

Unit 27: Samoa's Past Revisited: Political History before European Partition

Teiufafeau Brown

Facts

Location:	14° South of Equator
Current Population:	219,818 inhabitants (July 2009 est.)
Main Language:	Samoan
Date of Independence:	1 January 1962

Glossary

Ava	A sacred ceremony from ancient times which is still practised today
Cosmic	An explanation that relies on supernatural, godlike causes
Political history	History of events in political affairs, relations between political parties, and between governments and their people
Supreme ruler	Someone who has ultimate political power in a group or society



Figure 27.1. Map of Samoa

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Recall the legendary origins of Samoa
- Describe how the legend of Pili is important to understand the political structure of Samoa
- Know why Samoa came under Tongan rule and what it was like
- Describe how Samoan chiefs ruled and tended to local affairs

How can you make sense of the political history of Samoa before European partition?

According to legend, the island of Samoa was created by Pili, a descendant of the god Tagaloa. Pili also created a complex political system in Samoa. The legend of Pili lays the foundation for the political history of Samoa.

This chapter examines the main aspects of the **political history** of Samoa, from 900AD to the late 1899 when Samoa was divided into two territories, German in the west, and American in the east.

What are the legendary origins of Samoa?

Pili descends from heaven

There are different versions of legends about the original settlement of the Samoan Islands, but they seem to have some points in common regarding the role of Pili: first, that he was a descendant of the God Tagaloa, and second, that he was the ancestor of all Samoans.

The legend of Samoa's creation is based on a genealogy. It begins with the **cosmic** marriage between the rocks, mountains, and the heavens, which gave birth to Tagaloa, the creator of human beings. Pili, the son of Tagaloa descends from heaven to inhabit the new islands created by his father. The settlement of the Samoan Islands then emerges, with the highest position occupied by its creator, the god Tagaloa.

One of the reasons the legend of Pili is so important in Samoa is that it is closely associated with the origins of the island's political structure. The legends of Pili tell a story of early settlement and the development of social order. Early clan leaders established a political system which enabled them to control the organisation and distribution of food and land resources, as well as making local laws to govern the people.

The **ava**, a sacred ceremony from ancient times which is still practised today, recognises the traditional political structure of villages and districts.

Each district is represented by the seating arrangement of high-ranking chiefs in the **ava** ceremony. A chief receives his **ava** cup, and tips it to pour out a little of the **ava** before drinking. In ancient times this gesture was in honour of the creator Tagaloa.

Political development and expansion of Samoa

According to the earliest oral traditions, the *Tui Manu'a* (the leaders) were, through Pili, direct descendants of Tagaloa. The divine origin of the *Tui Manu'a* inspired reverence and fear. These ancient rulers were looked upon as possessing great mana or supernatural powers. They were worshipped as demigods.

Under the rulership of Fitiaumua Manu'a, an empire was established, extending not only over the whole of Samoa, but also Tonga, Fiji, Rarotonga and Tahiti. These islands paid a yearly *umiti* (tribute of fish and food) to the *Tui Manu'a*.

In about 900 AD, Upolu was politically organised by Pili and his four sons, Atua, A'ana, Tuamasaga, and Tolufale (today known as Manono). Pili organised Upolu into four major districts, which today still bear the names of his sons.

Some years later, Lealali, a descendant of Pili, established a political organisation of Savaii Island. Fune and Lafai, the grandsons of Lealali, founded *Falefa o Safune* (the four Safune places), which comprised the villages of Safune-Taooa, Safune-Vaiafai, Safune-Vaisala and Safune-Sili. These four villages have the sole right to confer the Tagaloa title.

Fune's brother, Lafai, became the ancestor of two important ruling families in Savai'i.

The political organisation of Upolu by Pili's sons, and of Savai'i by Lealali and his grandsons, provided the titles of Samoa's most important ruling families.

Not long after the political organisation of Upolu, in 900 AD, the Tongans, under the leadership of *Tui Tonga* Ahoaitu, invaded Samoa. When Ahoaitu took control of Samoa, the ruling families of Upolu lost much of their recently gained influence.

According to Tongan oral history, Ahoaitu, the *Tui Tonga* and chief from Tongatapu, was the first to refuse to pay further tribute to Fitiaumua. Ahoaitu also conquered places such as Niue, Uea, Futuna and Rotuma, making them pay him a yearly tribute. A few years later, Ahoaitu conquered and occupied all of Samoa, except for Manu'a (no evidence exists in the oral history accounts that the Tongans ever invaded Manu'a).

Tongan rule in Samoa lasted for almost 300 years. During this period, the titles of *Tui A'ana* and *Tui Atua* were not conferred by Leulumoega and Lufilufi, as they lost their influence. The early Tongan rulers, after Ahoaitu, ruled so wisely and benevolently that most Samoans were happy to tend to their own affairs.

However, when Tala'aifei'i became *Tui Tonga*, the situation changed. He took control of the Upolu and Savaii administration, whilst his brother Lautivunia controlled Tutuila. Tala'aifei'i was said to be a cruel and pitiless warrior chief. His cruel and harsh treatment gradually united the Samoans against him: they planned to overthrow his government.

The revolt against Tala'aifei'i in Upolu and Savaii was led by Tuna and Fata, and was followed by a revolt in Tutuila, led by Fua'autoa. The defeat of Tala'aifei'i in 1250 AD brought an end to Tongan rule in Samoa.

Questions and Activities

1. Why is Pili so important to Samoan history?
2. What are the four main districts of Upolu and how were they created?
3. What happened in 900 AD?
4. What do you think led to the decline of *Tui Manu'a* Fitiaumua's empire?
5. Who were the following people, and what role did they play in Samoa's political history:
 - (a) Fitiama Manu'a
 - (b) Lealali
 - (c) Fune
 - (d) Lafai
 - (e) *Tui Tonga* Ahoaitu
 - (f) Leulumoega
 - (g) LufiLufi
6. How did Tongan rule in Samoa end?

The *Malietao Title* and the reorganisation of Tuamasaga

Following the Tongan War, the Samoan people looked up to the old Atiogie with gratitude for the deeds of his sons, Tuna and Fata. Atiogie played an important role in leading the war against the

Tongans, and that is why people honour his House. Atiogie's family lived in Tuamasaga, and his house became the ruling family of that district.

Tui Tonga Tala'aifei'i's parting words to the victorious brothers Tuna and Fata, before he left Samoa, were "*Malie toa, malie Tau*" (Brave warriors, bravely you fought). These words, which would be long remembered throughout the history of Samoa, created a new title, the *Malietoa*.

The establishment of this new title (in Atiogie's family) introduced a new line of rulers, which resulted in the political reorganisation of Tuamasaga.

Atiogie appointed his eldest son, Savea, to reside in Malie as the first *Malietoa*. Malie then became the seat of government of the *Malietoa* family. Tuna and Fata were appointed as supporters and protectors of their brother's government. Tuna remained in Faleata and Fata established Safata in the south coast. Both Faleata and Safata provided a strong army of warriors to support and defend the *Malietoa*.

Questions and Activities

7. How did the *Malietoa* title emerge?
8. Why is Atiogie such a central character in the history of Samoa?
9. What happened to Atiogie's sons, Savea, Tuna and Fata after the end of Tongan rule?

The four royal titles and the supreme rulership of Samoa

The years following the end of Tongan rule in 1250 AD became a period of social, political and economic recovery. Villages and districts began to extend their power, and a series of political struggles occurred, affecting their whole of Samoa (except for Manu'a).

A chief often sought marriage alliances with women from influential families in other districts to enhance their prestige and wealth. These marriage alliances proved valuable in times of war. For example, *Tui A'ana* Tamalelagi had ten wives. Powerful chiefdoms developed from these alliances..

The political districts of Manono and Savai'i played significant roles in the political developments in Upolu. However, it was not until the middle of the sixteenth century that complete political supremacy over the rulership of Samoa would be achieved by Queen Salamasina. She became the first *Tupu Tafa'ifa*, or '**supreme ruler** of Samoa' (except over the kingdom of Manu'a, which was ruled by *Tui Manu'a*).

Queen Salamasina was related to all the royal families in Samoa (including the *Tui Manu'a*), as well as Tui Tonga and Tui Fiti. She held four titles – *Tui A'ana*, *Tui Atua*, *Gatoaitetele* and *Vaeatamosoali'i*.

The four royal titles were usually in the possession of different powerful families and orators, who guarded their titles tenaciously. No chief after Salamasina could become supreme ruler of Samoa without being vested with the four royal titles by their respective families. At times, the absence of a *Tafa'ifa* (**supreme ruler**) caused political intrigue, turmoil and even war between rival chiefs.

Struggle over the *Tafa'ifa* supreme rulership of Samoa;

From Tamafaiga to Vaiinupo

The death of King l'amafana in 1802 brought about political discontent. People were unhappy about the appointment of *Malietoa* Vaiinupo as the King's successor. The late King was the last of a long line of rulers of the old *Tui A'ana* and Tupua line, a direct descendent from Queen Salamasina.

The appointment of Vaiinupo was the cause of a feud between the Malietoa and Tupua families, which was to last for almost one century. In the middle of this political turmoil following King l'amafana's death, Leiatua Pe'a (later known as Tamafaiga) achieved supremacy through warfare. By 1824, he had taken control of Upolu and Savai'i.

Leiatua Pe'a, the warrior chief of Manono, had gained fame earlier as a *Taulaitu* (shaman). His influence was felt in Manono and the neighbouring districts of Upolu and Savaii. The island of Manono, which lies between Savai'i and Upolu, was notorious for the prowess of its warriors in times of war. Manono was a strong ally of A'ana. This alliance enabled A'ana to maintain political

authority in various parts of Samoa through a long line of rulers (to which l'amafana belonged) for more than three hundred years.

However, Leiataua Pe'a came to be known as *Tamafaiga*, meaning 'the terrible', because of the cruel and tyrannical nature of his deeds. This eventually led to his assassination around 1829 by the people of Fasito'outa, in the A'ana district. Manono and its allies rallied their forces and declared war on A'ana, in revenge for Tamafaiga's death. They also wished to destroy the power and prestige A'ana had enjoyed for centuries.

Following the A'ana War of 1830, Malietoa Vaiinupo, a relative of Tamafaiga, obtained the four royal titles and became King of Samoa. Throughout the centuries, Tutuila was caught up in the political turmoil and wars on Upolu due to its association with the district of Atua.

Tutuila owed allegiance to the *Tui Atua*. Many of Tutuila's chiefly titles originated from political districts in Upolu and Savai'i, and can be genealogically traced back to the paramount titles of *Tui A'ana*, *Malietoa* and *Tui Atua*.

Questions and Activities

10. Why did chiefs seek marriage alliances with women from influential families?
11. Write a paragraph on Queen Salamasina (Who was she? What role did she play in the political history of Samoa?).
12. Explain how the *Tafa'ifa* rulership after Salamasina shaped the course of Samoa's political history.
13. What caused the feud between the Malietoa and Tupua families?
14. Explain why the alliance between Manono and A'ana was important.
15. Write a paragraph on Leiataua Pe'a.

Malietoa Vaiinupo's succession and the supreme ruler of Samoa

Following Malietoa Vaiinupo's death in 1841, the *Malietoa* title was passed on to his son Moli, who became the thirty-first *Malietoa*; the *Tui Atua* title went to Mata'afa Va'alua, who became the thirty-second *Tui Atua*.

As the paramount titles returned to their respective families, the *Tafa'ifa* rulership of Samoa remained vacant for about five years.

Soon after Malietoa Vaiinupo died, the Malietoa clans of Savai'i, Manono and Tuamasaga – began to threaten the people of A'ana.

The Malietoa clans feared retaliation from A'ana in revenge for the devastating war of 1830. A'ana in alliance with Atua, prepared for war against Tuamasaga, Savai'i and Manono. Warriors were again dispatched from Tutuila to fight for the A'ana–Atua alliance.

Attempts by the missionaries to preserve the peace were unsuccessful, and war broke out in 1847, this time with European firearms. The nature of traditional warfare in Samoa would never be the same.

The War of 1847 continued for several years until 1853 when neither side was able to claim victory. In the end, *Tui A'ana* and Moegagogo came to terms with the Malietoa clans, and peace was established.

Meanwhile the local district Chiefs continued to govern their people and tend to local affairs within their villages and districts. The struggle for the *Tafa'ifa* rulership continued in a series of feuds and wars between Samoa's ruling families. The four titles continued to exist but when Europeans started arrive more regularly no one was able to claim all four titles.

Questions and Activities

16. Why did the *Tafa'ifa* rulership of Samoa lay vacant for 5 years?
17. Why did the Malietoa clans fear retaliation from A'ana?
18. What caused the wars between villages and even districts in Samoa, long after the end of the Tongan war?
19. Why did the district of A'ana refuse to recognise *Malietoa* Vaiinupo's appointment as King I'amafana's successor in 1802?
20. Why did Leiatua Pe'a quickly rise to power?
21. Why was Manono politically important to the A'ana district?
22. Why were Manono and its allies determined to destroy A'ana following Tamafaiga's death?
23. Explain Tutuila's connection to the political turmoil and wars in Upolu in earlier centuries.
24. How did some Tutuila Chiefs acquire their titles?
25. Why was the war in 1847 different from any other war fought earlier in Samoa?