

Samoa Tuna Cannery Workers in American Samoa

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During the 1960s, my grandmother, from the island of Savai'i in Samoa, and my grandfather, an American Samoan, worked for the tuna canneries in Atu'u in American Samoa. They both had the same reason for choosing this work: to earn sufficient wages to enable them to fulfil their family, village and church obligations, and serve (*tautau*) their parents.

The wages my grandparents received from working in the tuna canneries helped support their families and villages and contributed to the *alofa* (church pastor contribution) in their communally oriented kin-based society. In addition, these wages provided comforts their families had never experienced before. My grandparents' stories echo those of many other Samoans and American Samoans of their generation, and of generations ever since.

This chapter examines the main push factors – the ethical, religious and cultural responsibilities – that have led many Samoans and American Samoans to seek work abroad since the 1950s. Describing the lived experiences of some former employees of the tuna canneries, this chapter offers an insight into the reasoning of the thousands of men and women who leave Samoa to work in tuna canneries in American Samoa and the similar reasoning of thousands of American Samoans who leave their homeland ('The Rock') to work on the United States mainland.

The two Samoas

The islands of American Samoa and Samoa are part of the same archipelago, and the various districts and islands were once controlled only by *matai* (the heads of extended families: chiefs). With a short distance of around 100 miles (160 kilometres) between the island of Tutuila (now part of American Samoa) and the island of Upolu (now part of the Independent State of Samoa), Samoans travelled freely within the archipelago and beyond until the colonial era, when borders were put in place. People moved between the islands of the archipelago to visit families, find spouses, attend celebrations such as marriages and the giving of chiefly titles, and also to join wars that flared up from time to time between the districts.

During the late 1800s, three colonial powers, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, contended for control over the Samoan archipelago. This exacerbated clashes between chiefs in Samoa, with three paramount chiefs competing to be the 'king' of Samoa. Following two civil wars in Samoa, which were fuelled by and participated in by the colonial powers, an agreement was reached by the colonial powers in 1899: the Tripartite Convention. Under this Convention, the western islands of Upolu, Savai'i, Manono and Apolima were placed under the control of Germany, while control over the eastern islands of Tutuila and Aunu'u, and later the Manu'a Islands, was given to the United States. The United Kingdom relinquished its 'rights' in Samoa in exchange for three islands of the Solomon Islands archipelago that had been German colonies as well as other concessions by Germany in Tonga and parts of Africa. Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century, the western islands of the Samoan archipelago became a colony of Germany – known as German Samoa – while the eastern islands became a colony of the United States of America (USA) – known as American Samoa.

At the start of World War I in 1914, New Zealand took over German Samoa on behalf of Great Britain, declaring the western islands of Samoa to be occupied in the name of His Majesty King George V (Meleisea and Schoeffel Meleisea 1987). Subsequently, the islands were a trusteeship of New Zealand until the local independence movement succeeded in ending the trusteeship and declaring Western Samoa an independent nation in 1962. In 1997 the Government of Western Samoa amended the constitution to change the country's name from Western Samoa to Samoa. The capital city of Samoa is Apia.

In 1951, governance over American Samoa transitioned from the United States Navy to the Department of Interior, and American Samoa remains a territory of the United States to this day. The capital city of the territory is Pago Pago. American Samoans are entitled to apply for United States (US) passports and can travel freely to the US.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ American Samoans are considered 'US nationals' rather than 'US citizens', and their passports are marked accordingly. As US nationals, they have the right to work in the US – in jobs that do not require citizenship – and they can apply for citizenship (via a complex process) after residing in the US for some time (NBC News 28 March 2018).

Tuna canneries in American Samoa

Prior to European contact, the Samoan economy was primarily subsistence agriculture and fishing based. In the mid 1800s, European traders and whalers introduced new forms of fishing and exchange to the Samoan archipelago, which modified traditional Samoan fishing practices. Then in the twentieth century the introduction of outboard engines changed traditional methods further, allowing Samoans to travel greater distances and faster than in traditional fishing boats, making fishing into a more commercial venture. Although sharing and trading of seafood between families and villages continue today, new technology and an increasing reliance on the cash economy from the 1940s onwards have resulted in a decline in subsistence fishing practices (Levine and Allen 2009:22-23).

In the 1940s, the US Department of Defence implemented a number of projects in American Samoa as part of the war efforts, which brought about significant changes (Department of Commerce American Samoa 2019:9) and a wave of prosperity for local merchants (Gray 1960). The construction of a naval station in American Samoa during World War II, for example, provided “high wages, on constructional work of many kinds, in unloading ships, and for those with a good knowledge of English, as interpreters” (Davidson 1967:157). During the 1940s, the United States marines outnumbered the population of Tutuila Island in American Samoa, which was approximately 16,000 (Levine and Allen 2009:9).

At that time, the international tuna market was almost exclusively under the control of the United States. American Samoa’s location became a base for distant water tuna fleets. The location was attractive to the tuna fishing and canning industries for the same reason that the location had been attractive to the US navy in the nineteenth century: Pago Pago’s deep, semi-enclosed harbour (Campling and Havice 2007:213). In addition, American Samoa, with its dispersed outer islands, has a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), larger than that of the Independent State of Samoa despite American Samoa having much smaller islands. This large EEZ meant a larger fishing area was available.

In 1949, American Samoa was authorised to allow commercial enterprises into Pago Pago for the processing and export of locally harvested tuna (Department of Commerce 2019:8). That year, an aviator pioneer, Harold C. Gatty, acquired USD1.5 million from the Rockefeller Foundation to set up a tuna cannery called Island Packers, Inc. in the village of Atu’u near Pago Pago

(Gillett 2007:10). This business venture was unsuccessful, however, due to an inconsistent supply of fish. Gatty eventually sold the cannery to the American Samoa government for USD40,000 (Gillett 2007:10).

When the tuna enterprise was first introduced, American Samoans were consulted and it was agreed that approximately 150 Samoans would work at the cannery and that “not more than 10 non-Samoans” would be employed (Honolulu Star Bulletin quoted in Poblete-Cross 2010:509) as there were concerns about foreigners profiting from the industry to the detriment of the local inhabitants (Poblete-Cross, 2010:508-509).

In 1953, Japanese fishermen took advantage of a new rule that allowed non-US flag vessels to offload their tuna catches within the waters of Tutuila Island. In addition, tariff provisions meant that products from American Samoa (e.g. tuna) could be exported to the US tariff-free if the local component was at least 30 percent of the value — a significant advantage considering that canned tuna imported from elsewhere was subject to a duty of between 6 and 35 percent (Gillett 2007:10; Memea Kruse 2018:91). Immediately, Van Camp Seafood Company leased the site of the cannery, contracted Japanese fishermen, employed workers and relaunched the cannery enterprise (Gray 1960:264). The tuna cannery was considered a blessing for American Samoa’s citizens, offering them paid employment and the possibility of buying imported goods (Crocombe 1995:273).

In 1955, 80 percent of the region’s total exports came from the Van Camp Seafood cannery. (Poblete-Cross 2010:508). In 1963, StarKist Samoa (SKS) established a tuna cannery plant adjacent to that of Van Camp (Gillett 2007:10). The social and economic infrastructure of American Samoa began to improve in the 1960s when US President John F. Kennedy appointed Governor John Hayden to expedite the construction of new roads, hospitals and public schools in the territory. As Line-Noue Memea Kruse put it, American Samoa “was transformed into a modern island economy with the requisite infrastructure to secure private sector growth” (2018:90).

Over the years, “the tuna industry has remained the only stable industry in American Samoa” (Memea Kruse 2018:92). Today, although the public sector is the largest employer in American Samoa, the tuna canning industry remains essential, and in 2019 accounted for over 80 percent of the territory’s exports (Department of Commerce 2019:30).

Labour migration from American Samoa

The canneries provided paid employment to many American Samoans, which they were grateful for. Initially, few foreigners were permitted to work in the canneries so that jobs would be reserved for local workers, but cannery work was challenging and became less attractive to American Samoans over time. The work involved 12-hour shifts, in conditions that were:

... smelly, wet, hot (unless one works in cold storage), deafening (from the noise of machinery), exhausting (from standing for an entire shift), and dangerous (from the heat of steaming processes, the quick and sharp knives for processing, and the powerful and potentially crushing packaging machines) (Poblete-Cross, 2010:509).

Eventually, American Samoans began to “look down upon cannery work” (Poblete-Cross 2010:509), and many American Samoans began to seek employment opportunities in the public sector and abroad. At the same time, some employers in American Samoa began to seek workers from overseas. This trend continued over the subsequent decades because, as Doane and Gray observed in 2006, employers felt that local workers were “less productive, unwilling to undertake employment in certain areas, and unwilling to work for minimum wages” (cited in Levine and Allen 2009:15).

With opportunities for migration to the US mainland and Hawaii, from the 1950s onwards many American Samoans left the territory in search of higher-paid employment opportunities and education. There has been a steady stream of departures over the years. Between 2009 and 2017, for example, American Samoa saw a decline in population at an average annual rate of 2.2 percent (Department of Commerce 2019:5,10).

My grandfather was one of the American Samoan tuna cannery workers who moved to the US mainland. He came from the village of Vatia on the northern coast of Tutuila Island. It is isolated from other villages on Tutuila, and in the old days villagers had to climb a challenging few miles up the steep ridge of Mount Alava to get to town. That was the trip my grandfather made when he went to work at the tuna canneries. Like other cannery workers who came from rural villages, he moved to Pago Pago and lived with close family members.

Working in the tuna cannery made it possible for my grandfather to meet his cultural obligations to his family and village and serve (*tautau*) his father, who held the chiefly title of Alofaituli in the village of Vatia. My grandfather’s ledgers from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s provide a glimpse of his financial

outlays before he left Vatia for America. For example, he listed the costs of building materials used for building a family house. The *fale tele* or *fale talimalo* (traditional Samoan houses) were built using local materials harvested from family land, but my grandfather's ledgers indicate that his family built a house with cement, which was no doubt purchased with earnings from the cannery.

While the wages offered in the American Samoa canneries enabled families to have access to European-style houses and other comforts, the wages were low compared to what could be earned abroad. Like other American Samoans before him, my grandfather migrated to the United States in search of the higher wages offered there.

As was the case in New Zealand (see the article titled "Samoan Labour Migration to Aotearoa New Zealand" by Cluny Macpherson and La'avasa Macpherson in this volume), the process by which American Samoans, including my grandfather and most of his siblings, moved to America was chain migration. Early migrants helped their family members to migrate, and they in turn helped other family members. My uncle, Tamati, would joke with the younger generation, "We all waited for our numbers, and when you were next, you jumped on a plane to America." Once they arrived in America, many American Samoans took on menial labour jobs to survive. Some migrants, like my grandfather, found work in tuna canneries in California.

Labour migration from Samoa to American Samoa

The outflow of people from American Samoa gave rise to a labour shortage in the territory (Memea Kruse 2018:92). Consequently, the tuna canneries started recruiting immigrants to process the fish. The gap the American Samoans left was largely filled by workers from Samoa, who had fewer labour migration options than their counterparts in American Samoa.

Thus, American Samoans migrated to the United States, and citizens of Western Samoa, along with other Pacific Islanders and Asians, moved into jobs unwanted by American Samoans. Writing of the labour migration from the Samoan islands of the west to the east, Unasa Va'a observed that "Western Samoa is dependent on American Samoa for economic opportunities, and American Samoa is dependent on Western Samoa for people" (2010:82).

The main factor drawing Western Samoans to American Samoa was the higher wages offered there compared to those available at home. Like American Samoans, Western Samoans have obligations to their families, villages and churches, as part of their ethical, cultural and religious life, and the more they can earn and send home the better they can fulfil their obligations. So Samoans from Western Samoa moved in fairly large numbers to American Samoa to seek employment in the tuna industry (USGAO 2020).

Guest worker programmes were put in place to recruit workers from Samoa. American Samoans were able to sponsor their relatives in Samoa to join them as guest workers, but as sponsors they were responsible for medical bills, taxes and public debts (Doane and Gray 2006). Not all American Samoans were keen to sponsor Western Samoans, however, because despite family ties, Western Samoans were “seen as outsiders, or subordinate to American Samoans” (Poblete-Cross 2010:511) because of the lack of infrastructure in Western Samoa and the perceived ‘backwardness’ of Western Samoans.

Over the years, through intermarriage and other processes, many Samoans from the Independent State of Samoa were able to become residents of American Samoa. And some have used their residency status as a stepping stone to enter the United States (Ryn 2012). Workers from other countries, notably the Philippines, have followed suit.

In recent decades, American Samoans have begun to perceive a “strain” on their “limited resources” caused by an increasing number of “non-citizens”, such as Western Samoans, Tongans and Filipinos (Sagapolutele 28 May 2009, quoted in Poblete-Cross 2010:507). According to the 2007 report of The Future Political Status Study Commission of American Samoa, the high number of foreigners remaining in American Samoa after the completion of their contracts was a significant concern:

Policy planners and lawmakers knew and accepted this heavy presence of Western Samoans and Tongans because it was critical to the success of both the canneries and the construction industry. There were groans about the growing number of aliens, but we had to have them in order to realise the opportunities in economic development.

Today’s dilemma is different. The public is concerned about the presence of large numbers of foreigners from Asia and the Philippines. Immigration officials say the quota system is being followed with diligence. But the public is still worried. They suspect aliens are finding ways to enter and reside illegally (TFPSSCAA 2007:44)

In addition to the increasing public opposition in American Samoa to immigration and the negative perceptions some American Samoans have of Samoans from the Independent State of Samoa, another factor served as a deterrent to Samoan citizens seeking employment in the tuna canneries of American Samoa: the deplorable working conditions.

In 1995, the late Eni Faleomavaega, the American Samoan delegate to the United States House of Representatives, drew attention to the terrible working conditions in the tuna canneries. He called out the multibillion-dollar corporations' "blatant disregard, handsomely profiting from the labour of our people, yet knowingly jeopardising their health and safety" in conditions "so horrible that some workers have lost legs and fingers. Others have lost their hearing. Many have been exposed to lethal gases and blood-borne diseases" (Faleomavaega 1995, quoted in Bennett 2009:37). Despite the adverse conditions, Samoans have continued to migrate to American Samoa because of their goal of earning sufficient incomes to fulfil their family, village and church responsibilities.

In 2007, the United States passed the Fair Minimum Wage Act, which ensures scheduled increases to the minimum wages in the US, including in American Samoa. Between 2007 and 2018, the minimum wage in the territory rose by 70 percent, from USD3.26 to USD5.56 (Carreon 18 June 2020). In response to such increases, as well as to increased competition globally, two tuna canning companies left American Samoa: Chicken of the Sea closed their Pago Pago cannery in 2010 and Samoa Tuna Processors (STP) closed its plant in 2016 (Carreon 18 June 2020). StarKist Samoa, owned by a South Korean corporation, took over the STP plant and is today the only remaining cannery corporation in the territory (USGAO 2020).

Tuna exports from American Samoa to the US are currently valued at USD348 million⁴⁸ annually, on average (Samoa News 31 October 2023), and Samoans from the Independent State of Samoa are major contributors to that export income. They make up 90 percent of the tuna cannery labourers in American Samoa today (Keresoma 2022), and this workforce is crucial to keeping the canneries functioning.

⁴⁸ American Samoa's exports of canned tuna peaked in 1993 with a value of USD485 million (Department of Commerce 2006:198).

Remittances: a duty and an honour

In communally oriented, collectivist⁴⁹ kin-based societies, there is an emphasis on a 'we' consciousness, rather than the 'I' or 'me' individualistic consciousness. Members of a collectivist community seek to satisfy the needs of the wider group; this maintains stability.

Samoans have a collectivist society that is interconnected culturally, religiously and socially. According to *fa'aSamoa* (traditional Samoan culture and customs), younger Samoans are subordinate to their elders and to *matai*, who are responsible for protecting and representing their families in village and church settings. "Generally, young people work for the extended family (*aiga*), the church and the village, and through this service [*tautua*]they gain respect and high status as they grow older" (Armstrong 2008:53).

Fa'aSamoa has evolved over time, due to colonial experiences and Samoa's participation in the capitalist global economy, but village structures, chiefly authority and the culture of gift exchange are still in place today and continue to influence everyday life (see the article titled 'The Socioeconomic Context of the New Samoan Exodus: 2007–2023' by Penelope Schoeffel and Malama Meleisea in this volume).

The "Attitudes Survey", conducted in Samoa in 2022, found that being "truly Samoan" means respecting Samoan culture and traditions and "being Christian" (Leach et al. 2022:9). Despite globalisation and the influence of secular viewpoints, most Samoans maintain a commitment to the Christian faith and Samoans contribute to various church-related functions, particularly the care for their pastors within their respective villages.

When migrants leave Samoa and American Samoa, they take their Samoan values and practices with them. The family network and the sense of 'we' continue in the diaspora. My grandfather, like his compatriots, continued to contribute throughout his life to family *fa'alavelave* (family events such as funerals, pastor installations, weddings, etc.) and donated most of his resources to establish, with other like-minded Samoans, a Congregational church in Carson, California.

Remittances sent home by Samoan labour migrants have moral, ethical and religious dimensions that are linked to Samoa's collectivist society. For Lilomaiva-Doktor (2009:20), migration is culturally motivated and not self-

⁴⁹ Hofstede describes collectivism as a community with a "collective identity, emotional dependence, group solidarity, sharing, duties and obligations" (Hofstede 1980).

centred, and any act of giving is considered part of maintaining social connections and relationships of family members (*vā*). That is, remittances are part of maintaining the *vā*. Those who send remittances have a strong sense of the *vā* between themselves and their cultural responsibilities; their economic gain is not just material but part of their moral responsibility, and they practice self-denial by saving their earnings (to give to the family) rather than spending their incomes on themselves.

A 2021 study of seasonal workers in New Zealand and Australia found that the remittances sent home to Samoa reflect a strong sense of family solidarity (Fatupaito et al. 2021:56). Many seasonal workers frame their work abroad as *tautua* (service) to their families, villages and churches, and they are critical of those who use their wages for themselves (see the following articles in this volume). These young Samoans have the same ethics as their elders did — ethics that motivate the young to serve their elders and motivate all people to serve their families.

Garbin (2019) refers to “sacred remittances” as contributing to the development of both the homeland and the church. Remittances not only help families to pay for living expenses and for modern comforts, but also go toward the *alofa* (financial support of the minister), new churches, *atina’e* (church operating costs) and various groups within the Church such as the *’autalavou* (youth), *a’oga Aso Sa* (Sunday school), *mafutaga tama* (men’s fellowship) and *mafutaga tina* (women’s fellowship). By contributing to *fa’alavelave* and church expenses, individuals retain a place within the family network and express “love for God and family” while “affirming the family’s position vis-à-vis other families” in the village (Gershon 2012:57). The element of pride also contributes as a motivating force behind these efforts (Gershon 2012).

The three institutions: family, village and church are interconnected; they cannot necessarily be separated. Giving to the family for *fa’alavelave* is partly a way of giving indirectly to the church’s minister as part of *fa’aalooaloga* (cultural gifts). Likewise, providing funding for village projects is indirectly connected to church contributions.

Samoans often use the Samoan word *onosai* to imply calmness or patience in a given situation during manual labour or when one experiences hardship: emotionally or physically. When speaking of their feelings about financially helping their families, many Samoan migrant workers say they need to be patient (*onosai*) (see also Fatupaito et al. 2021). This means that they need to

be mindful of their obligations to help their family and church community by means of the hard work they do, rather than just seek to improve their own circumstances.

Stories of mobility between the two Samoas

With grandparents and other family members who worked the American Samoa canneries in the 1960s, I have heard stories of the experiences of local cannery workers, both good and bad. To get the perspectives of Samoans from the Independent State of Samoa who have worked in canneries in American Samoa, I interviewed two individuals: Sione, aged 22, and Tone, aged 32 (their names were changed to protect their privacy). Both worked at StarKist. Sione worked at the tuna cannery between 2019 and 2022, while Tone worked from October 2022 to November 2022, only two months. I interviewed Sione in person, but communicated with Tone via text messages and telephone. In addition, I contacted a 76-year-old woman living in American Samoa, Agalelei, who worked at the tuna canneries from the 1960s until 2008. She shared her experiences with me via email, with the help of her daughter. I also conducted an interview via email with a staff member of the National University of Samoa: Tavita (not his real name), who recruits workers to the tuna canneries. While this is a small sample, the similarities between the motivations and experiences of the interviewed cannery workers and those of many other cannery workers I have spoken to indicate that the interviewees are largely representative of most cannery workers from Samoa working in American Samoa.

Sione's story

When asked why he travelled to American Samoa and how he spent his wages, Sione responded that he went because he was excited to make his own money. He earned approximately USD5 per hour and received a raise of USD0.50 per hour every six months.

Sione gave his pay checks to his sponsor, his mother's sister, who lives in American Samoa with her husband. He lived with this aunt and his uncle during his time in the territory. They were both deacons in their church, so they had financial responsibilities of tithing and assisting with maintaining the church facilities. Sione said his earnings helped to support "*O meafa'alelotu, le nu'u, ma meafaaleaiga (fa'alavelave o Aiga)*" ("church, village and

fa'alavelave"). Church was mentioned first. As a member of the *Lotu Taiti* (Congregational Christian Church of Samoa), he was familiar with the expectations of the church. When Sione was asked to describe the specific ways in which his wages were spent, he said "*O tele mea tau le lotu, e pei o saogamotofi, o tofiga*" ("A lot of church responsibilities, such as preparations [money, food] for visiting preachers [to the village] and meetings"). When asked, "How much of your check goes to church responsibilities?" Sione responded "*E afa o lo'utotogi e alu i meafa'alelotu*" ("About half of my pay check went to church-related responsibilities"). Sione's earnings not only helped to pay for the church responsibilities of his host family in American Samoa, but also contributed to paying for the same kinds of church expenses of his parents in Upolu.

Sione said he felt good contributing to the daily responsibilities of paying utility bills and was aware of where the money was spent. He stated that Wi-Fi was a priority because everyone uses it, saying that "*Matou e ola i le wifi*" ("We are dependent on Wi-Fi"). Internet was his key means of communicating with loved ones and friends back home in Samoa, and was important for connecting to the world. He seemed to be pleased about having a bank account, stating proudly, "*Na fai ma lo'u savings*" ("I have my own savings account").

When Sione was asked, "*O fea le mea e tetoomagaiai pe a e 'pressure*" ("Where do you go when you feel pressure?"), his response was, "*O le falefaigaulega*" ("The workplace"). Sione was more comfortable with his "own people" at the tuna cannery than with his host family, or even the church community.

Sione worked 12-hour shifts stationed at the pallets loading cases of tinned fish. He seemed grateful that he did not work in the area for the *au safui'a* (tuna cleaning). Those who scaled the fish had a difficult task. According to Sione, "*O vaegalena e tigaina, e alualu e faki,ona e faigata legaluega*" ("In that section of the factory people suffer, they do not last long because it is difficult work"). He expressed sympathy for those working in that section, saying, "*E leai se tigaina o matou, e faiuma e masini, na'o i totonuoutealofaiiai e tigaina, ae maisetagatamatutua, e le talafeagai le nei ga luega ma latou*" ("Our section did not suffer in comparison to those inside; I feel for them because it is hard work and they are elderly, they are not fit enough [to do that type of work]"). He said that older Samoans "*e le gafatia*" ("cannot

handle [the long hours]”. Generally, Sione enjoyed his work because he was fit and did not have difficult tasks at the tuna cannery.

Sione was treated reasonably well by his host family. He said that he gave the host family his pay checks and they gave him money to purchase what he wanted, such as clothing. Not all Samoans in American Samoa are treated well, however. According to Sione, “*E iainiisi o tagata e o ese mai aiga sanonofoiai one e leaga o latou aiga*” (“Others [Samoans] leave their families because they are mistreated”). When asked what the meaning of being “mistreated” was, he said “*Efa’aaoga e latou naitagata*” (“They are used by the people they live with”). During the interview, Sione used the word *leaga* (bad) at least five times to describe his fellow Samoans’ treatment.

Despite his lack of control over his earnings, Sione’s experience was positive overall. Sione felt good about his experience, and was satisfied that he had contributed to a larger purpose. He was not willing to return to work in the tuna cannery, however. He said he preferred to stay with his family and village in Samoa, which are his “safety nets”, rather than be in a foreign country and be unable to find people he trusted when he was upset. Rather than live as an individual, Sione is part of an extensive network, which reflects what Podsiadlowski and Fox describe as a situation in which “self and goals are construed to be an inseparable part of a family, a tribal group, or some other definably collective set” (2011:6).

Tone’s story

Tone’s short period of employment at StarKist, while fairly well-paid, was not a positive experience. Tone said that the stench of the Atu’u tuna cannery plants was unbearable, even outside for people passing by. This matched my experience when I was in American Samoa. When I passed the tuna canneries I would cover my face with a cloth or shirt. If I found the smell outside the tuna canneries intolerable, one can only imagine how bad the stench is inside.

Tone experienced a side of the tuna cannery work that Sione never did: tuna cleaning. In a text message, Tone wrote:

I le taimi foisaauaiatu ai i Amerika Samoa ile Falelaosegaluega manaia tele ose tupe lelei ae e iai lava itu faaletonulaitii nisi o taimi e pei kava (apron) o loo faaoga e le lava toe masaesae nisi o kava ele lava foimeafaigluaga (naifi) ma e iaifo nisi ole au faigluaga e matapogia o nisi e ono aafia ai lo latousoifua ilemanogi o nisi o taimi e faalogoina ai nisi ole au faigluagau faapeamaiuagaioiani a latoumea totino o nisi e faigluagaao la e faasuaava o nisi e tiaigaluaga ae le fanoi.

During the time I worked in American Samoa at the tuna cannery, the pay was good, but there were some issues from time to time. For example, there were not enough aprons to go around for the workers; some of the knives we needed to use were not sharp enough; some workers would faint from the strong stench; other workers would complain about other workers stealing their possessions; and other workers continued to work while vomiting [because of the strong stench]; and others would just leave their job without asking permission.

In a phone interview, Tone said he made USD5.96 an hour, approximately USD400 clear a week. Although pleased with what he received, he said he had hoped to make more. Like others who went to American Samoa, he wanted to make more than what he had been paid at home (in his case, in a large hardware store) in Samoa and seek a '*manuia*' (financial blessing). Like Sione, Tone had responsibilities to his host family and his family in Samoa. However, Tone felt that although he gave most of his pay to his host family, he got little in return.

He spoke of the experiences of other Samoans working the tuna canneries and said that many people left the job because of their living and working conditions. When asked what he would change, Tone said there was a need to provide housing for workers, so that they could avoid living with host families. He also recommended improving the working conditions. Although there are regulations, he said people do not comply with them. He said there should also be an upper age limit so that older people do not suffer from the working conditions.

Although both Sione and Tone found the wages earned in the canneries attractive, neither described their experiences in a way that accords with government claims that working abroad offers Samoans opportunities for upskilling; neither felt that they had gained useful new skills while at the tuna canneries.

Agalelei's story

Agalelei dedicated forty years of her life to StarKist. Originally from Western Samoa, she moved to American Samoa at the age of 19. She received US citizenship many years later, in 2015, after she had retired.

She worked hard and was able to "move up to a supervisory role" even without a "proper education" (she left school after Form 2). She said in her first job she worked cleaning fish for eight hours or weighing cans of fish for ten hours, and eventually she became a supervisor. She knew her job well, but she "did not have the advantage of understanding [the] company [work]

benefits” that she was entitled to. However, she was given back pay when she discovered her entitlements.

When she married, Agalelei was the “primary breadwinner” of a family of four: her spouse and two young children. As well as working full-time in the cannery, Agalelei shouldered a lot of domestic work. Tasks included doing the laundry and preparing meals, which included the work of gathering bananas, taro and breadfruit from the plantation. She said that these family responsibilities were challenging to manage while working full-time at the tuna cannery.

Agalelei said she learned to work through the good and bad times at the tuna cannery. Despite it being difficult to make ends meet to support her family, she was able to save enough money to purchase a vehicle and a property in the Tafuna area. She later remarried, and she and her second husband worked long hours to build themselves a home and support their families.

Agalelei said she felt that it was rewarding that she was able to gain financial security for herself and her family. She said that had it not been for working at the canneries, “I would have been burdened with housekeeping duties for my first husband”. The tuna canneries gave her the freedom to make a living and also build “lasting relationships” over forty years of working in the industry. Although Agalelei did not mention the word “*onosai*” in her comments, this sentiment is reflected in the way she persevered through difficult times to achieve what she and her family have today.

Tavita’s story

When Tavita (a recruiter for the tuna canneries in American Samoa) was asked about the moral obligations and ‘pressure’ on young people to go away to work in American Samoa, he said:

Yes, definitely, church, the pressure of church, family, village obligations motivate them to move for a better salary or wage. That will enable them to support their parents, families and village. It is always the pride of any family to make sure these obligations are met to the highest [village standards] for the sake of their family name in the community. It is almost an insult if a family cannot meet those traditional obligations. This has therefore resulted in more young Samoan people today moving away from their villages, looking for places to free themselves from these pressures of village obligations (church etc.), and to help them from afar.

Referring to graduates of the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme in Samoa, Tavita said that in his opinion the reasons those

young Samoans choose to go to American Samoa were the higher wages there; the attractive work package offered, including health care for families and schooling opportunities for children; an opportunity to use their training; and poor financial opportunities for workers graduating with trade certificates in the Independent State of Samoa. Tavita said he supports the recruitment of Samoan graduates to “ensure their skills are well utilised and their human rights are protected”.

He believes that another reason that young trade-qualified Samoans want to move away is to “free themselves” from village tasks, which include church duties. He also mentioned that young people have a sense of “adventure”, and for them going to American Samoa was a bit like going to America, because it is different from their home islands.

Looking towards the future

Getting work at the tuna canneries in American Samoa can be a financial blessing for Samoans who have never made ‘good wages’ in Samoa. Despite the stench of the facilities and the difficult work and living situations, Samoans continue to be motivated to work at the tuna canneries in American Samoa due to the wages, which are higher than wages in Samoa and allow them to meet their obligations to the family, village and church, in accordance with their collectivist ethics.

Samoans who work in the canneries in American Samoa see room for improvement, however. Unlike the workers who go to New Zealand and Australia on labour mobility schemes, workers recruited to American Samoa are expected to find their own accommodation, which usually means boarding with relatives. As seen in the comments by Sione and Tone, this is often to the disadvantage of young workers, because they are sometimes mistreated. Many Samoans working in the canneries also feel that the working conditions are harsh and that they are looked down upon by American Samoans.

Until recently, Samoa’s government had not looked closely at the living situations and working conditions of cannery workers in American Samoa. This is in strong contrast to the attention paid to workers participating in New Zealand and Australian labour mobility schemes, which are subject to government-to-government monitoring and discussion. But in 2022 the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour began exploring the possibility of developing a labour mobility scheme for American Samoa like New Zealand’s

Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme (Talanei.com 17 September 2022).⁵⁰

At the “Atoa o Samoa” (All of Samoa)⁵¹ executive meeting between the Government of American Samoa and the Government of the Independent State of Samoa in April 2023, labour mobility was a key topic of discussion. In particular, the talks covered labour recruitment from Samoa to American Samoa, including the recruitment of skilled workers from Samoa to work at the StarKist tuna cannery as electricians and mechanics, and the recruitment of unskilled workers for the cannery floor. The talks also highlighted “human capital development” through “capacity building and professional development initiatives” (Government of Samoa 2023).

The two Samoan governments also discussed the “safety and rights of workers” at the recent Atoa o Samoa talks, but it is not clear whether improvements will be made to workers’ living and working conditions. Perhaps if the voices of the workers were heard in bilateral discussions between the governments, decision-makers would consider factors beyond just the “higher wages” that can be earned in American Samoa. If the labour of Samoans is as important to the tuna canning industry as it seems to be, the workers’ wellbeing should be closely monitored, and steps should be taken to ensure workers are well treated.

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⁵⁰ Under the RSE scheme, accommodation is provided for workers.

⁵¹ The Atoa o Samoa talks enable the two Samoan governments to discuss areas of mutual bilateral cooperation, such as labour mobility, trade, security, environmental protection, culture, agriculture, fisheries, health and legal matters.

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