

Consensus versus dissent: Democracy, pluralism and governance in Sāmoa

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Abstract: *Consensus is a term widely used in Sāmoa and elsewhere in the Pacific. It is considered to be a key feature of decision-making and a fundamental characteristic of fa'asāmoa and other Pacific ways of being and doing. In Sāmoa it has been a mark of the strength and continuity of the fa'a matai through the ages of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalisation. However, although it has evolved in many ways to take into account new social trends (for instance allowing children to take part in family discussions) and remains strong at the family and village level, its role at the national level has virtually disappeared. This is seldom stated publicly and consensus is still held up as a defining characteristic of Sāmoaness. At the same time, although the rise of dissent is given little acknowledgement, it permeates public life. One could assume, based on this result that the ideology of consensus is perpetuated in order to reduce national public debate on governance issues.*

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Consensus is a term widely used in Sāmoa and throughout the Pacific. It is a fundamental feature of decision-making and an important characteristic of *fa'asāmoa* and other Pacific ways of being and doing. It is a term with which people identify and which they generally use with pride.

Consensus has an *alter ego* that is much less commonly referred to in the Pacific: dissent. The very notion of consensus, however, implies that of dissent: if any given society or group strives for consensus, it is because of the inevitable potential for dissent. In the Pacific, while consensus is highly emphasised and valued, dissent is almost always associated with undesirable disagreement and conflict.¹ The stress on consensus is related to the 'smallness' of island societies, colonial and religious legacies and the adherence to traditional and sacred authority. This is contrary to the West where consensus

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is seldom mentioned, but rather assumed, and where dissent is considered an essential element of representative democracy, mainly because of its role as a check on (secular) power.²

When Sāmoa became independent in 1962, it adopted features of the Westminster parliamentary model but retained a mode of representation consistent with the *fa'amatai*. Suffrage and candidacy were restricted to *matai* only as they were deemed to be the sole legitimate political representatives in Sāmoan society. Although politics has evolved considerably since, particularly with the adoption of semi-universal suffrage in 1990, there has been no public debate about the appropriateness of consensus as a form of decision-making in Sāmoa. In fact, consensus has been elevated into something of a public virtue. Yet it remains a nebulous and ill-defined concept, which has never been adequately researched or critiqued.

What then is consensus? When Sāmoan people refer to consensus what do they mean? What are the implications of the ideology of consensus for decision-making and governance? Does consensus contribute to openness or does it prevent political dialogue? Finally, how does consensus relate to dissent, and particularly to democracy and governance issues faced by Sāmoa today?

The paper begins by examining the grounding of the notion of consensus in the Sāmoan context, and how consensus is practiced at the family and village levels. It then puts forward the views of a cross-section of Sāmoan society about the meanings of consensus and dissent; about how the latter are translated into practice and how they affect leadership. It concludes with a discussion about the application of consensus in contemporary Sāmoan society.

UNDERSTANDING CONSENSUS: THEORETICAL GROUNDING

In Sāmoan, consensus is '*autasi* (literally, many in one) or *tasi* (one or united). It is defined as a decision that has been reached without a dissenting voice and it is valued because it connotes strength and unity. A consensual decision is guaranteed the full support of not only those who participated but all those they represent symbolically and who are affected by it as well.

Underpinning consensus is the concept of *soālaupule* (literally, partnership to your authority). The word *soālaupule* comprises the three words: *soa* (in partnership with, or to be part of), *lau* (your) and *pule* (authority or rule). Generally, however, *soālaupule* suggests being part of a decision-making process where everyone freely discusses the issues involved, puts forward their views and weighs all views against each other for their merits and practicality. This eventually results in a decision that everyone is happy and comfortable with. It explicitly establishes the fact that the decision has been made by more than one person. The more people involved in the decision the better, as dictated by the Sāmoan proverb: '*O le tele o sulu e maua ai fīgota* (The more lit fire we have, the more fish we are likely to catch).' In some contexts, *soa* means advice. This meaning is also relevant, particularly in situations where people discuss issues and bounce off ideas in trying to come up with a

decision that satisfies everyone. In this context, *soālaupule* refers to people contributing to a decision in the form of a suggestion or advice.

Soālaupule is closely tied to another aspect of the Sāmoan ethos, *āmana'ia* (literally, being recognised or valued). For example, even if I did not contribute anything useful to the discussion, the fact that I was part of the decision-making process, that I had a chance to have my say in the discussion, and that the other people in the decision-making process took the time to listen to my views, are indications that I have been recognised, valued and respected as a person in the collective decision. It gives me great satisfaction to feel that I have been part of the decision. Examples of *āmana'ia* can be seen in several practices of custom and tradition and Sāmoan culture in general. If a chief (*tamāli'i*) presents a talking chief (*tūlāfale*) a gift, in money for example, the latter would normally acknowledge it in a loud voice as he leaves the chief's residence and returns to his own house. From the *tūlāfale*'s point of view, the purpose of this practice is two-fold; to let everyone in hearing distance know what has been received from the *tamāli'i* and most importantly, to let everyone in hearing distance know that by presenting him the gift, the *tamāli'i* has recognised him as a *tūlāfale* in the traditional manner. In such traditional acts, the *tūlāfale* feels honoured.

*Fa'alupega*³ (ceremonial greetings) – whether of individuals, of a particular *matai* title or group of *matai* titles, of the village, of the sub-district or district or nation – also recognise the identity and rank of each unit. When a guest arrives in the host's house, both exchange words of welcome in ways which recognise not only each other's mutual presence, but also their respective identity, rank and status in accordance with their professions, *matai* titles, families to which their respective *matai* titles belong, their titles' villages of origin, and so forth. In short, many elements of Sāmoan custom and tradition incorporate aspects of recognition and respect. Being recognised is being respected.

Thus, *soālaupule* is central to consensus, which implies recognition and respect in terms of one's worth as an individual and as a representative of a recognised group.

Soālaupule also implies *alofa* (love). The fact that one has been asked to be part of the decision-making process means that someone *cares* about one's participation and the interests that one might have in the issues that will be discussed. For a decision to take place, someone has to initiate the process and let people know about it. A person without *alofa* would go ahead with the discussion without letting those who should be there know about the meeting. Worse still, that person would go ahead and make the decision him/herself before or without consulting others.

Alofa is also particularly important in the context of representation. The whole family as a unit elects successors to *matai* titles. As such the *matai* is expected to represent the collective interest of the extended family, and not his/her own personal interest, as is any senior member of a family branch to whom respect is given by members of his/her branch to represent their collective view in a family meeting. A 'representative' who does not stand up and

speak for the collective interest of the unit he/she represents is said to lack *alofa*. Many Sāmoans would like to believe that *alofa* is the guiding principle of consensus: the latter ‘wins the day’ because everyone who participated in the decision-making process is ultimately governed by the principle of compassion, fairness and vision. In addition, participation implies public commitment to the decision and binds the participants and reduces the possibility for subsequent dissent.

Another key principle of consensus is *fa’aaloalo* (respect). It permeates the different levels of the polity where consensus operates. The core level is the extended family, which includes the highest-ranking *matai* titleholder of the family, several lesser *matai* titleholders, untitled but married men and women, untitled and unmarried men and women, and children. In families where the highest-ranking title is split between more than one holder, *fa’aaloalo* is normally conferred to the eldest or the most senior of the titleholders (i.e. the person who was the first among the joint-holders to hold the title).⁴ Similarly, the holders of lesser *matai* titles give respect to holders of their family’s higher titles, untitled people give respect to those with titles, unmarried men and women give respect to those who are married, and children give respect to their seniors. There is also mutual respect between the male and the female lines of the title.

CONSENSUS ‘IN ACTION’

The family level

If an extended family is meeting to choose a successor to its highest *matai* title, normally the titleholders residing on the family land meet to agree on whether or not such a meeting should be called. Once that is settled, they next agree on the date of the meeting and call the whole family. Ideally everyone who has an interest in the subject of the meeting is notified.⁵

On the day of the meeting certain unwritten rules are followed. First, a senior (older member or senior titleholder) opens the floor by welcoming everyone and re-stating the purpose of the meeting. Thereafter, people from different branches (lines) of the family speak in turns. The second, third and fourth turns only begin when the first round is complete. If it is a big family, usually one member of each line speaks on behalf of his/her branch. In which case the junior members are expected to agree with their ‘representative’. If not, the concept of *fa’aaloalo* comes into play. ‘Because so and so is the titleholder from our line, or is the oldest in our line, I have to respect (implying agreeing with) what s/he states as the view of our line’. Strong opposition from other branches of the family or from within one branch against some of their own members can prolong the meeting. Occasionally meetings are repeatedly adjourned until consensus is reached. Such meetings can be frustratingly long and can exhaust the resources of those hosting the meeting. Despite that, Sāmoan philosophy dictates that if consensus is not achieved, it is wise that the meeting be adjourned to the next day: ‘*Moe le toa* (Let the

rooster sleep)'. In the period of the 'rooster's sleep', members of the meeting rethink the issues involved and reconsider their positions for the next day. If consensus is still not reached, the meeting may be adjourned to the following year, and so forth. The long period of the 'rooster's sleep' eventually results in consensus as during that time the different opinions are reconciled through various informal channels.⁶ Some members may change their positions feeling satisfied that their voice has been duly recognised and respected by the other members and that even though they did not 'win the day', their turn will eventually come.

The process, however, is not always smooth. Vicious disagreement is sometimes shouted down and people with dissenting voices are reminded in no uncertain terms of their place in the family according to age, title rank, and extent of active participation in family activities. They are also reminded that '*O le ala i le pule o le tautua* (The path to authority/power is service)'. It is a reminder to the dissenting voices that their services to the family have not been sufficiently recognised by the rest of its members to deserve awarding them family authority through holding its title.

The village level

The next level at which consensus is sought is the village council of *matai*. In some ways, consensus at the village level is relatively easy to achieve. Every village has a *fa'alupega* (traditional constitution). It mentions the *matai* comprising the village and their respective roles and rank, among other things. Generally, all Sāmoan villages are governed by their council of chiefs. Individual villages, however, have variations in the way they govern themselves in terms of the procedures involved in the decision-making process. For example, in Village A, there are five foundation *matai* titles. Foundation *matai* are those who 'own' the village. They are distinguished from lesser *matai* titles, which are created by holders of foundation titles from time to time. They are also distinguished from *matai* from other villages who have decided to be part of the village council until such time as they decide to go back to reside at their village of origin. Three of the foundation titles in Village A are *tamāli'i*; the other two are *tūlāfale*. Decisions in Village A follow traditionally established procedures. One of the two *tūlāfale* (T1) gives a speech to open the meeting. The second *tūlāfale* (T2) introduces the agenda of the meeting (T1 and T2's roles are interchangeable). T2 then hands over the next part of the meeting to the *tamāli'i* who discusses the issues involved and comes to a decision.

All of the three foundation *tamāli'i* titles of Village A have been split among more than one holder. Each of them contributes to the discussion while the *tūlāfale* sit patiently to await the decision. The whole process is called *soālaupule* in the sense that all the holders of Village A's foundation titles are part of the decision-making process. Once the *tamāli'i* have come to a decision, T2 then announces it as Village A's unanimous decision or consensus. No decision can be made as long as one of the *tamāli'i* disagrees. In most

cases, when the view of one *tamāli'i* is at odds with that of the others, he eventually gives in to the majority view as a gesture of *fa'aaloalo* (and also because he may expect that at some future time others will be similarly required to concede to the majority). It is perceived as being rude to insist on a view that is not in line with that of the majority. Consequently, the different view is withdrawn, thereby falling in line with the majority view thus achieving consensus.

In most, if not all villages, there is another concept of *ali'i matua*, the most senior *tamāli'i*. This is the *tamāli'i* who has the respect of the whole village council as the senior *tamāli'i*. Once such honour is given, the appointed *tamāli'i* reciprocates by providing presents such as fine mats, food and money to the council of *matai* and other village sub-organisations such as *faletua matausi* (wives of *tamāli'i* and *tūlāfale*), *aualuma* (village girls) and *'aumaga* (untitled village men). The act of reciprocating the honour that has been conferred gives the appointed *tamāli'i* legitimacy and respect to the extent that the village council listens to and respects what he says. In situations where there are different views, the *ali'i matua* has the final say. And because of the respect he commands, every *matai* of the village council is bound by *fa'aaloalo* to accept it, thus achieving consensus. On the other hand, if one *tamāli'i* insists on a view that is different from that of the majority, the matter is dropped and no decision is reached.

As noted, in both the family and village council meetings, consensus is not always achieved through voluntary consent. An elderly person or a titleholder may speak on behalf of his/her branch of the family in a family meeting. Similarly, in Village A, in the majority of cases, if not all cases, only the foundation titleholders are actively involved in the decision-making process. Holders of lesser titles are confined to listening. Younger holders of the split foundation titles do not always speak, preferring that their senior colleagues speak on their behalf out of respect. Thus, consensus can be achieved without all people present in a meeting participating. Consensus in this sense can be valued or resented depending on the views of those present in the meeting. Sometimes there is general agreement with what has been said and decided upon. 'Junior' participants are happy to be listeners preferring their seniors to make decisions. In such cases, there is 'genuine consensus'. On the other hand, there are times when these cultural conventions prevent genuine consensus. For example, 'junior participants' may be coerced into a decision because of unequal title status, age group and so forth. In that case, there is silent dissent, which is often accepted as a part of Sāmoan decision-making. Therefore, in practice, *āmana'ia*, *soālaupule*, and *alofa* are not always applied across the board. Nevertheless, most Sāmoans have grown up and have been socialised into a way of life that accepts this situation as part of life and being Sāmoan. They believe that if their views are not seriously considered now, they will be when they are older and/or hold the same title their seniors currently hold. The same philosophy applies to all levels of decision-making.

Finally consensus is highly regarded because it implies *mālosi* (strength) and *mamalu* (dignity). Because all agree with the final decision and are happy

with it, *mamalu* is upheld. It is *mālosi* because all have a moral obligation to embrace the decision and make sure it is carried out.

The opposite of consensus is *fa'atu'i'ese* (dissent). Dissent is perceived as a deliberate attempt by a minority or a particular individual to subvert the majority view. As such it is seldom perceived in a positive light, is unwelcome, must be discouraged and is often severely dealt with. It is equated with divisiveness, egocentrism, selfishness, ambition and considered devoid of dignity. There is however, some acknowledgement by decision-makers (at quiet and relaxed times) of the value of dissent in as much as it is a way of putting forward another point of view and as a sign of individual strength and commitment. This occurs because, at quiet and relaxed times, dissent does not pose an immediate threat to the *status quo* nor does it require a response. In conclusion, whether or not a dissenting voice prevails usually depends on personality, perseverance and circumstances. It is rare, nonetheless, that the dissenting voice wins.

SĀMOAN VIEWS OF CONSENSUS AND DISSENT

The authors asked a cross-section of Sāmoans⁷ (youth – i.e. unmarried men, village chiefs, women, civil servants, ministers of government, church officials, academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations) the following questions:

1. What is consensus? (*O le a le uiga o le 'autasi?*)
2. How is consensus expressed? (*E fa'apefea ona fa'atino le 'autasi?*)
3. What is dissent? (*O le a le uiga o le fa'atu'i'ese?*)
4. How is dissent expressed? (*E fa'apefea ona fa'ailoa le fa'atu'i'ese?*)
5. How does consensus influence leadership? (*O a a'afiaga o le 'autasi i se ta'ita'iga?*)
6. How does dissent influence leadership? (*O a a'afiaga o le fa'atu'i'ese i se ta'ita'iga?*)

Below we present the respondents' answers with the objective of showing the array of views, rather than tabulating them. We therefore do not distinguish answers by stating how many gave them (except occasionally and in very general terms) nor who gave them.

DEFINING CONSENSUS

'Consensus is not a notion, it is a fact'⁸ (Sāmoan commentator).

One respondent's comment that consensus was the way Sāmoans live and make decisions, particularly at the village level, sums up the general understanding of consensus among those we interviewed. All viewed consensus as a decision-making process. Nonetheless, some respondents highlighted the 'goodness' of consensus of the process, while others focused on its negative aspects.

Positive views of consensus

Consensus as a holistic concept: One commentator felt very strongly that consensus promotes the common good. He argued that what is good for the group, as agreed upon by the group, is also good for the individual. Because everyone is consulted and heard, all are equal and there are no 'losers'. Whether you are in the majority or the minority, you are awarded the same treatment and opportunity (the minority is heard and acknowledged) and, ultimately, all agree on the outcome. This, according to the same respondent, allows for cohesion within the group and relies on and reinforces trust within the community. In fact, it maintains peace within the community. He also added that 1) the process does not concern itself with who is talking but with the issue at hand and 2) that it makes people feel like they are important.

Other commentators stated that consensus is about talking so that all come to the same decision. As such, they added, it is a long process as all ideas and views must be taken into account before a conclusion is reached. The talk does not stop until all agree; should a discussion be interrupted it will be picked up again where it was left off. If there is a disagreement at present, 'the thinking of the wise will continue', and it is acceptable for a decision to be reached after one month, three months or longer.⁹

As a system of representation: Various respondents emphasised consensus as a process of representation: the *matai* represent their family; they make decisions for them and the people look to them to do so. Another commentator noted that differences are resolved because those who may initially disagree with an outcome will eventually put their trust in what the leaders have decided. Various respondents stated that what is known as consensus may simply represent a majority view with the minority choosing to abide by the decision.

As a guardian of fa'asāmoa: Approximately half the respondents also viewed consensus as a system which emphasises respect and which has a protocol that all the members of the community abide by. It was said that consensus prevents disruption and allows conflicts to be resolved through consultative talks and a process of give and take. Accordingly, a good leader or *matai* is one who knows how to attain consensus. One blunt comment was that 'if you are the authority and you don't get consensus, it's a sad story.'

The above answers to our questions demonstrate that leaders use consensus (legitimately) to control family and village members, and that the latter expect their leaders to have the ability to do this. This unstated but assumed emphasis on 'control' may be explained in part by Sāmoan views, as described by Shore (1982), on human nature, particularly on people's inclinations to engage in *amio*, whenever possible.¹⁰

Negative views of consensus or 'consensus is an empty concept'

A matter of expediency: A wide variety of people (including *matai*) equated consensus with majority rule in which the minority feels obliged to go along.

One of them stated that consensus ‘gives leaders a feeling of power, like they can do anything’ (he defined this as ‘forced consensus’¹¹). Another felt that consensus allowed those with status or money to wield influence. A third said that people might agree with decisions either because they will benefit financially or because they hope that by giving up something today they will get something in return later. According to these ‘critics’, consensus is not about making sure all agree but about ‘power’ relationships and about compromising now for greater gain later. One person stated that all one had to do to sway the *matai* was to buy them ‘Vailima’.¹² Another felt that the notion of respect, *fa’aaloalo*, associated with consensus, is used by politicians to their advantage and that traditional Sāmoan custom should not be misconstrued as always coinciding with the public interest.

It was also suggested that the process of consensus was not appropriate for good governance at the national government level, because people need to be allowed to dissent after decisions have been made. Even though consensus was seen by some as leading to peaceful coexistence, others felt that avenues for disagreement and ‘greater justice’ must be made more available.

Lack of representation: Various respondents stated that young people feel that their voices are not heard and that consensus, as it is practiced, stifles them. One (a *matai*) stated that in his village ‘*taulelea* hardly say anything’. Another (also a *matai*) said that when, for example, non-governmental organisations go to villages, ‘only the leaders are consulted and that when youth are present, they [the latter] cannot talk’. Respondents also argued that the same problem applies to women for decisions that concern the whole village and that, although, both the youth and the women have their own groups in which they may discuss issues more freely, they have little say at higher levels. This is, according to them, because consensus is more about imposing and maintaining status than about sharing. Thus, lower level chiefs will not contest higher level ones even when it is in their family’s or their constituents’ interest for them to do so.

One critic stated that ‘though consensus may exist as a theory, the benefits are not even or fair. The gap between the rich and the poor is increasing and a new relationship must be forged.’ Another felt that consensus just meant ‘giving up your views in deference to the elders.’ It was also suggested that the emphasis on consensus forces people to align with others only because they don’t want to be seen as being disruptive.

Changes in consensus

Consensus in Sāmoa, according to our respondents, has undergone changes for a variety of reasons: an increase in the number of *matai*, the impact of money, technological changes, the introduction of voting at elections, changes in levels of education and attitude, the establishment of political parties and the influence of new church groups.

One respondent argued that in the past, in villages where there were only 10 to 12 *matai*, consensus was easy to achieve. Today, these same villages may have

50 to 60 *matai* and the matters under discussion are more complicated and the financial resources at stake more important.¹³ Under these circumstances, the commentator felt that consensus is difficult to achieve and that what is called consensus is a form of compromise where one gives up one's views.

Another stated that the circulation of money influences consensus and that it may be used to 'buy' opinions and often creates divisions within families and villages. One critic stated that 'now money is everything in consensus whereas in the past it was not important.' This has particularly become the case with the inception of universal suffrage. For instance, 'a district may be unhappy with their MP but at election time the latter will buy support.' Actions like these mean that 'consensus is no longer an element of Sāmoan society.' In addition, it was thought that the introduction of voting has created a lot of uneasy relations within families, villages and districts. Decisions about who should represent them are not as simple to agree on as in the past.

People felt that attitudes towards consensus and status have changed. While in the past, 'consensus at the village level was based mainly on status, today many *matai* have never had to serve as they obtain their title through their educational or professional achievements.' These changes have been brought by 'people who were educated overseas' and who sought to change the system to their advantage. The latter were deemed responsible also for the dramatic increase in the type of *matai* that 'goes against consensus' and 'follows the European style of politics.'¹⁴

Various respondents felt that consensus is no longer practiced at the national level, i.e. in Parliament. One stated that although it was practiced for about five or six years after independence the establishment of political parties changed the behaviour of politicians. He felt that respect might still be at the core of the system but not so for consensus. He added that this was particularly so under the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) government that has a large majority and can therefore push through votes without consultation. One critic said that this had led to 'the loss of the mutual respect between *matai*, and the respect younger *matai* used to hold for their elders [in Parliament].'

Another factor leading to the breakdown in consensus has been the growth of the evangelical movement that 'leads youth and church members to view *matai* just like anyone else.' In these evangelical congregations 'everyone is allowed to stand up and express themselves regardless of age or status, which is anathema to how traditional consensus works.'¹⁵

Some respondents added that children, young people and women have also come to expect more rights. Children now play a greater role in family discussions but at the village level, many youth are 'not committed to the old ways anymore' and 'go to Apia' to escape them, essentially because they feel 'powerless' and underrepresented.¹⁶

The practice of consensus

It was stated, not surprisingly, that the setting for consensus is mainly the family and village *fono*. Respondents emphasised that within the family, consensus

may take different forms. In some cases, the *matai* will listen to all the members while guiding the discussion and then make the final decision. In others, the *matai* may just decide matters without consultation. Much of this process, they added, depends on the individual *matai*. One person argued that in some families, when it comes to choosing a *matai*, there is no real consensus but as long as there is a majority decision, it will be taken as consensus.

Others felt that in many villages, consensus is equated with decisions made by high-ranking chiefs after an issue has been discussed, e.g. 'In my *fono* everyone expresses their view on the matter at hand but when the elders make known their opinion, there is a complete absence of dissension. They carry the day', and, 'In the *fono*, the high chiefs speak last and then that's the end of the matter. They don't give their views until the end because otherwise it will cut short the discussion.'

People added that consensus does not always imply wide-ranging discussion though, as illustrated by the following experiences related to us:

The high chief dominates the village *fono*. When he makes a decision the lesser chiefs have little to say. Things are not openly discussed – they are suppressed. In my village the *taulele'a* hardly say anything and the discussion is very short.

In the village council there are high chiefs, almost high chiefs, important and less important chiefs, high orators, low orators. There are villages where only one or two chiefs make the decision and this is taken as consensus . . . When there are offences or punishments to be dealt with, the decision is taken after only two or three speakers so if you are a *matai* who sits at the back and you raise your hand to say the decision is unjust, you are told: 'decisions are not normally taken at the back of the house.'

DEFINING DISSENT

'Sāmoan culture revolves around consensus so there is not much to say about dissent'. (Sāmoan commentator)

Because dissent is thought of as being anathema or contrary to consensus and not a part of Sāmoan culture, it is often dismissed outright.¹⁷ Dissent is particularly undesirable or even unacceptable at the family and village levels. However, many of those interviewed felt that dissent was a necessary element of national governance.

Dissent as a disturbance

Various commentators stated that dissenting is not an accepted form of behaviour in Sāmoan society. One said that dissenting against a hierarchical 'superior' is particularly *tapu* and goes against the *va tapuai* (sacred space or relationship between two entities).¹⁸ He added though, that one way to get around this is to engage in passive or silent resistance. A few commentators stated that dissenters are generally seen as people who are disruptive and don't command the respect of others. One person felt that dissent is almost a

derogatory word and the dissenter is seen as someone who undermines the welfare of the family and acts like a dictator.

Dissent was also equated with demonstrating disrespect as well as a lack of understanding of Sāmoan principles – various commentators stated that when a decision is made, even if one does not agree with it, the assumption is that one should accept it. Dissent, according to various respondents, does not benefit society. When it takes place at the village level, they added, it is usually because of a disagreement between leading *matai*. This polarises the village and leads to families fighting each other (this has particularly become the case with the introduction of voting – because people disagree about whom to vote for). One respondent commented that *fa'asāmoa* and the communal law of the village (without which there is a risk of war) must prevail, not dissent.

Dissent as a check

One observer stated that many people in Sāmoa live in a traditional context and don't necessarily understand that the constitution includes both modern and traditional aspects, and that the former include dissent. He argued that freedom of expression is guaranteed constitutionally and is an important part of the development of a mature society. People, he added, need to know it is acceptable to dissent against unjust decisions as that is how decision-makers become more aware and sensitive. Another felt that leaders need more exposure to dissent so that they learn to accept it and do not feel threatened by it.

One commentator said that dissent over national issues reminds the government that it does not own the country. Others felt that open dissent and constructive criticism benefit the country and that it is preferable to have a strong opposition in parliament as it acts as a check on the government.

It was felt that dissent in the media also serves as a watchdog at the national level. When issues are raised, the government is obliged to respond. The commentator added that a dissenting voice makes for a healthy country and dissenters shouldn't always be seen negatively as they may have valuable insights.

According to one respondent, an area where dissent is desirable is in the context of the church. 'Many pastors rule with an iron fist' and 'have become gods rather than keepers of the flock.' People, he thought, need to speak up against many of the acts committed in the name of God but they are afraid to do so because the church is a part of the culture and they think culture should not be questioned.¹⁹

Avenues for dissent

As shown above, dissent is either dismissed by its detractors or wished for by its proponents, but both parties discuss it as though it were not a part of Sāmoan society. And yet, there are issues over which people regularly express dissent. They include land, titles, religion, salaries, taxes and constitutional issues.

According to our respondents, there are various avenues through which Sāmoans regularly express their dissent. These range from taking a case to the

Land and Titles Court, establishing a new denomination in a village, not attending family or village meetings, holding two or more titles within the same village, crossing the floor in parliament, marching, striking, etc.

Recourse to the Land and Titles Court is frequent in Sāmoa (up to 300 to 400 cases a year were taken to court in the mid-1980s).²⁰ Where consensus over a title or land (or lease) within a family or village is unattainable, members may seek the judgement of the Land and Titles Court. People use it as an avenue to express their disagreement. They may even use the court not because they think they can win the case, but because it is a way to make a statement that will be remembered.

Passive forms of dissent, according to our respondents, do not seek to question the system or jeopardise the social fabric but to demonstrate one's disagreement with a decision. They occur mainly at the family and village levels and range from moderate to strong 'actions'. Mild forms include not contributing resources to family, leaving one extended family to go live with another, attending a different church from the rest of the family, not participating in village activities (e.g. refusing to pay for a new church building by temporarily joining another church or refusing to carry out communal work), and, not attending meetings called by the *pulenu'u* (this is generally done by those who are opposed to the government of the day). More severe forms include ignoring village rules, openly defying the council by disobeying village council decisions, moving to Apia. A dramatic but not infrequent form of expression, prevalent among the youth, is suicide.

Respondents felt that at the national level there is greater scope for active dissent. There have been strikes (the 1981 Public Servants' Association strike was the first of its kind), marches or protests such as those organised by the *Tūmua ma Pule ma 'Āiga* against the Human Rights Protection Party, delegations meeting with the government, and villages erecting roadblocks to prevent the government from pursuing development projects (e.g. Vaiusu village).

Some added that individuals or groups may also choose to vote for the opposition or to run for public office and to go to court over human rights issues (some non-governmental organisations have gone all the way to the Supreme Court over the constitutionality of laws). Politicians may show their dissent by crossing the floor of parliament or by deliberately expressing radical views.

One respondent said that using derision or sarcasm against a person, village, district, party or government is another effective tool. He added, for instance, that a *matai* might deliberately omit a family or a village in a *fa'alupega* or in a maiden speech in Parliament. Another said that church pastors also use the pulpit to express their disagreement with the government or village council.

Restrictions on dissent

Dissent, according to our respondents, is constrained by cultural and political factors. It is generally not well looked upon to fight for issues: 'people just

think you're trying to be clever'. Some felt that the fear of being mocked or punished (by family, village or God) also prevents people from questioning aspects of culture and religion they find unjust. Others thought that Sāmoans consider it more important to uphold the dignity and respect shown to leaders than to acknowledge peoples' views or feelings about issues.

Some respondents also felt that there is also a general lack of distribution of information. One in particular argued that the cumulating of positions of power (e.g. individuals holding more than one ministerial portfolio) allows for the concentration and withholding of information. He added that in Parliament, the Speaker often interprets the rules in favour of the government, thereby suppressing the opposition. Another felt that many Members of Parliament (MPs) and ministers do not readily accept dissent: they expect undivided support and attention. This often leads to the belittling of opposition members' questions and to character assassinations in Parliament. A former MP, who has had a long experience in the opposition, stated that dissent in Parliament has no effect on the leadership but just amounts to 'talk' which the government manipulates so as to put across its own views. He felt that the breakdown of consensus in Parliament, since the introduction of political parties, had ironically, stifled the expression of different views.

DISCUSSION

'Even if you are banished from the village *fono*, you can still go to church. Even if you're banished from the church, you still have your land.' (Sāmoan commentator)

Consensus is considered an integral part of Sāmoan culture or *fa'asāmoa* but this has not always been the case. As Morgan Tuimaleali'ifano states, the Sāmoan emphasis on unity came as a result of Sāmoan opposition to European domination: 'Before Europeans, there was a tradition of dissent among major political lineages. Europeans provided a common enemy to Sāmoans and unity became a virtue overnight' (pers. comm.). Indeed, in the past, there was an accepted traditional balance of power that acknowledged the legitimacy of the *itu malo* (winning or governing side) over the *itu vaivai* (losing side), until the latter could wrestle power and in turn become the *itu malo* itself. Thus the concept of opposition (and dissent) thrived but the rule of the *itu malo* overshadowed the *itu vaivai*.

Today's insistence on consensus has thus no doubt been reinforced by Sāmoa's colonial experience. Particularly important is the fact that Sāmoa was unable to resist foreign takeover in part because it didn't have a strong tradition of national leadership and was unable to put forward a single ruler or king to satisfy the demands and expectations of the European powers of that era (Tuimaleali'ifano, pers. comm.). Sāmoa's subsequent colonial heritage and the influence of the church also account for today's insistence on consensus. As Liu states, the *matai* 'rely on *faiifeau* to preach obedience and "tradition" to their congregations'. *Matai* and *faiifeau* collaborate in village affairs and '*faiifeau* direct funding requests through the *faamatai*' (1991: 149).

Although the *Mau*²¹ was a high moment of Sāmoan dissidence and opposition to colonial administration, it also served to reinforce the emphasis on consensus through the idea of a 'natural' Sāmoan unity against the coloniser. In a sense it reinforces Tuimaleali'ifano's comment that, 'when *fa'a-* is appended to a noun, for example, *fa'asāmoa* or *fa'apapālagi*, it suggests the transformation of the object into the character, manner and image of Sāmoa or Europeans, such that for every Sāmoan or European conceivable there is a corresponding transformation or creation' (Tuimaleali'ifano, 1997: 44). Thus the idea that all Sāmoans necessarily agree and are united is reinforced.

It is not surprising then that even though our respondents did not define consensus in terms of values or beliefs, they saw it as a fundamental aspect of Sāmoan culture. As one commentator said, it is a 'system widely recognised and accepted by the community'. However, many were concerned about how consensus operates on a day-to-day basis.

Consensus, as a process of decision-making where everyone's opinion is validated and where decisions are not rushed to ensure that all agree, is an ideal method of governing which seems particularly well suited to small, close-knit and kin based societies. It ensures harmony by acknowledging the individual voice while, at the same time reinforcing the notion of the group acting as a single entity. It does not have to presuppose a 'common good' but rather tries to achieve one by allowing people to attain it together.

In practice, consensus requires a modicum of protocol and procedure: if all speak at once or show disrespect towards other participants, consensus will be difficult to achieve. But does it require following a strict hierarchy? Is the latter not anathema to consensus? Although, the notion of *fa'aaloalo* is for many Sāmoans inseparable from consensus, it is also one of the elements which contributes to making consensus (in the words of one critic) an 'empty concept.' If all are not equal, nor entitled to truly express their views because they must defer to a higher ranked person, can there be consensus? It is thus perhaps not the notion of consensus that needs 'modernising' or rethinking to improve decision-making, but the emphasis on hierarchical ranking within the consensual process.

Moscovici and Doise distinguish between what they call 'normalised participation' and 'consensual participation'. The first occurs when a hierarchy 'regulates how members of the group enter into the discussion and participate in the consensus' and member's participation is determined by their 'relative standing' (1994: 61). In contrast, in 'consensual participation' the participants are able to freely state their views with no constraints, and conflict is considered 'tolerable'. Although 'consensual participation' as defined by Moscovici and Doise may be difficult to achieve, it is one that is desirable in a society that considers itself democratic, as it allows for wide participation on an equal footing and ensures that all participants are in agreement with the final decision.

It may also remedy one of the dissatisfactions that was raised by some of those we spoke with: the emphasis on obeying decisions. This aspect of Sāmoan consensus may be detrimental to its future as a process of decision-making. Tcherkézoff, in his article on the contemporary debate on democracy

in Sāmoa states ‘... the main consequence of [a consensual decision] is not that everybody is “obliged” to follow the decision but that everybody shares in it’ (1998: 492). One may question this at two levels. First, not all of those whose comments we recorded shared in and/or agreed with decisions made on their behalf. Second, people who disagree with a decision are nonetheless obliged to conform to it, and know they risk being ‘punished’ if they don’t. As shown above, many resist but they run the risk of banishment.²² The question should be, to what extent should consensus require ‘forbidding’ disagreement and non-compliance to decisions?²³

In the past, serious disagreement could have led to war, but as pointed out by Tcherkézoff (1998), the establishment of the Land and Titles Court at the beginning of the century, provided a means to resolve differences at least over title and land matters. Although Tcherkézoff states that, ‘the necessity of appealing is considered, as was the declaration of war, something “bad” and “shameful” for the family, since it shows the inability of the family to reach consensus’ (1998: 429–430), the large number of cases taken to the Land and Titles Court indicate that it is now an accepted part of social interaction.²⁴

Consensus, as a decision-making process, is viewed by some of its proponents as superior to majority rule²⁵ on the basis that while in the former there is a winner and a loser, in the latter everyone is taken into account. There is no risk then of ‘majority tyranny’. However, by assuming that everyone should, after due process, accept the decision, consensus leaves behind or ignores those that are not in agreement and who do not wish to comply. In some ways Sāmoan consensus may be construed as ‘élite’ or ‘entrenched consensus’,²⁶ where those with higher status or positions of influence, may dictate what is appropriate for debate and how it is to be debated.²⁷

A couple of our respondents distinguished *maliega* from ‘*autasi* and stated that if consensus were construed as *maliega* (consent), people would go along with decisions more happily, since *maliega* implies that people actively consent to a decision. This statement concords with Sartori’s view that, ‘[Consensus] does require that each and all give active approval to something [and that] much of what is called consensus may simply be acceptance, that is, diffuse and basically passive concurrence’ (1997: 65).

Unity or plurality?

In Sāmoa people adhere to the idea of consensus in part as a way of maintaining their culture, i.e. of holding onto something that distinguishes them from others. Jocelyn Linnekin (1997: 202) makes this point in her analysis of Sāmoan historical discourse and the emphasis on *taeao* (mornings): ‘The prevalence of gospel “morning” [*taeao*] in oratory asserts an image of Sāmoans as a politically unified, culturally conservative, and Christian people – an image that valorises Sāmoa in comparison to many other, wealthier nations. Significantly, the referent of “mornings” is now “the country”. The invocation of *taeao* thus accomplishes a symbolic “centering” and suggests a vision of collective identity. . . .’

At the same time, many have indicated frustration with consensus in practice. This raises the issue of unity versus pluralism in Sāmoan society. In her definition of Sāmoan culture, Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, stresses unity and a holistic worldview. She writes, 'Aganuu [the word for culture] speaks of nature and nurture in the same breath; for *aga* is the essence of the nature of things while *nuu* represents the sum total of man's learned experience' (Aiono, 1992: 121). She extends this unitary quality to the whole organisation or structure of Sāmoan society (all the different elements of society work together to form a whole) and to the decision-making process of *soālaupule*.²⁸

Implicit in this discourse is the belief that all Sāmoans can trace their roots to a unitary founding ancestor (Tagaloa-a-lagi) – and are therefore in some way bound by this commonality. The idea (or ideology) of consensus builds on this belief by extending this assumption of unity of origin symbolised by the *fa'asāmoa* into all aspects of daily life.²⁹ The importance of unity is reinforced within each family by the reference to the '*āiga*'s founding ancestor whose name lives through the *matai* title. The choosing of a title thus takes place in a 'sacred circle' and is 'sealed' after a 'consensual' decision has been attained, by the drinking of *ava* (Tcherkézoff, 1997: 326–327).³⁰

Unity is further symbolised by the idea of the 'socio-metric wheel', which envelops the *fa'amatai* (Aiono, 1992: 118).³¹ Circles are both inclusive and closed. Discussion is enhanced within a circle that all belong to but it is also contained and therefore restricted. Although a circle may overlap with other circles (i.e. village groups overlap into the village,³² families overlap into villages – one or more – villages into districts etc.) it is nonetheless a sealed shape. It is particularly difficult to withstand dissent within a circle. The stress on the sanctity of the circle gives it an additional aura that makes disagreement or dissent appear obstructive and unacceptable.

This emphasis on unity and circularity is in sharp contrast with the 'Western' emphasis on duality³³ and on its appeal to reason or rationality and against holistic spirituality. However, Sāmoan society is heavily influenced by 'modern' thought (and its accompanying institutions) as reflected in many of the answers given to us about both consensus and dissent. Although many respondents liked the ideal of consensus as a unitary force, they felt that its practice is problematic. We believe that this is because Sāmoa is, in many ways, not a unitary society, even though its value system emphasises the 'goodness' or desirability of unity.

As argued elsewhere, Sāmoa is a politically plural society (Huffer and Schuster, 2000). People have varying opinions about their political system as well as varying access to information, money, services, education, etc. The creation of parties in Sāmoa and the increase in numbers of candidates in elections reflects this growing diversity of opinion³⁴ (as well as more 'traditional' rivalries). In addition, court cases over 'civil and political liberties' relating directly to parliamentary elections have increased. Generally, the cases have been initiated by candidates who were not approved by their village council but nonetheless chose to run and appealed to the courts to be able to do so.

So'o (2002) illustrates two such cases that occurred in the 2001 elections: in both cases the plaintiffs won in court and one was also elected.

It is also clear that consensus as a form of choosing candidates for elections is less and less practiced. The general elections of 1985 were the first since independence where all the 47 seats of parliament were contested. As discussed elsewhere (So'o, 2001: 36–46), the number of seats elected unopposed has gradually decreased since the first general election for the newly created legislative assembly in 1957. Although one or two MPs were elected unopposed in the four general elections after 1985, it is clear that the trend now is for all seats to be contested. Two main reasons account for this shift in election practice. First, the political party system has greatly encouraged the contesting of all seats in order to give rival parties an improved chance of winning government. Second, the initial post-legislative assembly practice of rotating MPs among villages comprising the constituencies has declined over the years. These two factors have resulted from the general widening of political participation since independence, which has in turn given rise to increased democratic competition among those aspiring to political positions.

In addition, decisions of parliament are rarely achieved through consensus. In accordance with the constitution and the standing orders of parliament, decisions of parliament are based on the majority view as determined by the speaker of the house. When in doubt, the speaker carries out a voice count. The few times when the Sāmoan parliament arrived at decisions through consensus were when the first Prime Minister of Sāmoa was re-elected in 1961, 1964 and 1967. On these three occasions, the decisions were unanimous, as there were no other nominations to the post. Most if not all other decisions of parliament have been by majority. Majority decisions became particularly visible and frequent following the establishment of political parties.

The Sāmoan representatives who drafted Sāmoa's constitution in 1960 were fully aware of the positive and negative aspects of consensus. It is for that reason that they chose the parliamentary system, despite its weaknesses, over the potential 'battlefield approach'. In the parliamentary system, at least a decision is reached – even though it might be unpleasant to some – without resorting to violence. The HRPP, which has been in power since 1982 except for the two years from 1986 to 1987, has often been accused by its critics of bulldozing parliamentary decisions against the wish of the people. However, the HRPP has been governing the country, for the most part, in accordance with the rules laid out in the constitution and standing orders (although the former has been amended to benefit HRPP and the latter have at times been stretched). It has made majority decisions and not used the consensual approach that Sāmoan traditionalists prefer (but which is difficult to adhere to in this age of rival political philosophies and approaches to achieving the public interest, however that is perceived). As a result, one often hears complaints from members of the public and opposition MPs that decisions have been forced upon them and that parliament is a foreign institution that does not encourage consensus but rather division.

Another criticism made against parliament by a leading Sāmoan critic is, ironically, its suppression of dissent. In an editorial entitled 'Suppressing dissenting views shows [Sāmoan] society is sick', (*Sāmoa Observer*, 28/1/1999) Savea Sano Mālifa lamented the Speaker's suspension of the then leader of opposition from parliament over his criticism of government proposed supplementary budgetary estimates. One of the arguments put forward to exclude the leader of opposition was that his criticism was slowing down the proceedings of parliament. This provoked Mālifa to write: 'These proceedings should be slowed down anyway to allow for enough debate of important issues raised . . . The freedom to criticize should not be suppressed for any reason at all . . . For this is the key to a healthy, decent society' (*Sāmoa Observer*, 28/1/1999). Mālifa's comments are echoed by a leader of the *Tūmua ma Pule* marches who, referring to the Tofilau government,³⁵ told us: 'to dissent is a bombshell in the present parliament', and added that the 'government [was] always trying to oust *Tuiātua* [the leader of opposition at the time] because he was constantly dissenting.'

The media, particularly the radio and newspapers, have provided important avenues for the disgruntled members of the public to express their voice of dissent. The well publicised *Tūmua ma Pule ma 'Aiga* protest marches of the 1990s (see So'o, 2000: 141–146) and post election court cases in 2001 resulting from village councils punishing village members who voted against their wish, are examples of how dissent is becoming part of Sāmoa's democratic political system. Dissent, as stated, is not new to Sāmoa. What is changing is that dissent is making its way into the public arena through the radio and newspapers. Dissenting voices are now firmly established in the public domain (see So'o, 2001: 36–46, 2002) thanks in particular to the clause on individual rights in Sāmoa's constitution and a strong judicial system. Increasingly dissent will become an important aspect of academic studies and academic publications coming out of the newly established National University of Sāmoa where academic freedom and independence of thought are encouraged.

CONCLUSION

Because consensus in Sāmoa has been promoted as a symbol of the strength and continuity of the *fa'asāmoa* through the ages of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalisation, it has become an essential part of the 'public' or 'official transcript',³⁶ which was rarely openly contested until recently. One reason why consensus nonetheless remains so persistent may be that although consensus is tipped in favour of the *matai*, particularly the more powerful *matai*, it offers all an opportunity to be part of the political process, if not today at least tomorrow, when today's non-*matai* may become *matai*.³⁷ Many Sāmoans also have a sense that they are adequately represented through their family *matai* and that the latter's authority is reasonably legitimate. Another reason is that the consequences for dissenting, particularly at the village level, can be dramatic, as they range from public humiliation, to banishment,³⁸ to destruction of property, to physical harm and even, albeit rarely, to murder.³⁹

It is not surprising then that much of the dissent engaged in by Sāmoans, according to our respondents, appears to be passive, individualised and generally non-threatening to the *fa'asāmoa*. Aside from the large *Tūmua ma Pule* demonstrations that could potentially have destabilised the status quo and may even have led to a rethinking of Sāmoan institutions and processes,⁴⁰ most of the dissent emphasised by our respondents takes on the form of withdrawal rather than confrontation. This is particularly so at the family and village levels where consensus is strongest due to the importance of kin ties and because it is here that disorder is most easily and drastically suppressed. Active dissent is hard to sustain in opposition to one's own cultural and family group, particularly in a society that places so much emphasis on relationships.⁴¹

In addition, Sāmoan families and villages afford little private space, one of the elements necessary for a freer expression of dissent.⁴² It is difficult in the village context to escape from *matai* authority and from observation by other members of the village.⁴³ And, although it would seem that the social groups which make up the village, especially the *'aumaga* which brings together the young (untitled) men of the village, could be a site for potential dissent, on the contrary they reinforce the order by adhering to consensus and hierarchy in their own decision-making, thus reproducing the *fa'amatai*.

The national level is vastly more influenced than the *nu'u* by Western principles and institutions. It is therefore not surprising to note that this is where it is considered more acceptable for dissent to occur. The rules of national politics differ from those of the family and village, and as demonstrated above, have progressively transformed the electoral process. In addition, the state has to take into account international norms about human rights and particularly the right to freedom of expression. The judiciary has the responsibility to ensure individual rights with respect to elections, freedom of religious expression etc. are upheld, even if the villages frequently ignore its decisions. But with more Sāmoans migrating to the urban areas (over 50 per cent of the Sāmoan population lives in North-West Upolu and Apia urban area), the influence of national politics and trends will grow.

Overall consensus has already evolved in many ways to take into account new social trends (for instance allowing children to take part in family discussions) and its capacity to survive in the future depends on these kinds of adaptations. Increased circulation of information, higher levels of education, particularly among young women, the increasingly frequent recourse to the courts for the redress of human rights grievances, greater emphasis on market economics and the acquisition of personal wealth etc., will put pressure on the system to eventually become more inclusive at the family and village levels or ultimately disappear. The role of consensus at the national level has essentially disappeared (and in a sense national politics have reverted to the *itu malo* versus *itu vava'i* tradition). But this is seldom stated publicly and consensus is still held up as a defining characteristic of Sāmoanness. At the same time, the rise of dissent is still given little acknowledgement and yet it permeates public life.

NOTES

- 1 Tuwera (2002: 83), quoting Opetaiā Dereketirua, writes that, in Fiji, an important role of the *matanivanua* (heralds) is to 'digest' dissent: '... They press down (*bika*) and hide within their own hearts the angry words of the chiefs about the people, and they hide also in their hearts the angry words of the people about the chiefs; and for this reason they are called the "Stomach of Evil" (*kete ni ka ca*) for their first responsibility is to preserve the land from weakness of destruction through dissention . . .'
- 2 Consensus is nonetheless viewed as a basic ingredient of democracy. It is a generally accepted view in Western political theory that without consent there cannot be democracy. Consent is effected through a large part of the population agreeing to the political regime, i.e. establishing a consensus about the type of rule and the type of rulers. The question then is more how much or what kind of consensus is necessary for democracy to flourish. Some theorists argue that too much consensus may lead to a lack of expression of difference which is precisely what democracy thrives on. For a discussion on this see Partridge (1971) and Sartori (1997).
- 3 *Fa'alupega* are sets of ceremonial greetings associated with a particular person, a *matai* title, a lineage, a village, a sub-district or a district. *Fa'alupega* often include information about rank, status and certain attributes specific to the unit being mentioned. It is considered an essential and a proper part of Sāmoan custom and tradition that *fa'alupega* are cited whenever either of the mentioned units is referred to in ceremonies and formal conversation as they confirm the importance and special status of the unit being greeted.
- 4 For example, even though one of the authors is the oldest of the titleholders in his family, his cousin who is much younger than him has held the title several years more than him. Subsequently, his cousin is the senior titleholder. On the other hand, if he were the oldest of the four that were given the title at the same time, then the younger titleholders would normally give him the respect due to an older person.
- 5 In reality, however, only certain people are notified: they may be the senior members of the family in terms of age, titles held, or the most senior member of certain lines (genealogical connections) of the family.
- 6 There are some families whose titles have remained vacant for up to 20 years or even more.
- 7 We interviewed 22 respondents over a two-week period in January 1999. Our objective was to conduct a qualitative, not quantitative survey. Over half the interviews were conducted in English. Some were conducted in Sāmoan and others in both languages. Some took place in offices (including in private businesses, government departments, church buildings and halls, union halls, at the University of the South Pacific Alafua campus), others in homes, one in a village pastors' house, one in a bar/restaurant. All interviews except one, were carried out during the day, with the researchers going to people's workplace (formal and informal), residence or place where they spend time.
- 8 Names are withheld when using direct quotes to maintain the anonymity of those we interviewed.
- 9 Another expression conveying this idea is '*E lē uma le faiaso*' (there will be more days).
- 10 Shore writes: 'The distinction between *amio* and *aga*, two important "sides" of each person, is really a kind of Sāmoan ideology distinguishing human nature from culture'. *Amio* is behavior associated with a lack of rules or laws, or 'a Hobbesian state of nature marked by passions, self-interests, and ubiquitous conflict' (1982: 156–157). *Aga*, on the contrary, is representative of socially appropriate behavior. If we were to use Shore's model, we could say that consensus is part of *aga* while dissent is a reflection of *amio*.
- 11 Tcherkézoff, in a paragraph dedicated to consensus in Sāmoa, writes that 'It is obvious that consensus is always more of less forced (*Il est évident qu'un consensus est toujours plus ou moins forcé*)' (1998: 326).
- 12 Vailima is the locally brewed beer.
- 13 This comment is echoed by Macpherson who, writing about the nomination process of *matai*, states that, 'With an increasing number of family members involved in the

- nominating process and a growing number demonstrating service and an extended range of valued skills, it has become increasingly difficult for *aiga* to agree on a single candidate' (1999: 84).
- 14 One critic felt that this was particularly the doing of Tuiātua Tupua Tamasese who brought in new ideas from overseas and sought to increase the number of *matai* so that he could increase the number of votes in his favour.
 - 15 Tcherkézoff makes a similar assessment of the role of 'new' churches: 'The problem is that these new churches are relatively independent of the *fa'amatai* and that they therefore, put forward a discourse based on the individual relationship between God and the believer's soul (*Le problème est que ces nouvelles Églises sont relativement indépendantes du faamatai et que, par conséquent, elles entonnent un discours du rapport individuel entre Dieu et l'âme du croyant*)' (1997: 342).
 - 16 The respondent who mentioned this aspect in particular, compared Sāmoa to Tokelau, which in its new institutions has created a means of representation specifically for women and youth. She felt that in Sāmoa, the many social and economic changes taking place required parallel changes in power structures.
 - 17 One respondent stated that 'there is no dissent in Sāmoa because in consensual decision making there is no dissent.'
 - 18 For a more complete definition, see Va'ai, 1999: 54–55.
 - 19 Macpherson argues that this is already being done: 'There have been cases of individuals claiming that individual rights embodied in the Western Sāmoan constitution take precedence over rights conferred on *matai* by tradition and legislation. Thus, individuals have claimed, for instance, that the right to freedom of religion takes precedence over the traditional practice of a family worshipping where its *matai* choose . . . each successful challenge erodes the unity of the group and the authority of traditional leadership' (1999: 89).
 - 20 See Tuimaleali'ifano 1997: 16–18. He adds that, 'although many commentators have described the growth of disputes appearing before the court, like defining *fa'asāmoa*, the exact number for individual years can be elusive.' There is no doubt, though, about the large backlog of cases.
 - 21 There were two *Mau* (or large protests) in Sāmoan history. The most significant one occurred in the late 1920s and was aimed at protesting against some of the policies of the New Zealand administration. *Mau* means opinion. See Field, (1991).
 - 22 Surprisingly, none of our respondents mentioned banishment as a restraint on dissent.
 - 23 Some would argue that compliance is an essential feature of Sāmoan consensus and one that holds the *fa'amatai* together. Thus, removing this aspect of consensus would bring about its demise. We would argue that progressively more and more people will question this aspect of consensus and that, therefore, a more flexible or tolerant attitude towards non-compliance may help preserve consensus.
 - 24 Va'ai (1999: 54) also states that the preferred way of solving differences about these issues is through '*faaleleiga*' (reconciliation) or *seumālō* ('an impartial appeal to disputants to reconcile'). As pointed out by Cluny Macpherson (pers. com.), 'ironically, land and titles disputes can produce high degrees of consensus among members on each of the sides of a dispute.' We could add to this though that as disputes go through different stages or go repeatedly through the court process, the consensus established at one point may disintegrate at a later stage. This is illustrated in Tuimaleali'ifano's (1997) thesis on the dispute over the *tama'aiga* title in Falelatai.
 - 25 Western democratic theory does not oppose consensus and majority rule.
 - 26 According to Partridge (1971: 132), 'entrenched consensus' or 'élite consensus' is set and determined by the élites who have the greatest say on values and issues and who control public debate, dissemination (or lack thereof) of information, and the institutions which effect policies. This kind of consensus does not provide room for dissent since the 'agenda' is already strictly set. This is akin to what Moscovici and Doise call '*consensus omnium*' which is guided by adherence to a 'truth' which must not be questioned. '*Consensus omnium*', according to these authors, leads to treating 'anyone who proves an

- obstacle to this consensus' with 'intolerance' '... since truth cannot be manifest so long as someone rejects it' (1994: 11).
- 27 Tuimaleali'ifano (1997) goes so far as to refer to Sāmoa as a gerontocracy.
 - 28 Aiono gives the following definition of *soālaupule*: '*Soa* means two or a pair; *lau* means to recite or declare; *pule* means to distribute or portion out and conveys authority. The given meanings of the three words in *soālaupule* should make it easy to understand the inclusive decision-making process pertinent to the *fa'amatai*. The *fa'amatai* insists on making decisions on a consultative basis. At least two people are involved in the making of a decision, but the ideal is to include and involve all the relevant people' (1992: 123).
 - 29 As Stephanie Lawson (1996: 119) points out, '... the concept of *fa'asāmoa* is construed in terms which imply a unitary cultural entity encompassing the whole of the Sāmoan people'.
 - 30 Tcherkézoff writes 'Once all the arguments put forth have been exhausted, a persisting but non-vocalised opposition does not prevent everyone from drinking the ceremonial drink in the same cup (the kava, drink of the gods and ancestors); thus this union sanctioned by the ancestors cannot be undone (*Une fois que les arguments exprimés sont épuisés, la persistance d'une opposition non verbalisée est une autre chose qui n'empêche pas que tout le monde boive la boisson cérémonielle dans la même coupe (le kava, boisson des dieux et des ancêtres)*' ainsi cette union sanctionnée par les ancêtres ne pourra plus être défaite' (1997: 326).
 - 31 The circular basis of society is further symbolised by the shape of the *fale fonu* which brings *matai* in a circle around the *tanoa*. See Tcherkézoff, 1997.
 - 32 See Aiono's diagram of overlapping circles which together make up the *fa'amatai* (1992: 124).
 - 33 Roland Bleiker (2000: 189) writes, 'Much of modern thought has revolved around the juxtaposition of antagonistic bipolar opposites, such as rational/non-rational, good/evil, just/unjust... One side of the pairing is considered to be analytically and conceptually separate from the other... The crucial spaces between them, the grey and undefinable voids, remain unexplored.'
 - 34 Asofou So'o (2002) illustrates the increasing competition for parliamentary seats from 1958 to 2001. While in 1958 31 MPs were 'elected unopposed... in the last general election, in 2001, only one seat was not contested' (2002: 228). At the same time, the number of candidates has increased from 41 in the 1961 election to 153 in the 2001 election (the highest number, 195, was in the 1982 election) (2001: 5).
 - 35 Tofilau Eti was Prime Minister of Sāmoa until November 1998 and subsequently passed away. He has been replaced by Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi who leads the HRPP.
 - 36 James Scott defines the public transcript as 'the self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen' (1990: 18) It also refers to the communication that generally occurs between subordinate and dominant groups in society, where power relations are upheld and not questioned. See Scott 1990, Chapt. 3 in particular, p. 18. For a definition of the 'official transcript', see p. 87.
 - 37 This explanation for accepting 'ideological hegemony' is provided by Scott: 'The expectation that one will eventually be able to exercise the domination that one endures today is a strong incentive serving to legitimate patterns of domination... it would help explain why so many age-graded systems of domination seem to have such durability' (1990: 82).
 - 38 For instance, in reference to Falelātai, Tuimaleali'ifano (1997: 55) describes two forms of banishment: 'In the first form, detractors are cut off from participation in local governance but are allowed to remain on their land. The second form is more serious and is commonly known as *ati ma le lau*, meaning family dislocation from the village. Anything left standing is slashed and burnt. Associated with this form is the deletion from memory of any form of existence, past, present or future'.
 - 39 The most infamous recent example of this was the shooting and killing of Nu'utai Māfulu in front of his family in the village of Lona in Fagaloa. For a brief description of this case, see Va'a, 2000: 158–160.
 - 40 There was talk at this time about creating a second chamber of parliament for representatives of the *tūmua ma pule*.

- 41 On the Sāmoan emphasis on relationships, see Shore, 1982.
- 42 Similarly, there is a lack of what Scott (1990: 128) calls 'autonomous social spaces' which favor the development of a 'hidden transcript'.
- 43 For an informative description of village controls, see Shore 1982, particularly Chapter 9. See also Lawson's assessment of the 'oppressive' nature of the *fa'amatai* (1996: 154).

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