

A Short Account of the Long History of Chiefly Female Leadership in Sāmoa

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Abstract

There are many accounts of great female chiefs in Samoa's ancient narratives and genealogies, and 19th century ethnographies and memoirs by missionaries and other foreigners residing in Samoa. Why then have so few women stood for election or won seats in Samoa's parliament since Samoa's Independence in 1962? This account will examine this question in the three contexts. Firstly, we consider the pre-Christians status of Samoan women and how ancient cultural practices associated with marriage shaped missionary beliefs that forms of Christianity based on Victorian era cultural norms would rescue Samoan women from degradation; second we point to Samoan cultural notions of power and authority, their transformations under Christianity, and their influence on contemporary political attitudes to gender. Finally we review Samoa's response to the international agendas of 'gender and development' and 'the empowerment of women' that contributed to Sāmoa making legal provisions that women must hold at least ten percent of seats in parliament. In these contexts we consider Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Matā'afa's leadership and the unusual circumstances that arose during the recent constitutional with regards to the 'ten percent' provision.

Keywords: Women, politics, parliament, Samoa

Women with Power

Among the many international media stories on Samoa's 2021 constitutional crisis, and about Samoa's new Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Matā'afa, a CNN report (Hollingsworth, 2021) mentioned that when, as an unmarried woman at the age of 20, her title Fiamē was conferred upon her, it was "a highly unusual situation in Samoa, where women are expected to become wives, and the vast majority of matai titles are held by men." While this is generally true today, in ancient Sāmoa there were many prominent women leaders. What changed?

Fiamē is not only the daughter of Samoa's first prime Minister, Matā'afa Fiamē Faumuina Mulinu II and one of its first female member of parliament La'ulu Fetauimalemau Mataafa, but belongs to Samoa's highest ranking lineages which were founded by women in approximately the 16th century; Levālasi So'oaimalelagi, her niece Salamāsina, and Salamāsina's daughters Sina and Taufau. Other great women of ancient Sāmoa are remembered as supernatural beings, notably the

warrior goddess Nafanua who, in approximately the 17th century, decreed a new political order in Sāmoa that prevailed until the 1830s (Schoeffel, 1987). The recognition of great women chiefs continued well into the late 19th century; for example William Brown Churchward (who had been British Consul to Sāmoa in the 1880s) recalled, in his memoir meeting a woman who was deferred to by the male chiefs because, as they told Churchward (1887), she was "... the highest in the district by birth, being, as was said, descended from the ancient gods ...". However, by the 20th century new Christian religious values had eclipsed the old values that validated female chieftainship. The English missionaries who founded the Christian churches in the early nineteenth century taught that all persons were equal in God's eyes and disapproved of the loose marital ties and polygamous or polyandrous practices among those of chiefly rank. They believed that by adopting the Christian faith, the status of Samoan women would be elevated, as John Williams, the pioneer missionary to Sāmoa, wrote:

I prayed that by the blessing of God upon our labours, the day might speedily arrive when these interesting females should be elevated from this terrible degradation, and, by the benign influence of Christianity, be raised to dignity of companionship with their husbands (Williams 1845: 91)

The "Terrible Degradation"

There were three reasons why 19th century missionaries believed that Samoan women were degraded: the impermanence of the married state; the testing of a bride's virginity; and the practice of allowing sexual license to all but the highest ranking virgins at night dances (*poula*) when a village received a visiting party from another village.

The public testing of virginity has often been misunderstood as a verification of the bride's virtue but should instead be understood as a gift from the bride's lineage to that of the groom and his lineage. When a chief married, the virginity of his aristocratic bride was the most important of the treasures she brought with her as marriage gifts, which in chiefly virgin girls (*taupou*) chosen for their ancestry, was carefully guarded from their age of puberty until first marriage when they were about 15 years of age. The central rite of the chiefly marriage ceremony was her public defloration, which most missionary observers found too disgusting to record in detail, although the practice was fully described by several mid-19th century foreign observers. The chiefly groom or, in the case of the highest-ranking chiefs, his orator, ruptured the hymen of the bride, using the fingers. The onlookers from the bride's and the groom's districts sang songs and rejoiced that the way had been opened for the creation of a chiefly child combining the *mana* of its parents'

ancestral gods. The elliptical marks that are still drawn on the cheeks of Samoan girls dressed as *taupou* and young men dressed as *manaia*² are contemporary echoes of this ancient practice. Ritual defloration was not merely reserved for chiefly marriages, but was widely practiced for young women of all ranks: according to John Williams it was also:

“... common for young women to be publicly deprived of their virginity by a young respectable Chief in the same way as in the marriage ceremony. This is considered an honor & no person objects to marry a young woman who has been thus treated. The Chief who ruptures the Hymen will frequently give the young woman a great name which will gain her respectability but I suspect the reason why this singular custom prevails is the young females are tired of submitting to the restraints their virginity imposes on them & being thus honorably deprived of their virginity they have full liberty to gratify their wishes & also escape the disgrace of being looked upon as common prostitutes. (Moyle, 1984)

Williams, acute observer although he was, did not understand that the emulation of this chiefly practice by those of lower rank as an assertion of the girl's high status was more akin to middle class English Victorian era families aping what they took to be aristocratic behaviors, often wittily depicted in the novels of Anthony Trollope. In ancient Samoa those ranked as *ali'i* were held to be the earthly manifestations of the gods, an exalted class who maintained their status through endogamous marriage within a network of ancestrally connected aristocratic families spanning the Samoan archipelago. The objective of chiefly marriage was a mating to create a new chiefly lineage. The term *usu* used in the standard formula of Samoan genealogies indicates the primacy of the sexual union; for example '*sa usu Tui Manu' a ia Sina*'—'Tui Manu'a conquered/had sexual intercourse with Sina' (Milner, 1966: 304). Men and some women of the highest ranks were expected to enter into a series of unions, as many as possible, with the object of begetting a child to link their lineages and polities to others of importance. Williams instructed the Tahitian and Rarotongan missionaries he had brought to teach the Samoans that while they should not ban all traditional amusements, they must advise the chiefs to prohibit "...those dances that were manifestly obscene such as dancing naked, singing their filthy songs & such like. (Moyle, 1984: 125). The "filthy" practices Williams condemned were integral to the prevailing political and moral order. As Williams observed on several occasions in 1830 and 1832, dances were held when a party from one village visited another for courtship or marriage ceremonies. Williams found most Samoan dancing quite unobjectionable, including those performed at night. What shocked him were dances he said the Samoans called *sa'e*³ (Moyle, 1984:

² Manaia is the term for sons of highly ranked ali'i

³ In this context sa'e refers to the exposure of the thighs.

246-47) which were competitive erotic performances held at night between the young people of host and guest polities, typically in conjunction with the rites of chiefly courtship and marriage, and undoubtedly intended to encourage sexual encounters between ordinary young men and women from different and often distant polities. In Samoan morality, sexual encounters and marriage within a local polity (*nu'u*) was undesirable, even improper. Accordingly, spouses should be found outside, from other polities. Consistent with the Samoan principle of *feagaiga* young men and women from the same village were ideally as brothers and sisters to one another (Schoeffel 1985, Tcherkezoff, 1993). Marriage and sexual unions within the village were disruptive of its social hierarchy and moral order, and also defeated the purpose of marriage for the creation of wide-ranging alliances. Accordingly, when chiefs went travelling for courtship and marriage, so did their followers; the ensuing chiefly rites provided a venue for two or more polities to come together in an atmosphere of supernaturally charged sexual licence. Each young man went out hoping to sexually "conquer" a young women from a rival polity, perhaps to bring her home to serve his family and bear his children, at least for as long as he could hold her.

Christian Conjuality

The missionary ideal was of monogamous Christian conjuality and so the roles of women in Sāmoa were revised, so that they became their husband's helpmates instead of their brother's sacred sisters. This accorded with Victorian British ideals in the 19th century, at a time when married English women lacked rights to control property, or to vote in elections, let alone play a leading role in religious rites. Village pastors of the Congregational and Methodist churches, and Catholic priests soon took the place of sacred chiefs as the earthly representatives of God. In the new Christian order of the founding churches women were held to be secondary creations whose divinely ordained purpose was to be wives and mothers. As Meleisea (1995) and Tcherkezoff (2000) have explained, the matai system of Sāmoa today is a late 19th century patriarchal revision of the ancient system of chieftainship. Only recently have women been given matai titles⁴ in this system.

⁴A matai is a person holding a title, (often glossed as 'chief') usually the name of an ancestor, bestowed by his (or her) family. Matai are ranked hierarchically in the villages with which they are associated, based on the ancestral traditions of that village. There two order of matai; ali'i (chiefs) and tulāfale (orators)

Power and Authority in Ancient Samoa

In pre-Christian Sāmoa there was a distinction between *mana* (power) and *pule* (authority) in the Weberian sense of these terms, and a complementarity between them. As Meleiseā (1987) pointed out, the *ali'i* were once the earthly manifestations of ancestral gods and their powers were imbued with the supernatural. Many 19th century observers were mystified by the fact that all the political wheeling and dealing appeared to be done by orators (*tulafale* or *faleupolu*) instead of by the most highly ranked chiefs. This was because the orators exercised *pule* that was legitimized by the *mana* of their *ali'i*. Generally, like their male counterparts, chiefly women had *mana*, but more rarely *pule* (see Gunson 1987). In the 19th century conversion to Christianity *mana* was transferred to God (and nowadays the term refers exclusively to 'the grace of God'), and thereby to the churches and their ministers who are now as latter-day sacred chiefs, while the *ali'i* have become secularized. Therefore in Sāmoa it is asserted that political authority is God-given, God's *mana* legitimizes chiefly *pule*. This is expressed in the saying '*Ua tofia e le Atua Sāmoa ia pulea e matai*' (God appointed *matai* to rule over Samoa). When a *matai* title is bestowed, it is given with a blessing from a church minister. The idea that formal authority is sanctioned by God is exemplified by the name chosen by the new ruling political party *Fa'atuatua I Le Atua Sāmoa ua Tasi*- FAST (Sāmoa united in faith in God). The Samoan belief that authority is sanctioned by God's will may help to contextualize statements by the outgoing Prime Minister Tuilaepa of Sāmoa reported in the media (Otago Daily Times and New Zealand Herald, 14 May 2021) to the effect that he was appointed by God. It also explains why, since the time when Samoans became Christian, women have tended to be excluded from the political sphere; the ministers and churches have God's *mana*, while the *matai* and village councils have *pule*, the authority to make and enforce village by-laws and guard its customs, and parliament has the *pule* to make laws.

Contemporary Status of women

Today most Samoan women have dual status; as a wife they are subordinate to their husband and to his family if she lives with them (the common practice for most married women), A woman living with her husband's family (*nofo tane*) has no voice in his family matters or in his village, except in those responsibilities delegated to in-married women in the village woman's committee or church fellowship, such as keeping the village⁵ and the church clean and beautified, and raising funds for

⁵ In the period 1930-1980 women's committees were also responsible for public health promotion.

various activities. Sometimes, if a man resides in his wife's family (*faiavā*), his wife will ask for him to be given a family title to represent her and their children. A woman's status rises with that of her husband and she is entitled to a more important role among women when her husband is bestowed with a *matai* title, especially if the title is highly ranked. In most villages the leaders of village and church women's groups are the wives of its highest ranking *matai*.

In contrast, as sisters, Samoan women are supposed to be shown particular respect by their brothers and their brother's wives according to the *feagaiga* relationship (Schoeffel, 1995), which was imbued with supernatural power in pre-Christian Samoa. It is now the echoes of ancient concepts of *mana*, that a sister should be 'sacred' to her brother, in the sense that she should be protected and honored by him and her wishes obeyed on matters concerning her birth-family such as the bestowal of *matai* titles, family rights in the community and over land, and in ceremonial matters. The *feagaiga* is still honored in some villages such as Saoluafata and Leulumoega due to remembrance of their great chiefly women of the past; as the daughters of the village; the sisters of its *matai* enjoy special respect as the *aualuma* or *tama'ita'i*; the leaders in women's affairs. (These villages also have women's committees composed of in-marriage women who are responsible for public health and cleanliness). In old Samoa the daughters of the village had their own house, to which they were admitted at puberty. The daughter or the highest ranking *ali'i*, the *taupou*, resided there with her attendants and older women who had once themselves been the *taupou*.

Today the importance of women's associations in village governance has declined considerably since the 1980s when the village women's committees were de-linked from the public health nursing services in the Ministry of Health. This occurred due to policy changes under which nurses no longer went out to villages to oversee health education, maternal and child health, and public hygiene; instead people in villages sought advice and treatment from the nearest health center or district hospital, or if they had the means to do so, went to the outpatient clinics at the main hospitals on Upolu and Savaii. The institutional arrangements linking the women's committees to the central government have changed several times in response to the government's interest in obtaining funds for 'women and development', an aid donor priority which emphasized the inclusion of women in economic development programmes. In the 1980s women's committees were linked to the Prime Minister's Department and the Ministry of Agriculture for women in development projects, which emphasized income generation rather than public health, but responsibility was later transferred to the Women's Division of the Ministry of Women Social and Community Development (MWSCD) which was established in 1991. Since that time

the aid donor focus has been on ‘gender in development’ which has a focus on women’s legal equality and equal political representation (Schoeffel, 2016).

Women and Matai Titles

Only matai may stand for election to parliament and in 1960s there were few women matai, mostly women who has been among the first to hold university degrees or other professional qualifications. By the 1970s more families began to bestow matai titles on women, usually to honor their financial contributions to their families, made possible by their educational and career achievements or overseas earnings and remittances. One of the historical changes in relation to chiefly power and authority is that many matai, many of them women, as well as men and women who live in town or overseas, concern themselves only with their extended families and do not engage with the governance of the villages to which those titles belong. Research in 2014-15 investigated the reason why few women participate in village government, as well holding seats in the national parliament. It found that few women living in villages hold matai titles and of those, even fewer are member of the governing village councils. About nineteen villages in Sāmoa did not recognize a matai title if was held by a women, even though this is not a consensus view in those villages. As discussed above, the normal practice is for women to take the status of their husband in the community, and for men to represent their wives. Accordingly, bestowal of a *matai* title on a woman is not necessarily given in the expectation that she will concern herself with village government or politics. The system of traditional village government in Sāmoa limits women’s access to and participation in decision-making forums in local government councils, church leadership, school management and community-based organisations. The most common obstacle to women’s voice in local government is that of the very few female matai living in villages, even fewer sit in the village councils. Their absence reinforces public perceptions—even religious beliefs—that a married women should take her status from her husband and that decision-making in the public sphere is a male prerogative, not only in the village councils, but also in the church, in village school committees, and by extension, in national parliament. Without significant participation in leadership decision-making at the village level, it is difficult for women to become—or to be seen as—national leaders (Meleisea et. al. 2015).

Women and Parliamentary Elections

In a post-election study in 2016, Fiti-Sinclair interviewed 24 women who, out of a total of 164 candidates, stood for the 2016 elections. There has been no change to

the proportions of women elected to parliament since independence which has consistently remained low; the largest number being five women, elected in 1996, 2006 and 2021. The largest number of women who have ever stood for parliament was 24 in 2016 and 2006, in each case following a campaign urging women to stand. Since 1961 most of the women who won seats were unmarried or widowed and those who were married had husbands who were urban part-Samoans or non-Samoans.

Analysis of the characteristics of women who won seats in 2016 (Fiti-Sinclair and Schoeffel, 2017) showed that they had certain shared attributes. Strong family support and participation in their village council at the time of the election appears to have been important for electoral success, as was membership of one of the mainstream churches (Congregational, Catholic or Methodist) in the electorate. Most of those who won seats had attained post-secondary levels of education and had a career background in government or business. The majority held *ali'i* rather than *tulāfale* titles. All were of a 'mature' age (over 40).⁶

In 2013 the government of Sāmoa passed an amendment to the Electoral Act which guaranteed women ten percent of seats in parliament, which at that time was five seats. If fewer than five women are elected, the women candidates who did not win a seat, but who scored the highest number of votes will be appointed. In the 2016 elections 24 women out of a total of 164 candidates stood and four of them won seats including Fiamē, who was elected unopposed, as she was in 2021. The legislative change allowed an additional woman to be appointed to a seat in parliament, thus increasing the number of Parliamentarians from 49 to 50. The party parity model (see Baker, 2019) that places the onus on parties to preselect woman candidates was not considered when the Act was amended because until 2021 Samoa's political parties did not pre-select a single candidate for each electorate prior to elections; members of the same party stand against one another in the same electorates. Every matai title is associated with a particular village and each electorate comprises many villages, which tend to compete with one another to win the seat for one of their own. The system has thus always favored candidate from the most populous villages. In urban areas only those who are permanently resident there may vote in the two urban electorates. All others aged over 21 years must vote in an ancestral village that they nominate at registration. The fact that FAST preselected its candidates in most electorates in the 2021 election and HRPP did not is likely to have been a major factor in the FAST victory.

The main driver of the ten percent rule was not public sentiment but pressure on the government of Sāmoa by international agencies to honour its commitments to

⁶ An analysis of the characteristics of the five women who won seats in 2021 has not been done yet.

women's equality (Schoeffel, 2020). Sāmoa is a party to the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without reservations, and committed to the 2000-2015 Millennium Development (MDG) Goal 3: 'to promote gender equality and women's empowerment', for which one of the indicators is the number of parliamentary seats held by women, as well as Goal 5 of the 2016-2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life."

The women's seats became politically significant in 2021. In the elections that year the new FAST party won the majority of parliamentary seats (26 with the support of an Independent) but the previously long-dominant HRPP party claimed to hold an equal number of seats by invoking the ten percent provision. Five women won seats, but HRPP said that ten percent equates to six women as there were by then 51 seats in parliament, following a revision of electoral boundaries in the period 2016-2021. HRPP appointed Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tu'uau, who qualified under the Act and who had been an MP under the ten percent provision in the previous parliament. This gave HRPP 26 seats. At the time it was widely believed in Sāmoa that the HRPP leader Tuilaepa intended to use the 'hung parliament' situation that this could have created as a reason to re-run the elections. Had he succeeded, it would have allowed him to exclude losing HRPP candidates from standing again and to take advantage of the fact that, by numbers, HRPP had won the highest number of votes (albeit split between rival candidates). This might have made it possible to defeat FAST in a new election. However it was not to be, a re-run of the election was disallowed by the Court. The appointment of a sixth woman to parliament was contested by FAST and the matter went to the Court of Appeal in June 2021. The Court agreed with HRPP that ten percent did equate to six women but Ali'imalemanu's appointment was not legally upheld until after by-elections resulting from appeals upheld by the Court. These gave FAST a clear parliamentary majority and as no women gained a higher proportion of votes in the by-elections than Ali'imalemanu, she was appointed a seat.

The Future for Women in Samoa's Parliament

We have explained above that there are structural reasons why few women stand for parliamentary elections and why fewer win seats: according to Samoan custom, a woman takes her status from her husband. There is a customary role for the wife of a matai, but none for the husband of a matai. It is in this context that we question the view that has been expressed in most media reports of Samoa's 2021 elections and subsequent constitutional crises, that by becoming Prime Minister, Fiamē Naomi

offers a role model for Samoan women in the future. Fiamē is unique in she was raised by her parents to believe that a political career was her duty, one she has performed since the 1980s as a back bencher, as several times a Minister, then Deputy Prime Minister and now Prime Minister. She has faced many barriers, the first was when she was awarded the Fiamē title by the Land and Titles Court but her claim to succeed to her father's high titles Matā'afa and Faumuinā was refused. The Court ruled that her father's three titles could not be held by one person ever again, and making mention that Naomi was a young woman; only the expatriate judge commented that her ancestor Salamasina was also young when she became Samoa's first 'queen' (Meleisea 1987). By choosing to remain unmarried Fiamē has retained her high ancestral rank, which as a married woman, could have been eclipsed by her husband's rank and status -- whether high or low. She has not had to attend to a husband's family and village obligations, but has been able to devote herself to her own traditional obligations.

Overall, women in Sāmoa are doing approximately as well as women are in New Zealand or Australia in education, the public service and private businesses. Politics represents the biggest obstacle for women to dismantle because the Samoan political system is based on traditional electorates, gendered values and leadership norms as they were in the late 1950s. This may change; now only a little more than half of Samoans in Sāmoa live in traditional villages (Meleisea et. al. 2015) and those who live in the new suburban areas surrounding Apia are less bound by conservative norms than are those living in traditional villages. Yet village populations are probably over-represented in the national electorate and urbanization is increasing. Further, more than half of all Samoan people live overseas in New Zealand, Australia, United States and elsewhere, where political leadership by women is increasingly becoming a norm. Therefore it seems likely that factors of demography, urbanization and globalization will lead to increasing numbers of women succeeding in politics in the future.

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