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## The matai tautua and the word ‘matai’ through time and space

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## **The *matai tautua* and the word « *matai* » through time and space.**

*(4891 words, including notes, following the 5000 words limit assigned ; 5130 including bibliography)*

### ***abstract***

This presentation has two parts: some comments stemming from my sparse observations of three generations of *matai*-s and a reconsideration of the socio-political and linguistic evolution of the concept and of the word “*matai*”. In the first part, the example of the first generation of *matai* that I will evoke is a *matai* who spent all his life in Samoa, but pushed his children to seek opportunities overseas. One of his sons who moved to New Zealand accepted at the end of the 1970s, when he was in his 40s, responding to the pressing demand from his parents, to take the title. The third generation I will mention includes a transnational *matai* who came to NZ in his young age and became a *matai* in his late 20s. In the second part, I will add few precisions to my findings published in 2000 about the uniqueness of the word “*matai*” for designating a “chief” throughout all Polynesian languages, and the transformation in Samoa from a time when all *alii* and *tulafale* were not considered to be *matai* to a time when the word “*matai*” became to designate the encompassing class of all the “chiefs”.

First of all, let me express my deep respect to the past and present members of all Aiga o Samoa, who are symbolically present through the Samoan design of this magnificent Fale Pasifika. Also all my respects to the Iwi-s on whose land I humbly stand here today. And all my thanks to the organisers of this symposium, Afioga Lupematasila Misatauveve Dr Melani Anae, and the whole team, Seira Aukuso-Sue and others, and of course the Centre for Pacific Studies and at the larger level the University of Auckland.

Dear Colleagues, and with this collegial word I want to include everyone, from Vice Chancellors to students present today, as you are all sharing strongly the same collegial deep engagement with the *FaaSamoa*. I feel privileged, during this symposium, to be part of that collegial relationship, this *va*, as in the sacred expression “*teu le va*” which is, I quote Dr Melani Anae, “valuing and nurturing of sacred and secular relational spaces between people, knowledge, environment, ancestors, the cosmos and things”.

In our gathering, *teu le va* is also caring for the link between each *matai* and their *aiga*, and the link between the spaces where transnational *matai*-s stand, in the islands and overseas, particularly here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

When I received your kind invitation, I wrote in the usual academic way. I realise that, after listening to the wonderful but also very entertaining papers presented up to now, all addressing important social issues but also very lively and filled with personal memories, I should have planned this paper differently, with a more personal side. It is too late to change the whole but at least I will add few words about my own names, my *matai* names or other names, to bring in a more personal approach. I will come back to that in the second part of this presentation.

### **I. Three generations of *matai*-s *tautua***

First, let us evoke the continuity of the *faamatai* through the exemple of three successive generations.

In the early 1980s I came to know a Samoan *matai* who was a high chief in his own village and district (Salani, Faleali'i), but also very respected within the village of his wife (Faanenefu, of Moata'a) even though he was there as a *faiava*. He was Fuimaono Manulua.

When I knew him he was in his late 70s, a man that I believe was a *tamali'i* in every sense of the word. I recall seeing many people coming back and forth to his residence in Moata'a . These people coming back and forth were seeking advice about speeches, coming from his own village of (Salani). Others would be his extended family from other villages seeking his wisdom on title disputes or support in preparation for an upcoming land and titles court case.

Through his service, humility and knowledge of *fa'asamoa*, his wife's village respected him very much in the village council and sought advice from him whenever

that was need. I could see a man that instilled values of service, humility, love and service to his children.

In fact, he represented his wife's family at many of the court cases. When a judge of the land and titles court asked him: "Fuimaono why are you representing your wife's family?", he would reply: "There are two places where a person can be buried, firstly in his own land, secondly in the land belonging to the family of his children".

Manulua was born in Moata'a, to his parents Tima and Isara, Isara has been, I was told, the first church minister of the LMS church in Moata'a in the 1890s. Years went by and Isara and Tima passed away and are buried in Moata'a. From what I have been told about the life of Fui and Nefu, Nefu's father Laulusa died in 1918 due the terrible influenza epidemic brought on ship that we all know about.

Fuimaono Manulua rendered service not only to his wife's village but to his children's village. He was known to have led all the major Court cases pertaining to his family in Salani, Vaiee, Mulivai. He also led court cases for his wife's family in Moata'a and won several of those court cases.

At this point Fuimaono Manulua's story continues with his son Laulusamanaia Fuimaono Ativalu, but I don't need to go there much as Fono Tuvalu mentioned yesterday that story when talking about his "Uncle Fui". And you remember that story, of how the old Fui asked Uncle Fui to think about taking the title Lauulusa, before going to NZ, etc., his reply and the mention of the ava cup.

The Laulusamanaia title was held by one title holder until 1979. By that time, the family's *faletama* (different branches) wanted the title to be split. Laulusa's

grandfather was the only male heir and he had five sisters, four had children and one, Lepetimalo who married Tui Pelehake, didn't have any children.

You remember, again from Fono's presentation, how Laulusa became a *matai* in 1989 and with the passing of his father in 1988 became holder of the Fuimaono Atanoa title. He moved to New Zealand in the 1970s for a better future for him and for his children, however he never stopped rendering service (*tautua*) to his parent's in Samoa. He built a two storey house for them in Moata'a and would visit his parents often.

Laulusa later took on the same duties his father previously held. He started to be involved in Court cases at the land and titles court with regards to family matters in Moata'a, Vaiee, Salani and Satalo.

From what I observed Laulusa was a transnational *matai* that understood the importance of being present in family's *fa'alavelave*-s in both Samoa and New Zealand. In the early 2000s, he initiated the "Fui and Nefu family reunions" as it became to be called from his parents, and where all the descendants attended.

In New Zealand, Laulusa held the role of "*taitaifono o le aiga Au Salamo*" for over 20 years. He was related to this family through his grandfather Isara, he was not even a *matai* from Faleasiu, however he continued to serve as the *taitaifono* for many years. He only resigned when he was unwell and heading towards his last years.

Laulusa attended all family funerals, bestowments and any major *fa'alavelave*. I can recall a family *fa'alavelave* in Wellington a few years back. Laulusa helped bring to New Zealand a cousin from Samoa in the 1970s, who later settled in Wellington; and had a family of his own. He died and his wife's family decided to organise the funeral. When Laulusa heard, he went over to the cousin's in laws to *soa-lau-pule* (to consult and

discuss) and asked them for his cousin's body to be returned to the church hall. He also made sure the funeral was done by our side of the family. Why would he care so much? Why couldn't he just have his cousin's in-laws do the funeral?

The answer could lie in this man upbringing. He was taught by his parents from a young age that *tautua* is the most important duty of a *matai*. Laulusa knew the meaning of *tautua*. He would tell of the story of *tautua* from when he was young. Laulu had two older brothers, one married and left for Savai'i. The other stayed in Moata'a and they grew up together. They were quite the pair in their younger years, whenever there was trouble the brothers would be somewhat involved. Their father told them that the duty of the Samoan brother is to serve his sisters. Hence they would do all the cooking and when meal time came, their parents and sisters would sit around whilst the two brothers prepare and bring forth the meals. Sometimes there was nothing left to eat after that and they would climb a coconut tree to find at least a *niu* (young coconut) to eat.

These experiences helped Laulusa in his journey as a *matai* in New Zealand. He saw the importance of participating in family *fa'alavelave* but he also saw the importance of education for his children. This he was indeed successful in supporting his children to achieve. All his children received tertiary qualification in NZ, one became nurse, the other a teacher and rest held good jobs within the public service sector. One could say that Laulu's experience as a young man and the struggles he went through led him to support his children to have a better future.

Laulusa was *matai* that held education in high regard. I remember being in the first family reunion on my wife's family. As a person married into the family I was expecting to be treated like everyone, sitting in the same table and chairs like everyone

else. However, I was called to sit at the head table with the two ministers of the family and their wives. Laulusa was of course showing respect to my status as “Professor” (teacher), as I am not a *matai* (and he did not know about my Siliga-ma-aitu story, see here the second part), but yet he saw the importance of the roles connected to education. Laulusa I believe was able to experience the old fa’asamoa that was practiced by his father; but he also exercised, experience and paved the way for transnational *matai* in his family.

Laulusa passed onto his brother’s grandson, the knowledge he acquired from his father and also shared with him his experience from his experience growing up in Samoa in the 1930s up until the 1970s. Laulusa saw the importance of succession and passing of knowledge to the next generation. In 2016, the old man was unwell and he knew that time was not on his side. So he requested Vaa (now Lauulusa), his sister’s son, and Tuvalu (now Fono) his brother’s grandson ---whom we heard yesterday-- to come to Wellington to discuss a decision pertaining to his succession. He was advised by his two living sisters to hold the Laulusa title until his final breath; this created some tension within the family. However the old man stated he wanted one of his older sisters son’s living in Samoa to be bestowed the title Laulusa, which was done.

Fuimaono Manulua lived in a time where *fa’amatai* was done in a very traditional way; his son who became Lauulusa experienced some of those changes and lived in a time when transnational *matai* were first starting to move around between Samoan and NZ. Laulusa knew from his experience as a *matai*, he could have gone to grave with his Laulusa title and then the family would have to seek advice from others on how the bestowment should progress. However, he wanted to pass the knowledge onto to the next generation, not only the family knowledge but the cultural knowledge.

That succession of 3 generations is all about passing down the unchanging values of the *faamatai*, through and in spite of the wide social changes that came about.

## **II. Words and names.**

### **II. 1. Names and *matai* names given to a visitor in 1981.**

From the Russian first name Serguei (my parents were Russian who met in France) my first name in France was written down in my birth certificate as Serge, the French usual translation of Serguei (in this part of the world, the name is more often known through its Italian version: Sergio). Now my parents did not preview that I would go often into English speaking countries, where the name Serge is unknown, and thus people have hard time pronouncing it when they hear. When they see the written form they try to say “Surge” which then evokes like a surging source of water. That sounded ridiculous to Samoan ears when I came to Samoa. Thus no “Serge”. Then my name was made into a local style transliteration: from “S-e-r-g-” they made of it “Se-le-ga”. But Samoan names are immediately shortened by close friends, and, believe it or not, it became “Sela”, and there I was condemned to be for ever “short of breath” in Samoa (as this is the meaning of the common word “sela”). So, after an initial period of jokes, my friends stopped to call me like that; they realised that, in those years at least (not now), I could walk up and down the hills without being *sela*.

Then some more generous friends said that among Samoan first names, one was close enough: Siliga. So for some I became Siliga. With that name, one day, in those early times, I went to Laulii, as I was friend with the then pastor’s son there. One evening, a



good friend of the Pastor's family, an old orator who told me that his name was Salapo came to see that new visitor named Siliga. He told me that he heard that I was keen to study the Samoan customs and was ready to help. We both agreed that a case of Vailima was a necessity to engage in such a deep discussion. On departing, a number of hours later, and making me believe that he was impressed with my sincere attraction to understand Samoan customs, he told me that from now on I was to be called with, he said, "an ancient and vacant *matai* title of the *nuu*, fitting for someone already named Siliga": and that *matai* name was Siliga-ma-aitu (literally: Serge with a spirit-ghost side). I was honoured, but thought it was a kind of honorific joking name and forgot about it.

Sometime later, I happened to enter and try to listen to some court cases discussed at the Land and Titles Court. One day, at the end of a session, I saw my Lauili old orator standing up, and a long line of people going towards him, giving him words of thanks and putting in his hands a "pepa lima, pepa sefulu tala" etc (bank notes). He had obviously pleaded and won a case. On turning his eyes around, he recognised me and, to my great surprise and even despair, he said in Samoan in a loud voice to everyone: why do you all come only to me, don't you see that we have here with us Siliga ma aitu! And there I saw that long line coming to me, everyone a bit surprised as they did not know my face, but still shaking my hands and putting in my hands also the same kind of bank notes... Well I realised that day that my *matai* name was not just a joke...

The saga of my names is not finished, but the last part belongs to my distinguished companion in this panel, Luamanuvae Morgan. When I did the grand mistake, another day, long ago, to tell him my Lauili story, he began in his usual mischievous way to shorten my name Siliga-ma-aitu into just "Aitu". And when I would arrive in a group where he was present, he would greet me with that name, or better

said that *matai* title: “Here is coming Aitu”! And you can imagine how other people present, when they did not know me, were kind of thinking: should I run away or would I dare to stay? I could continue with the Aitu reference, this time not jokingly at all, with our speaker who presented yesterday, Fonomaaitu Tuvalu, but he already explained the origin of his title Fonomaaitu and this ancient practice of *matai* meeting in a closed house, in silence, and seeking inspiration from “aitu”. In the pre-Christian times, the word was not opposed to Atua, and referred to past ancestor souls; but, in my years, the old man who had this title was usually called Fonomaalii, and I was told one could not — should not — talk about “aitu. So let us now leave aside my “aitu” side and step back into a more academic side. But at least we stay with mystery stories, as I want to deal with the historical and linguistic mystery of the word *matai*

## **II. 2. The word *matai*: a quick update**

First, as an anthropologist-sociologist, I am always very interested in the commentaries about the meaning and the etymology of any word that is at the core of a social institution, when these commentaries or even short comments are offered by those who are practitioners within that given social institution, in the present case the *matai*-s themselves and other Samoans.

We know how these insider comments are often called, in the outsider academic vocabulary, “folk etymologies”, a label which carries an unfortunate condescending tone, with the understatement that the content of the “folk” knowledge is wrong once it is

assessed by “serious” (understand outsider) historical research. Let us forget about that tone.

Local interpretations of the words are always a strong way of expressing shared values, and are thus an important source of information for any student delving into a given culture, in this case the *Fa’a Samoa*. Among those insider commentaries, as I heard from some Samoan elders, and I think Fono-Tuvalu evoked it briefly yesterday, the most often offered comment states that the word *matai* takes its existence and meaning from its base “mata”, whether to be understood as “mata-i-ai”, “a-mata”, etc. These comments stress the fact that a *matai* is one who is supposed to “look to” for the group, has his eyes outward, in this way he also is the eyes of the group, but also in another way he is looking after the group; anyway, a number of variations can be discussed with the base “mata”. That entire configuration of meanings is sociologically very true in the Samoan social organisation, as the *matai* to his group like a sister to her brother, who is the most important component of her brother’s eyesight (we know the saying: “the sister is the pupil of her brother’s eye” *o le ioimata o le tuagane lona tuafafine*).

That main role of the *matai* has been deeply misunderstood by outside observers, at least in the past and when they were wearing their “political science” lenses. That is why the usual translation in Western languages has become “chief”, and led to misunderstandings, as those that one can read for instance in the United Nations reports when UN commissions were visiting Western Samoa in the preparation of independence, in the 1950s. From the commissioners’ point of view, the *matai*, the chiefs were the social class of “nobles”, as distinguished from the “commoners”, and of course those commissioners were horrified, in the name of modern post WWII “democratic” values, that the majority of Samoan people were advocating for a post

independence parliamentary system where only *matai*-s —but it became said among the commissioners: where only “nobles”— could be candidate (and electors) in each constituency.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Leasiolagi Meleisea (nd ms [1987] : 13-14) has written an ironic comment on the way that these Western commissions wanted to impose their definition of democracy through “a very non-democratic way” and it was indeed difficult for the Samoans in the Constitutional Assembly of the late 1950 to maintain their wishes and their views. In the end, formally, the *faamatai* prevailed, but the Constitutional Advisers from Australia and New Zealand, the well-known historian James Davidson and the jurist specialist Colin Aikman, influenced the draft of the Constitution in such a way that undoing the *faamatai* prevalence was possible through an ordinary act of Parliament and did not require a full amendment of the Constitution with a 2/3<sup>rd</sup> vote in the Parliament. As we know, the consequence was that, without a Constitutional vote but a simple majority vote, part of that change came in reality in 1990<sup>2</sup>. In a way the contemporary outsider comments about the transnational *matai*, those that Melani wants to address and redress, and which she quotes in the proposal of our program about Transnational *matai*, continue the same misunderstanding, just that this time it is not a class distinction by birth and rank, but a distinction in financial means: “*matai* living overseas are only taking advantage of their title and shirking their responsibilities”, etc.

Now, this being said on local understanding of the word, we also have another comparative duty. Samoan language and culture belong to the group of Polynesian languages, and even, at a larger level, they belong to the so called Oceanic languages and

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<sup>1</sup> All the relevant quotations from these UN reports (but in their French language version) and all references can be found in Tcherkezoff ([in French]2003 : 235-238).

<sup>2</sup> On these points, see Tcherkezoff ([in French]2003 : 233-234).

cultures, and we can enter into this comparison. There we have a difficulty, that is that the word *matai* as chief of extended clans-families *aiga* seems to be unique in the whole area, and appears in the end to be restricted to the Samoan language. Indeed, everywhere else, the chiefs are designated by the pan-Polynesian word *alii*, *arii*, *ariki*, which of course is very well known in Samoa, but applied for only one type of *matai* chief, in contrast with the other type, the *matai*-orators. That situation had led me to try to solve that mystery. I went into mid 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnography, in various sources, including the narratives in Samoa recorded by Krämer, and it became evident that, at that time, within a great *aiga* headed by an *alii*, the different households following the orders given by the *alii*, for instance for preparing gifts for a *faalavelave*, were headed by men who —them only— were called “*matai*” (Tcherkezoff 2000a). From there, it became clear that only towards the end of the century, during German colonial times, a certain levelling happened, in successive steps, in fact pushed forward by the administration, that made all chiefs being considered, from outside, as one category (Tcherkézoff 2000b).

Thus, for instance, German sources in 1911 state clearly that “the word *matai* has only lately been applied to ‘chiefs’ “. The matter is even clearer when looking at the early missionary dictionaries. In all early missionary ethnography accounts, the word *matai* is absent from their narratives describing the social settings; it is found only in the missionary dictionary. One can see in the first edition of 1862, two different entries: word *matai* and word *alii*: “*matai*, the head of a family” and “*Alii*: a Chief”. I am not rehearsing here all the relevant ethnography and discussion, as the papers published in

2000, particularly in JPS, were quite long and are, at least for the JPS one, easily available on line.<sup>3</sup>

The historical-linguistic query becomes then different. Clearly the word *matai* has not been “invented” in the second part of 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was already in the language. But to what other words in the region can it be linked to? Thus another short part of my papers of 2000 tried to put the word *matai* into a regional comparison. This is where, today a brief update is useful, and I am deeply indebted to another great colleague and master of Oceanic languages, Paul Geraghty of USP. In 2000, I attempted to say that we should not be surprised that, in Samoan, the word *matai* came to designate household elders, as I found different occurrences of that word in neighbouring languages, applying to someone who is the best in his activity, and among others a master in a craft. In German ethnography of Samoa, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is not clear when *matai* is mentioned as head of family or as a master in a craft, *matai tufuga*, because master *tufuga* were indeed most often *matai* family head. But I then thought, with my naïve linguistic shortsight, that anyway the two words were the same.

So I went on to say that the word *matai* as applied to Samoan chiefs at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century originates from the word designating an expert craftsman, someone skilful, or just the quality to be expert, to be the best, as it can be found in several Western and Eastern Polynesia languages. Thanks to Paul Geraghty, through a personal communication (private letter he sent me long ago, 15 August 2000, after reading my 2000 paper), we must now consider two different words. The Samoan “*matai*” as family head has a short <a> in the first syllabe, while the various words found in the region for

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<sup>3</sup> I take this opportunity to thank once more our Colleague Judith Hunstman who provided me with her well-known generosity and spent a long time transforming my draft, written in Frenglish, into proper English.

the expert (the Fijian word for “carpenter”, also to designate a “clever” person, the Tahitian word for being “skilful”, the Tongan word for “expert”, etc.) are all “*maatai*” with a long initial <a>, even if written everywhere in the same spelling as “*matai*” with a short initial <a>. So we should not think that the Samoan position of *matai* as family head somehow originates from a regional notion of expert, skilful, the best.<sup>4</sup>

But on the other hand, Paul continues, “Samoa *matai* may well be related to the Fijian verb *matai* which means to be first, perhaps via a form like *mataitagata* for ‘leading man’; and is probably also a component of *mataisau*, Fijian carpenter, which appears to be of Samoan origin and to have spread relatively recently to Fiji and parts of Vanuatu”. In another writing, our late respected Colleague Aiono Dr Fanaafi mentioned that the creation power of God in ancient Samoa was named the *mataisau*.

There are still many unanswered questions around this wide lexical configuration of words applied to being a leader. But let us say for the moment that we did and do have a regional notion of localised leadership, with the connotation of being the first as a social position, even if probably not evolving from being a master in a skilled activity. Beyond these linguistics debates, the main point remain solid: *matai* as an encompassing category of chiefs, of *alii* or *tulafale* types, is a recent development, specific to Samoa, where, perhaps more than elsewhere, large *aiga*-s headed by *alii* contained many subgroups, households headed by *matai*-s, and thus the notion of *matai* was apt to become more universal for family chiefs when large *aiga*-s became more and more divided in autonomous groups and when, as a consequence, the whole traditional

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<sup>4</sup> Also a note of further thanks to Paul Geraghty: when discussing the word “*matai*”, I was also quoting Te Rangi Hiroa and Raymond Firth about the word for a fishing line, and from there the connotation of leading line; in his personal communication of 2001, Paul made it clear that this is an altogether different story, because the word is *mata'i*.

idea of rank was gradually eroded and even flattened, if I may say, by the outside influence and colonial administration.

Thus, today and since more than hundred years, the institution of *matai* includes at the same time 1) a strong idea of sameness, the unitary notion of leadership, what it is to be a *matai*, and all papers have discussed that, and 2) a strong idea of rank, at the national and local level, between names within a polity, be it the village-polity *nuu*, the parliamentary district *itumalo*, or the whole of Samoa atoa, as well as within the same name but held between several holders.

In conclusion, allow me a note of nostalgia: I still cherish the supportive comments done right here, well another building but on this campus U of A, by our late colleague Roger Green, when I presented my research on the word *matai*, some time before my 2000 publications, in a seminar of the anthropology department. Roger was very happy because, as he told me, I have cleared one obstacle, at least for that specific part dealing with the notion of chiefs and the words applied to it, which stood in his way when he was pursuing, with Patrick Kirch, the wide comparative study that they published shortly after in 2001 (their well-known *Hawaiki Ancestral Polynesia*).

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