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Experiencing Samoa Through Stories: Myths and Legends of a People and Place

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Experiencing Samoa through Stories: Myths and Legends of a People and Place



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S.I.T. Samoa, Spring 2011

Abstract

This research will explore oral tradition, indigenous beliefs prior to Christianity, and the significance of place through the study of Samoan myths and legends. The researcher will investigate the tradition of storytelling by hearing the stories from Samoan elders themselves. These stories will be supplemented with details from secondary written resources in order to compile comprehensive versions of the myths and legends. The research will consider the affect that Christianity has on the meaning of the stories and examine whether traces of indigenous belief/religion are preserved today through storytelling and the remembrance of myths. The researcher will spend a significant amount of time in the villages of the myths in order to understand the role of place and environment in Samoan stories. The stories' connection to a physical, tangible environment and being embedded within the elements of nature will provide another way in which to study the selected myths. Visiting the places of the stories will also provide the researcher with an avenue of personal reflection and a means of establishing another layer of understanding. The investigation of Samoan myths and legends not only sheds light on stories of the past, but also delves into other realms of Samoan culture. Myths, legends, and storytelling open windows to the past while simultaneously providing a lens in which to view and understand Samoan culture and belief today.

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Dedication

For the 4 eternal fish showering me with infinite love and light...always... swimming in
the soul of the moon.

Acknowledgments

I would like to recognize those individuals who have helped me knowingly and unknowingly with this project and throughout my journeys in Samoa. I'd like to thank Micah Van der Ryn for being my advisor and offering advice and support every step of the way. A thanks to each and every individual I encountered and contacted who willingly revealed their memories, thoughts, emotions, and stories...nothing was forgotten. This project would not have been possible without your kind hearts and enlightening words of wisdom. Thank you, Acacia Cochise, for your genuine interest and assistance in our academic work and for your constant humor and motivating energy. Incredible thanks also to the SIT group and to the abundance of smiling faces at USP...there was always someone there to offer a cup of tea and a warm hug. My utmost gratitude goes out to our fearless leader, Jackie Fa'asisila, for her inspiration, strength, and encouraging guidance...your presence in my life will be immensely missed.

And finally, to Samoa...in all your colorful, complicated, humorous, and layered meanings...you have rejuvenated and balanced my mind, body, and spirit....

To the sun's vibrating warmth

To the sea's welcoming depths

To the tree's waving hands

To the rain's solemn cries

To the wind's tender blanket

To the moon's smiling face

And to the spirit of life that flows through and around me in endless motion

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Dedication.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Rationale.....	6
Introduction.....	6
Methodology.....	8
Themes:	
Oral Tradition.....	10
Indigenous Belief and Christianity.....	13
Spirit and Place.....	18
Lotofaga, Upolu:	
Retelling a Myth: Le Pisaga: To Sua ma To Le Sua.....	22
Explanation.....	25
Discussion of Lotofaga Surveys and Interviews.....	26
Falealupo, Savaii:	
Poem: Dreaming Awake.....	28
Explanation.....	30
Falealupo myths and stories.....	31
Observations/Personal Reflection.....	34
Conclusion.....	35
References.....	37
Glossary of terms.....	39
Appendix A.....	40
Appendix B.....	41

Rationale

Before I stepped foot in Samoa, the words of Dr. Lynette Cruz struck me and have been the motivating force behind this research. In talking about her journeys in the field of anthropology, Cruz admitted being caught up in the negatives and often times questioned her own devotion to the field. Yet, knowing that anthropology allowed for the transmission of stories and created avenues for understanding people and culture, she remained committed (2-8-2011). When it came time to decide on a topic for this research, Cruz's words echoed in my mind. I wanted to hear stories, to interact with the people of Samoa, establishing a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and insight. The telling of a story involves the words and memories of the speaker and the open ears and mind of the listener. It creates a bond that bridges gaps between cultures and establishes paths of thoughtful understanding.

Introduction

Amidst a globalizing world, Samoa is becoming less isolated and increasingly interconnected with the influence of other cultures, modes of thought, religion, and politics. With these new elements filtering through Samoa, a complex situation arises. How can Samoans hold on to the past, unwilling to forget, while existing in the present moment? Throughout this research I have come to understand myth, legend, and storytelling as crucial means in which to acknowledge indigenous belief while simultaneously recognizing the affects of changing times. Myths and legends not only bring to light beliefs of the past, but they preserve the native language of a culture. Native language circles are fundamental to the continuation of culture. The ways in which stories are told have changed and the meanings

attached to the stories have altered with the influence of Christianity and other factors of change, such as technology. The content of the myths are retained in the memories of people, yet Christian theology has instituted new ways of interpreting the stories. It is difficult to comprehend the extent to which Christianity has affected myths and indigenous belief because culture and religion are inseparable in Samoa. However, through my research it is evident that some myths today are viewed in a Christian context and the indigenous beliefs that stem from myth and legend are changing in value.

Not only are the stories themselves important, but the places in which Samoans inhabit are of great significance in the realm of myths and legends. This research examines the importance of connecting to place, the physical environment. The natural surroundings are alive with the past and are themselves containers of knowledge and stories. Feeling the spirit and energy within nature reawakens the mind and body. The places where myths and legends are said to have occurred serve as tangible, real, and accessible evidence to the stories, to the past. An essential aspect of this research involved me visiting certain landmarks and the places of the stories, establishing my own connection to the environment and to the story. These experiences not only gave life to the words of the people, but they brought forth another layer of awareness—a deeper understanding of the significance of physical place and importance of natural landmarks. Myths and legends are the doors into people's pasts. They illuminate the beliefs, experiences, and threads of knowledge regarding a culture and place. Storytelling in Samoa, the passing along of myths and legends from one generation to the next, gives power to a peoples' voice and breathes new life into a long ago past.

Methodology

This research gave me the opportunity to not only study an element of Samoan culture and tradition, but to integrate with the people of Samoa; to listen to their stories, exist in their environments, and interact in their worlds. The methods utilized in this research include surveying, formal and informal interviewing, participant observation, and personal reflection. The informal manner of interviewing consisted of storytelling, whereby people of the village would relay their knowledge of myths and legends orally. Through this mode of research I realized the significance of language barriers. Some individuals spoke enough English to tell me the stories, but from those versions I only gathered the general plot and characters. Also, since the stories were not told to me in the Samoan language, I concluded that there would be inevitable gaps and I would not be able to grasp the full meanings. Some individuals who I encountered opted to write down the stories if they did not feel competent telling them in English. In these circumstances, I did not experience the Samoan oral tradition of storytelling as much as I had planned. However, I felt as though it was an acceptable sacrifice in my research in order to gather as many versions and as much content as possible regarding the myths and legends to generate more comprehensive understandings.

The second form of interviewing was more formal and directed towards a different audience (see Appendix B). I targeted academics and literary scholars who have had experience studying and working with Samoan myths and legends for either ethnographic /scholarly aims or creative purposes. These sources illuminated how individuals from academic backgrounds utilize Samoan stories and interpret their own experiences with myth and place in their

scholastic or creative work. The respondents' words also shed light on the overarching themes of this paper; oral tradition, religion/belief, and connectedness to place. The surveys I designed mixed quantifiable questions with questions that called for expansion and explanation (see Appendix A). This was beneficial in terms of gaining as much information as possible from each individual I approached. On the other hand, this method of surveying turned out to be fairly inconsistent as some surveys turned into interviews, while others remained only partially completed because of the respondent's lack of knowledge about the stories. It would have been more efficient to create two separate surveys; one with short, straightforward and quantifiable results and another survey of follow-up questions to give after an interview. This topic is not one that really calls for mass surveying, but it would have been beneficial to have some statistical data as reference points. For example, out of all the respondents, a percentage of how many individuals knew/did not know the myths, a scale of how important myths are (i.e. ranking 1-5, least to most important), and a percentage based on how many people did/did not visit the landmarks of the myths/legends. I avoided random surveying because my aim was to gather information from those who knew the most about the myths; thus, I did not have a diverse range of respondents and failed to take into account the number of individuals who knew nothing about the myths. Although survey data was inconsistent and unpredictable at times, the questions asked still brought forth considerable information and knowledge.

It is one thing for people to tell me the stories, but it is something entirely different in terms of how I interpret their words. I will never have a total understanding of the meaning the stories have to the people who know and tell them. I am born of a different place and people and thus will never fully comprehend. Because of this unavoidable gap, I established my own

personal connections to the stories. Interspersed with the research lies creative writings that were brought about by personal reflections in the places I visited. In my experiences, these places were dense with spirit and energy and I wanted to convey my thoughts and feelings through a creative outlet. The locations of the myths and legends chosen for this study are part of or near the sea. To me, the sea signifies the unknown, mystery, ambiguity—a concept that resonates deeply with myths and legends. There is no certainty concerning myth. People remember and believe differently; yet, these beliefs solidify the boundaries of their realities. Spending time in locations by the water was very fitting for the theme of study and for conjuring up my own ideas about the meaning of such stories, places, and spirit.

Oral Tradition

“If we heard olden times stories we can try to keep it in mind. Keep stories alive when we tell to our children. We don’t have to write in books, we just tell.” (Sitagata 4-25-2011).

Language is the lifeblood flowing through the veins of a culture. It is the holder of cultural knowledge and preserver of tradition. The spoken word carries with it meaning, belief, history, and emotion. Not only do the words themselves convey messages, but the speaking of a native language itself holds much significance. Native languages are being forgotten and fading as English is increasingly emphasized in educating the youth (UNESCO 26). Yet, western culture and the English language are shared by so many that one can easily get lost within it, becoming anonymous (UNESCO 26). The importance then of distinct, unique histories becomes felt and acknowledged. Native languages give small cultures in a globalizing world the ability to retain ties to their past and not get swallowed up in a realm of sameness. Language empowers a people and gives them a direct pathway to their distinguished identities. It is with language that words and ideas are formed into stories and flow from each generation to the next.

The myths people tell illuminate their histories, their beliefs. The oral traditions of Samoa are crucial in connecting people to one another as well as to their pasts. As renowned writer, Sia Figiel, notes, “Legends and stories connect me to the past...to my ancestors...they are the thread that transcends time and space and I’m trying to pass that sense on to my own children...by doing the same...telling them stories and teaching them songs” (5-5-2011). She comments on the importance of language by saying, “Our rule is to speak as much Samoan at home as possible...as language is such a critical aspect of transmitting knowledge” (Figiel 5-5-2011). Part of Samoans’ identity is rooted in oral tradition because the retelling of myths and legends creates an avenue for the transfer of cultural and religious knowledge. The myths re-awaken the past and bring to light indigenous belief about how the world was made, how people came to exist, the gods who controlled the lives of the people, etc. (UNESCO 22).

The knowledge and beliefs embedded within the stories people tell is as important as the act of storytelling itself. *Fagogo*, a traditional form of storytelling, usually occurs at night when elders in the village tell tales to usually a younger audience (Burke 5). When asked how she came to know the myths of her culture, Tili Afamasaga, Director of the Oloamanu Center for Professional Development and Continuing Education at the National University of Samoa, responds, “Firstly as a child from the many elders of my family. I used to listen to storytelling when I was a little girl before 5 years of age” (5-10-2011). This act sustains a traditional type of folklore and passes stories on to younger generations so they are not lost. Although storytelling still exists, its traditional ways are fading and increasingly fewer young people know about myths. While in the villages asking about myths and legends, I noticed that stories told to me

were mostly from elders or *matai*. There was not one individual below the age of twenty that I approached who could tell me a myth/legend of their village.

Through my observations in Lotofaga village and from interview responses, it is clear that *fagogo* is less practiced today, partially due to the large influence and appeal of media on both the young and old generations. Sia Figiel mentions the role of television, movies and internet, in consuming much of the free time in young peoples' lives today. "It is sad...but we must as individuals practice storytelling in order for it to live on. That is easy with my children because we do not have T.V. or cable" (5-5-2011). During my stay in Lotofaga, each night the T.V. was on or movies were played. Everyone in the family and even neighbors gathered in the *fale* to watch. Many nights the children would fall asleep to the sounds of the T.V. as opposed to the sounds of voices. However, media can also play a beneficial role in preserving the stories since that is where the focus lies for many people. In reference to the prevalence of storytelling today in Samoa, Micah Van der Ryn, Ethnographic Specialist/Instructor at the Samoan Studies Institute at American Samoa Community College (ASCC), posits that, "Yes, it [storytelling] still exists in both American Samoa and Samoa, though there is definitely less informal storytelling *fagogo*, especially in American Samoa, but also all over Samoa, particularly with the contemporary prevalence of watching television. That is one reason, Samoan made video productions on television is an important new mode of storytelling in Samoa" (5-5-2011). Although, traditional modes of storytelling are not as present in today's culture, modernized versions of storytelling exist in order to keep passing along the knowledge.

Sound is transitory, yet the sounds and words that make up stories have existed for over a hundred years in Samoa because they are ingrained in the memories of the people (UNESCO 28). Thus, even with words that are fleeting, stories are retained because they are essential carriers of knowledge and belief that remain grounded in the minds of the people. Yet, it is inevitable that these stories will change and maybe even fade with passing time for memory is not perfect. Parts of stories are lost through word of mouth, bits and pieces are changed, and different interpretations exist which could be a reason why there are various versions of many of the myths I heard. People sometimes forget and when stories skip generations or elders die, knowledge is lost. An elderly woman of Lotofaga village proudly says, "In the meantime we try to tell our children so they know when we die. That's how Samoan culture works...pass stories from generation to generation" (Sitagata 4-25-2011). Figiel also comments on the importance of storytelling in her family by saying, "Night time is the time for storytelling...For us, it is a conscious choice...to be connected to the past...to keep the past alive...to not forget...that is more valuable to me than watching T.V" (5-5-2011). The implications of traditional storytelling are apparent; for elements of Samoan culture are bound up in myth and legend as well as in the nuances of the Samoan language.

Indigenous Beliefs and Christianity

Lightness is dead. Lightness died that first day in 1830 when the breakers of the sky entered these shores, forcing us all to forget... to forget... to burn our gods... to kill our gods... to re-define everything, recording history in reverse (Figiel 236).

The first missionaries arrived in Samoa in 1830 and brought with them Christianity, a system of beliefs and values that soon became the foundation on which all Samoans proudly stand today. The above quote by Sia Figiel might give the impression that the arrival of

Christianity denounced the old culture, ushering in new ideologies and ways of thinking. In reality, the situation is more complex. Further study suggests that Christianity did not erase indigenous belief, but rather altered it, gave it a new face and in doing so some aspects of the old religion inevitably faded. The adoption of a new religion brought changes and alterations in ways of thinking about the world. However, it is difficult to say whether new beliefs superseded the old, changed them entirely, or were simply re-interpreted in the context of indigenous religion.

There is no absolute answer to this controversy and certain aspects of pre-Christian religion have been upheld or molded to fit in a Christian context while other areas of religious life and belief have in fact deteriorated. Professor of Anthropology and Samoan Studies at The National University of Samoa (NUS) and literary scholar, Unasa Va'a, writes on the myths surrounding *Le Fe'e*, a Samoan war god, and its subsequent destruction of the ancient temple with the arrival of Christianity. He argues that, "The Christianity introduced by the Evangelical missionaries who came to the Pacific in the 19th century was intended to save the inhabitants of the region from the darkness which embroiled them. This involved not merely the preaching of the Bible, but also the destruction of the old pagan order" (Va'a 108). Parts of the old Samoan religion that still re-surface today can partially be attributed to the value and maintenance of myth and storytelling. On the other hand, Figiel believes, "If anything, Christianity makes people's beliefs in the stories grow even stronger...deeper" (5-5-2011). Here, Figiel supports the notion that Christianity made people hold on tighter to their roots, their histories and their stories. These differing views again highlight the blurriness regarding the extent to which

Christianity impacted Samoan culture and the complexity of the situation, which calls for further and more in-depth investigation.

The literal translation of myth is *tala o le vavau* (story from the *vavau*), the word *vavau* coming from *faavavau* meaning forever into the future (Kamu 71). This translation gives the word myth a sense of timelessness, a story that despite changing times and originating from the far distant past is never totally lost. Although stories of the past remain present in the culture, Christianity undoubtedly altered the religious landscape of Samoa. In doing so, belief systems of pre-missionary Samoa were changed in one way or another, as seen through the retelling of myths and legends.

Prior to missionary contact, Samoans relied on myth for an explanation about how the world came into existence. Myth served to explain the mysteries of life, the cornerstone of Samoan beliefs rooted in mythical stories (Kamu 8). In reference to Samoans, Kamu states, “Their understanding of God, Creation, the culture and their world view have been drawn from the myths of creation” (8). The ancient gods of Samoa played a significant role in religious life as well. Their supreme god was *Tagaloa*, the god of creation, but many other deities existed as divine manifestations of the one supreme god (Kamu 16). The various gods served different purposes and were called upon during different times. For example, *Le Fe’e* was called upon during times of war and the warriors of the Vaimauga district would seek the god’s blessing for strength in battle (Va’a 99). Furthermore, “The point was that the people recognized that these gods really had much affect on the lives of the people. These gods helped in their time of need, in their decision making, and also in seeking advice” (Leanavaotaua 21). *Le Fe’e* occupied a

central role in village life as seen through the elaborate festival thrown in his honor. Va'a states, "Called *O le Tapu o le Fe'e*, it was held for two weeks in May and attracted people from all parts of Samoa who joined the celebrants in sports, feasting, dancing, and singing" (100). Also, in pre-Christian religion animals served as the physical incarnations of *aitu*, *ancestral spirit*, and respect was channeled towards these gods through the peoples' reluctance to eat the *ata*, physical incarnations, of their *aitu* (Va'a 108). With the arrival of Christianity, many of these traditions faded, as there is no such festival in honor of *Le Fe'e* today and converts of Christianity were made to eat the *ata* of their gods in a public ceremony as to signify their conversion (Va'a 108). However, it is clear that the gods of ancient times were highly venerated by the people and the passing along of myths works to continually acknowledge these indigenous beliefs.

The supernatural realm was a significant part of religious belief and deeply integrated with the earthly realm. The *agaga* is the soul of a being that remains within a person until death. After death, the *agaga* leaves the body and either enters into the kingdom of the dead becoming a revered spirit or becomes a wandering spirit, also known as *aitu* (Kamu 20). The *aitu* as spirits of ancestors were treated with respect and occupied different roles in village life, acting as general village gods or household gods (Kamu 21). In the old Samoan religion, the significant connection between the dead and living occurred through the acknowledgment and respect of *aitu*. The earthly and supernatural realms were inextricably woven together. With the arrival of Christianity, the concept of *aitu* did not disappear; rather its meaning was rearranged and reinterpreted. With these altered beliefs about *aitu*, it can be argued that the meaning of stories about *aitu* changed as well.

The myths people tell today reawaken the notion that *aitu* had a divine nature, but although the stories are not forgotten they are still recognized as containing beliefs of the past. The concept of *aitu* was re-interpreted as being evil spirits to be compatible with Christian theology, as opposed to *aitu* being ancestral deities. A woman from the village of Lotofaga recognizes stories containing *aitu* as referring to dark times. In asking about the importance of Samoans knowing their myths, she says, "It is important to know legends because that's what it was before Christianity. Before Christianity there were spirits, these times no spirits, the world moves on" (O'Donnell 4-24-2011). Referencing the landmarks of the *To Sua ma To Le Sua* legend she says, "I believe there were things happening there at that time, but I am a Christian. I don't believe in ghosts, just evil spirits and those were evil times, just stories" (O'Donnell 4-24-2011). The arrival of Christianity clearly altered peoples' perception of *aitu* and the supernatural realm, in effect altering the meaning and interpretation of myths.

Before Christianity, Samoa was understood as the center of the world and the horizon being the meeting place between heaven and earth (Kamu 13). The first white men that came to Samoa were named *papalagi* meaning sky-burster, as they were seen as coming from beyond the world of Samoans (Kamu 13). Not only did their coming destroy Samoans' sense of the way the world was created and shaped, but the message accompanying these white men did much to change the Samoan way of thinking. However, the new religion did not enter unchecked. There was much talk and discussion, but with every chief's conversion and favorable outlook upon Christianity came the subsequent following of his whole village (Leanavaotaua 35). It is inaccurate to say that Christianity was forced upon Samoans because Samoans accepted Christianity in terms of their old beliefs. In other words, "Undoubtedly pre-

Christian attitudes persisted, and in the minds of the converts, the new was interpreted in terms of the old” (Hogbin in Leanavaotaua 184f). For example, the concept of one, omnipotent god was sustained, but this god became the Christian god rather than *Tagaloa*. As mentioned above, the notion of spirits remained amongst Christian influence; the idea was just rearranged to denote good (the Holy Spirit) from evil spirits (*aitu*).

In reference to indigenous religion, Leanavaotaua posits that, “This was a time of myths and what has often been referred to as a time of superstitious beliefs. It was at this early stage that these myths and the history of the Samoans were preserved in memories and were handed down orally” (12). These memories are still preserved through oral tradition and are handed down through storytelling, yet the stories take on different form and are infused with new meaning. Pre-Christian Samoa was a time when myth, religion, and culture were all indistinguishable threads part of the same fabric, equally significant in the creation of worldviews and systems of belief and action. Christianity did not separate these threads, but rather gave them new colors and shapes, changing the overall pattern of the fabric, the place and people of Samoa.

Spirit and Place

“The land has eyes and teeth and knows the truth” (Rotuman Proverb)

The mountains that carpet the coast, the trees lining every path, the sea children swim in, and the caves on these rocky shores are all tangible testaments to stories of the past. The places people inhabit reawaken the myths and stories told over and over again. Visiting a place that legends and myths tell about breathes new life into those stories. The words of the storytellers begin to dance and move with fresh energy. In having a place to visit and

experience, people develop a stronger connection to the myths, which simultaneously allows them to establish their own personal relationship to the stories; to have a stake in their meaning and significance. Our surroundings are alive with energy and spirit and are witnesses to a long ago past. In reference to the two pits in the myth of Lotofaga, *Le Pisaga: To Sua ma le To le Sua*, it is said, “To present times, the people of surrounding villages are in awe of these ancient landmarks, that are ensconced with an aura that no one dares to defy, especially during certain times of the day when only the voices can be heard, with no visible sign of human presence” (Oloialii and Maugaivao 102). The myths told are just as important as the places they tell about, for without the living spirit of the world around us, the stories gradually become uprooted...floating aimlessly away from home.

The myths examined in this research all have a physical place or landmark that point to where they occurred. It is one thing to read about these places or talk to people who have been there, but it is something entirely different to visit the places for oneself. In other words, “In all myths and legends of Samoa, the listener seeks to gain from a moral within the story. However, if a landmark exists to support the story, then there is added reverence and belief for ongoing generations” (Faatonu 44). My experiences visiting these places and connecting to my surroundings added a whole new layer to my understanding of the myths and legends. Being in places surging with mythical energies allowed me to understand the role of physical place in keeping stories of the past alive. It also enabled me to engage more deeply in the myths, to understand them from a different angle and establish my own bond to the stories. These experiences brought forth new and greater understanding of Samoan mythology while illuminating my own ties to the spiritual realm existing within nature. The landmarks/places of

the myths I studied are near the ocean. The sea is mysterious, its darkest depths unknowable. The power of its current is infinite and unopposed. Mystery is an idea that resonates with myth just as the farthest reaches of the sea breathe an air of secrecy. It was very fitting for me to contemplate the myths where they are said to have occurred, by the sea. The sea being as infinite as the myths are timeless.

Before the arrival of Christianity, many divine manifestations of the supreme deity, *Tagaloa*, existed within nature. Although today the land and the natural environment are still respected, there was a time when the sacred was infused into nature. In reference to pre-Christian religion, Leanavaotaua states that, “These gods were often identified with animals, trees, stones, fish, and a number of countless other things” (15). The land was more than respected; it was divine. Even though elements within nature do not occupy a religious role anymore, energies are still felt within them and land is still highly valued in Samoan culture. The above mentioned saying, “The land as eyes and teeth and knows the truth” is a well-known Rotuman proverb and applies to many Pacific Island cultures. The saying speaks to the living spirits embedded in the land and an undeniable consciousness of what surrounds us. The value of myth may differ depending on religious undertones of the culture, but the places of these myths stand strong and sturdy and are holders of cultural knowledge themselves. The landmarks and places of myth exist in the everyday environments of the people and embody their histories. They are alive with stories and know the truths. Stories of the past are being awakened within the present moment.

The retelling of stories prevents histories from being forgotten and visiting places where these stories occurred brings the past to life. Art is another way in which the stories and the knowledge they contain can be preserved. Samoan artist, Penehuro Papali'i, creates wooden sculptures of legends in exquisite and meaningful ways. The manner in which he interprets and interacts with his environment brings forth stories of the past in the form of art. By making a tangible piece of artwork in his own interpretations, he gives a refreshed, new face to the stories; in doing so, reawakening the words in the minds of those who view his work. In his depiction of legends he notes that he merges the aesthetics of nature with the story itself (Papali'i 3-15-2011). He recognizes his use of nature as a source of inspiration because of the inextricable link between the surrounding environment and myths and legends (Papali'i 3-15-2011). Many aspects of the natural environment are explained by myth and infinite references to nature exist within stories. The bond is so strong between the two that Papali'i sees the stories in actual elements of nature. In reference to his Sina and the Eel sculpture he says, "I saw the piece of wood, the log brought in front of me, and I saw the story, I saw the shape of an eel" (Papali'i 3-15-2011). The artist's vision for the piece of art came from within nature.

Visiting a place where legends arise makes the story alive and real, just as a physical piece of artwork does a similar thing; making the myths accessible, even touchable. A new perspective was generated when I walked, swam, and slept in the places I was studying. A deeper understanding of these myths and legends stemmed from my experiences with spirit and place. Sia Figiel notes the significance of places to her by declaring that, "The aura of a physical location is very important to me...because there is a history there...in the wind, in the trees, mountains...an unspeakable history that is there...that is ever present" (5-5-2011). The

closest we can come to these unspeakable histories is by telling over and over again the stories, by consciously existing in the places of myth and legend, and by rousing our minds and bodies to the spiritual presences moving within and around us.

Lotofaga, Upolu

Retelling a myth:

The below retelling of the myth, *Le Pisaga: To Sua ma le To le Sua*, was created through a compilation of interview/survey responses, written sources, and a reflection of my own experience at the place. The details about belief in the myth and what the holes were used for are drawn mostly from interview results. The depictions regarding the feelings and the vibes of the place stem mostly from my own experiences, while some descriptions are taken from casual conversations. In this sense, I am establishing a personal connection to the story, developing my own perspectives and understandings. Thus, it has become something that I am invested in and now connected to.

Le Pisaga: To Sua ma le To le Sua:

Ascending onto a high plateau, passing by rows of rock chimneys, overlooking the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, and descending again, we arrive at To Sua and To le Sua.

*We hear the roaring voice of the ocean's waves as they roll towards the shore.
Crash.*

Then, the soft whisper of their flowing rhythm as they glide back out to sea.

Staring down into two wide, cavernous holes, formed in the slopes of volcanic rock, there is a still and peaceful calm.

Looking into one hole we face emptiness, the hollow echo of our voices stretches for miles. Moving towards the other, we stare down to the depths of the sea. Feeling the urge to jump in...to experience the splash of a cool refreshment.

We call this hole To Sua, water exists within. And the other we name To le Sua, for it lacks water.

Looking around we see no one, not a single movement or figure, but we can feel an overwhelming presence, a powerful energy.

Sounds...whispers and rumbles.

It is not frightening or disturbing, but rather deeply mysterious.

We start the slow and steady climb downwards. Step after step lowering ourselves deeper into the pit.

Jump. Splash.

The movement takes us. The flow of tides engulfing our bodies.

Lying on our backs floating, weightless...feeling the power of the current

Taking us, controlling us.

Looking up towards the only way out, clear blue skies spotted with white pillows shining with the blinding light of the sun.

Feeling the power within, hearing the deep grumble of water within these rock walls.

Voices unseen, but heard.

The current pulls me towards To le Sua. Everything darkens and a silence lingers. Nothing is heard but the beating of our hearts and the soft drip of water from falling vines into the sea.

Feet.

Touch.

Bottom.

and we have entered To le Sua.

Sitting on the rocky edge, letting the water wash up our chest as the tide rolls in-feeling that floating lightness once again, and as the current rolls back out letting the water leave me sitting, feeling the heavy weight of my own body. My being.

Mystical.

Whose land have we come upon?

Here. Aitu peacefully reside.

"They are spirits, our beliefs, the ghosts of our ancestors, and the gods of our past" (anonymous interview responses 4-25-2011).

Their home is by the sea, within the caves. They are the guardians of this land.

On the darkest of nights, the aitu use To le Sua, because it is empty and without water, for their fiafia, their celebrations (Sanele 3-5-2011). We cannot see them, but their voices travel throughout the village and we hear their laughter and song.

We must treat these spirits with utmost respect and be cautious not to disturb and disappoint them. Or else we confront the pisaga, the pandemonium—inescapable voices and howling sounds haunting us on our further journeys, warning of trouble ahead (Oloialii and Magivao 105).

Between 12 noon and midnight it is requested that we not walk across their land, we must take care not to disrupt their calm.

The aitu are always among us, their presence lingering in the night air. For the most part, they lie and rest, watching over us as we go about our everyday lives. Yet, when they find reason, they will rise and make their anger known.

They are part of us.

Bridging the gap between the past, our ancestors, and our current lives.

Establishing one, continuous lived experience.

We believe because we see and hear them...feeling their presence within and among us.



Figure 1: To Sua (water exists within). Lotofaga Village



**Figure 2:
To Le Sua
(no water
inside).
Lotofaga
Village**

Explanation:

I wrote the above story from a collective perspective, which is why I kept using “us”. There are two reasons for this. One is because I wanted to retell the story from a personal standpoint so I used personal pronouns, but I felt as though I could not use “I” because the story does not belong to me. It is in fact part of a much greater web of cultural knowledge, tradition, and belief that exists to some extent outside my own understandings. Although parts of the story involve my own interpretations, I still wanted the words to be those of the people, not of an individual. The second reason why I wrote from a collective standpoint was because I felt the presence of other energies at *To Sua* and *To le Sua*. There was an overwhelming feeling that I was never alone, even though at times I could see no other physical bodies. When there were other individuals around me, I still felt there was a looming, supernatural presence flowing throughout the place. This sense of spirit called for a collective voice in the telling of the story, for I was never alone.

It was necessary for me to go to *To Sua* and *To le Sua* in order to get a well- rounded understanding of the myth. At that place, I made connections between peoples’ words and the places they were talking about. Finally, in spending the afternoon in this environment I established my own reflections and thoughts about the myth and the place. As a person not a part of Samoan culture, I felt as though I came one step closer to better comprehending a past that I am not part of. I will never fully grasp the significance of Samoan myths and their meanings, but listening to stories and existing in the environment where the stories resonate, I believe makes Samoan history and culture more accessible to an outsider. This gives me a

personal bond to the research because myth is a realm that is open for interpretation and contains an infinite amount of possible meanings.

Discussion of Lotofaga Surveys and Interviews:

The surveys and interviews conducted made clear that every person in the village with whom I spoke knew about this myth and of the place. All of the survey respondents also answered “yes” when asked if myths of Samoa are important for the people to know about. However, some people knew only small parts of the myth, while others knew more comprehensive and detailed versions. All of the younger people approached knew almost nothing about the myth besides that it existed in their village. Only three people knew enough about the myth to actually tell the story in full and these individuals were all above the age of 50. Most of the survey respondents could name the myth, identify the place, and make a reference to something of the supernatural happening at the holes. The most common response about the myth had to do with bad spirits existing there and roaming around, making noise at 12:00 noon and midnight. Interview and survey responses varied regarding what the spirits actually did at the holes. One woman mentioned that *aitu* had their *fiafia* at night in *To le Sua* (Otila 3-5-2011). While another villager mentioned that the ghosts would go to bathe in the water of *To Sua* (Soloau 4-25-2011). Other survey respondents suggested that spirits just lived there and caused noise and commotion.

References to the supernatural varied, ranging from ghosts, spirits, *aitu*, monsters, gods, and little people. Those who acknowledged that they knew the stories all talked about *le pisaga*, the pandemonium. According to Oloialii and Magaivao, “It is believed that the dry pit or

cave may have been inhabited by or became a resting place for spirits in their travels. Hence the name “*Pisaga*” or “pandemonium”, as it is known by local residents” (102). The local residents mentioned voices and noises being heard within the caves due to the spiritual presences in that area. One villager said, “The people in *To Sua* sing songs at night...make noise...that’s why *pisaga* means too much noise” (Siautu Seaga 4-25-2011). While I was there, the noises I heard came mostly from the rumble of ocean waves being pushed into small openings in the cave-like holes. The sounds of the current flowing in and out. The noises were very low-toned, haunting, and from deep within giving the impression of the existence of something else unseen and dark. The description of “the pandemonium” by Oloialii and Magaivao is somewhat different.

The surrounding forests had become silenced, and there was a deathlike stillness within the pit. Then there was the pandemonium—that was not unlike the shrieking cries of crickets calling to one another, that was all the more awesome because it was midday when the sun was directly overhead, and not at twilight, the usual hour for crickets to welcome the darkness (104).

My own experiences, accounts in written sources, and local residents agree that noises and the voices of the supernatural play a significant role in this myth. Villagers came to know about the myth in similar ways. All of the answers had to do with hearing them orally and also hearing them from family members, usually elders in the family. Sitagata says, “My father heard the story and he passed the story to us. That’s what we do...pass stories to the young” (Sitagata 4-25-2011). Not one person mentioned reading about the myth in a book or hearing about it in school or church. However, a villager from Lotofaga did help narrate this myth for written records in a collection of myths and legends from Samoa, *Samoa Ne’i Galo*. From these results, I gathered that the telling of stories remains a very family/village oriented tradition.

Falealupo, Savaii:

The below poem was written after a reflection on my experiences at Falealupo. It blends together my thoughts, emotions, visions, and dreams from my stay at this very mysterious and spiritual location.

Dreaming Awake

*I dreamt I was on the edge...
A place of departure
A calm masking the chaos
A calling from the horizon greeting another
tomorrow*

*I dreamt of darkness...
Ominous shapes looming overhead
A death-like stillness soaking the air
A haunting beckoning of the oceans' roaring depths*

*I dreamt of the sea...
A continuous circular current
A conscious force engulfing me
The sea's salty breath whispering in my ears*

*I dreamt of the clouds...
A sky carpeted in black
Peeking eyes where stars once flew
Shots of light penetrating heaven's darkest blanket*

*I dreamt of a setting sun...
A crisp orange face
Dripping silently into an open body
Its color echoing for miles saturating the earth's soul*

*I dreamt of a man...
Walking on the water
Crawling beneath the sand
Shuffling and sweeping to the beat of my heart*

*I dreamt of a voice...
A soft, lingering cry
Caught in-between two worlds
Spinning in a heavy gloom reaching for the lightness*

*I felt the darkness...
Creeping upon me*

*I dove into the sea...
Deeper and deeper*

*I heard sweeping murmurs...
Following my footsteps*

*I saw each cloud...
Walk across the sky*

*I stared towards tomorrow...
Blinded by a screaming sun*



Figure 3: Dark clouds overcoming the light. Falealupo, Savaii



Figure 4: Sun overhead. Darkness surrounding Cape Mulinu'u (left), Falealupo, Savaii

Explanation:

I wrote the above poem after reflecting upon my experiences at Falealupo in Savaii. From the moment I arrived, I felt an air of mystery about the place. It was very quiet and very few people were around the village. I immediately felt an overall silence and stillness. The village felt very isolated, almost deserted, and distant from anywhere else, secret and tucked away. I also felt very sullen vibes coming from my surroundings and the people I encountered. Walking around the areas destroyed from the recent cyclone in 1990 gave Falealupo an even darker and bare aura. The structures still standing looked ancient and as if the rubble contained stories from long ago.

The one night spent at Falealupo was filled with interesting dreams and curious visions and sounds. I had a very shaky sleep during the night. I experienced various dreams throughout the night, but even during those dreams I never felt completely asleep. At times I felt uneasy as though other presences were around me, watching me. The *fale* I slept in was on the end and facing Cape Mulinu'u, "the abode of the departed spirits" (Gisa, et al. 11). I kept the *fale* completely open because I wanted to be exposed, vulnerable. During the night, I felt the strength of the earth's energies. The ocean was roaring loudly, the temperature dropped and a chill lingered throughout the night.

Throughout the whole night, I was conscious of changing energies and awake even in my dreams. Hence, the title of the poem. I kept "waking up" to realize that what I was "dreaming" was actually occurring in my environment. It is still unclear to me what parts of the night were dreams and what parts I experienced awake. The night felt long and more to me like I was in fact in an in-between dreaming/awake state, still conscious of my surroundings but

allowing my mind to wander into other realms. Yet, the times that I felt “awake”, my dreams became my reality. The first stanzas of the poem begin with, “I dreamt”. Some of the descriptions that follow that line stem from my visions and emotions in my waking state, occurrences throughout the day; while others I have constructed from my dreams. The poem ends with definite statements about what I heard, saw, felt, and experienced. Some of the words and phrases harken back to the above “dream” stanzas, blurring the line between dream and reality. It could be possible that the dreams I had were exaggerations of the vibes and perceptions I had during the afternoon. Or that my dreaming and vulnerable condition allowed me to open myself to the supernatural and whatever else exists beyond the earthly realm. The afternoon was filled with a still calm, nothing unsettling just mysterious; while the night time unleashed a tone of uneasiness that still resonates with me.

Falealupo myths and stories:

From the moment I arrived at Falealupo until the time I went to bed, a constant presence of dark clouds hung over Cape Mulinu’u. Directly above the sun was shining, but everywhere else in the sky, especially over Cape Mulinu’u, was a haunting darkness. Yet, it never rained and the clouds never moved. Cape Mulinu’u is known as, “the abode of the departed spirits” (Gisa, et al. 11). It is commonly recognized by those who reside in this area of Savaii and even those from other parts of Samoa, that this place contains strong supernatural activity. This specific cliff marks the gathering place of spirits from all over Samoa before they travel to *Pulotu*, the underworld. “Behind the site of the *Puataupea*, is the *Pa Sopoia* (a mythical fence said to stretch from Manu’a to Savaii, following the line of the hill-tops; it is said to be the path of the departed souls on their way to the underworld)” (Gisa, et al. 12). The

Puataupea, a frangipani-like shrub with white flowers, is another mysterious aspect of this area. The plant, recognizable by its strong fragrance, does not grow on soil, flowers every day of the year, and remains the only plant of this type in the area. Inhabitants of Falealupo believe the plant is cared for by spirits on their way to *Pulotu* (Gisa, et al. 11-12). Another element to the story is that, “The people of the community have a firm belief that the *Puataupea* belongs to the ghosts, the reason behind [this belief is] that it never dies, even during drought periods” (Gisa, et al. 12). Stories and beliefs surrounding the *Puataupea* at Cape Mulinu’u largely concern the acknowledgment of spirits in the place. However, depending on who you talk to the meaning of these stories and belief in the actual presence of the supernatural varies. Figiel talks about her experience with the places of spiritual/supernatural stories by stating,

Yes, I consciously visited Falealupo when I was teaching in Savaii for a year. It is the entrance to the *Fafa*...or to *Pulotu* in Samoan legends...and I so wanted to go there. To feel the spirituality of the place as well as its aura. I was not afraid to go to Falealupo...It was strange to the party I was with, that I would want to go there. Samoans in general have a fear of such places...as it might be populated by *aitu*...or spirits (5-5-2011).

Figiel makes a distinction between why certain people would or would not want to visit Falealupo, mentioning that fear of spirits is common among Samoans. However, this fear of *aitu* did not always exist as I have argued above when examining the role Christianity has played in changing beliefs. Although supernatural activity is recognized at Falealupo, whether people interpret this fact as evil and frightening or simply as a testimony that ancestors exist in spirit form and should not be forgotten. These beliefs then determine the manner in which this myth and others of Falealupo are passed along.

The importance of Samoan mythology is evident in the culture today as many proverbs and Samoan sayings stem from myths. Van der Ryn states, “Yes, it is an important aspect of

Samoa culture because many cultural proverbs prescribing certain moral behaviors and attitudes are encoded in and derived from Samoan legends” (5-5-2011). The myths are more than just stories; they are essential ingredients to understanding the Samoan way of life, *fa’asamoa*. During the morning spent in Falealupo I visited the house of a *matai*, chief of the village, in hopes of hearing another story. Due to the language barrier, he wrote down the story of “Sina’s long house”, which I later translated...

The long house was built by Sina with her group of women and Leleisiuao with his group of untitled men at a time when Samoan people had two natures (half human, half aitu). They made an agreement that if the men’s side was finished first, Sina would marry Leleisiuao and if Sina’s side finished first, he would return to Palauli and there would be no wedding. They built the house and Sina finished first. That led to the Samoan saying: “Ua au le Inailau a Tina ae le au le Inailau a tane” meaning the womens row of thatch was finished but not the men’s (Tunei trans. Jackie Faasisila 5-2-2011)

This story of Sina’s house created the Samoan saying, “women finish and men do not.” This saying extends to other areas of Samoan culture other than just myth and legend. It applies to the productiveness of women’s work and their ability to get things done. Such a concept still resonates with Samoan women especially and can be seen in the strength of their work ethic and their motivation. Another intriguing aspect of this story concerns the mentioning of Samoan people with two natures. Although the story does not have to do with anything of the supernatural, it acknowledges that in the past the spirit and earthly realm were entwined. That the story regards Samoans of those days as being half *aitu* suggests the prevalence of the supernatural in everyday lives, detached from the evil/negative connotations that *aitu* sometimes hold today.

Observations/Personal Reflection:

After sitting with the *matai*, listening to the story, his wife walked in and took me by the hand. She instructed me to follow her and I asked where we were going. She said, “to Sina’s house...”

We walked along the village path to the neighbors land. She spoke with the women in the house and then we continued on. After a minute we diverted from the sandy path and walked straight into the bush. The scenery switched from white sandy floors and colorfully painted houses to numerous shades of green and brown, above and below. Hanging vines were dripping from ancient trees and the crunching sound of leaves under our feet played as a constant soundtrack. Only brief glimpses of light highlighted our surroundings and illuminated our shadows as we walked, for the bush was so thick with trees and vines. The sounds of our footsteps were no longer heard as the leaves under our feet disappeared and were replaced by a dark, textured rock. Lava rock. The hardened flow of lava leaving intricate swirling patterns beneath us, in the midst of a flowering forest. Life evolving from death. The burning destruction of hot lava years later creating a home for plants to take root. We crossed a small stone bridge and came upon Sina’s house. A large cavernous rock structure hidden within the forest, tucked away peacefully. We bent our backs and lowered our heads as we walked into the house. The sharp sounds of our voices changing to echoes as we stood inside. It was dark inside but a slight showering of light peeked through on both ends of the house, illuminating our faces. In the middle stood Sina’s chair. I sat down, imagining Sina in the same place, same chair years ago. The house was big and spacious with different corners and crevices to explore. I moved around slowly and curiously, the space filled mostly with silence except for the occasional chatter of our voices. It may have seemed like just a pile of rocks creating a cave-like structure, but there was something about being inside that felt like home. I spent some time in the cool and comforting darkness, letting the words and expressions of the matai filter through my surroundings, sinking in and recognizing my existence being in the place of an old Samoan myth. I felt the story come alive, the words dancing into place, reawakening a story of Falealupo, and placing it within a context that shouts reality. The story does not seem old and forgotten, but rather timeless; rooted in a place that never disappears and instead remains strong, tangible, and real—just like home.



Figure 5: Sina’s House (inside). Falealupo, Savaii



Figure 6: Sina’s House (outside). Falealupo, Savaii

Conclusion:

Myth is a reality immeasurably greater than concept. It is high time that we stopped identifying myth with invention, with the illusions of primitive mentality, and with anything, in fact, which is essentially opposed to reality. The creation of myths among peoples denotes a real spiritual life, more real indeed than that of abstract concepts and of rational thought. Myth is always concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do; its nature is bound up with that of symbol. Myth is the concrete recital of events and original phenomena of the spiritual life symbolized in the natural world, which has engraved itself on the language, memory, and creative energy of the people...; it brings two worlds together symbolically (Berdyayev in Kamu 7-8).

Concepts are constructed and maintain ideological boundaries distinguishing one idea from another. Their boundaries can morph and expand or contract, but still remain in the realm of rational, logical modes of thought. Myths on the other hand, are boundless in space and time. The timeless nature of myth stretches back into the past, resonates in the present moment, and reaches out far into the future. These stories are not written in stone and are never told in the same way time and time again for they are part of the human experience. They have no borders for they live in the memories of the people; memories that contain different perceptions, experiences, and beliefs.

Myths are molded by the minds who tell them, they may change depending on cultural/religious circumstances, but remain the backbone of a people's spirit. Afamasaga says, "A culture without legends however, is a culture without a soul. Legends provide a beautiful way of storing perceptions/perspectives/values/allegories/ memories/ways of seeing and knowing that continue to provide a rich source of creativity" (5-10-2011). In Samoan indigenous religion, the soul, *agaga*, remains in the body until death after which it can take different paths. It enters the kingdom of the dead, enters the body of another living being, or

becomes a wandering spirit (Kamu 20). Like the soul, myths and legends are part of a person's being and never fully vanish, they just change form. They carry a person's history and remain part of that body and even through death they remain eternal. Myths are passed down orally and spread throughout a cultural web of memories, never to be forgotten. Although the physical being dies, the soul and spirit are everlasting just as the stories, myths, and legends of a culture are in perpetual existence.

These stories give voice and energy to the living, breathing elements of nature and vice versa. They reawaken the beliefs and traditions of Samoa long ago and stir up new life in the people who know and tell them. Their words, molded with new and different meaning, flowing through the ears of another generation. Unwilling to forget, elders' search the furthest corners of their mind drawing forth a memory, a story. The story is then rejuvenated, floating in a fresh and brighter light. Belief, knowledge, and spirit are all tied up in the act of storytelling, in the narration of myths and legends. These stories speak to the history of Samoa and highlight pieces of the past in the context of the present day. More than words and memories, these stories are the original strands of Samoan culture, realities that make up the world of a people and place.

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Glossary of Terms

Aitu: ancestral spirits; deities in pre-Christian Samoa; sometimes denoted as evil spirits in contemporary Christian contexts

Agaga: soul

Ata: physical incarnations of aitu

Faavavau: forever into the future

Faasamoa: Samoan way of life

Fagogo: traditional form of storytelling/folklore

Fale: Samoan house

Fiafia: celebration ceremony

Le Fe'e: Samoan war god of Vaimauga district prior to missionary contact (1830)

Matai: village chief

Papalagi: sky-burster

Pisaga: pandemonium; noise/commotion

Puataupea: Frangipani-like shrub with white flowers

Pulotu: underworld of spirits in Samoan mythology and pre-Christian religion

Tagaloa: Supreme God of Samoa/God of Creation in pre-Christian Samoa

Tala o le Vavau: myth

Appendix A

Survey/Personal Communication for Villages:

Age/Tausaga:

Sex/ali'i:

Village/nu'u:

1. Does your village have legends/ *E iai ni tala mai le vavau i lo tou nu'u?*

Yes/loe

no/Leai

2. Do you know the legend of [To sua/Falealupo]/ *E te iloa ni tala mai le vavau e uiga i le [To Sua/Falealupo]?*

Yes/loe

no/leai

- Explain the legend/ *Faamatala mai le tala.*

3. How did you learn the legend/ *E faapeafea ona e iloaia le tala?*

4. Do you talk about the legend in your village/ *E te talanoa e uiga i tala mai le vavau i lo tou nu'u?*

Yes/loe

no/Leai

- When/ *O le a le taimi tou te talanoa ai i tala mai le vavau?*
- With who/ *O ai tou te talanoa iai?*

5. Have you gone to the place of the Legend/ *Sa e alu i le mea o lo o faamatala ai i le tala? Aisea?*

Yes/loe

no/Leai

6. Are Legends important/ *ni tala mai le vavau?*

Yes/loe

no/Leai

- Explain why/ *Faamatala pe aisea*

Appendix B

Interview Questions:

Age: Sex: village:

1. Do you know any Samoan stories/legends? If so, which ones?
2. How did you come to know these stories?
3. Have you visited any of the places/villages where the legends occurred? If so, why and what was your experience like at that place?
4. What do you think the significance is of physical place/environment in the context of legends?
5. Are legends of Samoa important for Samoans to know? Why or why not?
6. Do you believe in the legends/stories that you know/hear about? Why or why not?
7. Do you think Christianity has changed Samoan peoples' belief in and knowledge about legends? If so, how?
8. Does oral tradition/storytelling exist in Samoa? If so, do you think it is an important aspect of the culture, why or why not? Do you see this tradition changing over time? If so, how?