

# **FOOD, POWER, AND GLOBALIZATION IN SAMOA**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The effect of globalization on Samoan diet has been well documented as has the subsequent epidemic of obesity among Samoans. The Samoan diet began a transition in the 1830s with the introduction of more and more imported food items, culminating in a situation by the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that required the continued importation of food to meet the dietary needs of the population of the Samoan Islands. The dietary shift which accelerated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was accompanied by a dramatic increase in obesity among Samoans, although the dietary transition appeared to play less of a role in the increase in obesity than did changes in activity patterns. I begin this paper by summarizing the previous literature on dietary globalization in Samoa.

Next, I analyze several sets of previously collected but not yet analyzed data from work in American Samoa conducted between 1982 and 1992. In these analyses I look at associations between gardening behavior, family obligations, and diet in American Samoa.

Finally, I consider more recent aspects of food and globalization in Samoa, such as the expansion of the McDonald's franchise and the nature of food security in Samoa and American Samoa.

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## INTRODUCTION

The effect of globalization on Samoan diet has been well documented as has the subsequent epidemic of obesity among Samoans (e.g., Bindon, 1982; 1984; 1986; 1988; 1994; 1995; 1997; 2004; Galanis et al., 1999; Hanna et al., 1986; McGarvey, 1991; McGarvey et al., 1993). These changes have had profound influences on the relationship between food and power in Samoa. The Samoan diet began a transition in the 1830s with the introduction of the first imported food items, culminating in a situation by the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that required the continued importation of food to meet the dietary needs of the increased population of the Samoan Islands.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the relationships among power, food, and globalization for Samoans. The first part of this paper summarizes my previous work on dietary globalization starting with a description of pre-contact Samoan foodways and continuing with the documentation of the delocalization process for Samoan foodways. Next additional data on foodways, power, and globalization are presented to focus on the effects of dietary delocalization on the relationship of food and power. Finally, recent literature on food and globalization in Samoa is explored with an eye toward predicting future aspects of food and power.

In trying to understand the changes in food and power in Samoa, it is important to note that segments of the Samoan population have experienced different forces and intensities of globalization. The fact that the archipelago has been separated into two polities, an eastern one that is the territory of American Samoa and a western one that began the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a member of the British Commonwealth then became the independent nation of Western Samoa and finally was renamed the Independent State

of Samoa (ISS or just Samoa), plays a key role in differentiating the globalization experience. Other historical factors, including migration out of the Samoan Islands, have also shaped the present relationship between food and power in Samoa.

### **FA'ASAMOA—THE SAMOAN WAY**

Pre-contact Samoan subsistence was based on farming and fishing. The most common crops in use when Samoans first became extensively exposed to European influences in the 1830s included many of the species cultivated by the Samoans today, such as breadfruit, banana, taro, giant taro, and coconut. Domesticated animals included both pig and chicken as seen in the archaeological record (Kirch, 1978:11-12). In addition to the plants and animals that the early Polynesian settlers brought with them, numerous species of fish and shellfish, some birds, and sea turtles were exploited by Samoans.

The production and distribution of food has long been an inseparable part of power relations in Samoan society. In traditional Samoan society chiefly status within the village is validated and emphasized by food production, preparation, and eating. The social organization of each village is somewhat unique and idiosyncratic, so any generalizations given here should be viewed as abstractions adhered to by individuals in some villages. All Samoan villages are run by titled individuals (*matai*) of differing ranks who meet in council (*fono*) to plan what to produce, and how to dispose of the food, among other village matters. The chiefs direct the untitled men of the village in various subsistence tasks. In the village studied by O'Meara (1990:56) he supplies the following translation of a cry given by a mid level talking chief (*tulāfale*) to prepare the village for an important part of the production cycle: "Tomorrow will begin the planting of

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taro tops. Each *matai* must plant five hundred for the inspection on Thursday, three weeks from now." In this example the production is being regulated on each family's land, but similar decisions would be given by the *fono* about the use of village land, as well as family and village reef territory. In theory, all production should be regulated by the *fono*, while each *matai* is responsible for decisions about the use of the land and resources communally held by his/her extended family.

In terms of gender roles in Samoan villages, agricultural tasks are predominantly done by males. Untitled men clear the bush where the gardens are planted and carry the cuttings from harvested taro that are used to plant the new garden. Women may help in the weeding and harvesting of the gardens and in fact, in almost any aspect of gardening, but the success of the garden is said to depend on the hard work of the men, and the bush and plantations are said to be men's areas. Holmes (1974:42-43) emphasizes the sharing of gardening tasks by men and women in the village he studied in American Samoa, but this is going to vary by village, depending upon how strictly the *fono* enforces rules about the appropriate behavioral realms of men and women (see Shore, 1982:48-50).

While women occasionally assume titles in Samoan society, chiefly designations are primarily reserved for men. The traditional role of Samoan women in food production includes gathering fish and shellfish from the reef, an activity within a traditional village realm of women. The women harvest these foods with a minimum of equipment, usually no more than a stick and coconut frond basket. These foods form an important part of the traditional Samoan diet and supply a large percent of the protein intake. By contrast, the fleshy protein foods associated with men are consumed

less frequently, but they all involve more specialized equipment and tasks, are considered to be much more prestigious, and are the foods that are fit to be served to high ranking individuals. Examples include pig butchering and deep sea fishing which are male jobs that produce foods appropriate for serving to high status individuals.

Preparation also expresses a division of labor by gender. While untitled men harvest taro, bananas, breadfruit, and coconuts, women gather firewood and collect leaves to cover the rock oven. Untitled men and boys scrape the breadfruit and taro, and peel the green bananas and they make the coconut cream. Building the rock oven (*umu*) and cooking the food is also traditionally men's work.

These patterns of gender and rank division of labor are still seen in rural communities in Samoa today, as noted by Schendel (1989) and Pearson (1989). Schendel found that rural men spent about 15 hours per week farming, and another three to five hours fishing. An additional eight to ten hours per week were spent on domestic tasks, especially food preparation. Women in rural villages spent three to five hours per week on farming and fishing combined, with most of their time consumed in domestic tasks (nearly 20 hours per week), and crafts activities (about 15 hours per week). Pearson noted the differences in household interaction between males and females, with Samoan men spending significantly less time in the household context than the Samoan women (50% versus 75%). These observations were made in rural villages of (then) Western Samoa.

Traditional meal serving also emphasizes gender and status in Samoa. Chiefs and important guests are served first, with women and children eating next, and the girls who served and the young men who cooked eat last. The composition of the meal will

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reflect the status of the individual being served. Butchering a pig is called for when a high chief (*ali'i sili*) visits, although a large prestigious deep sea fish such as a bonito or wahoo will also do. After cooking, the specific part of the pig or fish that is served to a particular individual is determined by his or her rank<sup>1</sup>. Serving size is also related to rank, with more important chiefs getting larger portions of the prestige foods that are intended to go home for later consumption by their families.

In traditional Samoa, food and the power structure are linked from the production through the preparation and serving. Because of relatively favorable growing conditions no one went hungry as result of the manipulation of food to affirm status, but the linkages remained profound.

### **DIET AND GLOBALIZATION IN SAMOA**

As 19<sup>th</sup> century traders brought new foods to Samoa, food preferences and practices began to change and the beginnings of globalization laid the roots for the corruption of the relationship between food and power. By the 1880s, Samoans had eagerly adopted tinned meats and fish (called *pisupo* by the Samoans) and flour (*falaoa*). Churchward tells of a near riot in Apia in 1881 when a supply ship was late and flour supplies were dwindling (1887:171-172). The globalization of the Samoan diet continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the process was accelerated during World War II, by the extensive presence of a U.S. Naval Base and troop staging area in the Pago Pago Bay Area of American Samoa. In a 1952 survey, Malcolm appears to have caught the Samoans at a key point in their globalization (Malcolm, 1954). The Samoans had just emerged from a period of intense exposure to U.S. wages and foodways, and many had

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<sup>1</sup> Buck, 1930, details the specific carvings he witnessed of pigs and fish. These serving practices of allocating special parts of the animals to high ranking individuals are still going on in Samoa today.

abandoned farming and fishing and were reluctant to resume their former subsistence patterns. Local production was insufficient for the population that had become inflated by immigration from the western islands of the archipelago, so foods had to be imported to maintain the increased population (Malcolm, 1954:37). Foodways had to change because of the shortage of traditional foods. However, this change did not go unchallenged. Malcolm reports on attempts by the chiefs in some villages of American Samoa to prevent the people from buying imported foods. The chiefs were trying to maintain the traditional diet—perhaps partly as an assertion of cultural identity, but certainly also in an attempt to maintain the role of the *matai* and the *fono* in food production. The chiefs clearly saw the shift from *fono* control of farming and fishing to wage labor as undermining their power base. By trying to prevent the purchase of food they were attempting to preserve their traditional role in the face of changing times.

The chiefs were fighting a losing battle. Imports of meat, fish, and rice all increased about three-fold, six-fold, and more than 50-fold respectively between 1948 and 1980, while the population doubled (Bindon, 1988). In addition, many of the dietary staples such as taro, banana, breadfruit, and coconuts that had previously been grown in family gardens were being purchased at the local markets by 1980.

By the late 1970s Hill (1977) found that reefs had been over-exploited, resulting in lowered yields and he suggested a return to the traditional management system of *tapu* or *sa* (forbidden), where the village *fono* (council of chiefs) would once again regulate the taking of reef resources, as way to bring the catch back into line with reef productivity. This recommendation, while sensible, would have required adopting a concept of power that had been replaced by a much more free-wheeling *laissez-faire*



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process for using reef (and other) resources. Ultimately the recommendation failed in American Samoa and the reef resources continue to experience depletion.

New, imported foods have been added in to the Samoa diet in accordance with existing meal formats (Bindon, 1988). Foods tended to be incorporated into the diet according to cost/benefit calculations with the important qualification of cultural values added in (Bindon, 1988). Power considerations of chiefly rank still play an important role in food choice. Rice is the most rational economic choice as starchy staple for a family with cash income, and little time to spend gardening, but feeding an important visitor, preparing a wedding feast or celebrating the naming of a new chief all call for serving a meal based on taro. A similar economic/cultural calculus comes into play with flesh foods. The most culturally significant events still require the roasting of a pig. Buck (1930:122) notes that "[f]or ordinary guests, the fowl forms an economical substitute for the pig," indicating that chicken, a key modern import, forms a culturally acceptable offering for a mid level or lower chief, but roast pig stands alone at the top of the cultural hierarchy for offering to a prestigious visitor. Today, imported beef steaks and pork (chops and ham) have assumed a prestige between that of chicken and pig.

Another finding that has been borne out by several dietary studies is that as dietary delocalization and economic globalization has increased, the caloric intake of segments of the Samoan population has decreased (Bindon, 1984; Galanis et al., 1999; Hanna et al., 1986). This is in spite of increasing obesity with increasing globalization. As globalization has altered the relationship of food and power in Samoa, families have found ways to keep their reduced caloric intake in excess of their caloric requirements, resulting in the continuing increases in rates of obesity (McGarvey et al., 1993).

I conducted dietary surveys in American Samoa in 1976 and again in 1982. One focus of these surveys was to try to understand the process of dietary change that has accompanied the change from subsistence production to wage labor among Samoans. Food availability and consumption has been dramatically altered by the change from extended family households pursuing farming and fishing to nuclear family households with two incomes. Today, over half of the families on Tutuila, the main island of American Samoa are two-worker families, with little time for subsistence production, while in rural villages of the Independent State of Samoa farming is still the way of life for the overwhelming majority of families. Households in Samoa have adapted to the changes of economic globalization in two different ways:

1. In some families, the plantation (a grandiose term for the family swidden garden) becomes smaller, animal husbandry is reduced, fishing activities are foregone, and reef gathering becomes an infrequent source of food as the family focuses on education and higher occupational status to increase economic resources
2. In other families, additionally family members are brought into the household to help farm and fish and contribute wages (Bindon and Vitzthum, 2002).

Families who adopt the first strategy rely heavily on the markets and fast food and other restaurants for their foods. The bulk of their diet is composed of imported foods, supplemented with traditional produce, frequently purchased at the government-sponsored market and imported from neighboring Pacific Island countries. Families adopting the second strategy frequently recruit young adults from the Independent State

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of Samoa to move in and assist in food production activities—both in terms of supplying additional gardening labor and adding to the cash income of the household. Larger households that include these helpers are more likely to have active plantations with substantial consumption of taro, banana, yam, coconut, and breadfruit.

The 1982 survey of 62 families from over 30 villages on Tutuila, American Samoa, found that 78% of the families maintained plantations, with 15% of the families saying they relied heavily on the plantations. Sixty-three percent of the families were keeping pigs and 41% were keeping chickens. Father's education was higher among families not relying on plantations (Student's  $t = 2.36$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and father's occupational status was higher among families not keeping pigs (Student's  $t = 2.02$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) or chickens (Student's  $t = 3.27$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). These findings are consistent with the two mode economic strategy described above.

In a 1989 survey of 31 families living in American Samoa, two-thirds of the families reported eating foods from their plantations at least one day a week, with nearly 40% of the families eating from the plantation daily. Forty two percent of the families went fishing or reefing at least once a week to provide food, with only 10% fishing daily. These figures show continued diminution of the traditional farming and fishing pattern of life on Tutuila.

The kin group (*'aiga*) gains prestige and power based the title of its *matai* and on its public presentations in various social activities. The maintenance of this prestige depends on the ability of the *matai* to mobilize resources when events dictate (i.e., for marriages, funerals, title ceremonies, and the like). This depends on *'aiga* members developing a sense of obligation to the *'aiga* so that the *matai* can call upon them for gift

giving at public ceremonies referred to as *fa'alavelave*. The success and prestige of the *'aiga* is literally dependent on the feelings of obligation of the members. In a 1992 survey of 135 families from over 30 villages on Tutuila, American Samoa, participants were asked for their perceptions about their families participation in *fa'alavelave*, an indicator of the impact of globalization on power structures in Samoa. Two thirds of the families felt that they contributed to *fa'alavelave* more than once a month and 42% of the families perceived that more than half of their cash income was going to *fa'alavelave*. This suggests that the traditional *matai* and *'aiga* based power structure in Samoa has successfully morphed from controlling the agricultural and marine production of food to controlling the flow of cash. It also shows a reduction in the power held by the *matai* over income, since the traditional model would be for all individuals to participate in *fa'alavelave*. The tie between *fa'alavelave* and food is that the more demand a *matai* can put on a household for contributions, the less income there is to spend on food, and the more the family budget is squeezed between meeting household needs and maintaining the household. Several people expressed distress over what they perceived as excessive *fa'alavelave* demands by their *matai*.

### **Ongoing globalization**

An indication of the ongoing globalization of foodways was the successful launch of McDonald's® which opened on September 29, 2000, in American Samoa (Sagapolutele, 2001). McDonald's® was not the first international fast food franchise to set up in the territory, but the failure of a Subway® restaurant in American Samoa in the early 1990s apparently did not dissuade some Samoans from trying to bring the huge McDonald's® franchise to the islands. Former Governor of American Samoa, Tauese

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Sunia, claimed that the level of competition from the McDonald's® franchise was so intense that it caused the closure or decline of business at other local restaurants. At the one year anniversary of the restaurant, business at McDonald's® was still going strong, showing no indication of a waning preference for the burgers, in spite of the location near the airport, away from the "downtown" Pago Pago area:

One year after the American fast-food chain McDonald's opened a franchise in American Samoa, local residents continue to flock to the restaurant and there is no evidence of waning customer interest. Indeed, business is so good, that owners are looking at opening a second restaurant. (Sagapolutele, 2001)

While the immediate impact of the opening of this franchise enhanced the wealth and power of one chief in American Samoa, Agaoleatu (*matai* title) Charlie Tautolo, who is also a member of the American Samoa House of Representatives, it has to be assumed that as this food outlet claims ever-increasing amounts of household income, it will detract from the overall chiefly power structure in American Samoa, creating more of a pull toward *laissez faire* and away from the *matai* control of communally held resources.

The Division of Community and Natural Resources of the American Samoa Community College has produced several documents in support of grants that the college gets as a land grant institution. An important part of this process is agricultural extension outreach. One of the goals of their various grants is to produce an agricultural system that is highly competitive in the global economy. However, they note the difficulties:

Given the landmass of 76 square miles of which two-thirds have slopes greater than 30% and a population of 60,000 people, and an annual growth rate of 3.7%, it is doubtful that American Samoa will ever be [agriculturally] competitive in a global economy. However, we can reduce

our dependence on imported foods. Many of the traditional crops, such as taro, giant taro, and green bananas, are imported from the Independent State of Samoa. There are also continuing increases in imports from other Pacific Islands, including Niue, Tonga, and Fiji. Tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, leafy greens, and beans are imported from the United States. The 1996 statistics compiled by the American Samoa Department of Commerce has revealed that green bananas and taro accounted for \$283,639 of food imports, while fresh vegetables accounted for \$691,177 (update). These figures indicate an enormous demand for these food items. All of the locally grown produce is subject to plant pests and diseases. Vegetables that grow well in the United States face the additional obstacle of the hot and humid climate. (American Samoa Community College, 2005:7)

The Community College proposes several steps to try to increase local food production, especially increases in local crops of bananas, taro and giant taro to be sold at market. It is not clear whether this recommendation will be more successful than Hill's call for traditional control of reef resources was in the 1970s. If it is, it may act as a counter to global forces and serve to reinforce a more traditional relationship between food and power in Samoa.

Traditional Samoan culture still exerts strong influences on daily life in American Samoa. As the Community College points out:

In this communal society, people share food with others. There are federal food programs such as WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and food stamps (for low-income, blind, disabled, and elderly,) which together benefits about 7,500 individuals. Normally, the food benefits are shared within family groups. Almost everyone has access to food, though individuals may not be well nourished. (American Samoa Community College, 2005:15)

There are two important issues to emphasize about this statement. First, it is surprising that so many individuals are able to take advantage of the WIC program in a society that prides itself on taking care of its own. This suggests that the traditional relationship between food and power has broken down sufficiently so as to need federal assistance. Part of the problem, of course, is the dramatic population increase over the last hundred

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years which has resulted in a population that exceeds the farming and fishing carrying capacity of the islands. The second point is that Samoan culture remains tremendously resilient, incorporating this new access to food into the traditional *'aiga* structure and sharing the benefit among family members, a uniquely Samoan twist on government subsidies.

### **Conclusions**

While Samoan foodways and the relationship between food and power have undergone substantial change in the last century, there are still segments of the Samoan population that retain a great deal of the traditional flavor of *'aiga* and *matai* and *fono* control of food production, preparation, and consumption. At the same time, in parts of the archipelago, individual property rights are overtaking communal rights and nuclear families are adopting a very western orientation in their production and consumption patterns. While globalization may be an inexorable force, it is clear that Samoans will have their own unique way of adapting to the changes.

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