


Fall 2010

# Conditional Acceptance: Asserting Fa'afafine Claims to Legitimacy in Samoan Society

Teake

*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)

 Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Teake, "Conditional Acceptance: Asserting Fa'afafine Claims to Legitimacy in Samoan Society" (2010). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 923.

[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/923](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/923)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections.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](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

**Conditional Acceptance: Asserting Fa'afine Claims to Legitimacy in  
Samoan Society**

Teake

Advisor: Prof. Unasa L. F. Va'a  
Academic Director: Jackie Fa'asisila  
S.I.T. Samoa, Fall 2010

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	3
Process	4
<b>Part I. Literature Review: <i>Distorted Perceptions and the Fetishization of Samoan History</i></b>	4
<b>A. Obstacles to Studying Fa’afafine: Fear of Misrepresentation</b>	5
<b>B. Historical Misunderstanding: Perpetual Misrepresentation</b>	6
<b>C. Eroticism: Differentiating between the Shameful and the Life-affirming</b>	7
<i>Provocative Performance of Femininity by Some Fa’afafine</i>	8
<b>Part II. Contemporary Levels of Acceptance: <i>Qualified Public Approval</i></b>	9
<b>A. Hypersexuality as a Compromising Aspect of Fa’afafine Identity</b>	9
<i>Public Sentiment: Rallying for a Ban on Homosexuality</i>	10
<i>“Good” v. “Bad” Fa’afafine: Defining Tolerable and Unacceptable Performances of Gender</i>	10
<b>B. Asserting Fa’afafine Claims to Legitimacy: Three Strategies</b>	12
<i>1. Essentialist Response: Nature v. Nurture</i>	12
<i>2. Inscribing the Fa’afafine Role into a Larger Polynesian Narrative</i>	13
<i>3. Emphasis on Fa’afafine’s Family Role</i>	15
<b>Part III. Breakthrough-Voicing Fa’afafine Desires: <i>Articulating Wants and Needs</i></b>	16
<b>A. Individual Strategies toward Combating Homophobia</b>	17
<i>Addressing Village Restriction</i>	18
<b>B. Formation of the Association: Asserting a Fa’afafine voice</b>	19
<i>Reluctance to Associate with an International Gay Rights Movement</i>	20
<b>Conclusions</b>	
<b>A. Fundamentalist Backlash and Homosexuality as a “Foreign” Concept</b>	20
<i>Western Individualism: In Pursuit of Free-expression</i>	22
<b>B. Suggestions for a Further Study: Potential of Fa’afafine to Destabilize Existing Gender Norms</b>	23
Citations	26
Questionnaire	28
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	30

### **Note on the Use of the Pronoun: “he”**

Disclaimer: I have chosen to use the gendered pronoun “he” when referring to the liminal “third-gender” individuals known in Samoa as *fa’afafine*. I do this to emphasize the biological maleness that persists (despite a variety of gender performances, which differ widely from individual to individual). It is this biological maleness that renders a fa’afafine’s attraction to other male-bodied individuals problematic in the context of an increasingly charged public atmosphere of homophobia.

A gender-neutral pronoun could also have been employed to emphasize the liminal nature of a category-confounding third gender. Several male-identified respondents repeatedly stumbled over the choice of a gendered pronoun when referring to any given fa’afafine.

A gender-neutral pronoun would furthermore reflect the potential that the fa’afafine role holds to disrupt and re-modify dominant gender norms.

### **Introduction**

The author aimed to gauge levels of acceptance throughout Samoa of individuals known as *fa’afafine*. The term translates literally: “in the manner (or fashion) of a woman.” The term applies to those male-bodied individuals whose lifestyle and general conduct is characterized as feminine in the public’s imagination of a strict gender binary. Fa’afafine generally perform “feminine” roles in a sexual division of labor (often from a very early age). Some fa’afafine dress in women’s clothing and speak or walk in a manner commonly associated with feminine patterns of behavior.

The author initially hoped to investigate the extent to which the presence of a third gender serves to either reinforce or undermine existing gender norms. The author expected to find that fa’afafine serve as a potentially destabilizing influence on the public’s understanding of a socially constructed gender binary. But taking into account various interview responses, the research came to center primarily upon the question of whether fa’afafine are accepted in modern

Samoa culture, and if so, to what extent this is a *qualified* acceptance. The author sought to determine what the conditions of this acceptance are, and shed light on prospects for new ways of “being fa’afafine” in the near future. The author ultimately concluded there exists much less personal freedom allotted to fa’afafine than initially expected. The research offered mixed results concerning prospects for the future. The increasing visibility of a unified fa’afafine community suggests signs of an increasingly liberating cultural climate. However, there remains cause for concern in light of a disconcertingly widespread atmosphere of homophobia.

Process:

Collected 18 questionnaires. (11 completed by individuals who identified as fa’afafine, 5 by individuals who identified as female, and 2 who identified as male)

Conducted 12 formalized and semi-structured interviews, with permission from the head of the Samoa Fa’afafine Association.

## **Part I.** Literature Review: *Distorted Perceptions and the Fetishization of Samoan History*

In electing to study fa’afafine, I hoped to explore the complexities of gender construction and assess the role a “third gender” might play in destabilizing an otherwise dominant and restrictive gender binary. When I surveyed the previous literature, I realized I was engaging in a heavily practiced tradition of foreign academics conducting similar Samoan studies to fit their personal and intellectual agendas. Each publication invariably produces images of fa’afafine that do not necessarily represent the best interests of the participants involved. The results of these widely distributed works are often compounded with pervasive media imagery depicting the Polynesian region as a sort of “sexual mecca”<sup>1</sup> with the result that gross distortions and misrepresentations abound.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tamaira, A. Marat. 2010. ‘From Full Dusk to Full Tusk: Reimagining the ‘Dusky Maiden’ through the Visual Arts’: p. 7

## A. Obstacles to Studying Fa'afafine: Fear of Misrepresentation

Several respondents were ostensibly concerned that my research would produce yet another misinformed representation with the potential to negatively impact fa'afafine's image internationally. After reviewing my questionnaire thoroughly, one respondent refused to participate, concerned by the fact he had "no control over how the information will be used." During an informal group interview, another respondent asked to use my pen in order to write his own comprehensive definition/explanation of "fa'afafine". This same respondent repeatedly monitored my progress throughout the night with frequent remarks such as "what did you just write?!" He insisted what I wrote had an extensive influence due to my status as a university student.

Johanna Schmidt discussed this concern over misrepresentation in her essay "Redefining Fa'afafine."<sup>2</sup> She maintains "the 'Mead legacy' has left Samoans extremely wary of *palagi* [Western] researchers, especially those who evidence any interest in sexuality." She reports that "almost all Samoans seem to know Mead's name, and many are aware of the belief of promiscuity among Samoan youth that she propagated." One respondent grew particularly suspicious when I explained the anthropological nature of my work. "You want to study us?... like Margaret Mead," he suggested. When I faltered for a response, he declared "I *don't* like Margaret Mead."

The individual who choose not to complete the questionnaire was equally intent on determining the nature and ultimate purpose of my research. "What is this *for* exactly?... Psychology? Sociology?... *Sexiology*?" The respondent remained wary of any misinformed or distorted study that might center disproportionately on discussions of sexuality or sexual practices.

This reflects a widespread refusal to reduce fa'afafine identity to a mere question of orientation. This tendency may in part explain one respondent's use of the term "bi-potentiality" rather than "bi-sexuality" in response to the open-ended question: "what is an appropriate English translation for the term "fa'afafine?" Part II of this paper will explore the limitations that arise from conflating identity with orientation.

---

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008. 'Redefining Fa'afafine: Western Discourses and the Construction of Transgenderism in Samoa'

## B. Historical Misunderstanding: Perpetual Misrepresentation

Serge Tczherkezoff has worked extensively to deconstruct early missionary and voyager accounts and illuminate major misconceptions of the period. According to Tczherkezoff, distorted perceptions of the Pacific region today stem from the initial myth of a sexually liberated South Seas paradise (or “New Cythera”) propagated by travelers’ radical misreading of cultural scripts. The legacy of this skewed “interpretative tradition... continues to inform/deform the anthropological interpretation even of data collected recently.”<sup>3</sup>

In her recent article, “Reimagining the ‘Dusky Maidens’ through the Arts”, Marata Tamaira similarly demonstrates how artists who accompanied the first voyagers “literally and figuratively painted Polynesia as a sexual Mecca where sex-starved sailors and aristocratic gentlemen alike could satisfy their carnal itchings.”<sup>4</sup> This trope of licentiousness and sexual hospitality was often employed to obscure the level of violence that characterized early ventures into the South Pacific.

Schmidt reminds us that these tropes persist into the present:

In the experience of Samoans the result of [modern anthropological] research is usually a compounding of the process of the exoticisation and eroticisation of the Pacific Islands that started with the voyages of Captain Cook, continued with erotic Orientalist depictions of Samoan women, and was revived and reified by Mead.<sup>5</sup>

Schmidt demonstrates that widely distributed documentaries, such as Heather Croall’s *Paradise Bent*, tend to reintroduce existing paradigms suggesting Samoa to be a bastion of unencumbered sexual license. With regard to fa’afafine, Samoa is portrayed as an idealized land of unrestrained sexual liberty in which gender non-conforming individuals possess free reign to explore all aspects of their sexuality. This media-constructed image obscures the reality of fa’afafine’s current position of societal marginalization. Furthermore, the tendency to emphasize fa’afafine’s sexuality—and render it the defining aspect of fa’afafine identity—constitutes a major liability to the group in the context of an increasingly homophobic national climate.

---

<sup>3</sup> Tczherkezoff, Serge. 2004. ‘First Contacts’ in Polynesia: The Samoan Case (1772-1848): *Western Misunderstandings about Sexuality and Divinity*: p. 4

<sup>4</sup> Tamaira, A. Marat. 2010: p. 8

<sup>5</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008

### C. Eroticism: Differentiating between the Shameful and the Life-affirming

Prior to assessing the public's general level of acceptance toward fa'afafine (both as individuals and as members of a minority social group) it is necessary to determine what constitutes acceptable behavior in Samoan society at large. This section briefly traces the alterations that have taken place in Samoan attitudes toward sexuality since the time of contact.

Mageo<sup>6</sup>, Schoeffel,<sup>7</sup> and Tczherkezoff<sup>8</sup> have provided extensive evidence to demonstrate that the pre-contact articulation of sexuality, while it may have encouraged fruitful sexual liaisons, consisted of more than a mere indiscriminate display of wanton promiscuity. Rather, sexual mores represented a culturally embedded and legitimate form of marriage—neither strictly permanent nor monogamous—meant to produce offspring and link lineages. According to Jolly and Macintyre, upon contact with the West, this “vaunting of the pleasure of heterosexual relations and procreation had perforce to give way to Christian restraint and repression.”<sup>9</sup> Thus missionary influence marked a conceptual shift: from viewing sexual practices as enjoyable life processes to shameful forms of degradation.

The missionaries (and all other puritans) brought pornography by instilling in us the bourgeois morality of Europe, making us ashamed of the very stories and situations which made us laugh... In our more traditional faleaitu [comedies] actors display it with gleeful abandonment. And it is good. For our true humor is still alive and may someday – when we have purged ourselves of the guilt we acquired during our colonial experience – surface again in novel, poem song and play. (Glimpses of Home. *Tautai*, June 1969)<sup>10</sup>.

Haunani-Kay Trask discusses a similar conceptual shift as she details the commodification of traditional Hawaiian forms of self-expression. Lamenting the transformation of *hula* displays into decontextualized tourist attractions, she reports a clear degradation of that which was once sacred and enjoyable.

“...Thus *hula* dancers wear clownlike makeup, don costumes from a mix of Polynesian cultures, and behave in a manner that is smutty and salacious rather than powerfully

---

<sup>6</sup> Mageo, Jeanette M. 1992. 'Male Transvestism and Cultural Change in Samoa,'

<sup>7</sup> Schoeffel, Penelope 'Sexual Morality in Samoa and Its Historical Transformations':

<sup>8</sup> Tcherkezoff, Serge. 2004

<sup>9</sup> Jolly, Margaret and Macintyre, Martha. 1989. *Family & Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact*: p. 9

<sup>10</sup> Moyle 1975:227, R. 1975. Sexuality in Samoan Art Forms. In *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1975, pp. 227-247



erotic. The distance between the smutty and the erotic is precisely the distance between Western culture and Hawaiian culture. In the hotel version of the *hula*, the sacredness of the dance has completely evaporated, while the athleticism and sexual expression have been packaged like ornaments. The purpose is entertainment for profit rather than a joyful and truly Hawaiian celebration of human and divine nature.”<sup>11</sup>

It would be a mistake to conflate the Hawaiian cosmological views and customs with those of the Samoan islands. But it should be recognized that both regions’ views on sexuality experienced the same disruptive force in the form of newly introduced Western ideals. Whereas certain Pacific communities once attached a degree of respect to contextualized displays of virility and suggestive performances, today an influx of Western worldviews has rendered such candid displays suspect (especially when engaged in by biological females) and subject to public criticism.

#### *Provocative Performance of Femininity by Some Fa’afafine*

Jeannette Mageo reports that an increasingly sexualized and extroverted style of fa’afafine activity began to take shape in the context of the *faleaitu* (comedy shows) of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mageo has suggested that fa’afafine’s extravagant dress and provocative gestures served to fill the void left by village females who were no longer permitted to exhibit such erotic cultural scripts.<sup>12</sup>

Candid performances of the provocative were apparent in several (*but not all*) of the fa’afafine I interviewed. Notes from my evening interview with a group of three fa’afafine are rife with bawdy sexual comments and suggestive remarks (the majority of which were directed at me). Immediately following a brief daytime interview earlier in the week, I was also directly probed by the respondent about my own sexual preferences and inclinations.

These suggestive performances of femininity manifest not only in mannerisms, speech patterns and candid subject matter, but also (most ostensibly) through intentionally provocative make-up and attire. During the evening interview, one fa’afafine drew attention to another’s lipstick and commented on the shade. As the group prepared to disembark for a local nightclub, another fa’afafine lowered his dress below the shoulders in order to don a brassier.

---

<sup>11</sup> Trask, Huanani-Kay. 1999. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*: p. 144

<sup>12</sup> Mageo, Jeanette M. 1992.

While I agree with Mageo that many fa'afafine today exhibit overt displays of provocative or bawdy humor (*arguably* cultural remnants from a time prior to the influx of puritanical sentiments) I disagree that these exhibitionist performances serve any sort of public need to express a bygone display of sexually charged humor. One male respondent, who had spent half his life in New Zealand and exhibited an atypically liberal acceptance toward local fa'afafine, indeed claimed he found amusement in fa'afafine's spontaneous employment of *tausua* (sardonic quips with sexual overtones) which he confirmed is not typical conduct of "real" girls. But the majority of non-fa'afafine respondents exhibited blatant disapproval—in some cases outright disgust—toward fa'afafine's candid displays of bawdy humor or suggestive displays of attire and make-up.

As evidenced by Trask's portrayal of the Hawaiian *Hula*, the former sense of dignity and enjoyment has been effectively drained from today's performances of the erotic. A fa'afafine's appeal to exhibitionist scripts (increasingly acquired through overseas media imagery) is undoubtedly a *liability* and not an asset to his/her level of public acceptance.

## **Part II. Contemporary Levels of Acceptance: *Qualified Public Approval***

### **A. Hypersexuality as a Compromising Aspect of Fa'afafine Identity**

If the mandate to conceal suggestive displays was once imposed from the outside, this sentiment is now very much imbedded in the fa'aSamoa (Samoan way). It constitutes a pertinent reality in the every day lives of Samoans. As Jolly and Macintyre explain, "Pacific peoples have internalized European discourses about their past traditions and accepted negative evaluations of their indigenous domesticities."<sup>13</sup> Schmidt describes the same phenomena, albeit ascribing slightly more agency to the Samoan individuals involved in the conscious re-definition of cultural mores:

Christianity is now an integral part of fa'aSamoa, effectively incorporated into the discourses and enactments of Samoan culture. While Samoan modesty may be a legacy of missionary morality, today overt sexuality or bodily exposure, especially for women, is considered very unSamoan.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Jolly, Margaret and Macintyre, Martha. 1989: p. 16

<sup>14</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

This sentiment was expressed in one interview by a female respondent who proclaimed only a very *qualified* acceptance of fa'afafine in the community. She drew a clear distinction between what she termed “good” fa'afafine, and those she termed “bad” or “rude”:

Some people don't like their behavior...They're rude. (When asked to elaborate, the respondent continued): ...The way they dance, they way they walk. If they talk they don't care...they're nasty! Especially clothes...too short, too tight:...rude!”

When I suggested the styles that such fa'afafine exhibit are increasingly reflective of *Palagi* fashions, she confirmed this observation.: “yes...it's *not* Samoan.”

### *Public Sentiment: Rallying for a Ban on Homosexuality*

In July of 2006, a public outcry was raised against fa'afafine when two prominent religious leaders, Pastor of the Worship Centre Church Viliamu Mafo'e and Congregational Christian Church Reverend Fauolo, delivered impassioned addresses calling for a government ban on homosexuality<sup>15</sup>. Mafo'e issued inflammatory remarks declaring: “homosexuality should be demolished and...our leaders should be proactive to make sure we are not affected by this curse.” He concluded: “God demolishes these kinds of people.” A series of heated editorials soon followed, many in support of the proposed ban. One report gathered quotes from local community members and revealed a staunch anti-gay public sentiment<sup>16</sup>. Several respondents insisted: “to allow gay relationships in Samoa is like turning our lives back to Sodom and Gomorrah...” and “Being gay is not right and not normal. It is against our religion and it's evil. It should be banned”. Indeed, in response to the survey question: “What changes would you like to see in the next ten years”, three of the 7 non-fa'afafine respondents replied: “no more fa'afafine in Samoa.”

### *“Good” v. “Bad” Fa'afafine: Defining Tolerable and Unacceptable Performances of Gender*

In response to these displays of homophobia, several articles emerged championing gender-nonconformists' right to life and free-association. These editorials highlighted fa'afafine's extensive and time-honored contributions to society while challenging the opposition's inconsistencies as well as church hypocrisy. Several proponents of gay rights

---

<sup>15</sup> “Oka Back's ‘Gay’ Ban” in Sunday Samoa - 16 July 2006

<sup>16</sup> “Should Gays be Banned?” in Samoa Observer - 13 July 2006

submitted articles on conditions of anonymity, fearing public reprisals. One article by Toleafoa Afamasaga Toleafoa emphasized fa'afafine's central role in the family unit:

Fa'afafine and fa'afatama<sup>17</sup> more often than not play their part in the life of families and churches and villages like every one else. In fact very often, they far surpass others in what they do for the support of parents and families.<sup>18</sup>

But Toleafoa proceeded to qualify his acceptance of fa'afafine by emphasizing his concerns over the ills that can arise in an urban environment permitting increasingly liberal displays of self-expression. According to him, "urban life allows individuals more freedom to be themselves, and the gay community appears to have taken full advantage of that freedom to express themselves." He critiques the degree of *indecent* and culturally insensitive displays that follow:

It is one thing to participate in the life of the community, as the fa'afafine community is doing with their beauty pageants and charity work, but it is another thing to flaunt, as if we're going along with it, one's homosexuality.

When asked whether or not there exists more than one type of fa'afafine in Samoa, most fa'afafine respondents initially faltered, but almost invariably admitted that there exist two distinct kinds: those that dress as women (often donning lipstick) and those that do not. Additional surveys and interviews showed that many non-fa'afafine respondents similarly divide local fa'afafine into two categories, however they tend to apply the value judgments "offensive" and "tolerable" to these two categories respectively. As Toleafoa's comments suggest, fa'afafine from the latter category, who perform their "womanly" roles and family duties (primarily caretaking and domestic chores) are not merely tolerable but *desirable* assets to their families and larger communities. Alternatively, those that "flaunt" their individuality and openly express sexual desires apparently upset established sentiments regarding acceptable public decorum. Despite his outspoken support of gay rights, Toleafoa warns: "it is possible that some of the more outlandish behaviour of the homosexual community is beginning to push the bounds of what is appropriate in public."

Many of the fa'afafine interviewed reported an awareness of this *qualified* public acceptance. One respondent explained: "people have different opinions of fa'afafine. They want to accept them for the parts they want, like helping with the family. But they do not want to have

---

<sup>17</sup> \*biological women displaying male-gendered performances

<sup>18</sup> "Homosexuality in our midst" in Samoa Observer - 24 July 2006

anything to do with the sexual nature part.” Thus we see that fa’afafine are increasingly under scrutiny for their sexuality.

Part I of this paper demonstrated that sexuality has been disproportionately pinpointed as the primary axis of fa’afafine identity due to distorted historical views from the outside. Schmidt reports fa’afafine’s rejection of a purely orientation-based model as follows:

The exoticisation of fa'afafine has focused primarily on their erotic potential, (and) the erotic has thus become increasingly central to fa'afafine identities. However, the narratives I have been told also reveal the frequent prioritisation of interests such as family, employment, personal safety, religion and many other concerns over the expression of sexuality.<sup>19</sup>

Schmid quotes Besnir who observed that “sexual relations with men are seen as an optional *consequence* of [being fa'afafine], rather than its determiner, prerequisite, or primary attribute.”<sup>20</sup> The unyielding insistence on community contribution over individual sexual tendencies is best reflected in the statement one respondent placed in my notes. He aimed to provide a comprehensive view on Fa’afafine identity:

A fa’afafine is a cultural entity whose identity is deeply rooted in the fa’aSamoa, or Samoan culture – To understand fa’afafine you have to understand the Samoan Culture. If you DON’T... DON’T BOTHER!!! Xoxo

## **B. Asserting Fa’afafine Claims to Legitimacy: Three Strategies**

Schmidt notes that “fa’afafine themselves call on their place in 'traditional' *fa'aSamoa* as a solid foundation from which to base themselves as sexual and gendered persons”.<sup>21</sup> The inherent contradiction is that these “sexual and gendered” selves must remain vigilant not to over-emphasize their sexuality in the public sphere, where they risk attracting public ridicule and enduring the brunt of further waves of anti-gay discrimination. Throughout our interviews, fa’afafine tended to implement three recurring strategies to abate criticism.

---

<sup>19</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Besnir, Niko. 1994: p. 300

<sup>21</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

### 1. Essentialist Response: Nature v. Nurture

Perhaps the most debilitating denouncement in Reverend Fauolo's 2006 outcry was his assertion that "homosexuals do not care about what the Bible says because they know God disapproves their dirty habits."<sup>22</sup> In response to these and similar condemning remarks, many fa'afafine, as well as those proponents of gay-rights who submitted follow-up editorials, appealed to the essentialist claim that fa'afafine are born with an innate attraction toward other male-bodied individuals. This implies that efforts to redirect this orientation later in life are futile and misguided. Indeed, many fa'afafine and non-fa'afafine alike reported that one cannot "force" a person into or out of fa'afafine modes of conduct and inclinations.

Thus fa'afafine publicly champion "nature" in the recurring "nature v. nurture" debate, in order to reaffirm their *natural right* to individual liberty and dignity. They raise the argument that if God created individuals as such, church members have no right to challenge or disparage God's creation. Most of my interviewees reported very early memories of attraction toward members of the same sex. Schmidt similarly noted how "this understanding of an essential fa'afafine self may be used to counter accusations of deviancy, or suggestions that being fa'afafine is something they will 'grow out of.'"<sup>23</sup>

### 2. Inscribing the Fa'afafine Role into a Larger Polynesian Narrative

The second strategy in asserting the legitimacy of a fa'afafine lifestyle was usually to present the liminal third gender role as a cornerstone of Polynesian culture. One common response to my initial inquiry into whether or not fa'afafine are "accepted" was for respondents to point out that "fa'afafine have been around for a *long* time." One respondent confirmed: "Pre-Christianity... we have always been around." He emphasized the ubiquitous nature of third-gender roles throughout various Polynesian cultures. In my notes, he provided a list of analogous third gender terms spanning different islands: the *Mahu* in Tahiti, the *fakalaiti* in Tonga, the *vakavaine* in the Cook Islands, and the *vakasalewalewa* in Fiji.

Many others appealed to historical scripts to depict fa'afafine as time-honored contributors to Samoan society. During the group interview, when I misguidedly suggested that modern manifestations of fa'afafine behavior were a product of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (based on

---

<sup>22</sup> **paraphrasing** taken from "Oka Back's 'Gay' Ban" in Sunday Samoa - 16 July 2006

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

Mageo's hypothesis<sup>24</sup>), I received a blunt dismissal: "You haven't done your homework!" My informants proceeded to elaborate on fa'afafine's revered place in traditional Samoan culture by insisting the *Taupou* (virginal village maidens) that Margaret Mead encountered were in fact fa'afafine. "She just didn't know it!"

The one male respondent who had spent a large part of his life in New Zealand also characterized fa'afafine as a "*traditionally* accepted" part of Samoan culture, by which he meant that fa'afafine had *in the past* been thoroughly incorporated into village life without controversy, even if the legitimacy of their lifestyle faces public onslaught in contemporary Samoa.

This tendency to emphasize fa'afafine's "traditional acceptance" may explain some fa'afafine's hesitancy to acknowledge intolerance when first questioned. It is conceivable that fa'afafine do not wish to present themselves as a marginalized group (in the manner of gay communities elsewhere) for fear of losing the resources and cultural capital they derive from claims to their place in the fa'aSamoa. Many fa'afafine submitted surveys stating fa'afafine are "accepted" and "**not** restricted" at the village level, even when non-fa'afafine tended to report otherwise in their surveys.

This insistence on acceptance ran counter to one biological male's in-depth interview, in which he described, in jarring detail, the shocking levels of discrimination he knew to exist at both the village level and in the workplace. Fa'afafine themselves tended to admit some level of discrimination, but only during more in-depth and lengthy interview sessions. One respondent finally admitted, "I won't say we don't have some 'in the closet' ... We do." He then directed me to a painfully candid autobiographical account featured on the *Samoa Fa'afafine Association* main webpage.

When asked whether there had occurred any major changes in the past few years, one fa'afafine respondent insisted "there is definitely a better understanding of us as people... Things were bad before." This suggests that, despite a public willingness to allow fa'afafine to fill a myriad of social roles and contributions to the community (e.g. decorating the Apia churches weekly, according to one respondent) there is still progress to be made as far as respecting the lives of gender non-conformists as individuals. There has yet to arise a public effort to conscientiously explore and gauge the nature of third-gender individuals' personal desires and aspirations. (see Part III)

---

<sup>24</sup> Mageo, Jeannette. 1992.

### 3. *Emphasis on Fa'afafine's Family Role*

The final trope respondents repeatedly invoked was to present the fa'afafine as an integral part of the family unit. In a report for the American publication, *the Dallas Voice*, Shevon Matai insists: “the fa'afafine were always thought to keep families united. In Samoa, they serve as schoolteachers, choirmasters, babysitters, community service workers and caregivers for elderly relatives.” Matai asserts: “fa'afafine isn't a disgraceful term. In fact, we are the cornerstones of our families.”<sup>25</sup> Several respondents (fa'afafine and otherwise) similarly reported that fa'afafine in the villages are primarily loaded with the hefty burdens of homemaking and care-giving for the young and elderly. Researcher Niko Besnir<sup>26</sup> supports this claim with his observation that:

Like the *berdache* in Native North American societies, the gender-liminal person in Polynesia is commonly thought to excel in women's tasks: his mats are said to be particularly symmetrical and regular in shape, his domestic chores singularly thorough, and he is more resilient to tedium than the average woman. In urban settings, liminal men are superb secretaries and coveted domestic help. In this sense, liminal persons are more womanly than women, a theme that recurs elsewhere.

Tolefoa had similar attributed a high degree of proficiency in domestic skills when he stated “they far surpass others in what they do for the support of parents and families.”<sup>27</sup>

According to one fa'afafine respondent, this injunction to provide services (especially in the village setting) can grow to constitute an unreasonable burden. One fa'afafine lamented the fact that fa'afafine in the village are disproportionately expected to take on family tasks, such as caring for the very young and elderly, while siblings are expected to marry, and pursue their individual endeavors. Since they themselves are not expected to marry, fa'afafine are viewed as remaining unfalteringly committed to serving the household. One teenage fa'afafine from a village I visited reportedly engaged in an exorbitant amount of housework. An older fa'afafine I interviewed suggested that many fa'afafine flee to the Apia urban area to avoid the pressures and burdens of excess care-giving in the village setting.

---

<sup>25</sup> Kusner, Daniel A. “Transgender ‘Fa'afafine’ in Hawaii – Aloha Art” in *The Dallas Voice*” 21/10/08

<sup>26</sup> Besnir, Niko. 1994:

<sup>27</sup> “Oka Back's ‘Gay’ Ban” in *Sunday Samoa* - 16 July 2006



### Part III. Breakthrough—Voicing Fa’afafine Desires: *Articulating Wants and Needs*

The same respondent who provided a comprehensive definition of fa’afafine identity also wrote the following addendum in my notes:

Fa’afafine’s are the living example of unconditional love!  
People preach it, but we live it  
We are exploited because of love  
We are used because of love  
And we are loved because of love  
Our love is unconditional  
Our whole being evolves around love

This statement could be taken to reflect several facts of fa’afafine’s contemporary circumstances. As mentioned above, fa’afafine are generally expected to contribute disproportionately toward maintaining the household, even if these contributions are unreciprocated. Fa’afafine are meant to stem their own desires and endeavors in the effort to provide toward household upkeep and serve as “the cornerstones of our families.”<sup>28</sup>

But the statement could equally apply to the difficulties fa’afafine face in attempting to engage in long-standing relationships with male partners. Their efforts forge steady relationships necessarily must face obstacles such as public stigmatization and strict village custom. My informants’ reports aligned with those of Mageo<sup>29</sup> and Schmidt<sup>30</sup>, who similarly noted that fa’afafine’s male partners generally abandon them for female partners with whom to start a family. Others reported that fa’afafine’s straight male partners tended to “use them”, for money, for pleasure, etc... This explains the use of the term “exploit” in my respondents above statement. In the words of one fa’afafine respondent: “This is our way of life. This is our gift. This is our *curse*...”

During one candid interview, another fa’afafine respondent reported he had formerly made attempts to maintain steady relationships with other men. But because these men would inevitably leave, the respondent eventually resigned himself to engaging solely in “flings” and “quickies” with male-bodied individuals who frequent the various urban night clubs. This inability to maintain a long-term relationship is partly a result of the societal intolerance toward

---

<sup>28</sup> Kusner, Daniel A. “Transgender ‘Fa’afafine’ in Hawaii – Aloha Art” in *The Dallas Voice*” 21/10/08

<sup>29</sup> Mageo, Jeanette M. 1992

<sup>30</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008

same-sex marriages. As several respondents concurred, fa'afafine may be accepted in Samoan culture, but civil-unions are out of the question. "No way...it will never happen here," one respondent assured me. Both fa'afafine and non-fa'afafine respondents shared this sentiment. Others attributed this shortcoming to Samoa's being "a nation founded on God...and all that."

### **A. Individual Strategies toward Combating Homophobia**

When asked about personal strategies for coping with a pervasive climate of homophobia, one respondent had this to say: "People have a right to their opinions. But not a right to my bedroom!" This reflects an increasing attitude of resistance and what might be termed a personal rebellion executed individually by many urban-centered fa'afafine. Taking full advantage of their separation from the pervasive surveillance and gossip of the village, many in the city are increasingly pursuing their desires on a private and personal level, even as they insist that it is advisable for fa'afafine not to "flaunt" their personal desires in public or rally openly against major public figures or church leaders.

When asked how he planned ultimately to engage in "settling down", another respondent informed me that many of his friends had moved abroad, primarily to New Zealand and Australia. These fa'afafine generally acquired Palagi (Western) male partners in these relatively more liberal cultural settings. The respondent admitted he envied these emigrated fa'afafine. However, he maintained it was a pity they tended to attract only "gay" Palagi men. According to the respondent, the ideal would be to cohabit with a "straight," or at least a "bi," male partner. Similarly, one fa'afafine in American Samoa reported that *mala* (American Samoan slang for fa'afafine) generally travel to nightclubs in "packs," hunting down "bi" men to take as partners. I was told on several occasions that fa'afafine tend not to engage in intimate relations with other fa'afafine, as this would resemble "going with your sister...It never happens."

The tendency to select *straight* male partners demonstrates fa'afafine's general pattern of depicting themselves as a type of woman, rather than as homosexual males. This sentiment was similarly reflected when one respondent from the Samoa Fa'afafine Association reported they needed to modify a pamphlet solicited for distribution from an international gay health initiative. The informational pamphlet was addressed toward MSM (men who have sex with men). But the respondent declared: "we just don't see ourselves as men in that way." The title of the pamphlet

was subsequently changed to better the readership of the *Pacific Sexual Diversity Network*. As noted above, the tendency to disassociate from international gay rights campaigns reflects a level of caution on the part of fa'afafine who wish to avoid a homophobic backlash from the general public.

### *Addressing Village Restriction*

Despite efforts to differentiate international “gay” identity from local fa'afafine identity, fa'afafine still face many restrictions to free expression, especially at the village level. As Schmidt writes, “in the village context in Samoa, individual interests tend to be subsumed to the needs of the group and community.”<sup>31</sup> Repeatedly I was told stories about urban-based fa'afafine who are unable to return to their village due to council-enforced restrictions against long hair and lipstick for all male-bodied individuals. While some fa'afafine, who lead relatively independent lives in the Apia area, have reported same-sex living arrangements in the city, such arrangements are prohibited by most village *fono*. Those fa'afafine who wish to escape the limitations on physical appearance and public displays of affection in the village setting tend to migrate toward Apia voluntarily. However, one female respondent informed me that a family would be exiled and forcibly removed from a village if even a single member of that family attempted to engage in a same-sex marriage. “That’s the village lifestyle,” she explained.

One male respondent similarly reported that parents often place strict limitations on young children’s expression of fa'afafine behavior. “They *slave* them... They slave their mind” he told me. “[Adult fa'afafine] are sometimes sent away from the village, and this goes against their constitutional rights as a citizens. But still,” he reflected “...you can’t go against custom. Custom makes a person who they are.” This unyielding appeal to custom was characteristic of fa'afafine respondents as well. As noted above, fa'afafine have a large stake in supporting custom so as to reaffirm their established place in the fa'aSamoa. They tend not to challenge traditional forms of authority (such as church leaders) as they do not wish to be perceived as a socially tumultuous “special-interest” group.

---

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

## **B. Formation of the Association: Asserting a Fa'afafine Voice**

One respondent explained that the recently formed Samoa Fa'afafine Association serves as an effective tool for gathering fa'afafine and expressing a common voice. But according to this respondent, the organization furthermore aimed to teach local fa'afafine how to better “integrate into the community...without causing tension.” The respondent reported that religious leaders such as Mafo'e occasionally speak up and rally new attacks against homosexuality, “usually when they run out of things to say and have nothing better to do.” But the Association usually “does not respond” and prefers to “let it pass.” Respondents recognize that the pastor's initial inflammatory remarks from 2006 were “ridiculous”, and not befitting of an individual whose public office is meant to ensure the well-being of the community. Nonetheless, the organization sees the benefit in **not** openly casting itself as an opposition group to the established social authorities.

According to one sympathetic male respondent, the initial purpose of the Association was to allow fa'afafine “to unite: to show their voice, their strength, and what they have to offer society. This is good.” A fa'afafine respondent insisted the Association emerged as a result of pressure primarily from older fa'afafine who had “gone through the process of being loved, and being hated, being loved and being hated.” This particular demographic wanted to form a representative body to demonstrate the group's commitment and contribution to the community. They intended to “stomp on those notions we are bad people and to show our contribution to society.” (Several respondents characterized the Association as a forum in which older fa'afafine provide guidance and tools to assist younger fa'afafine in effectively serving the community. The Inter-generational structure of the Association could lend itself to a study of its own.)

When asked what sparked the 2006 outcry, one respondent insisted it was the sudden manifestation of a visible fa'afafine voice that spurred reactionary religious leaders to mount attacks. The respondent emphasized that the outcry “boiled over” from this shock, and was **not** sparked by any increase in overt displays of public affection or “people walking down the street, hand in hand, guy and guy.” The respondent's statement reflects the emphasis on public decorum and the need to deemphasize fa'afafine's personal desires and orientation in the effort to garner public support and solidarity.

### *Reluctance to Associate with an International Gay Rights Movement*

Even if fa'afafine and non-fa'afafine respondents alike used the surveys to draw a clear distinction between fa'afafine identity and “gay” identity, it is still instructive for fa'afafine organizations to make use of certain resources and cultural capital garnered from the internationalized gay rights movement. This proves problematic, because the terminologies that constitute cultural currency at international LGBT venues do not always apply to the particularities of the fa'afafine experience. Two interview respondents, who had recently attended international conferences on gender overseas, reported it was “a good experience.” However, they were both generally offset by the plethora of terminologies that seemed to complicate the issue in ways not applicable to the Samoan fa'afafine community.

Part I of this report also noted that an emphasis on sexual orientation (inherent in a most Western LGBT campaigns) is a liability that compromises fa'afafine's level of public acceptance in a fundamentalist environment. In her report, *Homosexuality in the Pacific*, Tracey McIntosh reports: “the transgendered Pacific person risks being absorbed into a certain form of gay culture that is as limiting as it may be liberating.”<sup>32</sup> This is certainly true in Samoa, where fa'afafine can benefit from increased avenues of public representation and the right to self-expression, but where organized groups must remain cautious not to depict themselves as minority groups, or over-emphasize the sexual nature of their desires.

### **Conclusions:**

#### **A. Fundamentalist Backlash and Homosexuality as a “Foreign” Concept**

As Samoa becomes increasingly connected to the global community, fa'afafine identity becomes increasingly implicated with gay rights ideology, for better or for worse.

According to Schmidt:

The internationalisation of gay identities means that Samoans who may have once thought of themselves as fa'afafine now consciously identify themselves as gay. Significant exposure to Western notions of homosexuality has coincided with HIV/AIDS awareness and the accompanying moral panic and this, coupled with a strong conservative Christian morality, has led to marked disapproval of anything that might be

---

<sup>32</sup> McIntosh, Tracey . 1999. 'Homosexualities in the Pacific,' p. 23

interpreted as homosexuality, which, as a result of imported understandings of sexuality, would appear to include fa'afafine.<sup>33</sup>

This “conservative Christian morality” was revealed in the interview with one female respondent who exhibited only a very *qualified* acceptance of fa'afafine in the community:

I asked whether there exist “gay” women in Samoa, she replied: “you mean *lesbian*?” I asked her what she thought of them. She replied bluntly: “Don’t like them.” I asked why. She responded: “...They are women married to other women... Ew...*Anti-Christian*”

Latter, when asked to elaborate, she explained “it is Anti-Christian if you are married to the wrong person. If God created man for women, then that is what it is supposed to be!”....

It is telling to note that religious leaders in 2006 pointed toward foreign influence as a primary cause of the proliferation of homosexuality throughout the Samoan islands. Reverend Fauolo openly blamed “the influx of movies, videos, DVDs and internet for promoting homosexuals.” Pastor Mafo’e spoke in terms of preventing the “curse” of homosexuality from spreading throughout Samoa, a country “founded on God.”<sup>34</sup>

In a sense, it could be argued, that “homosexuality” is a foreign invention introduced from the West, but not in the sense that Pastor Mafo’e suggests. Rather, the concept of labeling an individual homosexual and subsequently marginalizing and discriminating against this recently identified sub-group is, in a sense, a Western tradition and import. McIntosh’s report recognizes that “homosexual” was a term first implemented by a Hungarian doctor, Dr. Benkert in the mid 1800’s.<sup>35</sup> According to Foucault:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the tendency to label fa'afafine as homosexuals—and furthermore amplify their preferred sexual practices and orientation to constitute the main axis of their identity—is a western phenomena, and “homosexuality” a western invention.

As suggested in Part II section C of this paper, Polynesian cultures once incorporated third-gender lifestyles and practices into the functions of daily life with little or no scrutiny.

---

<sup>33</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

<sup>34</sup> “Oka Back’s ‘Gay’ Ban” in Sunday Samoa - 16 July 2006

<sup>35</sup> McIntosh, Tracey . 1999: p. 9

<sup>36</sup> Foucault , Michel 1976: p. 43

Today, these same practices draw public attention and criticism due in large part to the Western custom of identifying and categorizing individuals based solely on their sexual orientation and practices.

*Western Individualism: In Pursuit of Free-expression*

According to a article from the 2006 campaign against homosexuality, Leader of The Christian Party Tuala Falenaoti Tiresa Malietoa “urged leaders to wake up and take action, as homosexuals would spread like wildfire, destroying lives, families and this country.”<sup>37</sup> I argue that the influx of Western ideals of individualism influence does not necessarily lead to a higher occurrence of homosexual inclinations, but rather amounts in more individuals exhibiting same-sex orientations and tendencies they might have otherwise concealed or forcibly repressed. Western cultures do not generate homosexual tendencies. Rather they may draw existing ones into the public sphere in their rejection of any authoritarian injunctions to suppress innate desires.

As a result of globalization, a relatively liberal and individualist culture tends to expand outward from the urban centers of many Western nations. This liberal atmosphere may encourage those Samoans with existing “closeted” orientations to express these openly. In this sense, western cultural currents of individualism may proliferate the spread of “homosexual” *behavior*, among those already predisposed to it, but it is unlikely that the cultural shift could in any way foster an increased occurrence of innate same-sex tendencies in individuals.

Indeed, one informant reported that it was “easier” for people to take on fa’afafine identity now that the Association had formed, with the prime Minister’s approval as patron. The growing tide of acceptance has thus led to an increase in individuals’ expression of fa’afafine tendencies, but not necessarily an increase in individuals’ innate desire to become fa’afafine as children.

Western influence brings not only an increased injunction toward self-expression, but also an increased public anxiety toward this individual liberty, as well as an urge to catalogue and potentially discriminate against new categories of behavior. It seems the more Western trends exhibited in any given Pacific nation, the greater a tendency to pinpoint and root out “homosexuality.” Thus, the more “developed” nations of the South Pacific tend to exhibit a

---

<sup>37</sup> “Oka Back’s ‘Gay’ Ban” in Sunday Samoa - 16 July 2006

larger degree of homophobia and institutionalized repression of third-gender tendencies. Indeed, McIntosh's report demonstrated that Fiji (considered the most developed and modernized of South Pacific Nations, aside from New Zealand) exhibits the highest degree of discrimination against all forms of homosexuality.<sup>38</sup> This was confirmed anecdotally by Fijian informants who adamantly insisted that the vakasalewalewa (Fijian equivalent of fa'afafine) is not an integral part of Fijian culture. They characterized homosexuality as a regrettable foreign intrusion.

## **B. Suggestions for a Further Study:**

### *Potential of Fa'afafine to Destabilize Existing Gender Norms*

Throughout the interview process, many more questions arose than answers. This reflects the ambiguous nature of a liminal third-gender (by definition), especially in the context of rapid modernization and radically shifting gender norms. This ambiguity was reflected in several male respondents' tendency to stumble when determining which gendered pronoun to apply to any-given fa'afafine. One male respondent reported he had a nephew who had begun to exhibit fa'afafine tendencies. He assured me this was his favorite nephew, and that he loved him very much. But, he joked, sometimes he is unsure whether to refer to him as a nephews or a niece. This same respondent attempted to explain the appropriate manner for an adult male to interact with an adult fa'afafine: "Sometimes you treat them as a girl, but not quite, because you do it from the perspective of another guy..." He faltered: "does that make sense?"

It is my belief that this daily performance of ambiguity offers the potential to disrupt existing gender norms and destabilize established patterns of behavior. This can serve as a radically effective form of liberation, in light of certain restrictive or debilitating dominant norms.

Mageo has written about the role she believes mid 20<sup>th</sup> century fa'afafine played in critically analyzing and addressing the shortcomings of contemporary norms. She describes fa'afafine as having been crucial players in the dynamic negotiation of shifting male and female gender norms in light of the major transition from pre-contact standards of behavior to post-colonial views of normality.<sup>39</sup> Many have argued that the colonial influence tarnished women's

---

<sup>38</sup> McIntosh, Tracey . 1999. p. 23

<sup>39</sup> Mageo, Jeanette M. 1992



status by imposing the puritanical view of woman as the subservient wife in a strictly hierarchical, monogamous marriage dyad<sup>40</sup>. Mageo sees it differently:

In contrast, I argue that although the Christian role of the Samoan sister was much more restrictive than her pre-Christian role, it was elevated in status, as was the status of the Samoan-Christian wife.<sup>41</sup>

She explains that women were traditionally consigned to the realm of manipulating and negotiating *mana*, acting as repositories for sacred forces. Although women were granted authority in spiritual matters, this was ultimately inconsequential when compared to men's priority in political and secular matters, and their cultural monopolization of *pule*, or authority in village decision-making. Thus, Mageo argues women's traditional influence had no real "pull", because it had no real *pule*.

Tcherkezoff's deconstruction of early voyager accounts details the offering of "sacrificial" (and seemingly unwilling) village maidens to Europeans<sup>42</sup>. This further suggests a marked degree of restriction and social control over women's movement and lifestyle. But whether the situation proved better or worse upon European contact is irrelevant. The primary point is that gender norms are in constant flux, as are the power dynamics attached to them. Schoeffel highlights the many contemporary shortcomings—or rather, outright dangers—she encountered in the gender norms of an isolated Samoan village. Due to the prominence of Western Christian ideals mixed together with traditional patterns of behavior, she reported that "the prevailing moral values were continuities of older patterns, constraining unmarried girls to preserve their virginity, while expecting men and youths to quest for heterosexual adventures wherever they could find them."<sup>43</sup> In her ethnographic study from the mid 1970's, she suggests an unhealthy imbalance in gender expectations, which she believes accounted for the notably higher prevalence of female youth suicides than male throughout the nation. According to her notes:

---

<sup>40</sup> Jolly, Margaret and Macintyre, Martha. 1989. . 8

<sup>41</sup> Mageo, Jeanette M. 1996. 'Samoa, on the Wilde Side: Male Transvestism, Oscar Wilde, and Liminality in Making Gender' p. 592

<sup>42</sup> Tcherkezoff, Serge. 2004

<sup>43</sup> Schoeffel. 2005. Penelope 'Sexual Morality in Samoa and Its Historical Transformations' p. 68

A kind of sexual guerrilla warfare prevailed. As Malopa'upu Isaia recalls...young men regarded sexual conquest as a 'high risk thrill' and in Vaima'a, predatory sexual behaviour was not confined to youths..."<sup>44</sup>

While there is no room to discuss the details of the above three accounts, it is important to note the extent to which gender norms are not static, but rather historically contingent and in constant flux. In her interpretation of Butler<sup>45</sup>, Schmidt provides an explanation of how gender liminal individuals can potentially play a major role in initiating radical shifts in gender norms:

Judith Butler has shown how analysis of, and the very existence of, individuals and identities that fail or refuse to conform to hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender provide a means of understanding 'how the mundane and taken-for-granted world of sexual meanings is constituted,' and of exposing the 'limits and regulatory aims' of that world of sexual meanings. Although discourses around fa'afafine to some extent implement this potential, palagi observers continue to utilise historically and culturally specific concepts, and thus fail to fully realise the potential for the existence of fa'afafine to challenge the foundations of their understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality.<sup>46</sup>

Tamaira utilizes Albert Wendt's definition of the Samoan term Va to explain the potentiality inherent in gender liminality. Wendt writes:

Important to the Samoan view of reality is the concept of Va or wa in Maori and Japanese. Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things.<sup>47</sup>

Tamaira expands this definition to apply it to gender liminal individuals:

The w is thus a space of multiple meanings, a negotiable space where people or things can shift in any number of directions; it is, in short, a space of dynamic potential.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the fa'afafine's tendency to inhabit the space between regularly implemented categories may also undermine these very categories.

Schmidt reminds us that past representations of fa'afafine have tended to represent their personal histories as "stories of repression." But she insists:

---

<sup>44</sup> Schoeffel, Penelope p. 66

<sup>45</sup> Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 1990, pp. 110, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Wendt, Albert. 1999. Afterword: Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body. In *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*: p. 402 (italics in original)

<sup>48</sup> Tamaira, A. Marat. 2010: p. 18

fa'afafine understand themselves as active agents who, while recognising constraints, also engage in negotiations between the various facets of their own identities, and between themselves and the significant people, groups, and institutions in their lives.<sup>49</sup>

She concludes by noting that “these negotiations often include assertions of a right to sexual expression – an assertion that is only really possible *at this particular historical juncture.*” (emphasis mine) This point is crucial, as it suggests the historically contingent nature of gender norms, and the potential for public understanding of acceptable behavior to change over time..

Fa'afafine, as category-confounding, gender liminal individuals, exhibit a promising potential to disrupt existing gender expectations and redefine what Samoans consider normal behavior for women, and for men, as well as for fa'afafine. The liminal nature of their gender performance can serve as a tool toward radical liberation. Historical trends suggest that new cultural climates of individual free-expression will continue to emerge in contemporary Samoan society. However, a sense of optimism must remain grounded in light of the fact that radical change and liberation often attract powerful currents of reactionary, conservative backlash. Creative new performances of fa'afafine gender may continue to help reshape gender norms and address current societal shortcomings. But fa'afafine will also likely bear the brunt of the periodic public outbursts that accompany any effort toward subversion that threatens existing power structures. Thus this report represents a mixed forecast for the status of fa'afafine in Samoa in the near future, and presents a tempered hope.

### *Citations*

Besnir, Niko. 1994. 'Polynesian Gender Liminality Through Time and Space' in Herdt, Gilbert. *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Gender Dimorphism in Culture and History* Zone Books, New York: pp. 316-17

Butler, Judith P. 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York/London: Routledge: pp. 110, 17.

---

<sup>49</sup> Schmidt, Johanna. 2008.

- Foucault, Michel. 1976. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction*, Penguin, London
- Jolly, Margaret and Macintyre, Martha. 1989. *Family & Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Mageo, Jeanette M. 1992. 'Male Transvestism and Cultural Change in Samoa,' in *American Ethnologist* 19: pp. 449-50
- Mageo, Jeanette M. 1996. 'Samoa, on the Wilde Side: Male Transvestism, Oscar Wilde, and Liminality in Making Gender' in *Ethos*, Vol. 24, No. 4: pp 588-627
- McIntosh, Tracey . 1999. 'Homosexualities in the Pacific,' Department of Sociology, University of the South Pacific, Fiji, 1999. Prepared for: Fiji Council of Churches Research Group. Provided courtesy of NUS Library.
- Moyle, R. M. 1975. Sexuality in Samoan Art Forms. In *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 227-247.
- Schmidt, Johanna. 2008. 'Redefining Fa'afafine: Western Discourses and the Construction of Transgenderism in Samoa' in *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*.
- Schoeffel, Penelope. 2005. 'Sexual Morality in Samoa and Its Historical Transformations' In C. Gross, H. D. Lyons & D. A. Counts (Eds.), *A Polymath Anthropologist: Essays in Honour of Ann Chowning* (pp. 63-69). Auckland: Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland.
- Tamaira, A. Marat. 2010. 'From Full Dusk to Full Tusk: Reimagining the 'Dusky Maiden' through the Visual Arts' in *The Contemporary Pacific*. Vol 22. Number 1.
- Tcherkezoff, Serge. 2004. 'First Contacts' in Polynesia: The Samoan Case (1772-1848): Western Misunderstandings about Sexuality and Divinity. 2004 Canberra and Christchurch: *Journal of Pacific History* and the MacMillian Brown Center for Pacific Studies Canberra: ANU Printing Service.
- Trask, Huanani-Kay. 1999. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*. Revised Edition. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999
- Wendt, Albert. 1999. Afterword: Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body. In *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson, 399-412. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Below is a copy of the survey collected from various respondents.

*Malo! O lo'u igoa o Tiki. O a'u o le tamaitiiti aoga o Harvard University i Amerika. O lo'o o'u suesue e uiga i ali'i Samoa, tama'ita'i Samoa, ma fa'afafine. Ou te suesue i "Women and Gender Studies" i Amerika. E iai a'u fesili:*

1. Do you identify as fa'afafine? | *O oe o se fa'afafine*
  
2. Are you a part of the fa'afafine community in Samoa? | *Ua e auai ni fa'apopotoga o fa'afafine? Afai ioe, O lefea?*
  
3. Is there more than one type of fa'afafine in Samoa? | *E iai ni itu'aiga eseese o fa'afafine i Samoa?*
  
4. If so, what are the categories? | *Afai e ioe, fa'amatala mai.*
  
5. At what age did you first identify as fa'afafine? | *E fia ou tausaga ina 'ua e muamua fa'aaogaina le suafa fa'afafine?*
  
6. At what age do people usually first identify as fa'afafine? | *E fia masani tausaga o ni tagata i lou nu'u ina 'ua muamua fa'aaogaina le suafa fa'afafine?*
  
7. Are there any gay men in Samoa? Please elaborate. | *E iai ni ali'i "gay" i Samoa? Afai e ioe, fa'amatala mai, fa'amolemole.*
  
8. Are there any gay women in Samoa? Please elaborate. | *E iai ni tama'ita'i "gay" i Samoa? Afai e ioe, fa'amatala mai, fa'amolemole.*
  
9. Are fa'afafine accepted in your village? | *E iai se fa'aaloalo mo fa'afafine i lou nu'u?*

10. Are fa'afafine accepted in the city? | *E iai se fa'aaloalo mo fa'afafine i Apia?*
11. Are fa'afafine restricted in your village? | *E fa'atapula'a fa'afafine i lou nu'u? Afai e ioe, fa'amatala mai, fa'amolemole.*
12. Are fa'afafine restricted in the city? | *E fa'atapula'a fa'afafine i Apia? Afai e ioe, fa'amatala mai, fa'amolemole.*
13. Have you traveled abroad? If so, are fa'afafine accepted outside Samoa? *Sa e Malaga i fafo o Samoa? Afai ioe, e iai se fa'aaloalo mo fa'afafine I fafo o Samoa?*
14. Does the “international gay rights movement” have any significance (*se uiga*) for fa'afafine in Samoa?
15. Has the fa'afafine scene changed in the last ten years? If so, how? *E iai ni suiga i le malamalama i fa'afafine i le sefulu tausaga talu ai. Afai e ioe, fa'amatala mai, fa'amolemole.*
16. Are these changes negative or positive? *O ni suiga lelei pe le lelei?*
17. What changes would you like to see in the next ten years? *E iai ni suiga e te mana'o ai i le sefulu tausaga i le lumana'i?*
18. What do you think is an appropriate English translation for fa'afafine? *E iai ni upu fa'aPeretania e fetau i le uiga fa'afafine? Afai ioe, o a upu?*

*Fa'afetai tele lava le fesoasoani!*

*-Tiki (Teake)*

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank Jackie Fa'asisila for her generous guidance and support as Academic Director and Instructor during my stay in Samoa.

I would also like to formally express my gratitude to Professor Unasa L. F. Va'a of the National University of Samoa for his willingness to serve as an advisor, offering guidance, suggestions, and revisions to this paper, as well as for attending the oral presentation of this paper.

I would like to thank Avalogo Togi Tunupopo for granting me access to the National University of Samoa library and for providing me with crucial secondary sources and new articles to assist in my research.

I would like to thank the Samoa Fa'afafine Association for their support in my research. In particular, I would like to express my thanks to the President, Roger Tootoalii Stanley, for granting me permission to conduct in depth interviews with members throughout the community.

I would like to thank everyone who provided survey responses or participated in the interview process. This work would not be possible without your support and honesty. I hope the final product does your stories justice.