



# e Fruit of Good and Evil

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Twenty five hundred miles southwest of the Hawaiian Islands lay the islands of Samoa. Once under the rule of monarchy, the islands are now two dissimilar political entities. To the east is the United States territory of American Samoa, initially Eastern Samoa. West of American Samoa is the Independent State of Samoa, often referred to as Western Samoa. Although politically divided, the two nations are homogeneous. Both speak the same language and share the principles of the *fa'a Samoa* (Samoan way): the traditions and customs that govern the Samoan people. The *fa'a Samoa* creates a hierarchy that has placed the Samoan culture in a position impossible to either overcome or destroy, or at least from outside influence. While the *fa'a Samoa* completely shields off foreign influences that threaten to change the Samoan culture, its oppressive means of governance has spurred discontent from Samoans. Should change come upon the Samoan culture, it will likely begin from its own people.

The acceptance of Christianity by King Malietoa of Samoa apparently left quite the impact on the Samoan culture. After being presented with a copy of the *Holy Bible*, King Malietoa conferred the salutation *aofa'alupega* (head of all titles, even to the title Malietoa) to the first missionaries. From then on church ministers have always inherited the prestige of the nation. They possess dominant power. Their intelligence is acquiescence.

Samoans believe, through church ministers, families are blessed and at times, families are cursed. Yearning for blessings, Samoans serve by giving food and monetary donations to the church minister and family: “[s]ome villagers may even be pressured to contribute more than thirty percent of their income to support local pastors and church projects – a burden increasingly resented by many” (Governing Body of Jehovah Witness 69).

Resentful people, however, are told that they have failed to serve God when they forget to give, or just couldn't afford to. Some face public humiliation. Monetary donations collected for church ministers and for church improvements are recited so the congregation is informed of who donated and who did not. To avoid shame, families must give. Though the wealthy in this

case are rarely affected, the poor are greatly distressed. Raised in a religious family, I have experienced firsthand the burdens of religious institutions. As an illustration of my family both parents worked minimum wage jobs in American Samoa, raised six children, and served the church, in this case, a Methodist one.

Like most of the older generation, my parents have vowed their commitment to the church though I am uncertain when our service began. I must believe, however, that our service began years before I was born, and lasted long enough that before anyone is to eat, the best portion of the meal must be put aside and taken immediately to the church minister and his family. On Sundays, half of our family income is handed over and is recorded by the church secretary; the amount is then tallied together with other donations and announced before the congregation; individual families are called out and all donations are disclosed.

We were considered part of the low-givers at church, however. Our donations did not even compare to the wealthy as “there are even competitions to see who can give the most. Some churches announce the names of winners who can give the most money” (Governing Body 69).

On average, a church minister makes about three thousand dollars a month in cash, all of which are tax free. Aside from the income, “the pastor's house is the largest in the village, provided for him...by the villagers themselves” (Swaney 27). Also provided are food and many other services, all to accommodate who the Samoans claim as the *suli vaai'a a le Atua*, roughly translated as “the Seen One of God.” My family amongst others, feels the existence of oppression in any religious institution is unacceptable and should be changed (Swaney 27).

Many have questioned the influence and the credibility of certain denominations of Christianity that are found in the Samoan culture. The latter generations have called the denominations in question “a business.” Some say it is the ideal job. Parents still demand that their children become church ministers. The truth is that many “ordinary citizens are controlled by...religious institutions,” and because of this, according to Andre Vltchek, a journalist on Asian and South Pacific foreign policy, “out-migration has increased and Samoans leave for more than just economic reasons” (6-7).

Advocates of the various churches in Samoa, conversely argue that people suffer because of their little faith, and hence they could not withstand the faith. While this may seem reasonable because barely anyone understood Christianity as it first established on the islands, anthropologist Lowell Holmes

of the Wichita State University quoted in his book *e Samoan Village*, a statement of a missionary by the name of Felix Keesing:

I am afraid that from the Christian viewpoint the missions have been rather a failure in Samoa. Instead of accepting Christianity and allowing it to remold their lives to its form, the Samoans have fitted them inside Samoan custom, making them a part of the native culture (68).

Needless to say, families have suffered as a result of the presence of certain Christian groups in Samoa. With this claim, many have sought other denominations that, rather than exploit its members, preach the truth of eternal salvation. A number have emigrated outside the jurisdiction of the domineering churches. In the meantime, critics assert that church ministers have been assigned too much power and therefore have shaped Christianity in order to satisfy their personal greed. Like religious institutions, the *matai* system has also added to the oppression of the Samoan people.

In this dominion sequence is the *matai* or chief system. The word *matai* means “holder of a title,” and it is an honor that is bestowed on someone. The role of the *matai* is very complex and interwoven deep into the fabric of Samoan culture and history.

Once elected to lead the family, the *matai*'s responsibilities are manifold. He serves as a kind of family patriarch who must promote family unity and prestige, administer all family lands, settle disputes among kinsmen, promote religious participation, and represent the family as its political spokesman in the village (Tuiteleapaga 22).

Given the broad description of the task of a *matai* and his powers guaranteed by the culture, the system, like that of Christianity, continues to victimize Samoans, sending a chorus of disapproval from the very people that ought to be cared for.

Though said to promote family unity *matais* simply do the opposite. The younger generation, for example, strongly disapproves of the notion of inequality in the Samoan culture. Mainly in cultural ceremonies, the young ones are expected to serve while the elders eat. If food is left, the youth may eat; if there is nothing, the children are told to find something else to eat, or just wait for the next meal. At family meetings, children are expected to attend, not to participate, but to serve refreshments and so forth; besides, their presence is fitting should something be needed. Cognizant of alienation, the children have one thing to blame: the *fa'a Samoa*. This, unfortunately, has produced an incredible “rate of combined teenage suicide between the two Samoas known as one of the highest in the world together with sexual abuse, domestic violence, and violent crime in general” (Vltchek 7).

Not only are the young ones oppressed from the *matai* system, adults have also been victims of the “feudal and

extremely oppressive Samoan society” (Vltchek 7). “...At the village level...local chiefs often decide the religious affiliation of village residents,” leaving some people so neglected that they may have to find some other village where their religious denomination is welcomed (Governing Body 69). Such was the case of my late grandmother.

A couple with three kids searched for a place near the town of Apia to suit the husband's new job when they were offered one by my uncle. The couple accepted and moved to stay with us. We were in separate homes but living on communal land. On our first Sunday together with the family, everybody had left for church that morning except for the family. To my grandmother's surprise, the family was Mormon and we were Catholic. My grandmother approached them nicely and explained: “if you are not Catholic and wish not to be, you may leave.” That very moment, the family packed and left. Though my grandmother was not a *matai* she was the eldest sibling of our village's high chief in Western Samoa. Although harsh, situations like this reflect the truth and the reality of the *fa'a Samoa*.

The *fa'a Samoa* has also played to the political benefit of *matais*. As Elise Huffer and Asofou So'o emphasize in their article in *e Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*: “an emphasis on cultural values will provide public officials with refuge from accountability in public life” (326). Rightfully said, politicians in the two countries will either make use of politics or the *fa'a Samoa* to avoid criticism.

As with the ongoing federal cases of several government officials from American Samoa who were accused of fraud and bribery, all have pled not-guilty and have declared the *fa'a Samoa* in their defense. A rationale to this approach is that a *matai* is expected to cater to the need of his communal family and the gift-giving manner of Samoans is what makes up the *fa'a Samoa*. Even if this argument has merit, the gift-giving manner of Samoans takes place in ceremonial events, not between two or a few people. Oddly enough, the lawyers of the accused have asked a *palagi* or white man, an anthropologist, to be the expert witness in a case where the main issue is the *fa'a Samoa*.

To understand the composition of family and to identify how problems in the *fa'a Samoa* surface from within, it is important to consider the following illustration:

If a Samoan asked an American, ‘How is your family?’ the answer would probably be: ‘Mary’ (wife) is at home; John (son) is in school, Ann (baby daughter) is asleep.’ The same American would then ask the Samoan inquirer ‘How is yours?’ ‘My parents are in church; Sina and Mele (sisters), in school; Pai and Lafai (brothers), playing cricket; Tui (aunt), Tia (uncle), Tasi (cousin) Lua (sister-in-law), taking a bath; Tolu and Fa (relatives from another

village), sleeping, ... Surprised and confounded, the American would laugh and ask his Samoan friend what he meant and what kind of a family was that, thinking that he might be joking (Tuiteleapaga 51).

The dominant rulers in any Samoan household are the parents; therefore, whatever parents say, children do. The reality for young Samoans is burdensome because of family's domination. For instance, in American Samoa, teenagers are denied their constitutional right to freedom of religion. If the parents are Catholic, all children must be Catholic.

Opposition is restrained with corporal punishment and with religion so influential at all levels of Samoan society parents believe "spare the rod, spoil the child" (*Holy Bible* 637). According to Samoan parents, to "spare the rod" is the most unethical and unloving thing a parent can do to a child.

In relation to this, again, every citizen's right to vote is never a right for young Samoans. Parents and the extended family dominate every vote. For instance, in the 2008 election in American Samoa, there were rumors of both incumbents and candidates bribing *matais* in order to acquire all votes from the extended family. Humor told, to win an election in American Samoa: one must appeal to the *matais*. Family-ties have no boundaries. A married son or daughter for example, in spite of marriage, is still under the parent's control. Likewise, in the extended family, a person will always have a place until death do them part. Family involvement, therefore, in the everyday lives of Samoans can be seen as being very inconsiderate – according to outsiders – as one is under scrutiny everyday. Longing for an escape, many have sought way outside of the culture and far away from the *fa'a Samoa*.

Despite the fact that the *fa'a Samoa* has sturdily stabilized the Samoan culture from foreign changes, it fails to fulfill its purpose domestically. The continuous exploitation of people young and old by religious institutions, the *matai* system, and the family structure has sent across a public outcry. Seeking refuge, many have molded the culture to exclude the sovereignty of the *fa'a Samoa*. Though culture is a person's identity, which should we defend: the God-given gift of life or the man-made culture we hold dear?

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