GOVERNANCE IN AMERICAN SAMOA: THE ROLE AND POSITION OF POLITICAL LEADERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY MEMBERS IN THAT PROCESS

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When the US took over the administration of the Eastern Samoa, they kept in place a part of the existing political organisation, particularly the council of customary paramount chiefs or Fono. Today the executive is a bicameral body with a House of Representatives elected through secret ballot and a House of Senators selected among themselves by traditional leaders, the senior matai. Several times the US tried to make the territory adopt an Organic Act, which had been refused by Samoan traditional leaders mostly because the adoption of such an organised status would signify acknowledgement of the US Constitution, some articles of which may conflict with fa’asamoa, the Samoan way, and communal land tenure. Their protection have always been an issue in American Samoa and had been written down in the American Samoa Constitution and Law. Nowadays, although the US government does not seek to give American Samoa an organized status; it indirectly intervernes in the internal affairs of the territory, especially on the economical scene. For instance the Congress recently decided to raise the minimum wage in American Samoa, placing the territory in an uneasy position toward the two canneries settled there and which are the territory’s main industry.

In this context, two contradictory approaches of governance are competing: One of the Fono and Government of American Samoa, the other of members of the civil society. I will discuss here these two approaches.

Position of the in power traditional leaders

Regarding the position of the traditional leaders in office, one of the distinctive discourses comes from the American Samoan Congressman Faleomavaega (1995: 35) who
suggests rethinking the existing relationship between the United States and American Samoa and especially redefining the terms of the two Deeds of Cession, which did not offer according to him real protection of Samoan communal land and culture. In fact, Faleomavaega criticises the deeds of cession’s lack of clarity, the contract could be understood either as certifying the US government obligation to preserve and protect Samoa’s communal land system or as a statement of US sovereignty over the territory. To ensure the protection of fa’asamoa, the agreement needs then to be clearly redefined. But an Organic Act would not be acceptable either since, according to the Congressman: “Samoan cannot claim loyalty to America and at the same time refuses to apply federal standards that are clearly incompatible with its local traditions and land tenure system.” (Faleomavaega 1995: 42). In Faleomavaega’s eyes, if Samoans want to maintain their identity they must not compromise the integrity of their culture because of the relationship with the US. References to culture and the traditional land tenure system are then used to reassert the sovereignty of Samoan people and their leaders over the territory and their legitimate authority over American Samoa internal affairs.

Same arguments were used by Governor Togiola in his inaugural speech after his re-election last November 2008 (Samoa News 2009). He pointed out that the basis of Samoan culture seems to be slowly fading away as a result of globalisation and modern civilisation. He acknowledged the American Samoan double heritage; Samoan and American; but recognised that the two are sometimes unsuccessfully blended. He said: “We may have moved too far, too fast. And in our desire to be modern and global we fail to teach and demonstrate (...), the true values of fa’asamoa” (ibid.). Governor Togiola appealed then to customs and traditional knowledge to rethink the American Samoan relationship with the modern and global world, and he and his government would look to Samoan culture for a way to lead the territory. He emphasizes the importance of education and learning Samoan values. Nevertheless, Governor Togiola does not reject the American influence and American values, neither does he question his people’s American identity and long association with the US. However, he ended his speech by stressing that Samoan culture is, and I quote, “our haven, our unfailing safety net”.

To answer the issues raised by globalisation, modernisation and returning migrants, American Samoan political leaders chose to promote and valorise the roots of fa’asamoa, especially its matai and land tenure system. They also chose to preserve the present political organisation which relies on those traditions. They emphasize the Samoan epistemology in
order to maintain the status quo, more so because critics directly affect the leaders’ legitimate authority.

The position of the returning migrant with regard to change of governance

Fronting the conservatism of the political leaders, are a group of returning migrants who, supported by their overseas experience, look for an alternative model of society and governance. Young retired from the US administration or the military where they acquired important management skills, experiences of social work as well as discipline and strictness, they want to make their territory benefit from them. Usually not a part of the fa’amatai, they are members of the civil society or the private sector and although they do not want to abandon the matai system, they strongly question the senior matai’s grip on political position and governance. They expect a more democratic system but are not willing to see Samoan culture disappear. According to them, fa’asamoamoa and executive powers should be separated and part of different spheres; fa’asamoamoa and senior matai dealing with aiga, the extended family, and village life while the governance of the territory should be accessible to all and of a more democratic form – more like what exists in the US.

My first example is one of the candidates in the last gubernatorial elections in November 2008 who is a high ranking chief, but who was raised and educated in the US. He also has excellent management skills and a totally different approach of governance. He offered to set up a proper State management with more transparency and criticized the chief system based on kin relationships and giving favours to relatives or related senior matai. In fact he considers that matai, and especially those in the government, use their position to get benefits for themselves and their close relatives; a form of corrupt practice quite common in Pacific island countries (Schoeffel 1994: 373). Indeed, in American Samoa as in many neighbouring islands, traditional leaders use both the discourses of tradition and modernity for their own profit (Meleisea 2000, Tuimaleali’ifano 2000).

During the last elections, there was also a woman striving to get the American Samoa place in Congress. She is a retired military officer with 23 years of service who now wanted to serve her people. During the campaign, she criticized the current political leaders lack of tautua mo tagata lautele, or service to the people. She then emphasized her will to work on growing the economy and social welfare. Although She ans the US educated senior matai were not elected into office, their discourse illustrates a totally different approach of governance from the one promoted by Governor Togiola and Congressman Faleomavaega.
Instead, the arguments of those two unsuccessful candidates are very close to what can be heard from US politicians.

But it is not only candidates for election who contribute to this discourse. I met several returning migrants with a great will to help their territory and to offer their skills and experience. Like this man who worked in community service in San Francisco helping Pacific Islanders and who wants to continue to do so in islands. His aim is to create an organisation supporting youths in their education and which would train them in new technologies. He does not want to enter into politics but to work from outside where he feels less pressured and more free and upright. He supports the idea of the Senators’ election, believing that it would better serve the community. Although he is extremely proud and respectful of his culture and identity as a Samoan, he believes that fa’asamoa should have nothing to do with politics. For him fa’asamoa is not only the matai system and their position of authority, but it also relies on the aiga and on values like the welcoming and alofa as well as those of the Church.

Another person, a Samoan woman, born and raised in the US, returned a few years ago to the islands with the same will to serve her islands and people and to have them benefit from her education and experience. She stressed what for her is fa’asamoa and once again the position of senior matai was not paramount; what was of most importance was the extended family, which would be the core of the Samoan culture, each member contributing to its strength by sharing and supporting the other members. The taotua, service to the family, was also stressed.

These four characters are representative of the educated returning migrants who expect fairer governance. Going against the common idea that in Samoan islands every man or woman aspire to a senior matai title (Grattan 1985: 14), these people do not want to attain such a position to reach their goals, because it involves too many obligations and dishonest compromises. But they do not want to give up on their identity and what makes them Samoans either - they have a different approach of fa’asamoa which they do not define in terms specifically of chiefly organisation and traditional land tenure but emphasize some other core values around the aiga and its respect. Whereas they do not question the position of the head matai within the extended family, they do question the political grip of those paramount chiefs on legislative power and management of the territory. They consider people from the civil society to be as legitimate as matai and would prefer a more democratic form of authority where people make choices and give their voice throughout elections. But they do not feel less Samoan for all that.
Conclusion: There exists in American Samoa two distinctive approaches of how the territory should react to the new order of globalization and how governance should evolve (schematically, a traditionalist approach and a more modern and democratic one). From there two different perceptions of culture appear as well: first, the fa'asamoa claimed by the current political leaders, the Culture which serves leaders’ interests, the one which is spoken of; And second, the Samoan culture carried on by members of the civil society who claim a real Samoan identity while at the same time criticizing the immobilism of the political scene. It is in fact the culture which is according to me lived and experiences today.

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