

## A Celebration of Women Writers

"Samoa—Its People and their Customs." by Mrs. E. J. Ormsbee.

Publication: Eagle, Mary Kavanaugh Oldham, ed. *The Congress of Women: Held in the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U. S. A., 1893*. Chicago, Ill: Monarch Book Company, 1894. pp. 590-596.

[Page 590]

### SAMOA—ITS PEOPLE AND THEIR CUSTOMS.

By MRS. E. J. ORMSBEE.



MRS. E. J. ORMSBEE.

Samoa is the native name of a group of islands in the South Pacific, formerly known as the Navigator's Islands. The group is situated in latitude 13–14° south, longitude 171° west, and consists of eight or more inhabited islands, besides several uninhabited ones. It is a fifteen days' trip from San Francisco on the Australian steamers, which call at Hawaii for several hours, where the steamers coal. Seven days after we find ourselves on the Island of Upolu, which is next to the largest island of the Samoan group, and is forty miles long and thirteen broad. It has a range of mountains, densely wooded to the summit, extending from east to west, sloping to the shore, which is encircled by a coral reef.

Street or steam railways are, of course, unknown in Samoa. Most of the traveling is done by boat or on horseback. While we were there the first carriages were introduced.

The moon and stars shine with unusual brightness in this tropical country, and it was a constant delight to us to see the constellations new to us, the Southern Cross among others.

The Samoan people interested us greatly. They live on *taro*, *pigis*, breadfruit, pigeons, and, of course, fish and bananas, all of which they get without much trouble, and certainly without the necessity of labor. It is hot and tropical, and certainly not of that character which would tend to make work a pleasure in itself; and without the incentive of necessity, it is very easy to understand that the people naturally incline to the idle, open-air life which they lead.

We were glad to learn that the Samoans were never cannibals. In war they still practice decapitation, but justify it, so it is said, by citing familiar examples found in the Bible, which they glibly repeat when expostulated with on the subject by the missionaries. In war they are unquestionably very brave and fearless, but I do not think it is true that they delight in war; on the contrary, a little real fighting goes a long way with them. In illustration of one of their characteristics, notably that of fair play, it is a well-attested fact that in more than one battle one party has, under a flag of truce, called for a cessation of fighting until they could replenish their exhausted ammunition, which request was granted. Again they have been known to call a halt in battle for the purpose of a feed, or a feast, which they would indulge in between the lines.

The Samoans are a very good-looking and a finely-built race, both men and women, with skins of a pale brown color, bright eyes, straight black hair and beautifully white teeth. Physically it would be difficult to find a better developed race.

Only the men tattoo, not on their faces, but on their bodies from their hips to [Page 591] their knees, which gives them the appearance of clothing. One frequently sees a native with his name tattooed on his arm. The tattooing is compulsory, and the operation is said to be very painful, taking from two to three months, during which time the patient remains in the bush or some retired place. No youth is really respected until he is tattooed. The present king, Malietoa Laupepa, was averse to the practice, and passed beyond the prescribed period without having submitted to the painful ordeal, but when selected or raised to power his people refused to anoint him king until he had been tattooed in due form.

The Samoans, as a people, are most courteous and kind, and seem to be naturally endowed with pleasant dispositions and manners. They are particularly clean and in every way a most attractive race. Their houses are suited to the climate. The roofs are of sugar cane, very neatly thatched, supported on posts, and the better class of buildings are made of the breadfruit tree. There are no walls, cocoanut mats are let down at night when it is raining or during severe winds. Their native houses are built to be very strong and comfortable, and without nail, bolt or spike. Every part is tied with sennit, which is made from the

fiber of a peculiar kind of cocoanut, braided in three strands. This fiber is not more than a foot in length, so that it has to be constantly spliced. The old men make this sennit when sitting in council. The floors of their houses are made of small stones, four to eight inches deep, and covered with mats. These mats are of native manufacture.

Here they live, sitting and sleeping on the floor, for they have neither chairs nor beds, using in their place mats, and at night resting their heads on a bamboo pillow raised a few inches from the ground.

The natives wear very little clothing, save the lava-lava, which is a straight piece of cloth or *tappa*, wound about the waist, falling like a skirt to the knees, but they are never without that, men, women or children. Even the smallest baby always has the lava-lava. The lava-lava proper is made from their native cloth, *tappa*, or for everyday wear, of calico which is of European manufacture, designed especially for this trade. The colors are generally the brightest, and the patterns in many cases of the most wonderful description. One often sees large handkerchiefs of the brightest colors used for lava-lavas on the smaller boys and girls. Older natives use all sorts of leafy coverings made from banana leaves, and from the many vines which grow so plentifully everywhere.

The costume of a high official, or a member of King Malietoa's Parliament, is a white shirt and a lava-lava of brown *tappa*. The women, many of them, dress in the same fashion as the men, though they often wear a white chemise over their colored lava-lava. Another article of dress seen on young girls and offered for sale at the shops at Apia, is a low-necked and short-sleeved bodice, rather loosely cut, made of silk, satin and bright colored velvet, and trimmed with lace. On festive occasions they wear similar bodices made entirely of fresh flowers and vines. They also wear a garment that consists of a straight piece of cloth, about one and one-half yards long, with an opening for the head in the center, falling down a little below the waist, both front and back, leaving their arms free and uncovered. This garment is not only made of *tappa*, their native cloth, but more frequently of calico put together in patch-work style with white muslin, showing their fondness for a variety of colors. The women always wear what we call a "Mother Hubbard" dress, when they attend church or mingle with foreigners. I could tell you of numberless ludicrous costumes that one sees on the street daily. On an extremely hot day one often sees a native woman attempting to wear a Mother Hubbard with only one arm in its sleeve, and the skirt on the other side brought up over the shoulder with the sleeve hanging, leaving this arm free and bare, as they much prefer their natural freedom to the restriction which European dress imposes. The missionaries insist that the women shall cover themselves when in church, and as a rule they do so, most of them also wearing hats, though one frequently sees them with their hats in their hands or under their arms until they reach the church door, and on leaving the church they remove the hat the moment they are out.

[Page 592]

Many of the natives carry umbrellas, for though they are almost naked and bare-headed, they dislike to get their hair wet. If they do not have an umbrella, they hold a large banana leaf over their heads, or make a cap of the leaf, or use a small mat for an umbrella.

Both men and women are fond of bleaching their hair by the use of lime that is burned from the coral rock. This gives the naturally black hair a reddish color, which they prefer. While this process is going on it is essential to keep their hair dry. One frequently sees them with their heads white, their hair filled with this lime, which is allowed to remain during the day, but is washed out in the evening and renewed in the morning, and so continued until they are satisfied with the color. A flower is never more than a minute in the hands of a native, either man or woman, before it is transferred to the hair, or placed behind the ear, and when these white heads are decorated with bright colored flowers and leaves, the effect, contrasting with the dark skin, is quite striking.

The Samoan women have no regular method of dressing their hair. It is arranged according to each one's individual fancy, but all devote a good deal of time to beautifying themselves in this way. They shave their children's heads, and among young boys and girls the fashion is varied. Sometimes a child is seen with merely a narrow band of hair running down the back of the head; another with a small tuft in front, which they call the "love-lock;" another with only a little crown of hair on the very top of the head. Both men and women wear wreaths on their heads and garlands about their necks, made from the scarlet and green fruit of the *pandanus*, and generally a single blossom of the beautiful scarlet *hibiscus* (which grows everywhere) placed over their ear or on the top of their head.

Their clothing is made chiefly of *tappa*, their native cloth. *Tappa* is manufactured from the inner bark of the *ua* (oo-a), or paper mulberry tree, cultivated for this purpose. This bark is stripped from the tree and soaked for days in the river. Then the women, sitting on the stones on the edge of the stream and frequently in it, lay this juicy bark over a large flat stone or board, and with constant application of water, scrape it with a shell until the vegetable mucus is separated from it and nothing remains but the spongy white material. It is then taken to the house, and on a rounded hardwood log kept for that special purpose, is pounded with the flattened side of a heavy wooden club until the bark is expanded to the thinness wanted. Each piece is then spread in the sun to dry, and when a sufficient quantity is ready the women stick pieces together with arrow-root gum, layer over layer, until a cloth of the desired thickness and size is manufactured. It is then painted in many different

patterns. Their paint is manufactured from nuts, plants and flowers which they find in the bush. This painting is all done by the old women. This native cloth, when new, is not unlike Japanese paper, but by use becomes soft and pliable.

The language of the Samoans is very musical. They have only fourteen letters in their alphabet—a, e, i, o, u, f, g, l, m, n, p, s, t, v—and every syllable ends in a vowel, with only three letters in a syllable. They have a Bible, grammar and dictionary in their own language; their children all attend school; their churches are their schoolhouses, the pastor the teacher, and the Bible the reading-book. I was present at one of their school sessions during an examination in grammar, arithmetic and church history, at which the scholars acquitted themselves in a way that would do credit to many American boys and girls.

So far as I can judge, their life, ideas and practices, with reference to keeping the seventh, eighth and ninth commandments, are not in keeping with their seeming observance of the fourth, but before judging them harshly at this point there are aspirations to be other than as they are. They are happy and contented to a degree I have not seen elsewhere. They take or make little, if any, note of time or space, and even the better informed have no idea of their age, and I think there is no word in their language denoting distance, or by which it can be measured. I also think the [Page 593] same is true as to time. They seemingly have no more care or thought of the morrow than birds, only they see to it that food for Sunday is procured on Saturday. They are averse to doing more, or other, work than their wants require, and this is but little. No one is overworked. They are kind to each other, and seem to be as happy in their work as in their sports, which is evinced by the unreserved habit of singing when performing any manual labor. They are much given to exchanging children, or adopting each other's children, thinking in doing this that they strengthen their family ties. Observation leads me to believe that they are fond of their own children, but are seemingly as fond of others that come to them by exchange.

The chief article of export is *copra*, which is the kernel of the cocoanut cut into small pieces and dried. Formerly this was dried in the sun, but now they use large ovens, though the natives still dry in the sun in small quantities, of course, as they have to protect it from the frequent rains of that country, and they bring this to the traders at Apia and exchange it for whatever they need.

You can hardly imagine the many uses the Samoans make of the cocoanut. Really, the cocoanut tree is the mainstay of Samoa, for it is used for food, implements, utensils, fans, baskets, combs, brooms, roofs, and innumerable purposes. They serve you kava, their native drink, in a cup made from the cocoanut, which is often highly polished by constant use. When the cocoanut is wanted to drink, it is plucked while the outer husk is green. The milk, which is like water, is clear, sparkling, slightly sweet, and very refreshing, the meat at that time being fit to eat only with a spoon. In native churches fresh cocoanut milk is used in place of wine at the communion service.

While these natives use the cocoanut in so many ways, they are very dependent upon *taro* and bananas for their chief food. *Taro* is their chief vegetable, its growth being similar to that of our beet. It comes to maturity in four months, and is planted continuously all the year. When the natives take up the *taro*, they cut off the top and put it back into the ground, and another root forms as though nothing had happened to it. They scrape the root and bake it in their ovens. A native oven is a hole in the ground lined with stones, in which a fire is built and loose stones placed. When a pig is to be roasted, these loose hot stones are placed inside the pig, which is then wrapped in banana leaves, and after the fire is cleared from the oven, the pig, *taro*, fowls, pigeons, etc., all wrapped in banana leaves, are put into the oven, the top is carefully covered with stones and more banana leaves, and the whole is left over night.

The soil on all these islands is exceedingly rich and is everywhere covered with dense vegetation, from the water's edge to the mountain tops. The passai, or passion vine, grows there with great rapidity. Europeans train it over arbors, but it grows in the bush, climbing trees. The flower, with which we are all familiar in our greenhouses, is the purple passion flower, and the fruit we enjoy, only the center is eaten, which is a mass of yellow jelly-like seeds, and very delicate, and is called grenadilla. The Avoca pear is also very delicious, though it does not grow in abundance.

#### KAVA MAKING.

Kava is the national drink, and is manufactured from the root of a kind of pepper shrub that grows luxuriantly in many parts of these islands, both in native and cultivated state. It is used both green and dry, though generally dried, and the root has to be four or five years old to be good, and if it grows ten or fifteen years it is much better and larger and will weigh thirty pounds or so; when young, only four or five. It will keep for any length of time, and is bought and sold in all the stores of Apia, bringing from two to three English shillings a pound, dried. Kava is omnipresent and indispensable. Nothing is correctly done in Samoa without kava drinking. You enter a native house to call, and presently some native girls are summoned to make kava, for it is always made in your sight, is expected on all social occasions and is associated with every occupation. It follows working-parties in the bush. The fond- [Page 594] ness for it is not confined to the natives, for laboring whites become fond of it, and you as often see the kava bowl with this class as with the natives.

The making of kava is quite a ceremony. The root is either grated or pounded in a stone mortar. On ceremonial occasions three girls, usually the *taupou* (the maid of the village, with her attendants), appear dressed in their best, and seat themselves in a row on one side of the house, or on the grass under the shade of the mango, or orange trees (if the gathering is out of doors), and the large kava bowl is placed in front of them. The girl selected to make the kava then holds her hands outside the house and one of the attendants pours the contents of the cocoanut shell full of water over them, to assure us that they are clean. Then one of the girls puts the pulverized kava into the bowl, and the other pours some water in from one of the cocoanut water-carriers near by. The *taupou* stirs this vigorously with her hands for some minutes. The water-carriers are always cocoanuts especially prepared for this purpose. Then the other attendant hands the fou (the strainer) to the *taupou*: the strainer is made from the bark of the fou tree, which gives it the name, and is a bunch of strings of vegetable fiber. The *taupou* takes the fou and with many graceful and dexterous twists, moves it about in the liquid with great precision; then she takes up all the particles of kava on the strainer that it will hold, and after wringing it dry passes this to her attendant on the right, who flings it out in a most graceful manner and returns it. This is repeated again and again until all the sediment is removed. This mixture is of a yellowish tint, and I must say does not look very inviting to the uninitiated stranger. When all is satisfactorily concluded, three claps of the hands by the girls, proclaim the kava ready. You can hardly conceive, without seeing this ceremony, the perfect ease and grace displayed in serving the kava. One of the girls takes the cup, presents it to the *taupou* to be filled; this is sometimes done by plunging the fou into the liquid and squeezing the contents into the cup, or dipping with another cup from the bowl and pouring it into the one presented when filled, the girl faces about, and holding the cup by the outer rim, crosses to the person named to be served, and bending forward reaches him the cup in the most graceful manner. One is expected to drain the cup. The taste of the beverage at first is by no means tempting, but it leaves a not unpleasant aromatic taste in the mouth.

We are often asked if kava is intoxicating. We are told that the long continued excessive use of it will produce paralysis of the lower limbs, while the head will be perfectly clear, but the patient is unable to stand or walk, and he is obliged to wait for the effect of his excess to wear off. Old foreign residents use kava equally as much as the natives. Mr. Churchward, a former British consul in Samoa, says: "During my whole stay in Samoa I do not think I met one white resident of more than two months' standing who had not in a greater or less degree become a convert to the use of the national beverage." I must say that this was not our experience, for after a year's residence on the Island both my husband and myself still found it difficult to drain the cup as is customary. The *talolo* is one of their most important festivities, of which there are several kinds observed. The *talolo* proper we are told, is the presentation of food by a whole district (which comprises several villages). The scene of operation of the first one we witnessed was at Mulinu, where King Malietoa lives, surrounded by his chiefs, who are selected from the Island of Upolu, and the other islands of the group. These gifts were brought to be distributed among his chiefs.

The natives marched in large delegations from different villages, and each chief had a *tu-la-fa-li* (or talking man), as the chief considers it beneath his dignity to speak in public, who stepped out with considerable flourish and enumerated what his village had brought, the number of *taro*, pigs, cocoanuts, bananas, fowls, etc., and then this was all carried across the square to the opposite side and placed on the grass. (This square is always kept very neat and clean.) After several delegations had come and been announced, one came, bearing on the shoulders of ten or twelve men what looked like a boat made of the branches of sugar-cane, with bright flowers tied in them, the [Page 595] Samoan flag in the center, and on each side of the boat handkerchiefs with bright borders were tied in the branches, and filled in between with boxes of matches, cans of meat, biscuit, etc. In the bottom was any amount of *taro*, casks of beef, large tin boxes of biscuit, roast pigs and fowls, fish, bananas and cocoanuts. Next came a native leading a handsome white heifer followed by a crowd dragging by ropes two canoes lashed together, and filled to the brim with native food, all singing as they came. Then came nine men, followed by others, bringing on a kind of frame a cooked hog, weighing at least three hundred pounds. And so they came until the ground was covered with gifts. They said there were as many as one hundred casks of beef, weighing from thirty to fifty pounds each, and two hundred cooked pigs of different sizes. One chief alone brought six hundred *taro*; another three hundred *taro*, seven casks of beef, yams, etc. After all had arrived and been called off, the principal men and women of the villages withdrew to a neighboring bush to complete their toilet and put on the finishing touches to their gorgeous array, a toilet consisting of the best which they can secure in the way of a lava-lava of fine mats or painted *tappa*. The chiefs are particularly dressed in full war paint, a gorgeous display of head-dress of human hair standing two feet high above a band of shells around the forehead. In the center of the hair plume is fastened a round mirror, surmounted by a bunch of long red feathers of the boatswain bird. Their bodies above the waist are bare, shining with strongly perfumed oil (well rubbed in by the women), the inevitable necklace of scarlet *pandanus* hanging to the waist or below, while over the lava-lava is worn a girdle of streamers made from the leaf of the fou tree. The *taupou*, or "village maid" (always a girl of high rank), who invariably accompanies the chief of the village on state occasions, is, like the chief himself, bare to the waist, well oiled, her beautifully rounded shoulders shining under the tropical sun, dressed in her finest mats, while her head-dress is of distinguishing height and magnificence. At the side of each division marches and dances the grotesque funny man, a cross between a clown and an American drum-major, at whose antics and jokes all are expected to laugh. The passing of the column occupied an hour or more. On the arrival at the Malie the chief *tu-la-fa-li* (the talking man), steps forward, throwing his fly-trap (an article used to drive away mosquitoes and flies, which are unusually numerous in Samoa), across his shoulder, and leaning with both hands on his long

staff (which is his badge of office), proceeds to deliver a lengthy speech, in which he usually apologizes for the poverty of the country, etc. Then other *tu-la-fa-li* make their speeches very similar to the first, a proceeding much enjoyed by them, as all Samoans consider themselves born orators, and then comes the ceremony of dividing all this food among the different chiefs. How this is accomplished is astonishing, for it has to be done with great care as to quantity, certain portions belonging to certain ranks. We were told that some of their wars were started by the unequal distribution of food on these occasions. There were at least twenty-five hundred natives at this *talolo*, and it was exceedingly interesting.

The *taupou*, or village maid, is a peculiar Samoan institution. She is chosen by the old women, and is generally a daughter by birth or adoption of the chief, and must be beautiful and exceptionally attractive. She has certain responsibilities. She leads the *siva*, or native dance, presides over the house provided in every village for the stopping place of visitors from neighboring islands, is conspicuous on all ceremonial or state occasions, has several less prominent sisters to do her bidding and to follow her wherever she goes, and several older women whose special duty it is to see that she is not led astray, for a *taupou* must be perfectly chaste and pure. She is eligible to marry a chief who seeks her for her attractions and dowry of fine mats. Of late they are quite ambitious to marry a white man. Suega, a *taupou* we knew quite well, much prefers to dress like European women, and is very much averse to appearing in public dress "a la Samoa," but the requirements of the Samoans in that regard on certain ceremonial occasions are inexorable, and must be complied with in order to retain caste or position. [Page 596]

Sunday is a great day for all Samoans. They sing hymns from early morning until late at night, with the exception of short intervals of sleep. Their first service is at 6:30 in the morning, when all go, men, women and children. About half an hour before church they begin their preparations, and if there is not room to dress in the house, the outside will do just as well. Their best things are kept in small chests at one end of the house, or rolled in *tappa* or mats, and placed on the roof beams of their houses. The men high in rank, as a rule on Sunday, wear clean white lava-lavas and white shirts. They always carry their Bible and prayer-book carefully wrapped in a clean pocket-handkerchief. In the case of a chief a boy follows behind, carrying the chief's Bible. The native pastor marches ahead, always carrying a large umbrella and a lot of books, followed by a crowd of his people. He is usually dressed in a white lava-lava and white coat, bare-footed and bare-headed.

In conclusion I am moved to say of the Samoans, as a people, that so far as I am able to judge their advancement from barbarism to their present comparatively happy condition is due entirely to the missionaries.

As Samoans they are, as I have said, in a physical point of view, good specimens of men and women mentally, while they are probably wanting in ability to expand or grow to any great extent, still there is no stupidity in the Samoan. In other words, as Samoans, they may be said to be a success among the many races. An effort to make them other than as they are, or to advance them on a higher plane, would in my judgment be unsuccessful.

Speaking of Samoa as a race, Sir Robert Stout said: "Their development must be slow; any attempt to force them, or to make them like Europeans, must end in the destruction of the race. \* \* \* Physically they are a magnificent race. No one can see them walking without being struck with the gracefulness of their carriage. It is better than any race I have ever seen, white or colored. In point of intelligence, they are at least equal to the Maoris, and morally their notions and practices are such as would tend to their preservation. They are a kindly and hospitable people, good tempered, not given to quarreling, and pass their lives easily and happily. In my opinion it would be a crime to allow such a race to be destroyed."




---

[Page 590]

Mrs. E. J. Ormsbee was born at Wadhams Mills, Essex County, N.Y. Her parents were William and Emeline (Cole) Wadhams. She was educated in home schools and afterward in Essex, N.Y., and Burlington, Vt. She has traveled very generally in her own country and in the Sandwich Islands. She spent one year in Samoa. Mrs. Ormsbee is the wife of Gov. E. J. Ormsbee, of Brandon, Vt. In religious faith she is an Episcopalian. Her postoffice address is Brandon, Vt.

[Next]

This chapter has been put on-line as part of the [BUILD-A-BOOK](#) Initiative at the [Celebration of Women Writers](#).

Initial text entry and proof-reading of this chapter were the work of volunteer  
**Kris Kleberg.**

*A Celebration of Women Writers: Mary Mark Ockerbloom, Editor.*