THE FAA-SAMOA: FROM CANOES TO INTERNET SURFING

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Introduction

As used in this paper, the faa-Samoa means the Samoan way of life, or Samoan custom and tradition. An important element of the faa-Samoa is the faa-matai, or chiefly system, and this is a very visible element of Samoan social organisation though it is itself undergoing change both in its role and function. (For a more detailed discussion of this, refer So’o, 2007).

From canoes to internet surfing is meant to be a metaphorical expression to refer to the rapid changes which have affected Samoan society since the acknowledged date of contact with the West, namely 1830. This was the year when the first London Missionary Society evangelists, John Williams, and Charles Barff, arrived in Samoa from Tahiti to bring the message of the gospel. Of course, Europeans had visited Samoa in 1722 (Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen), 1768 (French navigator Bougainville), 1787 (French explorer La Perouse), 1791 (English Captain Edwards), 1802 (English trader Captain Bass) and 1824 (Russian navigator Kotzebue). Samoan contact with Westerners in 1830 was then not new, because there had been earlier contacts, though mostly at sea with Westerners, who arrived on ships of exploration (Roggeveen), search (Captain Edwards) and trading vessels (Captain Bass). There had also been some contact with several whalers, mainly from the New England ports in the USA, as well as up to a score of escaped sailors, and convicts from the English penal settlement in Botany Bay, Australia. Some brisk trade was always conducted when these American and European vessels visited. Trade items were mainly mirrors, beads, iron nails, knives, axes from the papalagi (white men) in exchange for food items such as pork, chicken, coconuts, water, and material artifacts such as turtle shells, tapa cloth and war clubs. Samoans had also known of the papalagi through their contacts with Tonga. Contact with the West changed the social landscape of Samoan society forever, with the introduction of Christianity in 1830, Western knowledge and the cash economy.

Communications Technology

One way of measuring the extent of social change, occasioned by
contact with the West was communications technology. Before 1830, amongst Samoans, communication was an arduous affair. There was no telephone, no telegraph available. If a message had to be sent from one district to another, as in times of war, it was conveyed through a specially appointed messenger. In the village, if an individual or family is to be punished or removed from the village, the matai council’s decision is delivered, also by a specially appointed messenger. When travelling between villages, groups of people usually started their treks before daybreak, often in the early hours of the morning, so that when the sun rose up, they would have passed the midway point of their travel. But more often travel was done through canoes. Thus, when Captain Wilkes asked an old native of Tutuila (island in American Samoa) what a comfortable living standard for a Samoan would be, he replied that a Samoan was in a comfortable position “when he has a good house; a well-made visiting canoe; a neat, handy, large, and well-formed woman for a wife; a taro-patch, with a good fence; cocoa-nut and breadfruit trees, with a reasonable number of pigs” (Wilkes, 1852:162). One might say that the canoe was the indispensable mode of travel. It was also the favourite mode of transportation for a bride-to-be, who would wear a special fine mat called ie nofova’a (fine mat for sitting in the boat) and then when she arrived at her destination she would wear another one called ie tu (fine mat for standing up) (Sunia, 2000). Truly, travel and communication in Samoa were arduous experiences and have been the cause of many tragedies, eg people blown off course while travelling between the Samoan islands, and people dying of pneumonia because of the cold and stress of travel over the mountainous paths.

From 1830 to the present, 2009, a period of 180 years, Samoa (formerly Western Samoa) has made gigantic strides in its economic development in all major categories, social, cultural, economic, religious, political. Travel has been greatly simplified by the use of steam boats, motor vehicles and both propeller and jet planes. Where it took days, weeks and months to travel from Point A to Point B now takes only minutes and hours. Messengers have given way to instant communication using the telephone, telegraph, fax and internet. The use of the

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telephone has been further improved with less dependency on land lines and increasingly more dependency on cellular phones, now marketed by the local private companies, Go Mobile and Digicel. The competition between these companies is so keen, that the government has been forced to employ a Regulator, who plays the role of referee in any disputes between the parties. The number of Samoans who buy cellular phones continues to increase every month. The same with those using the internet, to obtain information, read the latest news and send and receive email letters.

When the Lesamoa Internet Service Provider started in 1996, it had only one user, the CEO himself. But as of 2009, 13 years later, the company has 3,000 users. In 1996 it had a gateway connection to Big Pond in Australia with a capacity of 64 kbps kilobytes per second. Now the speed is much faster with about 10 mbps megabytes per second. Computer Services Ltd, which is 70 per cent owned by government, began in January 1998 with 200 customers. This year the number has grown to 4,624. Incoming speed of the internet is 6 Mbps, outoing is 3 Mbps but in practice these speeds have been halved “because Samoatel\textsuperscript{2} has complete control over the international gateway and can throttle internet speed” said a CSL spokesperson. In 2000, the Ipasifika Internet Service Provider had 100 users. This year, 2009, it has 1,000 users, a ten-fold increase. The speed of its internet service has also increased sharply, mainly as a result of the introduction of a broad band service in December, 2008, utilising wireless rather than a phone line. The broad band service, also offered last year by the other internet service providers, is ten times as fast as the service provided by telephone lines, but because of cost, is largely restricted to business houses

There is a lot of work to be done to introduce students in the primary and secondary school system of Samoa, to the internet services that are available. A laptop per child is a long way from being realised. This is a major challenge for the government. The Co-Managing Director of Ipasifika, Francine Fruean, put it well:

\textit{With regards to offering laptops to school children for internet access, we are not in a position financially to offer such a big project. But a project like that should be funded by Government}

\textsuperscript{2} A government-owned corporation.
or Aid and we are more than happy to help in the way of training and facilitation.

Any expansion of the internet industry may also effect other changes, for example, in the number of gateways to satellite communication. At the moment, there is only one gateway for internet and telephone communication, that provided by the government-owned corporation, Samoa Tel, with its large satellite dish situated at Maluafo‘ou village. All internet service providers have to use this single gateway and are thus wholly dependent on what is available through Samoa Tel. Currently, internet services will be improved further when the undersea cable network which connects Samoa, American Samoa, Hawaii and the United States is completed. This link is expected to be operational in June/July 2009.

**Conclusion**

Improvements in communications technology in Samoa, from canoe voyaging to internet messaging are but symptoms of the new global economy affecting Samoa and her neighbours. It is a result of modernization brought about by cultural contact, international trade, migration, aid, remittances and the effects of government bureaucracy. Modern communication itself is a means to an end for it is aimed at increasing the speed of communication and therefore facilitating contact between peoples. No doubt Samoans have benefited greatly from it.

Where it took weeks in the past to communicate by letter, it now takes only a few seconds to be able to talk over the phone or email with loved ones in American Samoa, New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii and the United States. The speed of communication has enabled Samoans throughout the world to better prepare for their family events *(faalavelave)* such as weddings, title investitures, funerals, births, 21st birthdays, house and church dedications, and so on. Fulfilment of social obligations has in turn contributed to the sense of social solidarity amongst family members.

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