



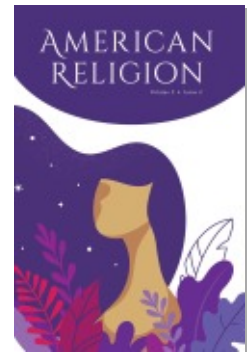
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TUI-MANU'A ELISARA AND THE AMERICAN MORMON "INTRUDERS"

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The Tui-Manu'a reigned as the supreme "king" of Manu'a Islands with a genealogical link to the god Tagaloalagi. In Samoan traditions and legends, Tagaloalagi formed the Manu'a Islands before creating the Samoan archipelago. For centuries, Polynesian legends have recognized the Tui-Manu'a title as one of the oldest in the region, with influence reaching Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and neighboring islands. Unlike other paramount chiefs throughout Samoa, everything the Tui-Manu'a touched became sacred. Possessing great *mana* (sacred power), the titleholder of the Tui-Manu'a remained a cultural symbol revered by Samoans and neighboring island chiefs as supreme. Samoa's last reigning Tui-Manu'a died at the beginning of the twentieth century, but before his death, he witnessed the transition of his islands to the US Empire. Although well-respected as a paramount ruler in the Manu'a Islands, he was committed to the Christian mission organization, the London Missionary Society (LMS). When Manu'a came under the flag of the United States, authority of the Tui-Manu'a was reduced immensely within a newly formed American Samoa. As an adamant supporter and graduate of the LMS seminary, Tui-Manu'a's "royal" declaration to deny access to other mission denominations became controversial toward eager religious missionary groups. With the eastern islands of Samoa now under the United States, Mormon missionaries used US legal concepts such as the "freedom of religion" to challenge the ruling of the Tui-Manu'a and eventually achieved their rights to evangelize their faith in the Manu'a Islands.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the “Three Powers” (Germany, Great Britain, and the United States) signed the Tripartite Convention of 1899. They carved up the Samoan archipelago, excluding the islands of Manu’a. Germany occupied the western islands of Upolu, Manono, Apolima, and Savai’i for copra plantations. In contrast, the United States acquired the eastern islands of Tutuila and Aunu’u for a military coaling station at the Pago Pago harbor. Great Britain relinquished its ties and accepted German colonies for German concessions over British claims to the Solomon Islands. To the east of Tutuila island lay the Manu’a Islands (Ta’u, Ofu, and Olosega) under the sovereign rule and authority of Tui-Manu’a Elisara, Samoa’s last reigning monarch. Eventually, the United States would control the Manu’a Islands and limit Tui-Manu’a Elisara’s chiefly *pule* (authority). In particular, Tui-Manu’a and his chiefs would be forced by new governing laws, specifically the US Constitution, to open up their villages to other religious denominations.

In April 1900, twenty high ranking *matai* (chiefs) of Tutuila and Aunu’u endorsed US occupation and agreed to “obey all laws and statutes made by the [US] government or those appointed by the government to legislate and govern.”¹ With the islands of Tutuila and Aunu’u under the US empire, US Commander Benjamin Tilley immediately put political pressure on the Tui-Manu’a to cede the Manu’a Islands to the US. During the discussions over the signing of the cession of chiefs of Tutuila, Tui-Manu’a Elisara refused to allow the US to influence his sovereign rule over his people and islands. Tui-Manu’a made it clear to Commander Tilley that, traditionally, Tutuila is part of the Atua district in Upolu, now occupied by the Germans. The Manu’a Islands are a completely distinct political-cultural entity from Tutuila.² In protest, Tui-Manu’a Elisara stated that he remained “sovereign over a sovereign state.” Tilley arrogantly replied, “whether you come or not, the authority of the United States is already proclaimed over this island.”³ Under pressures of colonial power, Tutuila, Aunu’u, and Manu’a became closely entangled in US policies within the villages and districts that once were grounds controlled by chiefly authority.

As a committed member of the London Missionary Society, Tui-Manu’a Elisara had closed off his island kingdom of Manu’a to any other form of worship,

1 J. Robert Shaffer, *American Samoa: 100 Years Under the United States Flag* (Honolulu, HI: Island Heritage Publishing, 2000), 111.

2 Line-Noue M. Kruse, *The Pacific Insular Case of American Samoa: Land, Rights, and Law in Unincorporated US Territories* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 34.

3 John A. C. Gray, *Amerika Samoa; A History of American Samoa and Its United States Naval Administration* (New York: Arno Press, 1980 [1960]), 110.

including old Samoan gods and new Christian denominations in Samoa, e.g., Methodists, Catholics, and Mormons. LMS was a Protestant organization from London made up of mostly Congregationalists. In the early nineteenth century, LMS successfully evangelized Tahiti, Society Islands, the Hervey Group, Samoa, Western Polynesia, and parts of Melanesia. In 1832, two generations before Elisara, the reigning Tui-Manu'a Tauveve had accepted LMS missionaries and officially made the eastern islands of Manu'a Christian. LMS had an immense impact on Samoans and chiefs by introducing monotheism, new laws, European lifestyles, and a concept of peace and harmony that attracted many people, including the reigning chiefs. John Garrett writes that the LMS and Samoan society "seemed to have been predestined as partners."⁴

Tui-Manu'a remained committed to his ancestral role as god-like within the Samoan cultural spirituality. He maintained the *va* or the sacred relationship between himself and his ancestors. The *va tapuia* is the reverence and respect "between all things," including the spiritual realm. Samoa's pre-contact notion of the *va* changed with the arrival of Christianity but never dissolved.⁵ Samoan chiefs embraced the new religion and respected the new institution. In the same manner, LMS missionaries knew that in order for the new religion to thrive in Samoa it would need to depend on chiefly relationships. LMS successfully worked through the *va tapuia* to build relationships with chiefs that eventually led to the acceptance of Christianity. As a result, Samoans claimed to be Christian but still accepted indigenous mythology and spirit lore.⁶ Similarly, Tui-Manu'a maintained his status as paramount chief and a committed member of the LMS denomination.

The first Latter-day Saints (LDS) missionaries arrived in Samoa thirty years after the LMS in 1863; however, it was not until 1888 that the LDS had a strong presence in the islands. With a zeal for converts, the LDS were seen as "intruders" into a stable religious situation in the Samoan islands. Naturally, the LDS and LMS competed to gain as many Samoan converts as possible, but the LMS dominated the religious landscape and developed a strong intolerance to other churches.⁷ With chiefs serving as deacons within the LMS church, they success-

4 John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Geneva, Switzerland; Suva, Fiji: World Council of Churches, in association with the Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1985), 121.

5 Brian T. Alofaituli, "Indigenous Protest in Colonial Samoa: The Mau Movements and the Response of the London Missionary Society, 1900-1935" (PhD diss., University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2017), 88.

6 Lowell Holmes and Ellen R. Holmes, *Samoa Village: Then and Now* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992 [1974]), 73.

7 R. Lanier Britsch, "The Founding of the Samoan Mission," *Brigham Young University*

fully united the villages “against the encroachment of Christian groups other than the London Missionary Society.”⁸ The Mormons faced opposition from Samoan LMS chiefs, clergymen, and European LMS missionaries.⁹ Tui-Manu’a Elisara remained faithful to the LMS and their theological teachings and, similar to hundreds of LMS-committed chiefs, refused to allow any other denominations within the village. Before the bestowal of the Tui-Manu’a title, Elisara graduated from the LMS seminary in 1887 and served as pastor of Fitiuta, then Olosega village, in Manu’a. One LMS report explained how US Mormons were casting doubts on LMS teachings, “picking holes in Christian customs,” and removing Samoans from “New Testament morality.”¹⁰ One LDS practice in particular that the LMS heavily frowned upon was polygamy. As a result, LMS missionaries advised natives to stay clear of “these new arrivals from the United States.”¹¹

Between 1902 and 1903, Mormon missionaries began proselytizing in the Manu’a Islands. With a small following, the Mormons faced opposition from former LMS pastor-turned-king, Tui-Manu’a Elisara. In February 1904, the Mormon missionary Elder A. S. Workman served in Olosega, Manu’a, for three months and often complained that village leaders halted his projects and educational programs. Families involved with the new church were either fined or punished by “old laws.” Converts were few in Manu’a, but the missionaries successfully learned the language and culture to help proselytize. European and American missionaries knew very well that once a chief converted to a religion, his entire family would follow him out of reverence of his authority.

Workman challenged the Tui-Manu’a and his authority when the United States had not officially ceded the Manu’a Islands. Unlike the LMS, Mormon missionaries were more aggressive in their approach with Samoan chiefs. Perhaps LMS missionaries came from a monarchical system in Europe and were more understanding of the system of “royal authority” as opposed to US Mormon missionaries. In mid-1904, Tui-Manu’a Elisara and four leading chiefs of Manu’a signed the Deed of Cession, formally transitioning the Manu’a Islands to the United States in return for a new school, teachers, and education for the children of his islands. Although revered by the people of Manu’a and throughout Samoa

Studies 18, no. 1 (Fall 1977): 21–22; and Lowell D. Holmes, “Ta’u: Stability and Change in a Samoan Village,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 66, no. 3 (September 1957): 337.

8 Holmes, “Ta’u Stability and Change in a Samoan Village,” 337.

9 Norman Douglas, “Latter-day Saints Missions and Missionaries in Polynesia, 1844–1960” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1974), 246.

10 L.M.S. Report from April 1, 1894, to March 31, 1895, London: Alexandar and Shephard, School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, 182.

11 Jason E. Pierce, “Unwelcome Saints: Whiteness, Mormons, and the Limits of Success,” in *Making the White Man’s West* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2016), 184.

with a genealogy that reached the highest of gods in the Samoan spiritual hierarchy, Tui-Manu'a Elisara's authority and status were reduced immediately to "district governor" and no longer recognized as supreme ruler of the Manu'a Islands.

Once the islands became a part of the US empire, Samoan chiefly authority would conflict with the newly enforced laws of the United States.¹² US laws now influenced and conflicted with Tui-Manu'a's restriction on religion and opened its borders to missionaries of new denominations. The people of Manu'a and the Samoan Islands witnessed the transfer of power and the conflict over decision making and authority between the United States and Samoa's last reigning monarch.

Unable to wield the chiefly authority, the LDS would use US legal concepts like "freedom of religion" to achieve their religious goals through legal means. As a US-based religion committed to the rules and laws of the United States, the LDS successfully used the US Constitution to overthrow chiefly authority and claims of sovereignty. Mormons believed that their form of government and belief system aligned with "constitutional guarantees of inalienable rights and liberties."¹³ In 1859 Mormon leader Brigham Young had stated, "the Constitution and laws of the United States combine the best form of Government in force upon the earth."¹⁴ Interestingly, one of the Articles of Faith of the LDS church proclaims, "We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law."¹⁵ Mormon missionaries applied their articles of faith to the US and not to Tui-Manu'a as sovereign ruler of his islands. As a US-based religion that favored the United States as a promised land for the post-resurrection appearance of Christ, the concepts of political liberty, anti-monarchical feeling, and republicanism became central to the teachings and concepts of US Mormon missionaries.¹⁶

In 1906, another Mormon missionary, Elder S. F. Smith, in Ta'u, Manu'a, again challenged the traditional authority of Tui-Manu'a Elisara when he stopped children of Ta'u village from attending a "Mormon school." Tui-Manu'a ordered the new denomination to cease. Smith claimed that since Manu'a was now under the United States, the islands, similarly to Tutuila, are confined to the US Constitution. After close review by the naval administration assigned to American

12 Gray, 126.

13 Patrick Q. Mason, "God and the People: Theodemocracy in Nineteenth-Century Mormonism," *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 363.

14 Brigham Young, "Human and Divine Government—the Latter-Day Kingdom, &c," *Journal of Discourses: Public sermons by Mormon leaders from 1851–1886* 6 (July 31, 1859): 344.

15 Mason, 354.

16 Douglas, 15–17.

Samoa (Tutuila, Aunu'u, and Manu'a), they concluded that all territory citizens must adhere to religious liberty as per the US Constitution. When the case went before the US Government, they upheld the ruling that Tui-Manu'a was "no longer King, but only district governor, and subject to the laws of the island government; the order relating to the freedom of religious belief would be enforced."¹⁷ The Secretary of the Navy abolished "all such laws or customs that interfere with religious belief as violations of the Constitution of the United States."¹⁸

The US government's policy of freedom of religion reduced Samoan authority and introduced new concepts that transformed Samoan governance. Over time, new religious denominations would lead to divisions within extended families and within villages. Missionaries of all religious institutions were aware of the influence of chiefs and that the denomination chosen by a chief became the church of the family. Democracy, the rule of law, equality, and religious freedom became a newly complicated identity for American Samoans. The chiefs of American Samoa became secondary to the President of the United States. Chiefly authority or *pule* was now filtered through a new political system. They maintained limited authority as leaders within their families and villages, but full sovereignty rested upon the United States. The American Samoan identity found another layer of complexity with the reinterpretation of authority or *pule*. Mormon missionaries in Manu'a used the political power of the colonial body to achieve their objectives.

The challenge against the Mormon missionaries in Manu'a is a story less of theological persuasion than legal contests over political authority. The US Constitution's "freedom of religion," in this imperial context, became a means of curtailing chiefly authority and allowing new religious communities to proselytize, none more vigorously than the LDS Church. As a result, the decision challenged the rights of Tui-Manu'a Elisara to protect his people from new institutions that would possibly bring divisions among families and villages. Tui-Manu'a Elisara became the last reigning Tui-Manu'a after his death in 1909, five years after signing the Deed of Cession with the United States.

17 Captain Henry F. Bryan, United States Navy, *American Samoa: A General Report by the Governor* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1927), 103.

18 Bryan, 102.