



When Culture Is Not A System: Why Samoan Cultural Brokers Can Not Do Their Job

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ABSTRACT *In independent and American Samoa, Samoan representatives have historically been successful at furthering their communities' interests when dealing with various colonial regimes. Yet during my fieldwork in California, I kept witnessing failed encounters between Samoan migrants and government officials. I argue that government officials helped create these problems through the ways they expected Samoan migrants to act as culture-bearers. I conclude by exploring how cultural mediators become the focal point for tensions generated by the contradictory assumptions government system-carriers and Samoan culture-bearers hold about how to relate to social orders.*

KEYWORDS *Migrants, welfare, cultural mediators, political representation*

Since the 1970s, government bureaucracies from Singapore to Sweden have gradually determined that a population's cultural diversity requires bureaucratic support, ideally to create a level playing field (Dusenbery 1997; Greenhouse 1998; Mackey 2002; Povinelli 2002). As a consequence, government bureaucracies often encourage their employees to take others' cultures into account when providing services. Yet as many analysts of multiculturalism have pointed out, using culture as a category for conceptualizing a citizenry's differences is a complicated venture with its own unintended consequences – frequently leading to essentialized and essentializing uses of the concept of culture (Briggs 2001; Handler 1988; Mackey 2002; Orta 2004; Santiago-Irizarry 1996; Taylor 2003). Janelle Taylor (2003) has pointed out that often bureaucratic institutions¹ attribute culture unevenly, presuming that only select outsiders are culture-bearers. The institutions and their employees tend to view themselves as acultural, unlike their clients whom they perceive as cultural beings. When clients enter these institutional contexts, they are figured

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as culture-bearers, in contrast to an institution's employees, who are figured as system-carriers. Culture-bearers often face particular strains or limitations because they alone are marked as 'having culture' in these contexts (Briggs 2001; Santiago-Irizarry 2003). This difference, between being a culture-bearer or a system-carrier, contributes to the inequalities and miscommunications that often accompany these encounters since participants understand themselves to be connected to different and perhaps incompatible forms of social orders. These can be social orders that encourage people to deploy distinctive and often clashing social strategies. In this sense, the difference between being a system-carrier and a culture-bearer is a difference in reflexivities, by which I mean the ways that people understand their own possibilities and restrictions in relation to what they themselves are conceptualizing as social order. To explore the price people pay for being cultural-bearers in 'spaces of no-culture' (Taylor 2003), I examine how migrants from Samoa navigate government bureaucracies. In this article, I focus on the price paid when U.S. government agencies required that someone act as a Samoan cultural broker, translating knowledge between system-carriers and culture-bearers in a fashion that is inappropriate from a Samoan cultural perspective.

Being Explicit about Being Samoan

Migrants engaged in the project of being Samoan seemed to be a particularly felicitous group to study, since if asked, they can easily talk about what constitutes Samoan culture. When I asked a Pacific Island trainer from the Department of Human Services if Samoan social workers were distinctive students, he answered by comparing training sessions with Samoans and Cook Islanders.² In these sessions, he asks Samoan and Cook Island social workers what their cultural values are. Samoan social workers always answered quite easily – rattling off four or five values that they thought were core Samoan cultural values.³ The Cook Island social workers always struggled to come up with unifying values. This is not to say that people engaged in being Samoan are much better at being cultural than those concerned with being a Cook Islander. Rather, people engaged in being Samoan were more comfortable describing themselves explicitly as cultural beings using a list of four or five core values. Other anthropologists of Samoans have documented their interlocutors' comfortable willingness to be explicit about Samoan culture and values⁴ in non-bureaucratic contexts (Drozrow-St. Christian 2002, Mageo 1998, Shore 1982, Va'a 2001). As Bradd Shore has pointed out, there are several differently nuanced words in Samoan for culture – *aganu'u*, *aga*,

or *fa'asamoa* (Shore 1982:221–222). Even linguistically, the culture concept and its equivalents are relatively accessible categories for Samoan speakers. Government bureaucrats did not have to teach Samoan migrants that they were culture-bearers, they already knew that they had a culture. The criticism that scholars have levied against bureaucratic treatment of culture – that it presupposes culture is static and rule-governed – has not been a problem that my interlocutors ever voiced. They seemed comfortable joining government bureaucrats in essentializing Samoan culture.

Since both the people engaged in the project of being Samoan and the bureaucrats they encounter are willing to treat Samoan culture as bounded and predictive of behavior, one might expect the interactions between these culture-bearers and system-carriers to go smoothly. Readers familiar with the history of Samoan colonialism might be as surprised as I was that I kept encountering failures instead of successes as my interlocutors tried to navigate U. S. government bureaucracies. After all, the history of Samoan colonialism is full of accounts in which colonial indirect rule enabled Samoan chiefs to invoke cleverly and effectively reified notions of Samoan culture for their district, village or family's benefit (see Meleisea 1987a, 1987b). Even my earlier fieldwork in New Zealand among Samoan migrants led me to believe that mutually agreeing to essentialize Samoan culture could be to Samoan migrants' benefit (Gershon 2001a, 2001b). Yet despite my interlocutor's comfort at being culture-bearers, they still faced many problems with the ways in which U.S. government bureaucracies required them to represent Samoan culture, especially when the bureaucracies expected them to act as cultural brokers.

I conducted fieldwork with Samoan community-based organizations in San Francisco in 1998, after scholars, inspired by anthropology's reflexive turn (see Song's article, this volume), became prolifically concerned with how anthropologists use culture (Abu-Lughod 1991; Brightman 1995; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Wagner 1981; Yengoyan 1986 among many others). As a result, I had grown suspicious of my own inclinations to bear witness for Samoan culture, or social orders in general.⁵ The people I met while doing fieldwork had no such reservations. They readily depicted the social orders they understood themselves to be engaged with as cultures or systems, and rarely confused one with the other. Although terms like 'culture' and 'system' are often analytical terms used exclusively by the anthropologist, in my fieldwork and in this article, this is not the case. All my interlocutors used the terms 'culture' and 'system' to describe social orders people engaged with. Those who discussed

belonging to a system never described the system as cultural, and those who talked about belonging to a culture never described the culture as a system. For my interlocutors in the field, these were two distinct forms of social orders, and each form of social order empowered at the same time as it limited the strategists involved. Thus in this article, social orders will be the general term, with culture and system deployed as ethnographically nuanced terms specific to Samoan culture and government bureaucratic systems.

I call reflexive the stances described by my interlocutors of how one can be a social strategist relating to a social order, defined either as culture or as system. Reflexivity – seeing oneself as a social strategist both limited and empowered by the structures of a social order – is my term, culture and system those of my interlocutors. An important way in which Samoan culture as a social order differed from a government system is in the kind of movements, or translations, between social orders that each tacitly allowed. For reasons I will discuss later, those engaging with a Samoan cultural order did not believe that people could move easily across multiple social orders, while those engaging with a government system did. Thus people had strikingly different beliefs about whether translation was possible, depending on what they understood about how people can engage with social orders. Translation is thus a social strategy that depends on the kinds of agency people on the ground believed to be realizable. Whether or not translation was socially possible is, in this sense, a question of reflexivity.

System-Carriers versus Culture-Bearers

To understand how system-carriers and culture-bearers clashed during my fieldwork, I turn now to an incident that occurred while I was studying family-government interactions among Samoan migrants in California. While I was volunteering with Samoan community organizations in San Francisco, one of the organizations, the National Office of Samoan Affairs, was evicted. This organization was established in 1976 to help migrants from independent and American Samoa. Over the years the National Office of Samoan Affairs (NOSA) provided many services – job training, parenting classes, legal advocacy, translations for city social workers and so on. By the time I began fieldwork in 1998, the office's major focus was housing a community day school designed to help Samoan high-school students on the verge of dropping out. This school was an innovative program run by the San Francisco school district. Students facing expulsion were placed in special classrooms housed by various community organizations throughout the city. The scattered community day

schools were all run through a central office and the school principal, Ben (who was not Samoan), oversaw the satellite schools.

During the eviction, Alofa, the head of the NOSA's San Francisco branch, tried to get assistance from Ben. The relationship between Alofa and Ben was ill-defined – no one knew who was responsible for what at the NOSA school. Alofa was convinced that the principal, not NOSA, had primary responsibility for the school. From a Samoan perspective, Ben was the 'chief' of the school – the one who allocated resources and should resolve any school-related problems. He was in charge of the teacher and the teacher's aide at the school – he paid their salaries and could hire or fire them. But Alofa oversaw the actual classroom. She called the parents when the students skipped class. She was instrumental in deciding who would be the teacher and the teacher's aide. Several of the students who attended the school were under juvenile probation, and Alofa was their case manager. So what Ben decided affected Alofa's work life, but he had no actual say over what she did.

Alofa realized that if NOSA were evicted, then the school would be shut down. She was not on particularly good terms with Ben because their interests often clashed. So she was not eager to ask for his help or to let him know that she was facing an eviction. It took her a few months before she was ready to approach him. By that time NOSA no longer simply needed money for the landlords, they urgently needed a new location. Alofa and I drove over to the school's headquarters, which consisted of a set of trailers in a large parking lot in a bustling Latino neighborhood. We sat down in front of Ben and Alofa humbly laid out the problem. She pointed out that the school system had several empty schools under their jurisdiction and asked if perhaps one could be given to NOSA. Since an empty school had already been given to the Office's rival Samoan community organization, this did not seem like an unreasonable request. Ben was reluctant to do anything. He explained that he too was caught in the system and he wasn't able to get anything done that he wanted.⁶ He went into great detail, discussing all the things he tried to accomplish, but couldn't because of the system. Finally he told Alofa that no, he wouldn't be able to help, the system was too overwhelming. Alofa listened to this patiently, but when we left his office, she turned to me furious. She said – *no matai* (chief) would ever do anything like that. When I asked her what she meant, she explained that a Samoan chief would have simply listened, nodded, and promised to do what he could. He would have accepted responsibility, and under no circumstances would he have mentioned how difficult his own position was.

Alofa was responding to Ben's plea for empathy – his insistence that she accept his 'no' because she understood his perspective and his own narrated limitations. Readers who have dealt with bureaucrats in other contexts may find this tactic familiar. Being asked to sympathize with the person who is rejecting one's plea is a bit difficult to swallow. Ben was asking for an empathetic response that he was not ready to reciprocate. Alofa was also responding to another aspect of Ben's positioning: his reluctance to fully inhabit his role as principal, as 'chief' of the school. This is antithetical to how people engaged in being Samoan will discuss a subject's connection to a social order. From a Samoan perspective, people embody social order, they don't mediate social orders. People have a finely nuanced set of Samoan role expectations for public contexts (Shore 1982). In Samoan contexts they will interpret and anticipate each other's behavior based upon each one's structural place within a context which is determined by categories such as the hierarchical position of one's family, one's gender, age, religion, and marital status. While the bureaucrats I met could spend a considerable amount of discursive energy trying to separate themselves from their roles, presenting themselves as personalities compelled by a system that they personally wished to exceed, my interlocutors engaged in being Samoan had no interest in exceeding the social orders with which they interacted.

To a certain degree, both Ben and Alofa were responding to shared assumptions about sociality. They both understood that people are connected in a myriad of ways, and that every social interaction contains the question: which kinds of connections will be made visible in this moment? The crucial, and in this case insulting, difference lay in how they understand people's relationship to their roles. The conflict lay in the different ways in which both Ben and Alofa thought it possible to be reflexive about one's connection to a larger social order. Ben portrayed his role as creating a barrier, a limitation on how he and Alofa can connect. To embody his role fully would be to sever connections with Alofa, to only speak the 'no' of the system. Only by displaying the ways in which they are both constrained, both limited and only partially committed to a system that hinders, does Ben reveal his other ways of connecting with Alofa beyond his official role. Alofa, however, construed the matter very differently. For her, disenchantment with roles and systems does not forge commonalities. Rather, potential unity lies in how well one embodies one's role – the shared order that roles contain is the basis for sociality.

This is the story of a commonplace clash, but a clash of what? This is not the now familiar anthropological story of a clash of world views, where mean-

ings and frameworks collide. This is not a tale about how people from one culture interact with people from another culture. My Samoan interlocutors were cosmopolitan, and certainly were familiar with operating within non-Samoan frameworks. Although two different understandings of how one is agentive in a system were at stake, this is not a story of misunderstandings or translations waiting to happen. My interlocutors were versatile in many different contexts. Neither the migrants nor the government officials I spoke with were operating solely within one framework. There is no single culture serving as a unifying backdrop for either actor. Ben had moved to the United States from the Philippines when he was a child, and still was immersed in transnational family connections. Alofa had years of experience in *NOSA*, was married to a man from Louisiana who claimed to be descended from Africans and native Americans among others, and went to a non-Samoan church. This is not to say she is any less Samoan, but to see her as operating only in terms of what an idealized Samoan would know does not do justice to her complex cultural expertise. In short, to see this as a collision of culture would erroneously presume that worldviews exist prior to the ways in which people form boundaries and distinctions in this intersection.

If this was not a clash of cultures, then what kind of clash was it? I would like to argue that it was a clash of reflexivities – a collision between someone who regarded himself as connected to a system and someone who saw herself as engaged with a culture, in particular, Samoan culture. This kind of clash happens frequently, especially in the intersection between government bureaucracies and migrant families. In these situations, bureaucrats often require that community representatives or family members stand for and translate their cultural order. To serve in this capacity, however, requires that they reframe the culture they represent to make it fit the parameters of the bureaucrat's system. As a consequence, Samoan community workers often find themselves negotiating spaces constructed as intersections – between cultures or between systems. Yet from a Samoan perspective, as I will discuss, being a culture-bearer is antithetical to being a translator. The conundrums the Samoan community workers encounter in these spaces reveal conflicting assumptions about how one can relate to social orders – as Samoan culture or as a bureaucratic system. Alofa was caught between incompatible alternative ways of acting as a social strategist in a context where one's relationship to a social order determines how one is strategic.

Two different forms of reflexivity are at stake in this intersection between government officials/system-carriers and Samoan culture-bearers (be they

Samoan family members or Samoan community organizers). There is the reflexivity already mentioned – the ways in which people view themselves as social strategists engaged with a social order that both limits and enables their efficacy. My Samoan interlocutors would describe operating within a Samoan context as though Samoan culture was a social order with role-specific hierarchies, and with roles clearly compartmentalized. They, however, never described their cultural orders as systems. Government bureaucrats would describe bureaucracy similarly; they too saw themselves as belonging to a system that was composed of clearly compartmentalized roles. Yet they would not describe bureaucracy as cultural, and indeed often seemed to view bureaucracy as culturally neutral.

An interrelated form of reflexivity, a second-order reflexivity, also comes into play here, involving how one construes others as social strategists. In the moments when system-carriers and culture-bearers interact, not only are people explicit about their relationships to a social order, be it culture or system, they also openly acknowledge that the other person is engaged with a different social order. Government bureaucrats know when they are dealing with a Samoan family or a Samoan community organization that Samoans have culture. In turn, the people they encounter know that bureaucrats have a system.

Reflexivity in a Samoan Perspective

In the intersection between government systems and cultural families, the U.S. government system often will rely heavily on two sorts of cultural mediators to navigate these intersections – representatives and translators. Representatives are mediators who are expected to speak for the interests of their communities. This type of mediator is one that migrants engaged in the project of being Samoan can often easily produce. The second kind of mediator that government systems require is a cultural translator – those who are expected to solve problems created by the disjunctures between bureaucratic efforts to regulate families and the ways in which people are living their lives. These mediators are often community workers who are expected to translate – linguistically and culturally – in order to resolve the problems that government bureaucracies have framed as cultural misunderstandings.

Governments require these two forms of cultural mediators to promote a specific form of multiculturalism. This multicultural governance hinges upon supporting and interacting with ethnic communities as entities with unified needs and agendas. Not surprisingly, when bureaucracies define differences as

cultural, cultural mediators are seen as conduits for circumventing the cultural misunderstandings that are potentially inherent in any cross-cultural interaction. Manuals and articles on how to be a cultural broker have sprung up (see Gregory 1993; Jezewski 1995, and National Center for Cultural Competence 2004), providing instructions on how best to mediate between cultures and systems. So as governments increasingly invoke multiculturalism as a lens through which to understand populations, cultural brokers become more and more fashionable from schools' or welfare services' perspectives. Yet people engaged in being Samoan are often ambivalent about this type of translator and frequently do not trust them enough to allow them to occupy their governmentally assigned role.

What do the two kinds of cultural mediators that multicultural governments require look like from a Samoan perspective? There are aspects of both representatives and translators that resonate strongly with the ways in which my interlocutors would discuss cultural agency. While moving between two cultures is an act of translation, it is also always an act of representation – people are always speaking for what a culture is meant to be at the same time as they are re-contextualizing cultural knowledge. From a Samoan perspective, it is this act of representation that is most salient and achievable. Readers familiar with Samoan social organization are aware that every Samoan extended family has at least one chief, a person who speaks for and about the family's interests in political contexts. This chiefly role is what Alofa claimed Ben failed to perform. It is this long-standing tradition of such representation that has led people in Samoa to declare that they were 'democratic' (in the form of political representation) centuries before colonialism (see Tcherkézoff 1998).

Yet Samoan chiefs are not Samoan social workers. Thus the question becomes how and when do the forms of representation people engaged in being Samoan regularly practice become relevant in their encounters with government bureaucracy. To address such representation, and by this I mean representation with a political edge – that is, how people stand for and speak for others in a Samoan context – I turn to what it means to be a chief in Samoan communities.

Every extended family has a chief, a person who speaks for the family's interests in different contexts – village council meetings and in various ritual exchanges such as weddings and funerals. Chiefly titles are not inherited through primogeniture: when a title becomes available, the elders of the family hold several meetings and decide who should be the next title-holder. There

are two kinds of chiefs, high chiefs (*ali'i*) and talking chiefs (*tulafale*). Every high chief has a talking chief who speaks for the joint title in ritual encounters. These two kinds of chiefs express power in two different ways. The high chief is the decision-maker, the arbitrator, the one who weaves together the differing political positions that people take into a unified moment that the family or the village adopts (Tcherkézoff 1993). The high chief embodies the moments in which group relations can become unified wholes. The talking chief is, conversely, the boundary-maker (*ibid.* 1993). He is the active one, the one who discusses people's genealogical connections, making visible the interconnections that link all those present at a ceremonial meeting (which always also entails disregarding other possible connections). The talking chief performs the tasks in Samoan contexts that are most analogous to the ones required by cultural mediators who represent. Talking chiefs also express publicly the linguistic markers that are commonly understood to index tradition – metaphors, mythical allusions – as well as delineating people's genealogical paths (for fuller accounts of Samoan chieftainship, see Duranti 1994; Shore 1982; Tcherkézoff 1993, 1998, 2000).

I have been describing chiefs as representatives of extended families and political actors in village contexts. This is no accident – Samoan social organization historically has been decentralized. Being able to represent or stand for a village, sub-district, district, or island has been a highly contested achievement. The hierarchy among chiefs is most clearly delineated within villages, and when comparing chiefs from different islands or different districts it is often difficult to evaluate which title is more prestigious. Most chiefly titles do not belong to a centralized hierarchy – their relative status can only be determined adequately on a village level. While conceptually it should be possible to compare titles from an outside perspective, in practice this stance is too fraught to be tenable.

Migrating created a new twist in this tension between village practice and nationwide ideology. When people migrated, they joined neighborhoods with people who originally belonged to many different Samoan villages. When they began to form new churches, this immediately became a problem. In Samoa, the village church hierarchy and the village chiefly hierarchy are symbiotically intertwined, but in practice serve as sources for different forms of power. While the minister provides spiritual leadership for the village, he is not supposed to be intimately involved in governing the village. The national church administration has placed him in the village after seminary training, and ideally has chosen a village where the minister has no relatives. He can

not hold a title and is not expected to help decide the village's daily functioning. Church positions, such as deacon, treasurer, and secretary, will be held by *matai*, but this tends not to generate most of the struggles for power. This separation was impossible to preserve in migration, where no village hierarchy is present to serve as a blueprint for various church roles.

Because the Samoan churches in diaspora have, out of necessity, members from different villages, congregants cannot determine status by comparing chiefly titles. People got into bitter conflicts when they tried to determine the status of various titles on an inter-village level within diasporic churches. For those involved, it would be insulting to attribute a higher status to a title from another village. Consequently, migrants were not able to recreate village hierarchies overseas successfully. A minister in Wellington explained to me that this was one of the most positive outcomes of migrating to New Zealand. He said that in New Zealand, every chief was equal – no one is greater than any one else. From his perspective, migration had formed a more harmonious space, without many of the conflicts that shifting hierarchies fostered in Samoa.

But this new equality also left Samoan communities in a bind when they have to have representatives speak in government contexts. Speaking for Samoan interests in diasporic contexts is a privileged and contentious position. People are often loath to credit another chiefly title with the privilege to speak for Samoan communities in general. This too undercuts their own families' pride, or their villages' pride, or their islands' pride. There are no traditional routes through which people can fashion themselves representatives of Samoan migrant communities in political arenas. People are assigned this role by the U.S. government, not necessarily by their local Samoan communities. So, despite the fact that Samoan chiefs might seem like a readymade cultural representative to speak for Samoan interests in bureaucratic contexts, this is not easily accomplished in the diaspora. Samoan representatives are rarely chosen by the city's churches or chiefs – this position is a job that one is hired to do or volunteers to do following government expectations, not Samoan ones. Often there are no established paths towards becoming a representative endorsed by all the Samoan communities of an area. Despite various attempts over the years, there is no Samoan chief for Los Angeles, San Francisco or Seattle – the chiefly system does not reconstitute itself along spatial lines when outside of Samoa. In short, outside of independent and American Samoa, standing for Samoan communities has become a contentious and easily undermined achievement.

While migrant communities might accept people who attempt to represent Samoan culture in government settings, albeit with reservations, they tend to be far more reluctant to engage with people positioned as cultural translators. U.S. government agencies have relied on cultural translators to assist members of Samoan communities since the mid-1960s (Joan Ablon, personal communication). These cultural translators are often younger people who have had institutional training in negotiating non-Samoan contexts – social workers, lawyers, and so on. These brokers are not always well-respected in their communities. From a Samoan perspective, translators are contentious figures and their assistance is often rejected. Representatives of other Asian/Pacific Island communities in the Bay Area, such as Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese or Korean, did not seem to face similar rebuffs from their clients. This rejection is partially a result of how one understands relationships to cultural knowledge in a Samoan register. From a Samoan perspective, Samoan cultural brokers are often seen as violating cultural imperatives and as being willing to act against their own communities' interests. Yet U.S. government agencies presuppose that cultural mediation is an essential tool towards promoting cultural diversity, rewarding some people with multiple cultural fluencies who are expected to act as skillful cultural translators.

Translation is, as I have mentioned earlier, the most difficult aspect for people engaged in a Samoan perspective to accept. Here I am not talking about the linguistic act of translation – people move between languages frequently. But translation is not only about linguistic meanings. As Walter Benjamin points out in 'The Task of the Translator': 'Translatibility is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability' (Benjamin 1968:71). Benjamin urges a focus on translatability as a quality that a work or idea can possess, transforming the ways in which one thinks of translation as a process. He moves away from a form–content dichotomy, arguing that it is neither form nor content whose distinctiveness sabotages translation. Instead, translatability in Benjamin's account is dependent on the ways in which the text is intertextual in the broadest sense, the degree to which the meaning of a statement is derived from the interwoven texture of a language's words (Benjamin 1968:78). Translation thus is not derived from a one-to-one correspondence between words. Rather, the translator must respond to words' historical and emotional connotations, moving words from one web of meaning to another. Benjamin presents the possibility that some texts might not possess the quality of translatability,

although given Benjamin's intellectual investments, this is not a possibility he explores. Benjamin's suggestion that translatability exists outside of the confines of form and content, and is a quality linked to perspective, resonates with how my Samoan interlocutors would engage with cultural knowledge. Benjamin saw all great work as translatable, while from a Samoan perspective, cultural knowledge does not possess the quality of translatability.⁷

This is not to say that people engaged in being Samoan frame cultural knowledge as *literally* untranslatable.⁸ People I encountered were willing, particularly in government or school contexts, to name core Samoan cultural values – both in Samoan and English. To explain what it means to be a Samoan, people can turn to an existing set of phrases such as: *tautua* (service); *fa'aaloalo* (respect); *alofa* (compassion and love); *ava* (reverence); and so on. As I mentioned earlier, these are the terms that people representing Samoanness readily produced in the context of government training sessions when asked what Samoan cultural values were (and for which they would readily offer English translations). Yet explicating Samoan cultural values on this level is a far cry from understanding or conveying Samoan cultural knowledge. Ideological assertions of what constitutes Samoan culture are not, from a Samoan perspective, effective translations of Samoan culture into other registers.⁹ Samoanness lies not in explicit reformulations but in appropriate contextual behavior that reveals a sophisticated cultural knowledge of how the context itself has come to be.

From a Samoan perspective, cultural knowledge is not translatable largely because it is presumed always to be situated knowledge. As I mentioned, translating presumes that the cultural knowledge and cultural roles can be disentangled from their contexts. When I started trying to ask about why Samoan community workers seemed out of favor with local Samoan communities, my interlocutors would explain that Samoans didn't trust community workers, the workers were perceived as embezzling government money. Yet other figures in Samoan communities were invariably described as corrupt as well. Church ministers and chiefs were constantly being described as embezzling large sums of money. I heard many rumors of ministers who embezzled from their congregation until they were kicked out. They left for Samoa, began a church there, and when they were kicked out for embezzling in Samoa, they started a church again in New Zealand. They were always able to start churches anew. When people told me these rumors, they expressed disbelief and frustration at how willing other Samoans were to accept and respect ministers, regardless of previous failings. Some rumors of corruption

seemed more effective than others at preventing people from doing their job. The crucial difference between Samoan ministers and Samoan social workers seems to be that Samoan ministers are operating wholly within contexts shaped by Samoan expectations. Samoan ministers had clear-cut roles in Samoan contexts, roles which contained intelligible expectations, in which the mediation was between God and the community, not the community and a non-Samoan government. In short, representing is acceptable from a Samoan perspective, while translating is not.

Various ethnographers of Samoa have argued that the fluidity of social roles is contextually determined rather than determined by set attributes. People act like respectful and subservient daughters-in-law because of the context, not because those qualities are part of their internal personality (Shore 1982; Mageo 1998). One cannot choose one's role, although one can have some control over which roles are thrust upon one. The reflexivity called for by a Samoan context is the awareness of how best to embody one's role fully, to understand the ramifications of everyone's role in a given context, and to make visible the aspects of the role that are most strategically advantageous. To successfully negotiate a given situation is often also to encourage others to adopt the role that one might find most profitable for that particular encounter. Inasmuch as Samoan roles serve as a bundle of guidelines for the types of obligations and respect two people owe each other, it is important for people to be able to predict how a context will be interpreted to ensure that others adopt the most circumstantially useful role.

Other scholars of Pacific diasporas have commented on how contextually specific Pacific migrants' identity claims are (Spickard 2002; McGrath 2002; Tupuola 2004). These authors all focus on how people's identities shift depending on the context – people will claim to be Hawai'ian, Samoan, or Maori in different situations. Spickard writes:

In the first place, Pacific Islander American ethnicity seems to be situational. Dorri Nautu has Hawaiian, Filipino, Portuguese, and several other ancestries. She lives in a mixed community of part-Hawaiians, Hawaiians, and several other ethnic groups, and she is qualified to attend the university on an ethnic Hawaiian scholarship. She identifies herself more than anything else as Hawaiian. But, she says, 'If I'm with my grandmother, I'm Portuguese. If I'm with some of my aunts on my dad's side, I'm Filipino. If I'm hanging around, I'm just local. If I'm on the mainland, I'm Hawaiian (Spickard 2002:44).

This is focusing on a multiplicity of identities that scholars of Samoans have already discussed at a different level of scale. As I mentioned, both Shore (1982) and Mageo (1998) discuss how the context determines who the person is at that moment, be it a quiet and deferential daughter-in-law or a charismatic and voluble Sunday school teacher. These authors all focus on how people shift roles, personalities and identity claims as they move between contexts. Here, I am focusing on a different aspect of this phenomenon – how important the context is for determining who people can be.

The most sophisticated cultural expertise comes from understanding the rules and interconnections so well in a given context that one can elicit the desired relationships and actions from others.¹⁰ Given this, the Samoan perspective offers pitfalls for people who wish to cross between social orders by translating. Re-framing cultural knowledge becomes troublesome, overlooking how one can possess cultural knowledge in the first place. In addition, being a cultural translator undercuts other people's abilities to strategize in a Samoan manner – to be a translator undercuts others' ability to shape the role one will inhabit in a given situation. One could be acting from the vantage point of either culture at any moment. The epistemological assumptions necessary to make one predictable from a Samoan perspective are not in place when that person acts as a mediator. No wonder Samoan cultural translators are so often described as untrustworthy – the structure of their role undercuts the potential for others to be strategically effective in a Samoan register.

The role of translator is difficult for people engaged in being Samoan to accept, because it presumes substitution. Translators are all theoretically substitutable for each other from a bureaucratic perspective. Any one with the necessary cultural and linguistic knowledge is acceptable as a translator. Yet from a Samoan perspective, no one is substitutable in any context. Who they are, their genealogical and lived connections, help determine what the context will be. The problem is not so much that translators move between government systems and Samoan culture, but rather that the role of translator posits a neutral, and non-embedded position within Samoan culture. This is a position that people engaged in being Samoan do not believe can exist. Samoan community workers may seem substitutable from the point of view of government systems, but from a Samoan point of view, they are always already enmeshed within Samoan networks.

In short, while representatives are problematic from a Samoan perspective because of how Samoan hierarchies change in diaspora, translators present a paradox for epistemological reasons. When cultural mediators translate, the

action presupposes that cultural knowledge has a quality of translatability, that one's relationship to cultural knowledge is portable and mutable, not fundamentally situational. Being Samoan entails representing a contextually-bound role, staying within a Samoan perspective, not moving between perspectives. It is this epistemological assumption about how one should be related to cultural knowledge that renders cultural mediators who act as translators into people who are too unpredictable from a Samoan perspective.

The Reflexivity in a System

Thus far in my analysis, government bureaucracies and their epistemological assumptions have been in the background, tacitly framing the requirements that Samoan community workers often found difficult to navigate. I want now to turn to why a government bureaucracy might require that Samoan community workers be translators that their own communities will not support. Here I rely heavily on Niklas Luhmann,¹¹ a systems theorist whose analytical account of how systems operate resonates with the bureaucratic systems that government officials enacted and described in San Francisco (Luhmann 1990; 1995). I am using Luhmann in this analysis to understand the epistemological assumptions underlying bureaucrats' reflexivity, not to comprehend the bureaucrats' reality. In doing so, I am shifting away from Luhmann's own premises by continually re-writing people back into an account of systems. Luhmann instead argues that people, as psychic systems, and social systems are distinct and inevitably miscommunicate. According to Luhmann, every system is autopoietic – it is solely constituted by its own processes. He writes that systems 'create everything that they use as an element and thereby use recursively the elements that are already constituted in the system' (Luhmann 1995:444). All the components of a system, such as the forms and circulating knowledge, are coded, constituted and re-constituted according to the system's own criteria. This ensures that all meaning-making activities, all evaluations and all analyses can take place only within the terms defined by the particular system within which the activity takes place. Thus reflexivity in the context of a system is defined solely within the terms of that system – each system has its own unique set of principles that determine what counts as reflexivity or effective action. In short, it is inherent to how systems function that they define the world in their own terms.

While the solipsism of systems ensures autonomy, systems still require input that is not defined in terms of the system. For Luhmann, this involves a system's relationship with its environment – a system must have an en-

vironment that provides constant material for the system to re-code and thus sustain itself. The government system requires intersections with other systems that create disorders which then need to be resolved from within this system. In the intersection that I am discussing, the government system's environment is principally composed of families, and in particular cultural families. So the government welfare system requires that families exist to provide the system with unorganized chunks of knowledge that must be transformed into organized information. This is the task of the bureaucrats my Samoan interlocutors encountered – they all were translating families into the parameters of the government system. The families often reluctantly agree to participate in this re-coding in the hope that this will assist different family members in navigating other systems – the economic system or the legal system for example.

To begin exploring ethnographically how systems might define the possibilities for reflexivity in a particular context, I turn to an encounter imbued with the explicitness common to training sessions. The setting is the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department's first training sessions for case managers in the Intensive Home Based Supervision program (IHBS). This is an innovative program which hires workers from community-based organizations to assist probation officers in monitoring youth in danger of becoming the most serious of juvenile offenders. San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department has funded the program since 1996, allocating money to community-based organizations¹² which, in turn, hired a case worker to supervise between five and ten juveniles.¹³

Angela, the trainer, began by defining case management. She explained that there are three types of case management. The first type of case management involves collecting accurate information, and does not entail personal interaction. She explained that most welfare officers perform this type, and would not recognize a client if the officer saw them walking on the street. The second type of case management involves referral, and Angela did not elaborate. The third type of case management was what IHBS case managers were supposed to do – help transform families into functioning systems by assisting the family to articulate and meet mutually established goals.

Throughout the training session, Angela would discuss how to begin treating families as systems (her term), as well as describing some difficulties the case workers might face when implementing this approach. She cautioned her audience that, as case workers, they must identify clearly who their client is as they perform certain tasks. She explained that this problem arises

when one begins to view the family as a system. A case manager must constantly ask whether they are trying to assist the child, the parents, the family as a whole or sometimes even the probation officer. Another case worker from a community-based organization, Orit, interrupted Angela, and asked her if promoting the child's best interests wasn't normally also promoting the family's best interests as well. Angela was quick to explain that in fact this would be the dilemma that would constantly haunt all case managers – children's interests often diverged from the family's interests as a unit. As an example, she talked about instances when judges might decide it is in the best interests of the child to be placed in foster care, although this is clearly not in the best interests of the family.

Throughout the day, Angela proceeded to outline how case managers should respond to families as systems. Here is a typical discussion from my field notes for that day:

Angela then starts talking about strength. She says that lots of times a parent's strength and a kid's strength will work against each other. Often if you pay attention to developing or encouraging a parent or child's strength you often end up ignoring the relationship between the two of them. Individual strength can create a tug of war, but what case managers need to do is focus on allowing the relationship to flourish... She said that lots of times we see strengths in terms of how families fit into society, but that this is misleading. Instead, family-focused work means that we are concerned with family cohesiveness. Sometimes, when families fit well into society, it means that the parents are working so much that they don't have time to have meaningful communication with the kids. They are doing all they can to survive, but aren't putting any energy into making sure that the family functions as a unit.

Orit responded by saying that she has a girl who doesn't know where or what her parents do for a living. Often her clients don't know where their siblings go to school, or how they are doing in school. There isn't even basic pooled information within the family. As she says this, other people in the room start nodding furiously – this is clearly a common phenomena.

A lot of the case managers agree that families aren't communicating, that parents and kids just aren't talking at all [Field notes, May 7, 1998].

These discussions were typical of the training sessions. Angela was suggesting that all family members relate to each other as though they are part of an integrated system, and thus are circulating information in a way similar to how an idealized welfare system circulates information. None of the case managers in training found that family members behaved as system-carriers

in this sense, and most were vociferous in letting her know this. Alofa, however, normally was silent about how inappropriate this approach might be for Samoan families.

Alofa expressed a critique from the standpoint of a Samoan perspective only once during the training sessions, largely because I instigated the conversation towards the end of a long session in early June. Angela was talking about encouraging parents to meet their children's emotional needs, a perspective that I pointed out was ethnocentric since not every cultural perspective encouraged parents to see children as emotionally needy. Angela was surprised to discover (as she perceived it) that Samoans might not see their children as bearing emotional needs or requiring conversations which assessed and supported their children's emotional make-up. In what I assume was an attempt to establish a common ground, Angela asked Alofa and me how Samoan parents addressed requests for lunch money or new sneakers. In response, Alofa tried to explain that children weren't supposed to express these needs openly. Parents were supposed to anticipate the physical needs of their children. If a child asks a parent for something, the child is implicitly criticizing the parent for failing in their parental responsibilities. In general, Alofa said, children are not seen as having needs. Instead, children have a specific role that has certain duties and obligations. Parents are also occupying their role, which entails fulfilling various responsibilities towards their children. Alofa explained that this was why most of her job as a community-based worker was teaching parenting classes – because what might be culturally appropriate in Samoa was not necessarily allowed (by the government) for Samoan families living in the United States. She described how Samoan culture often encouraged parent-child relationships that are detrimental to a child's well-being from a U.S. perspective. Despite Alofa's eloquent intervention, Angela was not persuaded. She kept insisting that to be a parent meant trying to understand and respond to one's children's needs.

After the training session, as Alofa and I chatted in the parking lot, Alofa told me that Angela's reaction was typical. When she first began going to similar training sessions, she was constantly trying to explain the Samoan perspective. She quickly realized that this was pointless and she now kept quiet. She told me that she had watched amused as I tried to intervene, and only spoke up to offer me support. In teaching case managers how to think of families as systems, Angela was also teaching how to think about belonging to systems, not cultures. Alofa had learned the futility of introducing culture into this context.

As I mentioned earlier, systems are autopoietic, requiring that they sustain themselves through processes defined solely on their own terms. As a result, systems must re-code all input from their surroundings into information structured according to their own principles. Angela even refers to this coding in her initial account of the different types of case managers. She first describes case managers whose sole job is to serve the welfare system. They don't know their clients as people, only as coded or codable case files. Systems are solipsistic – requiring that all other knowledge be re-arranged into information they can process.

The re-coding can occur on various levels. Angela's first example of recoding, the welfare officer who wouldn't recognize a family outside the office, is one that only occurs on the boundaries of the family – a processing that defines how a system will refer to a family every time the system and family encounter each other. The family becomes coded as potentially changing within set parameters and with certain quantifiable features. Angela, however, was teaching case managers to make the governmental system fundamental to how families interact by transforming them into family systems modeled on bureaucratic systems. Luhmann points out that often the governmental system encroaches upon other systems, in this case the family as system, justifying its own existence while attempting to re-make families in its own image (Luhmann 1995:213–214). This increase in administration is misplaced, since it is creating a government bureaucratic order in domains not conducive to that form of order. Not surprisingly, all the people Angela was training protested that families simply don't process information in the way that she was presupposing. It is telling that Orit, the first person who spoke up to criticize Angela's approach, did so precisely by pointing to questions of knowledge circulation. In later training sessions, Angela continued to promote training families to behave as political systems. She urged case managers to try to help families create a plan of recovery, in which they schedule the changes they will make each week or each month. She was presenting the families as functional when they are self-referentially 'managed' much like government agencies. Angela was teaching how families could be functional from a bureaucratic perspective. She was teaching case managers to replace the family's unique principles of how information and resources should circulate with bureaucratic principles, such as explicit detailed time frames for implementing overarching plans.

In this context, culture and system become antithetical frames for understanding how families operate. They are so incompatible, in fact, that when, as



described above, Alofa and I suggested moments when it would be culturally inappropriate to expect families to behave as systems, Angela responded with confusion. She told us that we were presenting Samoan families as operating according to principles that families simply do not use. In this context, and others in which the system perspective dominated, families had only a limited way to be cultural. To be cultural was to present a re-codable disorder. Culture was not a social order that explained complex hierarchical relationships or that determined how knowledge and resources might circulate. Instead, culture was an explanation for communicative failures, a frame required when people did not behave according to a system's expectations. Culture thus stands for an unstable difference, one that only becomes visible in moments requiring conflict resolution. This difference is invariably located outside of the system – the welfare system and its practitioners do not have culture, only the troublesome and unpredictable clients. It becomes the role of cultural mediators, such as Alofa, to translate between cultural clients and system-carriers. This often becomes an impossible task, since the ways in which clients relate to being Samoan does not easily mesh with how government systems operate.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to return to the encounter between Alofa and Ben, in which Alofa as cultural mediator is caught in a similar trap as Ben vis-à-vis systems. Neither Ben nor Alofa exists wholly inside the context of system and this partial commitment produces parallel constraints. Ben describes the ways he exceeds the system in terms of his personality – his wishes and personal motivations. For Alofa, it is her cultural perspective that drives her to exceed the system – a position created largely by her role as defined within a Samoan social order. In general, from a system's perspective, the type of agency that people can express in these systems is invariably partial in the following sense. Because people are continually moving between systems in their own lives, they are often driven to be reflexive about the differences between them. In the process, they are ascribing to themselves a limited ability to manipulate systems. I am suggesting that Ben's appeal for empathy comes from an understanding of what one can actually do in a bureaucratic system. People's primary function in these bureaucratic systems is to re-order incoming information into packets that are usable and manageable by the particular system. The information always arrives in a disordered fashion, thus warranting this ordering process and compelling people to be translators. System-carriers are both translators in practice and reflexively understand



their own agency as that of a translator – uneasy participants responding to systemic restrictions but never wholly immersed nor fully in control in any particular system.

But Alofa engages in this work of translation under special conditions. The systemic space of the state requires that she translates, while at the same time the cultural space she is charged with translating prohibits it. From a Samoan perspective when one is being cultural, one is embodying the cultural norms without any gap between self and culture. To move across this gap would be to deny fundamentally what it means to be Samoan. Community workers are suspect, largely because they are moving between two different social orders, each with its own limitations on how one can reflexively position oneself in relation to such an order. Moving reflexively between two social orders requires a relationship to cultural knowledge and to cultural roles that can be a distanced one. This relationship to knowledge and role is inimical to Samoan conceptions of culture, as I discussed earlier.

How is reflexivity different when moving between cultures than when occupying a prescribed cultural space? When one moves between social orders, one is enacting the possibility of other rules or epistemological perspectives on the world. One is practicing the moral lessons taught through cultural relativism, that there is no single traditional code dictating how one should be. To be culturally versatile is to take a particular stance towards the ways in which selves can and should embody cultural knowledge – one sees cultural order as mutable. When being a social actor, the goal is to be able to move strategically between and across rules. This form of self-making presumes the self and the social order are fundamentally divided.¹⁴ The aim is never to bridge the gap between self and culture, but rather to use the distance between self and culture to one's best strategic advantage. To mediate culturally is to be reflexive about one's relationship to social orders, to maneuver in the strategically fruitful gap between who one is and how one can articulate this. Yet, as I have addressed earlier, this gap between self and culture is nonsensical from a Samoan perspective. To be a cultural self from a Samoan perspective is to embody one's cultural roles as fully as possible. From a bureaucratic system's perspective, translation is both inevitable and essential, from a Samoan cultural perspective, translation moves one away from being Samoan.

As governments increasingly begin to address consciously the complexities inherent in governing a multicultural population, what counts as culture in multiculturalism becomes increasingly charged. I have been arguing that government agencies often require that those designated as cultural have a

specific and self-conscious relationship to their cultural identity. These bureaucracies require that culture-bearers behave according to pre-determined cultural norms. In addition, certain cultural representatives will be designated as cultural mediators, and expected to move easily between their communities' cultural expectations and bureaucracies' system-based expectations. This type of relationship to social orders, however, is not universally acceptable. Moving between two social orders is a task that can be accomplished from a government's perspective on cultural pluralism, but not a Samoan perspective. Mediation is contentious because the ways in which people understand their relationships to systems or cultures affects the kinds of agencies they will express. This is particularly salient in multicultural contexts, in which government officials try to govern people with potentially radically different assumptions about what it means to be part of a culture.

Samoan community workers are caught between the demands of belonging to a system and the expectations of participating effectively in Samoan cultural contexts. These impasses are largely created by second-order reflexivities – the understandings people have of what it means for another to belong to a social order, be it a system or a culture. In encounters between members of Samoans migrant communities and government officials, the tensions revolve around the figure of the cultural broker. From a system-carrier's perspective, culture-bearers should be translators whose work is to re-formulate cultural knowledge into information a system processes. From a Samoan perspective, other Samoans may not be translators of cultural knowledge, but, if hierarchically appropriate, can be representatives of such knowledge. In this sense, reflexivity ironically creates not the openings between social orders, but the barriers.

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Notes

1. Taylor is concerned primarily with medical institutions (2003).
2. This interview took place in Auckland, although the majority of the ethnographic encounters described here took place in San Francisco.
3. See Mulitalo-Lauta (2000) for an extended example of common accounts of Samoan culture.

4. This appears to be an historical proclivity on the part of people engaged in the project of being Samoan, countering Roy Wagner's (1981) suggestion that anthropologists might be largely responsible for convincing others that they have a culture.
5. This unease continues, and underlies my decision to use phrases such as 'people engaged in the project of being Samoan' or 'a Samoan perspective' (which one can decide to adopt) in an attempt to avoid essentializing Samoan culture.
6. Herzfeld describes how common this is as a bureaucratic tactic (1992:145).
7. For an example of how people on the ground have beliefs about language that shape their understandings of translation, see Kapchan 2003.
8. Mattijs van de Port (1999) discusses how Serbians also see their own cultural knowledge as untranslatable – his term is 'obstinate otherness.' For van de Port, Serbians' claims of incommensurability result not from language ideology but rather as a response to experiences of violence.
9. Both bureaucratic system-carriers and Samoan culture-bearers are willing to define culture in terms of values. The difference lies in how each relates to values. The government officials will describe a person's role as an instrumental means towards achieving a value. From a Samoan perspective, roles embody values – inhabiting a role is the same as practicing or being a value. One of the consequences of this is that values are fundamentally not translatable for people engaged in being Samoan, since a value can only exist within a particular situation and performance, not abstracted from the situation.
10. A Samoan lawyer explained to me this level of expertise when discussing how Samoans recite each others' genealogies at the beginning of any political meeting with savvy. He gave me a hypothetical situation – imagine that one village is visiting another in order to gain support for their political candidate. The visiting village's orator will judiciously tweak the truth, and present the host village as connected to Malietoa, Samoa's head of state. The host village will be flattered, and unwilling to debunk this connection. In addition, they will feel magnanimous towards the visiting village for this assertion.
11. For a more detailed account of Niklas Luhmann's work and its relevance to ethnographers of bureaucracy, see Gershon 2005.
12. During 1998, 10 community-based organizations were involved. Only two of these organizations – the National Office of Samoan Affairs and the Vietnamese group – targeted a particular ethnic group.
13. Supervision involved calling every day to ensure that the youth was obeying curfew, meeting with the youth three times a week and observing the youth at school once a month.
14. This relation to social orders calls to mind a notion of performance similar to what practice theory proposes (see Giddens 1984, or Bourdieu 1977).

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