

“Tui Manu’a Elisara’s Conflict with American Ideologies”

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The sovereign kingdom of the Manu’a Islands, under the authority of the paramount chief Tui-Manu’a, faced opposition from the United States and Mormon missionaries in the early 1900s. As a committed member of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.), Tui-Manu’a Elisara closed off the islands of Manu’a to any other form of worship, including old gods, Methodists, Catholics, and Mormons. Once the islands became a part of the American empire, Samoan chiefly authority would conflict with the newly enforced laws of America (Gray 1980). Since the eastern islands became an official U.S. territory in April 1900, Mormon missionaries claimed that the United States Constitution and religious freedoms would apply throughout the empire, including its colonies. Within a few years after succession, Samoan chiefly authority in what became known as American Samoa diminished under U.S. laws. This paper offers a glimpse into the complex relationship of Samoan chiefly authority, U.S. laws, and the introduction of Mormonism into the Manu’a Islands.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the “Three Powers” (Germany, Great Britain, and the United States) carved up the Samoan archipelago after signing the Tripartite Convention of 1899. Germany occupied the western islands of Upolu, Manono, Apolima and Savai’i for copra plantations. In contrast, the United States acquired the eastern islands of Tutuila and Aunu’u for a military coaling station at the Pago Pago harbor. Great Britain relinquished its ties and accepted German colonies in exchange for German concessions over British claims to Solomon Islands. To the east of Tutuila Island laid the Manu’a Islands (Ta’u, Ofu, and Olosega) under the sovereign rule and authority of Tui-Manu’a Elisara.

With the islands of Tutuila and Aunu’u under the American empire, U.S. Commander Benjamin Tilley put political pressure on the Tui-Manu’a to secede the Manu’a Islands to the U.S. In April 1900, twenty high ranking matai (chiefs) of Tutuila and Aunu’u endorsed U.S. occupation and agreed to “obey all laws and statutes made by the [American] government or those appointed by the government to legislate and govern” (Shaffer 2000). During the discussions over the signing of the cession of chiefs of Tutuila, Tui-Manu’a Elisara refused to allow the U.S. to influence his sovereign rule over his people and islands. Tui-Manu’a made it clear to Commander Tilley that traditionally, Tutuila is part of the Atua district in Upolu, now occupied by the Germans. The Manu’a Islands are a completely distinct political-cultural entity from Tutuila (Kruse 2019). In protest, Tui-Manu’a stated that he remains “sovereign over a sovereign state.” Tilley arrogantly replied, “Whether you come or not, the authority of the United States is already proclaimed over this island” (Gray 1980: 110) Under pressures of colonial power, Tutuila, Aunu’u and Manu’a were closely entangled in American policies within the villages and districts that once were grounds controlled by chiefly authority. As a result, the foreign powers reduced Samoa’s royal families to a lesser chiefly status.

The Tui-Manu’a reigned as the supreme “king” of Manu’a Islands with a genealogical link to the god Tagaloalagi. In Samoan traditions and legends, Tagaloalagi formed the Manu’a Islands before creating the Samoan archipelago. For centuries, Polynesian legends recognize the Tui Manu’a title as one of the oldest in the region, with influence reaching Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, Tokelau and other neighboring islands. Unlike

other paramount chiefs, everything the Tui-Manu'a touched became sacred. The titleholder was often preceded by two tulafale (talking chiefs) and possessed great mana (sacred power). In the Manu'a Islands, the Tui-Manu'a remained a cultural symbol revered by Samoans and neighboring island chiefs as supreme. Immediately after U.S. control, the status of the Tui-Manu'a and his reign would change with the introduction of American laws, new religious practices, and the marginalization of Samoan chiefly authority.

The London Missionary Society remained the most influential foreign institution before the division of the Samoan Islands in 1899. The L.M.S. arrived in the western islands in 1830, followed by the Methodists and Catholics in the 1840s and 1850s. The L.M.S. established a theological seminary in 1844, introduced the printing press, followed by the translation of the Bible soon after. Samoans throughout the islands remained committed to the L.M.S. and their teachings, including Elisara from Manu'a. Before the bestowal of the Tui-Manu'a title, Elisara graduated from the L.M.S. seminary in 1887 and served as pastor of Fitiuta then Olosega village in Manu'a. The influence of the L.M.S. became unmatched in comparison to the other European religious denominations on the island. The Mormons arrived in Samoa in 1863. The L.M.S. denounced Mormon missionaries as outcasts because of their theological interpretation of the Bible. As a result, L.M.S. missionaries advised natives to stay clear of "these new arrivals from the United States." (Pierce 2016)

Between 1902 and 1903, Mormon missionaries began proselytizing in the Manu'a Islands. With a small following, the Mormons faced opposition from former L.M.S. pastor turned king, Tui-Manu'a Elisara. In February 1904, a Mormon missionary, Elder A.S. Workman, served in Olosega, Manu'a, for three months and often complained that village leaders halted his projects and educational programs. Families involved with the new church were either fined or punished by "old laws." Workman challenged the Tui-Manu'a and his authority when the United States had not officially ceded the Manu'a Islands. However, in mid-1904, Tui-Manu'a Elisara and four leading chiefs of Manu'a signed the Deed of Cession, formally transitioning the Manu'a Islands to the United States in return for a new school, teachers, and education for the children of his islands. Although revered by the people of Manu'a and throughout Samoa with a genealogy that reached the highest of gods in the Samoan spiritual hierarchy, his authority and status were reduced immediately to "district governor" and no longer recognized as supreme ruler of the Manu'a Islands.

In 1906, another Mormon missionary, Elder S.F. Smith, in Ta'u, Manu'a, again challenged the traditional authority of Tui-Manu'a Elisara. Tui-Manu'a ordered the new denomination to cease. Smith claimed that since Manu'a was now under the United States, the islands, similarly to Tutuila, are confined to the U.S. Constitution. Smith argued that the former king challenged his constitutional rights of Freedom of Religion.

After close review by the naval administration assigned to American Samoa, they concluded that all territory citizens must adhere to religious liberty as per the U.S. Constitution. Years later, the Catholic Church would make the same attempt in Manu'a, and the acting governor made every effort to ban other denominations other than L.M.S. Again, the Constitution of the United States upheld the religious

freedom of its citizens throughout the territory despite chiefly authority to limit different denominations within villages (American Samoa 1927)

The L.M.S. dominated the religious landscape throughout Samoa, and admonished all Mormon beliefs. As a U.S. religion, the Mormon missionaries were aware of using the freedom of religion policy. Mormons believed that their form of government and belief system aligned with “constitutional guarantees of inalienable rights and liberties (Mason 2011). In remarks given by Mormon leader Brigham Young in 1859, he states, “the Constitution and laws of the United States combine the best form of Government in force upon the earth” (Young 1859). Interestingly, one of the Articles of Faith of the Mormon Church proclaims, “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (Mason 2011: 354) Mormon missionaries applied their articles of faith to the U.S. and not to Tui-Manu’a as sovereign ruler of his islands.

The U.S. government’s policy of Freedom of Religion reduced Samoan authority and introduced new concepts that transformed Samoan governance. Over time, the new religious denominations would lead to divisions within extended families and within villages. Missionaries of all religious institutions were aware of the influence of chiefs and that the denomination chosen became the church of the family. Democracy, the rule of law, equality, and religious freedom became the new complex identity for American Samoans. The chiefs of American Samoa became secondary to the President of the United States.

Religious freedom and the separation of church and state became significant within the American empire. Chiefly authority was removed by laws of the United States and marginalized in the general scope of American objectives. Together with the European missionaries, Mormons viewed Samoan chiefly status as backwards, and therefore the civilizing mission of achieving modernization through religious concepts became significant. Power was centralized and no longer given to various chiefs. The American Samoan identity became complex with the reinterpretation of authority (pule). American Samoans welcomed the changes, yet they questioned how these political forces, especially religious institutions, dictated the changes for an “equal society.”

Mormon missionaries in Manu’a used the political power of the colonial body to achieve their objectives. Rather than apply theological and peaceful means, Mormon missionaries used their American rights and the U.S. Constitution to introduce a new religion forcibly. As a result, the decision challenged the rights of Tui-Manu’a Elisara to protect his people from new institutions that would possibly bring divisions among families and villages. Unfortunately, the mission to preach and teach the message of the Gospel became a competition among religious institutions during a period of colonial transition. Tui-Manu’a Elisara became the last regining Tui-Manu’a after his death in 1909, five years after signing the Deed of Cession with the United States.

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