

Western Samoans

also known as “Tagata Sāmoa”

Data source: eHRAF

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** Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*

Entry tags: Religion, Oceanic Religions, Polynesia

The Samoan Archipelago is located in western Polynesia, which lies in the central Pacific. Together, the islands consist of about 3,000 square kilometers in land area. The Fiji-Tonga-Samoa area was settled between about 1500 and 1000 BC by “people belonging to the prehistoric Melanesian Lapita culture” (Bargatzky, 2009). Today, the Manu'a Island group (Ta'ū, Ofu, and Olosega), Tutuila, and 'Aunu'u, comprise the Territory of American Samoa, which was claimed in 1900. Western Samoa—including 'Upolu, Manono, Apolima, and Savai'i—was a German colony from 1900-1914, then administered by New Zealand until becoming an independent state in 1962. The first permanent European missionaries arrived in Western Samoa in 1835 (LMS and Methodists), followed by Roman Catholic priests in 1845 (Bargatzky, 2009). Christianity gained rapid influence, and today, most Samoans are devout Christians of either the Protestant or Roman Catholic denominations. This entry focuses on the time before Christian influence (about 1825), when it was still possible for ethnographers to study the traditional religious beliefs. At this time, Western Samoans possessed a pantheon of supernatural beings and ancestor-spirits, as well as religious practitioners and leaders who held great social and political influence. At the time this entry focuses on, the Western Samoan religious and political aspects of life were interwoven to the point that they are best characterized as coterminous.



Date Range: 1804 CE - 1840 CE

Region: Upolu Island

Region tags: Oceania, Polynesia, Samoa

"The Samoan Archipelago (about 3,000 square kilometers in land area) lies in western Polynesia in the central Pacific, from 13° to 15°S to 173°W. The Manu'a group (Ta'ū, Ofu, and Olosega), Tutuila, and 'Aunu'u comprise the Territory of American Samoa; 'Upolu, Manono, Apolima, and Savai'i make up the Independent State of Western Samoa" (Bargatzky, 2009). This entry focuses on the island of Upolu, Western Samoa, ca. 1829.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

— Source 1: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research*.

— Source 2: Murdock and Wilson, 1972. *Settlement Patterns and Community Organization: Cross-Cultural*

Codes 3. *Ethnology*, 11(3), 254-259.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ou08-000>
- Source 1 Description: Bargatzky, T. (2009). *Culture Summary: Samoans*. New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files.
- Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ou08-016>
- Source 2 Description: Turner, G. (1884). *Samoa, A Hundred Years Ago And Long Before: Together With Notes On The Cults And Customs Of Twenty-Three Other Islands In The Pacific*. London: Macmillan and co.
- Source 3 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ou08-017>
- Source 3 Description: Stair, J. B. (1897). *Old Samoa: Or Flotsam And Jetsam From The Pacific Ocean*. London: The Religious Tract Society.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: "Little, however, was known of these islands until 1830, when a mission was commenced there by the agents of the London Missionary Society" (Turner, 1884:2).



Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– Yes

Notes: "Throughout the Samoan group there were, in all, ten of these separate districts... In war some of the districts remained neutral, and of those engaged in the strife there might be two against one, or three against five, or, as in a late prolonged war, five against two. The district which was conquered, was exposed to the taunts and overbearing of their conquerors. But a subdued district seldom remained many years with the brand of "conquered." They were up and at it as soon as they had a favourable opportunity, and were probably them selves in turn the conquerors" (Turner, 1884:183).



Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Notes: "It is now close upon a hundred years since the Samoans had their first serious quarrel with Europeans, and which ended in a fight. I refer to the massacre at Tutuila of M. de Langle and others belonging to the expedition under the unfortunate La Perouse in 1787, and which branded the people for well-nigh fifty years as a race of treacherous savages whose shores ought not to be approached" (Turner, 1884:196).

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– No

Notes: Because the religious beliefs of the Western Samoans' were not distinct from society at large, there was not a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation; religion was just another aspect of the cultural heritage shared by all.

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– No

Notes: Because the religious beliefs of the Western Samoans' were not distinct from society at large, there was no recruitment of new members; religion was just another aspect of the cultural heritage shared by all.

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 35000

Notes: Turner, 1884:3. Because religion is coterminous with society, the societal population is reflective of the number of adherents.

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: "The priests in some cases were the chiefs of the place; but in general some one in a particular family claimed the privilege, and professed to declare the will of the god. His office was hereditary. He fixed the days for the annual feasts in honour of the deity, received the offerings, and thanked the people for them. He decided also whether or not the people might go to war" (Turner, 1884:20). "The Taulā aitu, 'anchors of the spirits,' from taula, 'an anchor,' and Aitu, 'spirit,' formed the priesthood, and possessed great influence over the minds of the people. They may be classed under four heads; viz. Prophets or Sorcerers, Family Priests, Priests of the War Gods, and Keepers of the War Gods" (Stair, 1897:70).

↳ Is there a hierarchy among these leaders:

– No

Notes: There is not an explicit hierarchy among the religious leaders. Rather, different types of religious leaders have roles and duties unique to their titles. See Stair, 1897 pages 220-228 for a detailed description of these roles.

↳ Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

– Yes

Notes: The religious leaders were believed to be able to communicate with gods (see Stair, 1897:220-228).

↳ Are religious leaders chosen:

– No

Notes: "The priests in some cases were the chiefs of the place; but in general some one in a particular family claimed the privilege, and professed to declare the will of the god. His office was hereditary" (Turner, 1884:20).



Are close followers or disciples of a religious leader required to obediently and unquestionably accept the leader's pronouncements on all matters:

– No

Notes: Although people were not expected to obediently and unquestionably accept the religious leader's pronouncements, "all the different orders of the priesthood possessed great influence over the minds of the people, who were kept in constant fear by their threats, and impoverished by their exactions" (Stair, 1897:225).

– No

Notes: See Turner, 1884, pages 180-182.

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: "There was a small house or temple also consecrated to the deity of the place. Where there was no formal temple, the great house of the village, where the chiefs were in the habit of assembling, was the temple for the time being, as occasion required. Some settlements had a sacred grove as well as a temple, where prayers and offerings were presented" (Turner, 1884:18).

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Notes: "There was a small house or temple also consecrated to the deity of the place. Where there was no formal temple, the great house of the village, where the chiefs were in the habit of assembling, was the temple for the time being, as occasion required. Some settlements had a sacred grove as well as a temple, where prayers and offerings were presented" (Turner, 1884:18).

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:

– Yes

Notes: "There was a small house or temple also consecrated to the deity of the place. Where there was no formal temple, the great house of the village, where the chiefs were in the habit of assembling, was the temple for the time being, as occasion required. Some settlements had a sacred grove as well as a temple, where prayers and offerings were presented" (Turner, 1884:18).

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: "The soul of man is called his angānga, or that which goes or comes" (Turner, 1884:8).

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body:

– Yes

Notes: "The Samoans believed in a soul or disembodied spirit, which they called the angānga. Anga means to go or come, according to the particle of direction suffixed. Anga atu means to go away; arrga mai signifies to come. The reduplicated angānga is used to designate the soul as distinct from the body, and which at death was supposed to go away from the body and proceed to the hadean regions under the ocean, which they called Pulotu" (Turner, 1884:16).

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "at death [the soul] was supposed to go away from the body and proceed to the hadean regions under the ocean, which they called Pulotu...In describing the localities about Falealupo in another chapter, we have noted some things about the lower regions which were supposed to enter from the neighbourhood of Falealupo. We know little, if anything, more of the notions which the Samoans had of a future state..." (Turner, 1884:16).

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: "at death [the soul] was supposed to go away from the body and proceed to the hadean regions under the ocean, which they called Pulotu" (Turner, 1884:16).

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined "below" space:

– Yes

Notes: "at death [the soul] was supposed to go away from the body and proceed to the hadean regions under the ocean, which they called Pulotu...In describing the localities about Falealupo in another chapter, we have noted some things about the lower regions which were supposed to enter from the neighbourhood of Falealupo. We know little, if anything, more of the notions which the Samoans had of a future state..." (Turner, 1884:16).

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: "The body was laid out on a mat, oiled with scented oil, and, to modify the cadaverous look, they tinged the oil for the face with a little turmeric. The body was then wound up with several folds of native cloth, the chin propped up with a little bundle of the same material, and the face and head left uncovered, while, for some hours longer, the body was surrounded by weeping relatives" (Turner, 1884:144).

↳ Interment:

– Yes

Notes: "The body was buried without a coffin, except in the case of chiefs, when a log of wood was hollowed out for the purpose. The body being put into this rude encasement, all was done up again in some other folds of native cloth, and carried on the shoulders of four or five men to the grave" (Turner, 1884:146).

↳ Corpse is flexed (legs are bent or body is crouched):

– No

Notes: (Turner, 1884:147)

↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):

– Yes

Notes: "The grave was often dug close by the house. They made it about four feet deep, and after spreading it with mats, like a comfortable bed, there they placed the body with the head to the rising of the sun, and the feet to the west" (Turner, 1884:147).

↳ Corpse is upright (where body is interred in standing position):

– No

Notes: (Turner, 1884:147)

↳ Re-treatment of corpse:

– Yes

Notes: "Embalming was known and practised with surprising skill in one particular family of chiefs" (Turner, 1884:148).

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: Items used during the deceased's illness were deposited into the grave (Turner, 1884:147).

↳ Personal effects:

– Yes

Notes: "...if it had been a noted warrior his grave might be surrounded with spears, or his club laid loosely on the top" (Turner, 1884:147).

↳ Other grave goods:

– Yes

Notes: "With the body they deposited several things which may have been used during the person's illness, such as his clothing, his drinking-cup, and his bamboo pillow. The sticks used to answer the purpose of a pick-axe in digging the grave were also carefully buried with the body.

Not that they thought these things of use to the dead; but it was supposed that if they were left and handled by others further disease and death would be the consequence" (Turner, 1884:147).

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

Notes: See Turner, 1884, Chapter XII: Death and Burial for a detailed description of Western Samoan burials

↳ In cemetery:

– Yes

Notes: Note that the cemetery was not communal, rather, each kin group had a respective burial ground. "There was no village burying-ground all preferred laying their dead among the ashes of their ancestors on their own particular ground" (Turner, 1884:147).

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: "The Samoans had several superior divinities and a host of inferior ones, 'lords many and gods many,' and they were also accustomed to deify the spirits of deceased chiefs" (Stair, 1897:210).

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: "There was a belief in a supreme being, Tangaloa, but Samoa probably never developed a national cult like that of the Society Islands or Hawaii. Tangaloa was a deus otiosus who withdrew after having caused the emergence of the islands and set in motion the process which led to the evolution of natural phenomena and, ultimately, humans" (Bargatzky, 2009). For a detailed description of Tangaloa, see Turner, 1884:7.

↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity:

– Yes

Notes: Turner, 1884:7

↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld):

– No

Notes: Turner, 1884:7

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: "At his birth a Samoan was supposed to be taken under the care of some god, or aitu, as it was called" (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ These supernatural beings can be seen:

– Yes

Notes: "These gods [aitu] were supposed to appear in some visible incarnation, and the particular thing in which his god was in the habit of appearing was to the Samoan an object of veneration" (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: Turner, 1884:17

↳ These supernatural beings can punish:

– Yes

Notes: "A man would eat freely of what was regarded as the incarnation of the god of another man, but the incarnation of his own particular god he would consider it death to injure or to eat. The god was supposed to avenge the insult by taking up his abode in that person's body, and causing to generate there the very thing which he had eaten, until it produced death" (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "The dispositions attributed to their aitu [gods] and sau-ālii [supernatural beings] by the Samoans varied considerably, some being considered playful and mischievous, other vindictive; whilst some again were reputed to be of mild and inoffensive temper" (Stair, 1897:229).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "The dispositions attributed to their aitu [gods] and sau-ālii [supernatural beings] by the Samoans varied considerably, some being considered playful and mischievous, other vindictive; whilst some again were reputed to be of mild and inoffensive temper" (Stair, 1897:229).

↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: "Tupua, the deified spirits of chiefs..." (Stair, 1897:210).

↳ Does the religious group possess a pantheon of supernatural beings:

– Yes

Notes: See Turner, 1884, pages 7-17 for a description of the supernatural beings' genealogy.

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model:

– Yes

Notes: See Turner, 1884, pages 7-17 for a description of the supernatural beings' geology.

Supernatural Monitoring

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Yes

Notes: "...aitu fale, or gods of the house" were capable of punishing (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Is the cause or agent of supernatural punishment known:

– Yes

Notes: "...aitu fale, or gods of the house" were capable of punishing (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Done only by high god:

– No

Notes: "...aitu fale, or gods of the house" were capable of punishing (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Done by many supernatural beings:

– Yes

Notes: "...aitu fale, or gods of the house" were capable of punishing (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Is the reason for supernatural punishment known:

– Yes

↳ Other [specify]

– Yes

Notes: Done to ensure respect towards the gods. "A man would eat freely of what was regarded as the incarnation of the god of another man, but the incarnation of his own particular god he would consider it death to injure or to eat. The god was supposed to avenge the insult by taking up his abode in that person's body, and causing to generate there the very thing which he had eaten, until it produced death" (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in this lifetime:

– Yes

Notes: "A man would eat freely of what was regarded as the incarnation of the god of another man, but the incarnation of his own particular god he would consider it death to injure or to eat. The god was supposed to avenge the insult by taking up his abode in that person's body, and causing to generate there the very thing which he had eaten, until it produced death" (Turner, 1884:17).

↳ Punishment in this life consists of mild sensory displeasure:

– Yes

Notes: "While a dead body was in the house no food was eaten under the same roof; the family had their meals outside, or in another house. Those who attended the deceased were most careful not to handle food, and for days were fed by others as if they were helpless infants. Baldness and the loss of teeth were supposed to be the punishment inflicted by the household god if they violated the rule" (Turner, 1884:145)

↳ Punishment in this life consists of sickness or illness:

– Yes

Notes: "As the Samoans supposed disease to be occasioned by the wrath of some particular deity, their principal desire, in any difficult case, was not for medicine, but to ascertain the cause of the calamity" (Turner, 1884:140).

↳ Other [specify]

– Yes

Notes: "A man would eat freely of what was regarded as the incarnation of the god of another man, but the incarnation of his own particular god he would consider it death to injure or to eat. The god was supposed to avenge the insult by taking up his abode in that person's body, and causing to generate there the very thing which he had eaten, until it produced death" (Turner, 1884:17).

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: Stair, 1897:210

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: Stair, 1897:210

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: Stair, 1897:210

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale “ceremonies” and “festivals.”

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Large feasts and festivals were present among the Samoans, but it is unclear whether participation was mandatory (Turner, 1884:20).

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A chiefdom

Notes: The Western Samoans have two levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community, which is reflective of a larger chiefdom (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, indicates that food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, indicates that food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Notes: Irrigation is not present among the Western Samoans (SCCS Variable 232: Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Notes: Irrigation is not present among the Western Samoans (SCCS Variable 232: Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– Yes

Notes: "The chief of the village and the heads of families formed the legislative body of the place, and the common court of appeal in all cases of difficulty" (Turner, 1884:177).

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– Yes

Notes: "Nor had they only the mere laws; the further back we go in their history, we find that their penalties were all the more severe" (Turner, 1884:177).

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include execution:

– Yes

Notes: "Death was the usual punishment for murder and adultery..." (Turner, 1884:177).

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include exile:

– Yes

Notes: See Stair, 1897:92-95

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include corporal punishments:

– Yes

Notes: "For adultery, the eyes were sometimes taken out or the nose and ears bitten off" (Turner, 1884:177).

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include ostracism:

– Yes

Notes: "For other crimes they had some such punishments as tying the hands of the culprit behind his back, and marching him along naked, something like the ancient French law of "amende honorable;" or, tying him hand to hand and foot to foot, and then carrying him suspended from a prickly pole run through between the tied hands and feet, and laying him down before the family or village against whom he had transgressed..." (Turner, 1884:179).

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Notes: "Having no written language, of course they had no written laws; still, as far back as we can trace, they had well understood laws for the prevention of theft, adultery, assault, and murder, together with many other minor things, such as disrespectful language to a chief, calling him a pig, for instance, rude behaviour to strangers, pulling down a fence, or maliciously cutting a fruit-tree" (Turner, 1884:177).

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Notes: The Western Samoans did not have a singular, institutionalized military. Rather, each district had a "certain village, or cluster of villages, known as 'the advance troops.' It was their province to take the lead, and in battle their loss was double the number of that of any other village. Still they boasted of their right to lead, would on no account give it up to others, and talked in the current strain of other parts of the world about the "glory" of dying in battle. In a time of peace the people of these villages had special marks of respect shown to them, such as the largest share of food at public feasts, flattery for their bravery, etc." (Turner, 1884:190).

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: The Western Samoans had no written language at the time this entry focuses on. See Turner, 1884:117.

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– Yes

Notes: "The moon was the timekeeper of the year. The year was divided into twelve lunar months, and each month was known by a name in common use all over the group. To this there were some local exceptions, and a month named after the god, who on that month was specially worshiped. It is said that of old it was universal to name the month after the god whose worship at that particular time was observed. Among a people who had no fixed astronomical dates intercalation was easy, and the names of the twelve moons kept uniform" (Turner, 1884:203).

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: Because the Samoan religious and political aspects are so interwoven, the religious group is coterminous with the society. "The Samoans are horticulturalists, raising tubers (taro and yams) on a

swidden basis. They also grow bananas, breadfruit, and coconuts and supplement their diet through fishing. They raise chickens and pigs, too, but pork is reserved as a special food for ceremonial occasions" (Bargatzky, 2009).



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

- Fishing
- Pastoralism
- Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards
- Other [specify in comments]

Notes: "The Samoans are horticulturalists, raising tubers (taro and yams) on a swidden basis. They also grow bananas, breadfruit, and coconuts and supplement their diet through fishing. They raise chickens and pigs, too, but pork is reserved as a special food for ceremonial occasions" (Bargatzky, 2009). Additional source of information: Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.