

The Classification of Spiritual Beings in Samoan Culture and Their Implications for Gospel Engagement

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Introduction

The classification of spiritual beings in Samoan culture provides a unique lens through which to understand the island's traditional belief systems and their lasting influence. Animism, the belief that spirits inhabit both living beings and natural objects,¹ forms the basis of many Samoan cultural practices and perceptions of the supernatural. This worldview encompasses a wide range of spiritual beings, including God the Creator (*atua o foafoaga*), individual spirits (*aitu aumakua*), ancestor spirits (*aitu o aiga*), village spirits (*aitu o nuu*), and malevolent spirits (*aitu fasia*). These classifications reveal the complex nature of Samoan spirituality and the interwoven relationships between people, their ancestors, and the natural world.

This paper examines these spiritual classifications and explores how they impact gospel engagement, specifically considering strategies that respect cultural identity while thoughtfully addressing animistic beliefs. By focusing on historical perspectives, missionary encounters, and culturally sensitive pastoral approaches, this research aims to provide insight into the balance between honoring Samoan cultural heritage and introducing Christian teachings. In doing so, it outlines key areas for gospel contextualization, bridging respect for traditional values with theological discourse that can lead to meaningful spiritual transformation.

¹S. M. Eames, *Pragmatism and Naturalism: Scientific and Social Inquiry After Representationalism*, ed. Elizabeth R. Eames and Richard W. Field (Columbia, IL: Columbia University Press, 2003), 140.

Thesis Statement

This paper examines the classifications of spiritual beings in Samoan culture and explores their implications for effective gospel engagement. It aims to provide strategies for presenting the Christian faith in ways that respect cultural identity while challenging animistic beliefs.

Scope and Limitations

This paper focuses on exploring the classifications of spiritual beings in Samoan culture—God the Creator (*atua o foafoaga*), individual spirits (*aitu aumakua*), ancestor spirits (*aitu o aiga*), village spirits (*aitu o nuu*), and malevolent spirits (*aitu fasia*)—and examines how these beliefs influence and shape Samoan society. The scope of this research includes a historical overview of pre-Christian Samoan beliefs and mythology of early missionary encounters, an in-depth look at the classification and role of spiritual beings, and an analysis of how these elements impact gospel engagement and pastoral strategies.

The study is limited in several key areas. Firstly, it will primarily address animistic beliefs within traditional Samoan contexts, drawing from existing literature, cultural accounts, and missionary records, rather than including other Pacific Islands or broader Polynesian beliefs. Additionally, while the research will discuss contextualized approaches to gospel presentation, it will not provide exhaustive missionary strategies but rather suggest principles for respecting cultural identity within evangelism. The paper is also limited to historical and cultural analysis rather than current sociological studies, focusing on animism's historical roots and theological implications rather than extensive fieldwork on present-day beliefs.

Historical Context of Animism in Samoa

Pre-Christian Samoan Beliefs

Before Christianity there were myths, legends, and stories. Additionally, Samoa's cultural continuity was sustained through a vibrant oral tradition, wherein the transmission of historical narratives, cultural norms, and religious beliefs occurred through the art of storytelling, myths, and legends.² The esteemed role of oratory skills was emphasized,

²Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiva-Doktor, "Oral Traditions, Cultural Significance of Storytelling, and Samoan Understandings of Place or Fanua," *Native American and*

with elders assuming a pivotal position as custodians of traditional knowledge, thereby ensuring the intergenerational preservation of Samoa's rich heritage.

Therefore, indigenous religious practices and beliefs in pre-missionary Samoa were deeply rooted in the Polynesian cultural traditions. The Samoan people held a polytheistic belief system, worshipping a pantheon of gods and goddesses associated with various aspects of nature and daily life.³ These deities were believed to have influence over different domains such as agriculture, fishing, war, and fertility.⁴

In Samoan cosmology, the universe is divided into two realms: one inhabited by benevolent deities residing in the heavenly realm, who engage with humans; and another occupied by malevolent spirits associated with the deceased, causing fear among people.⁵ This dual categorization highlights a fundamental distinction in the Samoan worldview, with gods leading separate lives but interacting with humanity, while spirits, existing at a level below gods, primarily manifest in the natural world, occasionally taking human form.⁶ The Samoan perception emphasizes the unique characteristics and roles of divine entities and spirits in their relationship with the human and supernatural realms.

Early Missionary Encounters with Samoan Animism

Moreover, before Christianity arrived, Samoans awaited for its arrival according to a prophecy by a Samoan goddess Nafanua after a war between different kings in Samoa. The prophecy was, "*Talofa, ua e sau, a ua ave le ao o Malo. Ae ui i lea, o le a tali i le lagi sou malo e te fai malo i ai.*"⁷ As translated in English; "*Alas, you have come, but the ruling title is gone. Nevertheless, you will receive a kingdom from heaven and you will be its ruler.*"⁸

Indigenous Studies 7, no. 1 (2020): 121, 123; doi:10.1353/nai.2020.a761810.

³Ron Crocombe and Marjorie T. Crocombe, eds., *Polynesian Missions in Melanesia: from Samoa, Cook Islands and Tonga to Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1982), 7.

⁴Elia T. Ta'ase, "The Congregational Christian Church in Samoa: The Origin and Development of an Indigenous Church 1830-1961" (Ph.D. Diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1995), 5.

⁵Erika F. Puni, "Toward a Contextualized Organizational Structure for the Seventh-Days Adventist in Samoa," (Ph.D. Diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), 151.

⁶*Ibid.*, 151.

⁷Samoan Mythology, "Nafanua's Prophecy," *Samoan Mythology*, <https://samoanmythology.net/ts-nafanuas-prophecy/> (accessed March 13, 2024).

⁸*Ibid.*

The prophecy is frequently recounted in the renowned Samoan legend featuring the war goddess Nafanua. Having vanquished her adversaries and asserted dominion over all aspects of the *ao malo* (authority) in Samoa, Nafanua found herself with none left when Malietoa Fitiseanu sought one for himself. Advising patience, Nafanua encouraged Malietoa Fitiseanu to await the *ao malo* destined to come from the heavens.⁹ Consequently, years later, upon the arrival of John Williams in Samoa to propagate Christianity, Malietoa Vainuupo embraced it as the heavenly-ordained “*ao malo*” promised to his ancestors, interpreting it as the realization of Nafanua’s prophecy.¹⁰

Classification of Spiritual Beings in Samoan Culture

The Samoans venerated at least four types of gods or spirits: individual, family, village and district gods, and the malevolent gods or spirits. In addition to these localized deities, there was also a national god known as Tagaloa, revered as the God of Heaven.

God the Creator - Atua o Foafoaga

Additionally, Samoan culture before Christianity recognized a Supreme God, or national deity, named Tagaloa-i-lagi (Tagaloa, God of Heaven), who is also considered the Supreme God across various Polynesian cultures.¹¹ Tagaloa was regarded as the creator (*atua o foafoaga*) and held a central role in Samoan cosmology, often linked to the origins of the islands and the natural world.¹² Erika Fereti Puni noted that “even the spirits are subject to his control.”¹³ Accordingly, Samoa has its own creation narrative through the Supreme God Tagaloa, who is believed to have created the earth by the power of his words—beginning with the land and sea, and subsequently forming humans, with lesser gods serving as his emissaries in the world.¹⁴ Elia Titiimaea Taase quoted from Thomas Powell, a nineteenth century missionary, botanist, and ethnographer, in saying that:

⁹Malama Meleisea, *Lagaga: A Short History of Western Samoa* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1987), 57.

¹⁰Grant J. Rich and Neeta A. Ramkumar, ed., *Psychology in Oceania and the Caribbean* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022), 60.

¹¹Taāse, 56.

¹²Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1987), 9.

¹³Puni, 163.

¹⁴Taāse, 56-58.

Tagaloa is the god who dwells in the illimitable void. He made all things, he alone [at first] existed. Where there was no heaven, no people, no sea, no earth, he traversed the illimitable void; but at a point at which he took his stand, up sprang a rock He said succession, the reclining rock, the lava rock Tagaloa then, looking towards the west, said again to the rock “Divide.” He then smote it with his right hand, the rock divided and immediately the earth and sea were born.¹⁵

Therefore, during Tagaloa’s creation, he had a son named Tuli, who is assumed to have taken the form of a bird.¹⁶ Tuli left the heavens and flew around the vast, empty void, eventually complaining to his father that there was nowhere to rest. In response, Tagaloa created land by pulling a rock from the sea, from which plants and life in the form of grubs began to grow.¹⁷ Ta’ase quotes Williamson, who recorded that it was not Tagaloa’s son but rather his daughter, Sina, who took the form of a bird.¹⁸ According to Malama Meleisea’s account, Tagaloa had a son named Pili, who was expelled from heaven. Pili traveled to the western islands from Manu’a, dividing the island of Upolu among his descendants. These areas were later subdivided into districts.¹⁹

Thus, Tagaloa, as an *atua* (*god*), was later used as the Samoan term for the Christian supreme God, Jehovah, when Christianity arrived in the 1830s. Meleisea notes that when Christianity became well-established in the 1860s through the work of missionaries, the concept of chiefly authority also transformed. This transformation was partly due to the adoption of the new name given to Jehovah in the Samoan language, *Ali’i Pa’ia*, meaning “Sacred Chief” who possesses sacred power. Here, “power” (*Mana*) was translated as *mana* in the Samoan language, referring to God’s “grace.”²⁰

Individual Spirit - *Aitu Aumakua*

Elia explains that in Samoan culture, each individual was assigned an *aitu* or spirit as a personal guardian from infancy.²¹ According to

¹⁵Ibid., 58.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Meleisea, *The Making*, 6.

²⁰Ibid., 13.

²¹Ta’ase, 56.

Karen Stevenson, this personal guardian god is also the family god called *aumakua*, who provides protection and guidance.²² The specific identity and form of this god were established at birth. During the mother's labor, family members gathered to *tapua 'i*—"to wait and pray"—and began suggesting objects thought to embody divine presence. The object named at the exact moment of the child's birth was then regarded as the person's personal god, destined to protect them throughout life.²³

Therefore, these personal gods often took the form of animals, trees, stones, fish, or flowers, becoming sacred totems treated with utmost respect.²⁴ As symbols of protection and providence, these totems were believed to bestow blessings when properly honored. However, neglect or disrespect towards one's totem could lead to misfortune, suffering, or even death. This practice reflects a reciprocal relationship in which individuals were expected to maintain respect and good relations with their personal gods to receive protection and favor.²⁵ Therefore, it can be assumed that this individual god no longer existed when Christianity arrived. Today, this tradition has changed, as family members now wait around and worship the Christian God while the mother is in labor.

Ancestor Spirits - *Aitu o le Aiga*

Ancestral spirits, also known as *aitu o aiga*, are described by Stevenson as providing protection and guidance to Samoan families and playing a vital role in family life and spiritual practices.²⁶ Elia further records that each family typically worshiped a family god, which was often associated with one of the personal gods of family members. In many cases, however, the god of the *matai* or chief was regarded as the primary deity for the entire family.²⁷ This connection was deepened by the cultural belief that the *matai* could embody or represent the family's ancestral gods. As Serge Tcherkezoff explains, "the chief personifies these gods and ancestors, they are said to 'incarnate' them."²⁸

²²Karen Stevenson, *The Frangipani is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985-2000* (Wellington, New Zealand: Huia Publishers, 2008), 100.

²³Ta'ase, 56.

²⁴Samantha Lichtenberg, "Experiencing Samoa Through Stories: Myths and Legends of a People and Place," SIT Digital Collections, last modified 2011, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1057.

²⁵Ta'ase, 56.

²⁶Stevenson, 100.

²⁷Ta'ase, 57.

²⁸Serge Tcherkezoff, *First Contacts in Polynesia—the Samoan Case (1722-1848): Western Misunderstandings about Sexuality and Divinity* (Canberra, Australia: ANUE Press, 2004), 124.

Moreover, some families' honored ancestors believed to have appeared in various forms, such as a bird or a man or woman of exceptional beauty and stature. Other families extended their reverence to celestial entities like the sun and moon, or to specific animals that held symbolic significance. For instance, the *atualoa*, or "long god," referred to a centipede that held divine status, while the *anae*, or "mullet," was revered as both an individual and family god by the family of Malietoa, a prominent Samoan chief. This practice highlights the intricate ways in which Samoan families connected their identity and lineage to both ancestral and natural elements, highlighting the spiritual importance of these beings within the family structure.²⁹

Village Spirits - *Aitu o Nu'u*

Elia quoted author Turner dividing the deities of the Samoan religious system into the "gods inferior" in which he included the individual and family gods and the "god superior" where he referred to the village, district, and national gods. He implied that at this level the distinction became shaky because village gods were also worshiped as district and national gods. They were also called "war gods" who watched over the village and the district, and whose wisdom and help were sought in times of need. Important examples in this class include Nafanua, the famous war goddess and the venerated district and village goddess on the west side of Savai'i.³⁰ She is the daughter of the underworld god in Pulotu whose name is Saveasi'uleo.³¹ Also, another village spirit is the *fe'e* "octopus" the famous war god of Apia and Tuamasaga district.³² Therefore, one of the well-known village spirits today is Nifolua which is mentioned in the next section.

Malevolent Spirits - *Aitu Fasia*

In Samoan spiritual belief, both benevolent and malevolent spirits play significant roles, embodying the protective and punitive aspects of cultural taboos and sacred observances. Telesa and Saumaiafi are notable spirits in Samoan cosmology, each symbolizing distinct but interrelated

²⁹Ta'ase, 57.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Philip Culbertson and Margaret N. Agee, *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples*, ed. Cabrini O. Makasiale (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 68.

³²Ta'ase, 57.

qualities in the cultural and spiritual life of Samoa.³³ Telesa is seen as a guardian spirit associated with fire and vengeance, protecting sacred sites and punishing those who transgress cultural boundaries. She embodies the dual roles of fierce protector and symbol of feminine power, asserting a supernatural enforcement of Samoan *tapu* or *sa*, or sacred taboos, which must be respected to avoid misfortune.³⁴ Saumaiafi, on the other hand, serves as a more nurturing ancestral spirit, a protector of the family unit who watches over descendants and offers guidance in times of need. Her role exemplifies the interconnectedness between the living and ancestral spirits, highlighting the Samoan values of family, unity, and collective responsibility. Unlike the retributive nature of Telesa, Saumaiafi's influence is less punitive and more benevolent, ensuring the family's well-being and harmony through spiritual oversight.³⁵

In addition to these protective spirits, Samoan cosmology also recognizes malevolent spirits known to inflict harm on those who violate cultural norms or sacred spaces. This is particularly evident in the beliefs surrounding spirits like Telesa, Saumaiafi, Nifoloa and other malevolent *aitu* (spirits) that are respected and feared across various regions of Samoa.³⁶ The spirit Nifoloa, known as "Long Tooth," is a feared malevolent entity from the village of Falelima on the island of Savai'i. His defining feature is a single sharp tooth as long as a man's finger, capable of causing death if he pricks a person with it.³⁷ Villagers believe that anyone harmed by Nifoloa must seek forgiveness from a Falelima resident or face fatal consequences.³⁸ As a village or district spirit, Nifoloa exemplifies the concept of *aitu o nuu* acting as territorial guardians; his presence is invoked to protect the people of Falelima from outsiders who may bring harm.³⁹ This spirit's capacity for vengeance against those who threaten the village or break taboos reflects the strong reciprocal relationship Samoans have with their gods and spirits, in

³³Jeannette M. Mageo, ed., *Cultural Memory: Reconfiguring History and Identity in the Postcolonial Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 70.

³⁴Tcherkezoff, 124; Jeannette Mageo and Alan Howard, ed., *Spirits in Culture, History and Mind* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 45, 47, 106.

³⁵Stevenson, 100.

³⁶Patricia J. Kinloch, *Talking Health But Doing Sickness: Studies in Samoan Health* (Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 1985), 41.

³⁷Augustin Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: An Outline of a Monograph with Particular Consideration of German Samoa* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 132; C. Steubel and Brother Herman, *Tala O Le Vavau: The Myths, Legends, and Customs of Old Samoa* (Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1987), 148.

³⁸Steubel and Herman, 81, 148.

³⁹Krämer, 132.

which respectful acknowledgment of these forces is necessary to ensure safety and peace.⁴⁰

Together, these spirits highlight the layered and complex nature of Samoan spiritual beliefs, where *aitu* embody both nurturing and protective aspects, as well as retributive and malevolent powers. Telesa and Saumaiafi highlight the importance of ancestral veneration and the protective role of spirits within the family and sacred spaces. In contrast, malevolent spirits like Nifoloa reinforce cultural taboos and territorial boundaries, reminding individuals of the potential dangers of disrespecting these ancient traditions.⁴¹ The integration of both benevolent and malevolent spirits within Samoan cosmology reflects a cultural system deeply rooted in respect, reciprocity, and the continuous influence of ancestral forces that protect and discipline, ensuring that Samoan values and sacred customs endure across generations.

Despite claims that animism is no longer practiced in Samoa, remnants of these beliefs continue to inform certain cultural and social practices. Many Samoans maintain a deep respect for sacred spaces and taboos (*tapu*), which often trace their origins to animistic traditions. For example, the fear of malevolent spirits like Nifoloa still lingers in stories and practices, particularly in villages such as Falelima, where his presence is invoked to enforce community boundaries and social cohesion. Even without overt worship or rituals directed at spirits, the acknowledgment of these entities often manifests in avoidance behaviors or community-led interventions when taboos are violated.⁴² These practices reflect the lasting influence of animistic cosmology, where spirits are seen as active participants in ensuring adherence to cultural norms.

Furthermore, the belief in spirits like Telesa and Saumaiafi continues to shape how Samoan families view protection and misfortune. While many Samoans identify as Christians, some still attribute unexplained illnesses, accidents, or blessings to ancestral spirits or supernatural forces. For instance, specific family traditions involve acts of reverence toward sacred objects or sites associated with ancestral spirits, suggesting an enduring connection between animistic beliefs and daily life.⁴³ This coexistence of Christian faith and animistic elements reflects a syncretism where traditional spirituality informs communal and familial practices. Such beliefs underscore the importance of addressing animism not as a relic of the past but as a framework that still subtly influences

⁴⁰Ibid., 132.

⁴¹Mageo and Howard, 100, 129, 185.

⁴²Krämer, 132.

⁴³Mageo, *Cultural Memory*, 70; Steubel and Herman, 148.

contemporary Samoan society, shaping how people navigate health, relationships, and community dynamics.

Implications for Gospel Engagement

Engaging with the Samoan spiritual landscape requires a deep understanding of its animistic classifications, including *atua* (the Creator God), *aitu aumakua* (individual spirits), *aitu o aiga* (ancestor spirits), *aitu o nuu* (village or district spirits), and *aitu fasia* (malevolent spirits). These distinctions significantly shape Samoan spirituality, influencing their understanding of power, protection, and sacredness in daily life. For effective gospel engagement, Christian missionaries and scholars must recognize how these animistic beliefs both complement and challenge the Christian worldview. Specifically, framing the Christian God in relation to *Atua*, the Creator, can foster a connection between Samoan and Christian understandings of a supreme deity. Therefore, by addressing these beliefs thoughtfully, missionaries can be more respectful and effectively communicate Christian teachings in a manner that aligns with Samoan perspectives, emphasizing the protective power and unique authority of the Christian God.

Contextualizing the Gospel

Contextualizing the gospel within Samoan culture involves presenting Christian teachings that resonate with the Samoan worldview without undermining core Christian tenets. For instance, the concept of *atua* as a creator figure can serve as a point of theological connection, helping to introduce the Christian God as a familiar yet distinct supreme being. Employing Samoan language, symbols, and narratives allows Christian missionaries to make the gospel more accessible, ensuring that the Christian message does not feel foreign or dismissive of Samoan heritage. Effective contextualization requires a nuanced understanding of Samoan cosmology, allowing missionaries to reinterpret Christian concepts that respect and engage Samoan spiritual values. Central to this process is addressing the spiritual fears rooted in animism by demonstrating the divine power of the Holy Spirit in direct confrontation with the perceived power of evil spirits.

Alan Tippett's theology of power encounter emphasizes the necessity of demonstrating Christ's superiority over spirits through visible, tangible acts that directly confront spiritual powers.⁴⁴ In animistic contexts like

⁴⁴Alan R. Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library,

Samoa, sacred objects such as totems, relics, or consecrated stones are often associated with spirits and serve as focal points of fear. Tippet argues that the removal or destruction of these objects demonstrates the impotence of these spirits in the face of Christ's authority, providing undeniable evidence of the gospel's power.⁴⁵ In Samoan culture, where spirits like Nifoloa are feared for their malevolent influence, such a confrontation becomes a powerful declaration of the supremacy of the Holy Spirit over evil forces. For instance, when a spirit associated with a sacred object is rendered powerless during a Spirit-led prayer encounter, it not only liberates individuals from fear but also serves as a communal affirmation of Christ's victory over darkness. These acts, underpinned by prayer and proclamation, validate the gospel's ability to transform lives and dismantle spiritual strongholds.

As missionaries and ministers engage in these power encounters, their spiritual preparation is crucial. Charles Kraft emphasizes that the minister's effectiveness in confronting animistic fears and engaging in spiritual warfare depends on their relationship with God and reliance on the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ For Kraft, being filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) brings not only the power to perform ministry but also the power to live like Christ.⁴⁷ This spiritual preparation becomes essential in the Samoan context, where fear of spirits such as Nifoloa and other malevolent entities often dominates. Ministers must cultivate intimacy with God through prayer, fasting, and obedience, enabling them to stand firm during confrontations with spiritual forces. By embodying the authority of Christ, they demonstrate the Holy Spirit's superior power in direct encounters with evil spirits, providing both a personal testimony and a practical demonstration of the gospel's liberating truth.

In Samoan culture, spiritual leaders are often seen as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, a role that aligns with the biblical concept of believers as ambassadors of Christ. Kraft's insight that the minister must possess "the power to be like Jesus and to minister like Him" reinforces the importance of spiritual readiness in confronting animistic fears.⁴⁸ This resonates deeply in Samoa, where communal and individual fears of spirits are frequently mediated through cultural practices and rituals. Paul's teaching on the armor of God (Eph 6:10-13) highlights the necessity for ministers to be spiritually equipped,

1987), 312, 319.

⁴⁵Ibid., 314-315.

⁴⁶Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1989), 166.

⁴⁷Ibid., 168.

⁴⁸Ibid.

relying on faith, righteousness, and the Word of God to combat the forces of darkness.⁴⁹ During power encounters, such as moments of deliverance prayer or exorcism, ministers who rely on the Holy Spirit not only disarm animistic fears but also redefine the role of spiritual leaders as advocates of the gospel. These acts of confrontation reveal the Holy Spirit's authority, replacing fear with trust in God and offering a culturally meaningful demonstration of Christ's power.

The combination of Tippet's theology of power encounter and Kraft's emphasis on spiritual preparation has profound implications for addressing fear in Samoan culture. The minister's life and actions serve as a model of faith and freedom, breaking the cycle of fear perpetuated by animistic beliefs. When Samoan believers witness ministers engaging in power encounters—destroying sacred objects, confronting spirits in prayer, and demonstrating the Holy Spirit's superiority—they are encouraged to trust in their identity as children of the King. This shift replaces fear with faith, empowering believers to embrace the truth that in Christ, they are no longer subject to spirits but victors in spiritual warfare. By showing that the Holy Spirit's power surpasses any fearsome force, the gospel not only confronts animistic fears but transforms the worldview of Samoan communities, leading to deeper faith and freedom in Christ.

Building Bridges: Respecting Cultural Identity

Building respectful bridges between Samoan culture and Christianity is essential for genuine gospel engagement. Recognizing and affirming the value of Samoan spiritual and cultural traditions, including respect for community values, allows for a respectful evangelistic approach that does not force Samoan believers to abandon their cultural identity. Acknowledging shared values, such as the importance of family, community, and reverence for the spiritual, enables missionaries to demonstrate how Christianity can complement rather than oppose Samoan culture. By approaching Samoan spiritual beliefs with respect, missionaries can encourage dialogue that both honors Samoan heritage and thoughtfully challenges animistic elements where they conflict with Christian teachings.

⁴⁹Ibid., 171.

Pastoral Approaches to Animism

In addressing animism within Samoan culture, pastoral approaches must be both theologically sound and culturally sensitive. Since animistic beliefs are deeply intertwined with Samoan social and spiritual identity, pastoral strategies should respect these cultural elements while offering a life-changing understanding of the gospel. These approaches include a spiritual reorientation, contextualized worship, deliverance ministry, and an emphasis on community.

Firstly, Pastors and church leaders can help reorient believers from animistic fears to a gospel-centered confidence by teaching about the sovereignty and protective power of God as mentioned in the last section by Kraft and Tippet. Through a theology that emphasizes God's ultimate authority over all spirits, pastoral teaching can affirm that believers are secure in Christ, who has "disarmed the rulers and authorities" (Col 2:15 ESV). This theological foundation encourages believers to trust in God's protection over traditional spirits.

Secondly, worship practices should integrate elements familiar to Samoan culture, such as music, dance, or storytelling, to create a worship experience that resonates with local congregants. This helps foster an environment where worship feels both sacred and culturally authentic. By using familiar symbols and traditions, pastors can frame the gospel as both relevant and life-changing within Samoan life. Reggie McNeal suggests that culturally grounded worship builds bridges, allowing congregants to encounter the gospel without feeling disconnected from their heritage.⁵⁰

Thirdly, deliverance ministries address animistic fears⁵¹ by helping individuals who believe they are influenced by malevolent spirits find freedom in Christ. Deliverance should be conducted with sensitivity, acknowledging and respecting the reality of these beliefs within the culture while pointing toward Christ as the ultimate liberator. Therefore, in offering deliverance through prayer and scriptural teaching, pastors can meet congregants at the intersection of their fears and faith, helping them to replace animistic practices with biblical practices that affirm God's power and love.

Lastly, in Samoan culture, the concept of *fa'aSamoa* (Samoan way) emphasizes the importance of community and relational harmony. Therefore, pastoral care approaches that involve family or

⁵⁰Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 51.

⁵¹Church Missionary Society, *Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record: Volume 61* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1910), 114.

village members can be particularly impactful. Healing ceremonies or communal prayers help individuals feel supported by both their faith community and their culture. Moreover, by blending the Samoan value of relational integration with Christian communal worship, pastors can address spiritual issues in a culturally appropriate and biblically sound way.

Holistic Mission Strategies

A holistic mission strategy is crucial for effectively ministering within the Samoan context. By addressing the broader spiritual, social, and emotional needs of Samoan communities, missionaries can demonstrate the relevance of the gospel to every aspect of Samoan life. This approach respects Samoan social structures, acknowledging the roles of village chiefs (*matai*) and other traditional authorities in communal decision-making. Integrating spiritual teaching with community support programs—such as health, education, and social initiatives—can make the gospel more meaningful and effective, showing that Christianity promotes not only spiritual transformation but also communal well-being. Holistic mission strategies that balance theological teaching with practical community benefits create a culturally affirming and effective approach to gospel engagement.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex system of spiritual beings in Samoan culture, tracing its origins from pre-Christian beliefs to the present, while also addressing how this animistic worldview impacts the process of gospel engagement. The historical and spiritual foundation of Samoan animism, with its classification of spiritual beings such as *Atua* (God the Creator), *Aitu Aumakua* (individual spirits), *Aitu o Aiga* (ancestor spirits), *Aitu o Nu'u* (village spirits), and *Aitu Fasia* (malevolent spirits), reveals the profound way these beliefs shape Samoan identity and society. Early missionary encounters highlighted the need for a nuanced approach in engaging Samoan beliefs, given the deeply rooted reverence for both benevolent and malevolent spirits as essential to cultural and social practices.

In addressing the implications for gospel engagement, this study has proposed strategies that honor the contextualization of the gospel within Samoan culture. Effective evangelism in this context requires more than a simple presentation of the Christian message; it involves carefully adapting gospel principles to resonate with Samoan spiritual

beliefs without compromising core theological truths. Recognizing the importance of traditional beliefs allows missionaries and church leaders to communicate the Christian message in a way that acknowledges and respects Samoan spirituality.

Building bridges between cultural identity and Christian faith is a central task in gospel engagement. By respecting cultural identity, evangelists can foster meaningful dialogue that does not alienate but instead invites individuals to see continuity between their cultural heritage and their faith journey. This approach helps counter the perception that Christianity is foreign or disconnected from Samoan identity, instead highlighting aspects of Samoan culture that align with Christian values, such as respect for family, community integration, and reverence for a creator.

Finally, effective pastoral approaches to animism in Samoa require holistic mission strategies that include teaching, discipleship, and community involvement. Pastors and missionaries should encourage believers to acknowledge the sovereignty of God over all spirits while offering guidance in renouncing practices that conflict with Christian beliefs. A holistic mission approach incorporating spiritual formation, community-based support, and ongoing education can provide Samoan Christians with a faith that honors their cultural background while affirming a life-changing relationship with Christ.

In sum, this paper suggests that successful gospel engagement in Samoa involves both contextual sensitivity and theological clarity. In carefully balancing respect for cultural identity with the distinctions of the Christian faith, church leaders and missionaries can offer a compelling vision of the gospel that is both culturally resonant and spiritually life-changing.

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