not buying or selling on Sunday is part of LDS doctrine) were praised by one LDS official. “They’re a very spiritual people,” he said.

Samoan Mormons saw these two cultures as even more distinct and splintered. Faleafa Fosio, a former missionary, called them “LDS culture” or “Jesus Christ culture” and “Samoan culture.” When Fosio is interacting with LDS members, he must use the Jesus Christ culture. He says this Jesus Christ culture is shared by LDS all over the world and they use it to share the gospel and their personal spiritual stories. The Samoan culture, however, is something that does not always correspond with the wishes of God, thus, many parts of it LDS discourages.

Another LDS member saw cultural conflicts between LDS and Samoans as issues of lack of education. A former missionary like Fosio, this man stated that some Samoans have “strong *fa’asamoa* and small faith,” directly setting LDS faith and *fa’asamoa* in opposition. It is only “lack of wisdom” he said, that allows other Samoans to reject the LDS church.

### **Non-LDS on Cultures**

Non-LDS informants noted that LDS and the *fa’asamoa* were involved in a very volatile relationship. Many commented on the foreignness of the theology and practices, saying that such thing were “un-Samoan,” “un-Christian,” or otherwise “strange.” An anonymous woman stated that most of the Samoan Mormons that she knew were “not really Samoan, at least anymore,” because their dress, their possessions and their mindset were now more Western and dominated LDS cultural norms. Liua’ana’s comments echoed her statement when he said, “the Mormons I know are very European.” In fact, Liua’ana summed up many of the interviews with non-LDS when he said, “they (LDS) would rather not do *fa’asamoa*.” Another scholar, John Garret, wrote that “Mormons have chosen assimilation rather than integration or bicultural co-existence” (1992, 385).

A young Samoan woman said that the Mormons are sometimes teased and called “worshippers of Joseph Smith” or the aforementioned *Mamona ma le ato pa’u*. In a culture where assimilation is valued, these heavily Western influenced LDS (who are sometimes Westerners themselves) stick out like sore thumbs. In a church where assimilation is highly valued, as evidenced by the authority of the LDS doctrine over all aspects of member’s lives, non-Mormon Samoans and their practices and beliefs also seem strange.

Liua’ana and many others noted that LDS missionaries often go in pairs, one Samoan and one *palagi*. Liua’ana suspects that the Samoan missionaries are used as “ice-breakers,” then LDS can attempt to introduce their theology. Other scholars have noted that LDS draws on their Christian roots in the early stages of proselytizing, to emphasize the familiar. However, their theology often extends way out of the bounds of traditional Christian theology (Kaiser, Garret, Barker, Liua’ana). The LDS church, as recognized by the Samoan non-members interviewed, is one that only utilizes the aspects of Samoan culture LDS finds helpful, a process of picking and choosing. One woman remarked;

They remove what makes it distinctly Samoan, so it’s not really an appreciation for *fa’asamoa* at all. Many of the Mormons that I know just joined because they don’t want to deal with the responsibilities of being a part of the Samoan culture. They want to escape *fa’alavelave* and those sorts of things. It’s cheaper, they have more resources and lots of Samoans are sick of paying out their ears for church related expenses.

## **Conclusion(s)**

The Mormon's success here in Samoa is undeniable, and their presence is becoming a force to reckon with. They exemplify unique aesthetics in many ways, the missionaries being one example already discussed. Their chapels stand roadside, all new or very well kept and very uniform. The temple that stands just outside of Apia is also hard to miss, with its lavish and large structure. The temple stands on a larger Mormon compound that houses a school, athletic fields, the mission office, other administrative offices, housing and even a book store. Further study of Mormon Aesthetics and media with particular attention to the contrast on a Samoan landscape could produce very interesting results.

Not only are LDS missionaries and houses of worship ultra-visible, but their presence in the business world is becoming undeniable too. Internationally, they own significant numbers of hotel chains, real estate businesses, insurance firms, trust holding firms, agricultural land, schools and media. They also own significant stock in Utah's energy companies and significant numbers of international companies like Coca-cola and Pepsi (Berg 28). Here in Samoa, many of the larger businesses are LDS owned and operated (Liua'ana). Further study of LDS business could provide very interesting insights into the LDS situation in Samoa and the economic factors involved.

Many predict that the church will only continue to grow. Missionaries quoted, "nothing can stop it, it can only get stronger," at least until the return of Jesus Christ. Liua'ana predicts that they will continue to move up in the ranks in Samoa, along with other less traditional, more evangelical and fundamentalist religious fractions such as Assembly of God; "I reckon about 40% will be mainline, and 60% will be other."

However, Liua'ana sees LDS as reaching its pinnacle around 30%, which is where LDS claims it stands.

It seems, from this research, that the LDS has become a Westernizing force in Samoa. All Pacific Island countries have been battling the Western influence and the onslaught of globalization. The case of Mormonism in Samoa represents an interesting and significant aspect of this process. LDS is concerned with the Westernization, but more specifically the “Mormonization” of Samoa, as well as other countries. One area of particular interest with respect to Westernization in Samoa is the issue of foreign aid. Samoa receives a considerable amount of foreign aid every year and many are concerned about the growing dependence on such aid and foreign products in a country where subsistence living has been the norm. Considering the sentiments of those interviewed, and the astonishing amount of aid LDS gives in the country, it seems safe to say that LDS is much like a foreign aid association in many ways. However, even more importantly, they are importing not just money, but culture.

Michael Otterson writes; “it is hoped that history will someday record that the LDS church was a major force in unveiling the greatness of the Pacific Islands and their peoples” (61). William A. Moody, an LDS missionary in Samoa wrote over 100 years ago that it was the LDS mission to teach the Samoans to become “a once more white and delightful people” (207). It seems then that the focus of the church in Samoa has changed greatly since its arrival here. But are Mormons American cultural imperialists? Either way, now or then, one can only say yes. Whether LDS is looking to make Samoans white, or reveal their “greatness,” they are a foreign power, run by white, middle aged, upper-class, American males, dictating corresponding cultural norms to a

third world people who, due to the stringent moral and hierarchical system in place, have little to no power to rework and control their own identity within LDS.

Epeli Hau'ofa, a Pacific Island scholar, complicates the notion of “traditional” culture. In his article, “The Future of our Past,” Hau'ofa writes;

I must confess that I am baffled by this concern with culture preservation. If we take it that “culture” means the totality of the way of life of a given population at any given time, and that this way of life is subject to alternation as its environment changes, then I do not see why the cultures of ex-colonial peoples should be singled out for preservation (152).

However, he does not see assimilation as the answer. In fact, the issue lies in the colonialist legacy that has been left in the Pacific. These colonial powers have long controlled various aspects of life and development across the Pacific. This is precisely where LDS comes into contact with Hau'ofa's argument. He sees a mounting recognition of similarities between Pacific Islanders and thus a potential for new cultural ground to be foraged in art, academics and other areas (169). In this post-colonial movement, or one like it, lies the potential for Samoans to reclaim, recreate and maintain their unique identity, minimizing damaging colonial residues. Through a self controlled process of identity formation, Samoans can incorporate religions into the *fa'asamoa*. However, while many forces from outside have the potential to mold the culture upon which they act (it being a malleable thing), it is not within the Samoan's ability to ascertain any significant sort of power within the Mormon Church. The LDS system is one founded in an American context, run by white, upper-class males with unwavering and unique Western norms. Therefore LDS can play no part in the formation of a new, self established, unique and innovative Pacific identity of any kind as it continues to be a

form of American imperialism, exporting its social values, practices, business franchises and other symbols of American culture all over the globe. Future religious study involving case studies on identity formation and LDS in Samoa could delve deeper into some of the issues presented in this paper and identify new areas of interest.

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## Glossary

*Aiga* – Extended family unit

*Aitu* – Spirits

*Atua* – Christian God, formerly the Pre-Christian gods of Samoa

*Fafa* – Hades, or underworld

*Fa'alavelave* – Family obligations and responsibilities. Literally, "much trouble"

*Fa'asamoa* – "The Samoan way" of life, customs, culture

*Fale* – Samoan house, traditionally without walls, made with wood pillars and a thatched palm roof

*Fono* – Village council, headed by *Matai*

*Ifoga* – Traditional Samoan practice asking for forgiveness where one and one's family or village cover selves with fine mats and sit outside the victim's *fale*

*Lagi* - Heaven

*Lotu* – Church/prayer

*Malietoa* – Chief who greeted the first missionaries and accepted Christianity

*Matai* – Chief and head of extended family

*Nafanua* – Samoan warrior goddess who foretold the arrival of Christianity

*(Pa)palagi* – White people. Literally, "burst from the sky"

*Sa* - Evening prayer. All villagers must remain in their homes during this time

*Tagaloa* – Pre-Christian Samoan creator deity