

Reflection: Samoan women as Covenant makers usurped by Christianity.**8th May 2022****By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai**

Our reading from Acts highlights the story of the raising of Tabitha from her death bed, I had contemplated preaching from this texts but in retrospect I thought it would be appropriate instead today to give a feminist view of the role and place of Samoan women in traditional Samoan society in the light of significant women's Sunday.

Traditionally the role of women in Samoa has always been one of honour and respect in terms of the feagaiga (covenant) relationship with her brother, her birth as the tama sa (sacred child), her role as the taupou (village maiden/virgin) and tausala (redeemer). The day to day chores within the village and family were divided up according to age and gender and it was always the role of the young men to cook and prepare the meals for the family. The role of the young women consisted of ensuring that the home was clean and tidy and that the young children were cared for by older siblings. When the family obligations were met the young women would gather with the older women in the fale lalaga (house of weaving) and join in the weaving of mats and fine mats for the village. Here they would receive instruction and listen to stories of the myths and legends of Samoa and traditions and protocols within the fa'aSamoa.

The specific group for young women is called the aumaga. According to Fairbairn-Dunlop

on reaching puberty young girls, joined the aualuma, where they learnt the skills of providing correct hospitality. The aualuma lived together in the large guest house of the village under the care and leadership of the sao

tamaitai (leader of the women). The organisation of the aualuma matched the ranking system of the village: the daughters of the prominent chiefs held the leadership positions and were served by the daughters of the lesser chiefs, or the untitled. The young girls were instructed on how to prepare the ava and weave ie toga...By way of contrast, wives were the lowest ranking adult status group in the village, the ‘outsiders’(for marriage within the village was discouraged) who were expected to serve their husband’s family and his sisters, just as he did.ⁱ

The arrival of Christianity domesticated the role of women along the lines of English protocol and women became more responsible for the provision of food and the well-being of her husband and family. Her focus centred on the family and less on the village and the decision making bodies of the village and church. Her roles within the church were concerned with the aesthetic material nature of the church in the area of flowers, embroidering of cloths and cleaning. Her role as feagaiga and tama sa were almost obliterated in the light of the Christian message that did away with traditional beliefs and practices. The roles of the taupou and tausala became very much ceremonial roles and most of these positions which were held by the high chiefs daughter went to the ministers daughter. The role of the high chiefs wife (faletua) in organising the women of the village went to the wife of the minister also known as faletua. The traditional village leaders of the Samoa village were replaced by the heads of the church and the village hierarchy took second place to the church hierarchy.

The role of minister was reserved only for the men, something which the missionaries brought with them from England and this went unchallenged. In fact all missionaries practices and protocol went unchallenged as instead of a gradual inculturation and developing an understanding for custom and protocol particularly in the area of gender specific roles, they introduced their English way

as the Christian and therefore the right way to live. From 1830 through to 2022 the question of women in ministry in Samoa remains unchallenged and now is assumed to be determined by Samoan culture rather than Christian culture. The main argument against the ordination of women is that it goes against the fa'aSamoa. The memory of old Samoa has become selective and very short and the Samoanisation of English Christianity has blurred the history of pre-Christian Samoa which held women in high respect and honour.

Dr. Fanaafi Le Tagaloa Aiono in her book *O Motugaafa*ⁱⁱ states that when the missionaries arrived in Sapapalii as outlined in chapter two Malietoa welcomed the missionaries to the status of the Tamaitai (lady) or the Faafeagaiga (sister). Both these female roles were honorific roles within the fa'aSamoa the highest status above any matai title. She continues to say that by:

giving the faifeau (minister) this place within the ideal social organisation of the Faamatai (chiefly realm), that our ancestors also gave the responsibilities of the Tamaitai/Feagaiga to the faifeau and priests of the new religion/tapuaiga. For the Tamaitai/Feagaiga is the Faioa (maker of wealth) the taulasea (healer), the ositaulaga (priestess), the Tausala (redeemer), the Pae ma le auli (peacemaker), the teinemuli/taupou (virgin) and Feagaiga (covenant). “E fai oe ma au Faafeagaiga: you will be like my feagaiga; you will be like my sister.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The English missionary and later on the indigenous teachers became the new covenant makers Fa'afeagaiga, in taking on these roles they actually assumed the roles formally held by women. The names were retained but the women were displaced hence many of the existing names used to address ministers within the church remain the names applied to women. So when people today talk about the true fa'asamoa as patriarchal and not accommodating of women in leadership roles within the church and society in general, they need to be reminded of the

rich heritage of a former matriarchal Samoa in pre-Christian times. The lines of demarcation in these sacred relationships have become almost obliterated and the tapu relegated to the heathenism of pre-Christian times.^{iv}

After the advent of Christianity the minister's wife became the leader of the women within the village as well as the church and church culture set the precedence and standard for Samoan culture. Even during traditional Samoan ceremonial occasions the minister takes the higher honour than the high chief of the village. The first of all gifts, kava, sua's and food is given to the minister and then to his high chief.

Dr. Aiono says that one of the most serious obstacles to Christian communication in Samoa today is that the Pastor has tried to take over the functions and status of the matai group, or the status of the Feagaiga in the extended family or parish, and have omitted or seem to have forgotten the Faafeagaiga status and responsibilities indicated and given in the original agreement between Malietoa and the first missionary/teachers.^v

In traditional Samoa women wore their hair short and men wore theirs long. Changes were instituted after the arrival of the missionaries included men cutting their hair short, women wearing theirs long, in imitation of European styles, and some adoption of European dress. "One symbol of Christianity – the familiar coal-scuttle bonnet and the long, ground sweeping Mother Hubbard dress—the Samoan women refused to adopt; and to the great scandal of the teachers 'wives, they persisted in exposing the upper half of their luscious bodies."^{vi}

According to Roach, the presence of the missionary's family provided an additional model of "woman as wife" to the Samoans: of woman as helpmeet to her husband. In this model a wife was seen not so much as a woman active

primarily in a sphere largely separate to that in which her husband operated, but as a woman active in a role as partner in husband's sphere (although one might argue that often it must have been as a "junior partner").^{viiiviii}

Dr. Fanaafi Le Tagaloa asserts in Samoan '*Ua fao uma a e le faifeau nafa ositaulaga o le tamaitai. E o'o fo'i a i le tauosia o le lagi ua I ai a ma le faifeau*' (Aiono,1996). This literally means that the pastor has robbed the *tama'ita'i* (young woman) of her priestess role and responsibilities (Ah-Siu Maliko, 1998, p.24). Unfortunately the demise of the female role and responsibilities of the *feagaiga* was due to the missionaries themselves believing that no human should have such powers as to bless or curse another (in the case of the *feagaiga* having the power to curse or bless her brother). The missionaries believed that God alone had the power to bless and curse and they as God's representatives here on earth therefore should be the new covenant makers.

Today on the surface Samoa appears to be a patriarchal society. Historically however, women held significant roles as goddesses and priestesses and Samoa has really had only one Monarch, in the 15th Century a female, *Salamasina*. The advent of Christianity in many ways usurped and dismantled the matriarchy of Samoan society. But underneath that surface today the matriarchy is still very much alive. In fact, Samoan society and the church is held together by the women, a minister cannot be ordained unless he is married, on the death of his wife he has 3 months to find another wife because she is the *faletua* the backbone of industry and backbone of his ministry. The matriarchy is alive and well in Samoa, Samoa now has a woman prime minister the Honourable Fiame Naomi Mataafa also a good friend of mine. Long may the matriarchy thrive, amen.

ⁱ P. Fairbairn-Dunlop *Tamaitai Samoa, Their Stories*, Suva, KIN Publications, 1996, 7-8

ⁱⁱ Aiono Dr. Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, O Motugaafa, Le Lamepa Press, Apia, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid 86

^{iv} ibid 89

^v ibid 87

^{vi} Roach , Elizabeth Marchette, From English Mission to Samoan Congregation: Women and the Church in Rural Western Samoa. Ph.D Columbia University 1984

^{vii} ibid 106

^{viii} ^{viii} P. Fairbairn-Dunlop *Tamaitai Samoa, Their Stories*, Suva, KIN Publications, 1996, 7-8

^{viii} Aiono Dr. Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, O Motugaafa, Le Lamepa Press, Apia, 1996.

^{viii} Ibid 86

^{viii} ibid 89

^{viii} ibid 87

^{viii} Roach , Elizabeth Marchette, From English Mission to Samoan Congregation: Women and the Church in Rural Western Samoa. Ph.D Columbia University 1984

^{viii} ibid 106