

Faamatai: traditional religious system



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It also aims to define and determine religious connections between the Mat system and the tabulate (Indigenous religion). Last but not least, it also focuses on how the system changed after Christianity arrived. Many people define the term mat in different ways. For example, Via and Tintinnabulation define mat as a " member of the nun (village) and a leader of an alga potato (extendedfamily) with a complex network of fall (diffuse cultural connections'. Pall's offers another deflation which states that mat evolves from two words " mat" (eye or seeing) and " l" (towards or at).

When two words are put together, It creates a traditional definition, the " act of looking towards or at someone or something". In other words, a mat is the " eyes" of the family. He or she is the role model of the family. Family members look up to him or her as a strong leader and effective decision maker. To understand the framework of the mat system, one must first review the Samoanculturecharacteristics. The Samoan identify their culture as the Fashion way of life according to custom.

Pall's described the term Fashion as referring to " the ancient ways of life Inherited from the ancestors". The rod FAA means " in the manner of", so the Samoan made it blend in with certain words in order to contrast the different ways of doing things. Traditionally, there are no laws in the context of the Samoan culture. However, Samoan people respected the decisions made by their own mat. To further understand the Samoan way of life, one must understand the village structure In the Samoan culture.

The (nun) village Infrastructure Is made up of all extended females and relatives who reside In that particular village. They are Individual heirs and

descendants of the mat such as father, mother, brother sister and etc... In the alga, all can be related whether by blood as traceable to a common ancestor, through marriage ties or even adopted connections. At the head of each alga was a mat. He was the one who held the family title until it was passed on by choice rather than by inheritance. The first stage in becoming a mat was to serve as a tattletale's (untitled man).

A tattletale's is defined as an untitled man who serves his mat with honor and diligently. Being in this level requires a lot of patience and caring. Each tattletale's has one goal in life which was taut (serve) as further explained by Applied as follows: " A fulfill mat a Samoa faithful muumuu maim lava lee tag as taut Elli I lee mat male alga ma lee nun. O taut a lee tuna's e mama maim Al fumigant's 'see's. A iii SE e via Oho I lee tutelage pull, all e taut, AAU o lee ala I lee pull o lee taut". When a chief was chosen, a person who served the chief, family and village well is most likely the primary he must first serve because the path to leadership is service) When a mat was sought, each alga would agree on a candidate and then all would decide on one who would be worthy to succeed to the title. Once receiving the title of mat, he is responsible for the leadership of the whole family. In the fond o lee nun (council of chief), the mat was the one who represented the whole family.

The authority of the mat was freely expressed by him in all matters, but most of the time he is free in so far as what he does was for the good of the family. In this respectful way, it could be seen, that the role of the mat was not merely authoritative, but it was also one of serving. It was then seen that all behavior was conditioned by the loyalty and devotion not only of the mat but the whole family. It was the pride of one's family which seemed to be the

basis of the Samoan culture. This has been an initiating factor by which " law and order" was kept.

In the Fashion, the extended family is the basic component of the village. Like I mentioned earlier, the village infrastructure is made up of all extended families which headed by a senior chief. Without the extended families and their chiefs, there would be no council of chiefs in the traditional village structure. The village itself became a factor in keeping the strong bond within the society. Socially, each village was embraced by a common pupilages (traditional greeting of mat titles in seniority).

Mauve stated that a pupilages is a rotational formula which contained all the dignity accorded to the village especially to the principle chiefs, stating their relationship to the broader royal lineages of Samoa. In the olden times, Samoan lived in a hierarchical society. In all levels of its political structure including the mat system, it was so clear for it to be seen. Through all these levels, there was one of unifying force at work in the maintenance of " law and order" such as loyalty and devotion, being part of the family, and villages and districts connecting to the royal line.

Politically, with the hierarchical structure of society, it could be seen that the ancient gods were also structured in such a way. It was the case that authority was delegated from the top to the bottom. If there was a need to carry out a proposal or any new ideas, it was first to be approved by the higher authorities. Permission had to be sought from the chiefs. Although these different levels still existed in the Samoan society, but there was still

the awareness of the necessity to function together as a corporate unity in order to survive.

The socio-political structure of the mat system was believed to have great importance. Many believed the importance again lies within the idea that it was probably within such a social structure and that the structuring and the understanding of the gods had originated. According to Mauve, he stated: In Samoan society, there were "As" such as the As Militate, As Loyola or As Amiga. The "As" gives the meaning of being very high in rank within the Samoan society. The full meaning of this word would not be expressed if only the word honorable was used.

The meaning of the word was not only "honorable" but took up other meanings such as sacredness and holiness in the ensue of been higher above all others in society. In this sense, As would really refer to the Alai (high or paramount chief). An Alai (high chief) was considered as the head of the village and its council of chiefs. Telltale (high talking chief) were orators and they spoke on the behalf of the Alai. According to Applied, mat were always the ruling powers in the society. Their authority is still strong today.

Their authority was to be chiefs were, it was always to be carried out by the magma (group of tattletale's or untitled men). What can be said at this point is that in the structural set up of the Samoan society, there is a clear distinction between the higher and lower classes. The structure of the society and the distinctions could have been the basis of the religious structuring and understanding of the ancient gods. In fact, the Samoan

indigenous religion also had a structure where there was the recognition of higher gods and lower gods.

In such a structure, there were responsibilities and functions performed by the gods that coincided with the responsibilities set out in the social life of the people. If the high chiefs were seen to rule and grant permission, then the higher gods were seen to possess more power. The higher gods would then be sought for the granting of the things that the society wanted. In this section, I will focus on the religious connection between the Mat system and a more detailed study of the traditional religious beliefs and other cultural practices.

I strongly believe that much of these beliefs and practices had great affect on the way Samoan had accepted Christianity. Before Europeans had ever set foot on the islands, Samoan had their own beliefs of deities believed to be divine. According to Melissa, he stated " Samoan religion as it generally understood refers to a system of beliefs, the ceremonial and tall activities that are associated with it, and the worship of a supernatural being or beings. " In addition, Samoan had no national religion. 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 Samoa were preserved in memories and through oral traditions. According to traditional beliefs, every individual had his own " tutu"(guardian spirit). It was the case that the families had minor gods and villages had their own local deities. These deities such as fire, rain, agriculture and etc... Were insider sacred and important to the Samoan. In the next couple of paragraphs, I will briefly

explain the religious connections of the mat system and the indigenous religion through many traditional beliefs such as the Toga myths, man, spirits, and other various gods.

One of the most popular beliefs in Samoan society was the Toxicological creation myth. In the alga, the head of the family is considered as the mat which was closely similar to the Toxicological and his rule. According to one myth, it stated that Toxicological existed as the main source in space and created the heavens. He was also known as the superior being or leader. I believethese creation stories had influenced many traditional world views of the Samoan and its mat system. In fact, the mentality about Toga creating Samoa still exists.

The variety of these creation stories has led to the idea that traditional beliefs had been elaborately connected in Samoa. In this case, the Samoan culture was produced in distinction of ranks and indigenous religion enforces it by giving the high ranks a special place in it. As also stated by Isaiah: The Samoan ranking system and cultural structure appears deceptively simple on the surface at first glance, but a deeper look into it vales a very competitive, complicated and rigid system. The religious beliefs of the people played a very important part in society.

As I mentioned earlier, the Titus (guardian spirit) had influenced many Samoan greatly especially the mat. The tutu is sometimes considered as a god of an individual. In most cases, mat are considered as the god of their own family. They believe the spirit of an ancestor is links the mat system to the indigenous religion is the concept of man (invisible living force) which

responsible for all the startling occurrences and effects beyond the human mind. In the Samoan culture, if a mat was able to defeat another mat at war, then he was said to have possessed more quantities of "man" than the man he defeated.

This concept was always associated within the mat system. The traditional belief of man(power) that a mat had to protect the family physically and his ability to supply materially had been a strong qualification for becoming a leader. Man, however was also known in the primitive world as the abundant special supernatural forces that could present in a man. In Samoan society, man was that force behind anything which was impossible for man to do. In this case, Samoan believe man and gaga(spirits) have strong relations.

It can be noted that for a man or mat to receive man, it would be possessed through favor of the gods or the passing of it to him by another man who had it before him. Many scholars saw this concept as a way for the gods to communicate their will to the people. Many believe that Samoan were also committed to polytheistic beliefs. Applied stated that the life of the people depended greatly on the gods in which they recognized as having strong powers over them. It was the gods that they would always call upon in times of difficulties.

Some of these various gods such as Laminas, Lethally, and Fee were believed to help many people avoid sickness, war and death. Laminas was defined as the child of the moon. This particular god was identified with the moon. In worshipping this god, there was much feasting and prayers. The head of the family or mat would pray that the god would help their family to

prevent disease and death from entering their home. In other cases, such as war, this god was also asked to help that particular family or chief. It has been noted that this god was one of the inferior gods in the traditional beliefs of the

Samoan society. Another particular god which many believe to be one of the well known house- hold gods was Lethally. This god was known to be embodied in the form of the centipede. In worshipping this god, people would often seek it in a tree that was usually near the house. If a person within the family was very sick, this god was called upon as to determine whether this person would die or become well again. In this particular belief, the mat would take a mat outside and await the coming of this god. The mat would be under close observation.

If the god did come, and was seen to have crawled under the mat, this meant that the sick person would die. If the god came and crawled on the mat, this meant that sick person's health would be restored. One of the most famous gods which was also well known to the Samoan people was the Fee (octopus). This god was often worshipped as the warrior's god. It was believed that this god had its resting place on the island of Western Samoa. According to Melissa, it showed that before any war, the chiefs would seek this god and receive his blessings.

In receiving the blessing of this god, there was the renewal of strength among the warriors. As a matter of fact, the main point behind all these traditional beliefs is that these gods really had much affect on the lives of the people. Not only the gods helped wartime or other ceremonial events.

This proved to me that many of these gods were considered as important factors behind keeping the law and order in the Samoan society and also the mat system. Samoan also had strong affection towards many cultural practices such as the outage, VA ceremony, biogas, sofa's and etc...

In the next part of the research, I will explain the relationship of the mat system and each cultural practice that Samoan had and believed in since ancient times. Earlier, I mentioned that the framework of the Samoan society was revolved around the mat. These mat were responsible for all lands and matters pertaining to the alga. They also served as main decision makers for the alga or village. They also had man(power) that could cause any injury to anyone in society. In this matter, the power of the chiefs and traditional beliefs of the gods was believed to bring law and order in unity.

It also brought strong ties and cultural connection between the gods and chiefs. One of the most important cultural practices that Samoan dealt with was known as outage (oath). According to Mauve, outage is one of the scariest and most sacred practices that chief ever gathered in the olden time. In this practice, the accused offender goes before the village councils and admits his guilt. This was where the fear of the gods came in to help solve a problem within society. This method was strictly practiced and enforced by the chiefs.

According to the practice, if a crime was committed and the person who committed the crime was not known, all the villagers would be gathered by the chiefs of the village. Each person was asked to take the outage(oath) and swear by the name of their own family god or village god. The chiefs

then asked the curses of the gods to be on that person if he was the one. It was often the case that the curse would include one's family member to become very ill if the person lied. It was the fear of these curses by the chiefs that would lead the guilty person to confess. In fact, many believe these cultural practices hardly failed.

The reason for this is because the guilty individual really feared the possibility of offending the gods and he could not at any time compromise the reputation of the a'vai to which he belonged. Another important cultural practice that Samoan still carried on today was the 'AVA ceremony. 'AVA ceremony is a traditional ceremony in which formal speeches are present among the chiefs. This ceremony usually held during the welcoming of the amalgam(traveled group). The religious part of this ceremony is when a chief partake his 'AVA cup. Before each chief take his cup, a portion of the 'AVA was poured out of the cup.

This was considered as an offering to the gods. It was also a sign of respect to acknowledge the help of the gods in bringing the Amalgam to their destination. To clearly explain the meaning of it, Tubule stated: The spilling of a few drops of VA on the floor before drinking would seem to have the same significance as do many of the ceremonies in/the various religions of the world - incense burning - sprinkling of holy water - offering libations of wine - and the offering of sacrifices varying from pound notes to lizards eggs - all are offered with the idea of placating or seeking the assistance of some God.

We are apt, perhaps, to view the custom of the Samoan as being merely the prostration of the intellect at the threshold of the unknown, but not all sacrifices by whomsoever offered, just this. Mauve also stated that among the chiefs. For example, a chief would say: " o lee 'VA linen o lee 'VA o taut, la mania lee auto ambulat" It means this VA, it is for the gods, bless our gathering. In all, I found out that most of these traditional practices shared an important relationship between religion and social life of the Samoan people.

It was so clear that Samoan had to live in a society where religion was seen as an important aspect in the culture. It was also clear that many of these cultural beliefs and traditional practices were considered as a set stage for Christianity. In this stage, it pointed out two important key elements that summarized the whole relationship between the mat systems and indigenous religion. One key element was the recognition of one great god above all gods, which was Toxicological.

It was this god that was so superior and was given such high respect. This reveals that even though Samoan were viewed as polytheists, there was still the recognition of one god, Toga. Secondly, Fear for the gods and spirits was another key element in the Samoan indigenous religion. This element explains the fact that gods could bring disaster to the people no matter what the case is. It can be said that the people in fearing had imagine the awful punishments that could take place because of disobeying the chiefs and the gods.

With all the tradition beliefs and cultural practices that Samoan shared in their society, I can now have a clear mind of what the early missionaries had walked into. Last but not least, this section focuses on the new changes of the mat system when Christianity arrived in Samoa. During my research, I found many ways of how the traditional and cultural beliefs were adapted to accept and embed Christianity without losing its value. I also found out how the mat system was easily led to the process of accepting the new religion.

There are many reasons why Christianity was easily accepted in Samoan society. Some of those reasons can be willingly determined while other reasons are more difficult to discover. To look deeply in those reasons, I trace it back to the importance and significance of the cultural and traditional beliefs that I mentioned earlier in the research. A fact that is now to be noted is that many of these beliefs and practices are still kept by the people. Though there have been many changes that have taken place, the practices of the past can still be noticed in the present.

In the mat system or political structure of Samoa, mat were always heading the families or villages. Within any villages, there was an Alai (high chief) that holds a higher rank. The fact is that there is only one Alai for a village and his authority becomes highly respected and recognized. According to Applied, 'Alai would hold the authority to express what to do and forbid the things that should not be done. This political structure is very similar to those that Christianity shared.

This was one of the few reasons why Samoan easily accepted the Christian god because of the reactive of owing respect and obedience to anything that

the chief ordered. Another reason that linked the mat system to the new religion was the creation myth of Toxicological. During ancient times, Toga was referred as the creator of the heaven and earth. I personally believe that the knowledge of these myths created a clear path for Samoan to easily accept the new Christian God. It seems that what the new religion was teaching to the people was nothing new.

Same goes to the concept of man and spirits. I also mentioned earlier that Chiefs were also believed and strength. Chief also held the roles of expressing the will of the gods. In this concept, it has a very strong relation to the new religion. Christianity believed missionaries were looked upon as priests receiving power from God to preach out the new religion. For what has already been mentioned, I can now see a strong relationship between the traditional beliefs in the mat system and Christianity. Today, mat system played an important part in the new religion.

In the pre- Christianity era, chiefs were believed to have powers that can meditate with the ancient gods. When missionaries arrived, they assumed new roles. They became deacons in the church. It was so obvious that many of these traditional practices and beliefs have helped greatly in accepting and understanding Christianity. I believe the Samoan society was always flexible ever since the start of their civilization. With this flexibility, Christianity was able to integrate with the traditional Samoan beliefs.

As a result, it seems the new religion had to be taken up and practiced as if it was truly part of the ancient Samoan society. In conclusion, I believe the structural set up of the mat system served as a basis for the continuing

strength of the Fashion (Samoan way). The continuing strength of the Fashion was to a great extent due to the fact that an authority did not come to bear all the weight of the emotional, political, social and religious attachment to the people to their culture.

The culture and the religious beliefs had helped making the people remain Samoan. I also believe the mat system had a strong relation and religious connection to the ancient indigenous religion. After gathering all the necessary information and specific evidence, it proved me that the mat system not only had similarities with Christianity, it was very easy for the people to accept the new religion into their indigenous society.