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## Beyond the Bun: An Ethnographic Examination of the Meanings and Significance of Hair in Samoa

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# Beyond the Bun:

An Ethnographic Examination  
of the Meanings and Significance  
of Hair in Samoa

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Honors Research  
Spring 2005  
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# Abstract

This paper examines the meanings and significance of hair in Samoa, with focuses on hair length, color and texture, and style in Samoa, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Data has been gathered from interviews, observations, and surveys, and is presented in an ethnographic format. Examined in depth is the topic of the *tuiga*, the Samoan ceremonial headdress, with an emphasis on its changing construction and usage in contemporary Samoa. The subject of hair and tourism in Samoa is another focus, specifically how Samoans are portrayed in literature produced to attract travelers to Samoa. Also discussed are the *teine sa*, or spirit women of Samoa, and how and why the threat of repercussions for going against social norms relating to hair affect Samoans today. In conclusion, the effects of increasing influence from New Zealand, Australia and the USA on Samoans are discussed in terms of consequences for hair, visible markers in Samoa in relation to hair, and implications for the future in Samoa.

# Dedication

To my parents, for supporting all of my past crazy endeavors, and hopefully my future ones as well!

To Jenny, for taking care of the dirty work while I was away doing research.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jackie Fa'asisila for your guidance throughout the data collection process and for helping me realize that hair is a big enough topic upon which to write a paper.

I would like to apologize to my informants, because I feel as though I was only able to scratch at the surface of their vast knowledge about Samoan customs and culture. If I have done anything that is not pleasing to you, please forgive me. I have done my best to synthesize the knowledge of many great minds into one paper, and I hope I have done so in a way that is satisfying to you.

Thank you also to Moelagi Jackson, May Sa'aga, Maila Sagota, Yvette Schmidt, Sala Pio Tagilima, Epesi Taito, Grace Taito, Kit Tugaga, Fuimaono F. Tupua, and Tasi Ulburg. Your generosity in helping me learn about hair in Samoa has been greatly appreciated!

An extremely large thank you goes to Dr. Rebecca Gearhart. Your guidance, thoughtful critique, and generous help were instrumental in this project becoming a reality.

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## Introduction

Walking down any street in Samoa, one will come to notice that the majority of women wear their hair long and in a bun, while the men cut it short. In spite of the heat inevitable in a tropical climate, it is somewhat rare to see a female with a cropped hairstyle. Similarly, it is rather uncommon to see a female wearing her hair down, except in the context of a traditional dance, when other social rules are bent as well. The question of how and why these societal norms evolved in Samoa led to this research on the topic of this paper: hair in Samoa.

Hair has changed in Samoa since the arrival of the missionaries beginning in 1830. What had been the custom for many generations of Samoans (specifically, men wearing their hair long and women wearing it short), changed with the arrival of Christianity to Samoa. Church teachings declared that men should wear their hair short, while women should wear it long. This was a complete reversal in the customary hairstyles for men and women, but it was accepted by the Samoans nonetheless, and prevails today.

Some Samoans held on to their traditional beliefs relating to the *teine sa*, or spirit women, and hair. To wear one's hair down is to anger the *teine sa*, and to anger the *teine sa* is to risk repercussions ranging from physical violence to possession. Thus, while the Samoans accepted that Christian tradition (and England's popular style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) declared that women must wear their hair long, they also showed respect for their traditional beliefs by keeping their hair up, most frequently in the style of a bun.

In contemporary Samoa, images of women with long, flowing hair worn down that seem to derive from an earlier era are being used to lure tourists on the premise of the exoticism these images



seem to suggest. While the images do not necessarily reflect an accurate picture of women and men in Samoa in current society, they are being utilized to bolster tourism, a very important industry.

This research entailed looking at these changing customs of hair and finding out to what extent the proliferation of foreign influence is affecting them. During the research, the Samoans with whom I worked presented four main topics: the changing customs of hair length, color, texture, and style; the *tuiga*, or traditional ceremonial headdress; hair and tourism; and hair and spirituality. Data was gathered through several interviews, surveys and observations, and findings are presented within the four topics listed above.



# Methodology

This research was initially intended to discover the cultural significance and meanings of hair in Samoa, both historically and contemporarily. It seemed a narrow topic, but as the research progressed, new questions began to present themselves about hair and religion, hair and tradition, and hair and foreign influence. Considering the scope of this topic, it would be erroneous to assert that the data gathered within the research period is absolute and comprehensive. On the contrary, the ethnographic interviews, the surveys, and the observations represent only a portion of the information available to the researcher. Within the time constraints, as many interviews and surveys were completed as possible, but it is important to note that this paper was affected by the time limitations of the research period.

During the research period, 11 ethnographic interviews were conducted, 11 surveys were collected, and three periods of observation were completed. Informants were extremely helpful and gracious and helped clarify the significance of hair in Samoa. With furrowed brows, they spent considerable time answering questions about hair and trying to think of additional topics relating to hair. With their guidance, the scope of this paper was broadened. They were also extremely helpful in locating additional contacts.

Two surveys were used to gather data about the cultural significance and meanings of hair in Samoa. The surveys were written in both Samoan and English, and those who were surveyed were told they could respond in either Samoan or English. While the data gathered through these surveys is not statistically quantifiable, it does serve to support data gathered in interviews when similar questions were asked. Sample surveys are included in Appendices B and C.

Additionally, data was collected through observation on three occasions inside the McDonalds restaurant in Apia, Samoa. While conducting observations in a McDonalds in the United States and most other Western nations might result in data from a small subgroup of people who eat a lot of fast food, the case is not necessarily so in Samoa, as many people enter the establishment for reasons other than to purchase food. A total of 148 Samoans, 84 of whom were female and 64 of whom were male, entered the establishment during the three periods of observation. For females, data was recorded on the length of hair (long, medium, short), the style (bun, ponytail, braid, down), if it was dyed, and if they wore a flower in their hair. Long hair was defined as four inches below the shoulder and longer, medium as between four inches below the shoulder and the chin, and short as above the chin. For males, data was recorded on the length of hair (long, medium, short), if it was dyed, and if it was in the afro style. Long hair in males was defined as shoulder length or longer, medium as above the shoulders to the chin, and short above the chin.

It was difficult to perceive the length of hair in women, as it was most frequently styled in a bun, but estimations were made. Hair was marked as dyed if it was immediately evident that the hair was dyed; thus, people with more subtle dye jobs or those dying to cover up grays most likely escaped notice. See Appendix A for charts showing the data collected during the periods of observation. While this data was useful for the scope of this topic, there is a great deal more information available on other topics relating to hair, and with a longer research period, more topics could be addressed.

# Hair Length, Color and Texture, and Style in Samoa:

## Past and Present

### Hair Length in the Past

Prior to missionary contact, Samoan men wore their hair long, while women wore their hair short, especially those who were of lower status. Samoan men styled their long hair in a knot, or *foga*, on the top of their head. The knot was usually tilted towards the right side, although it could vary from way on top, way in back, or on either side, depending on the current fashion. Men of the lower class of Samoa were required to undo their *foga* when in the presence of chiefs and during worship, suggesting that hair served as a visual representation of status. In times of war, the “male heathens” of Samoa let their long hair down to “flutter” when going into war, while the converted Christian men commonly cut their hair short.<sup>1</sup>

Before missionary contact, Samoan women wore their hair short, sometimes shaved close to their heads. Missionary John Williams, who came to Samoa in 1830, described females as having “their heads fully shorn except for a single six inch long curl which dropped from the left temple down over the girl’s neck.”<sup>2</sup> According to a missionary Reverend John B. Stair, who lived in Samoa from 1838-1845, this style, called *tutagita*, was only for “young females during their virginity.”<sup>3</sup> Girls of a higher class maintained two curls, which suggests that hair was used as a visual symbol of social hierarchy and status in Samoa prior to the influence of the missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Descriptions of Samoan females with short hair were written before missionary influence changed the custom drastically, and therefore short hair for females could be declared

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<sup>1</sup> Krämer, Dr. Augustin. The Samoa Islands, Volume II. Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1979, p 34.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 325.

<sup>3</sup> Stair, Rev. John B. Old Samoa: Flotsam and Jetsam from the Pacific Ocean. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1897, p 121.

<sup>4</sup> Krämer, p 325.

the “traditional” Samoan style. When a woman was widowed, she customarily cut her hair in mourning, which symbolized the transformation her life would undergo following the death of her husband.<sup>5</sup>

Once the missionaries arrived in Samoa beginning with the London Missionary Society in 1830, hair length customs reversed. Missionaries brought with them rules regarding hair that were found in the Bible, such as Corinthians 11:14-16: “Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as covering.”<sup>6</sup> Samoan women were thus told to wear their hair long and men were told to crop it short. This was also the style of hair popular in Britain at the time. Historically, some Biblical scholars have interpreted this verse as demonstrating women’s lower status compared to men, as they were told to cover themselves with their hair, while men were not, and also because women were to wear their hair in a manner that was considered disgraceful for a man.

The expectation for women to wear their hair long caused a conflict between the laws of the new Christian God the Samoans accepted, and the *aitu* and *teine sa*, spirits of Samoan indigenous religion. While the laws of the Christian tradition requested women to wear their hair long, there were traditional Samoan beliefs inhibiting women from wearing their hair long and down. It is possible that the most common hair style for females today, the *fa’apatu*, or bun, resulted from the “dilemma of wanting to please the new God with long hair, and not displease the old Gods, by wearing it free flowing,” so that the bun became an intermediary between the

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<sup>5</sup> Barrow, T. PhD. Women of Polynesia. Wellington: South Seas Publishing Party, Ltd, 1967, p 60.

<sup>6</sup> Committee on Bible Translation, ed. Holy Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, p 812.

two laws.<sup>7</sup> Wearing hair long became visual marker of Christianity for females and spread to all corners of Samoa, and continues to prevail today.

## Hair Length Today

As is evident to those who have spent time in Samoa, the majority of Samoan women continue to wear their hair quite long (shoulder length and beyond), while the vast majority of men wear their hair in short styles. The most frequent style of hair for females is the bun, which can vary in appearance and style. Somewhat less common is the ponytail, which is sometimes also braided. It is an infrequent event to see a Samoan woman with her hair down in public, although there are exceptions. Such exceptions can be found in nightclubs and at *fiafia*, Samoan celebrations that usually include traditional dance. Two reasons for women wearing their hair up are both missionary influence and also Samoan legends relating to hair, which will be examined later on in this paper.

Although few Samoans consciously equate the Christian religious tradition as a reason why women wear their hair long and men wear their hair short, it is nevertheless a primary factor. It is interesting to note that although Christian missionary influence was a factor in the changing hair length of the Samoan people, three out of five surveyed on why Samoan women wear their hair long did not suggest this. In addition, several informants said during their interviews that they thought it was traditional for Samoan women to wear long hair and men to wear short hair. Some informants believe that the Christian religious tradition has become part of what is “traditionally Samoan,” while others believe that women wore their hair down prior to missionary contact. While the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature discounts that females wearing their hair long was traditional for Samoan women, one must question from where these ideas are derived.

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<sup>7</sup> Sier, Maureen, p 75.

A number of villages in Samoa prohibit men from growing their hair long. Deviations in these accepted norms may result in a fine or other punishment if the person fails to conform to the village's rules. Already in 1972, Samoan military police were concerned about the influx of foreign styles (and hair lengths) that was infiltrating the Samoan culture. An article titled "Sex Films, Long Hair Upsetting Samoa MPs" describes the conflict, declaring that Samoa's MP's called for "new laws banning long hair, beards, and short skirts." An MP named Faigamaa Sapa is quoted as saying, "imported customs like long hair, beards and mini-skirts [are] a threat to Samoan culture and should be banned by law. They [are] already prohibited in some villages."<sup>8</sup> For a man to wear his hair long represents a deviation in accepted societal norms, and to act out against these norms can sometimes be seen as disrespect to the village chiefs, the upholders of the *fa'asamoa*, or Samoan way.

A more recent story relating to hair length comes from the village of Lotofaga, on the south coast of Upolu. A young male acquaintance from the village, who is known for his moderate-sized afro of curly hair, was warned by a *matai*, or chief of the village, to cut his hair to make its length more appropriate, as the village of Lotofaga has a ban against men with long hair. When asked if he was going to succumb to the *matai*'s desires for him to shorten his hair, he replied that he was intending to try to trick him by slicking his hair back with gel. This illustrates the fact that in the face of increasing foreign influence and popularization of longer hairstyles for men, the tradition of keeping males' hair short is still being defended in rural villages such as Lotofaga.

For women, hair length has become something of a prized possession; it is a symbol of Samoan femininity and moral purity to wear one's hair long and up in a neat bun. The fact that the cutting of a girl's hair can be used as a punishment for severe misbehavior, such as sexual

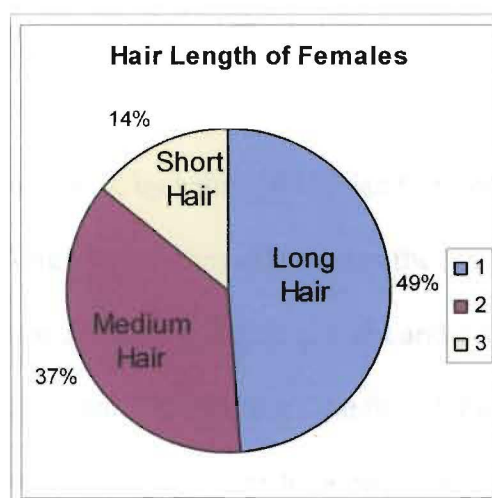
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<sup>8</sup> "Sex Films, Long Hair Upsetting Samoa MP's." *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Jan-June, 1972, p 99.

misdeeds, supports a connection between hair, and femininity and purity.<sup>9</sup> Samoan author Sia Figiel explores this topic in her book Where We Once Belonged. A young female character named Makaoleafi suffers a shaved head as well as physical violence when her family discovers a pornographic magazine in her backpack. Additionally, the 13-year-old main character, Alofa Filiga is frequently threatened with having her hair cut or shaved as a punishment for misbehavior.<sup>10</sup> While the cutting of hair in numerous cases has come to symbolize disgrace and punishment for females, it also reinforces long hair as the norm and societal ideal.

### Results of Observations on Hair Length in Contemporary Samoa

During observations in McDonalds, data was collected on 148 Samoans, 84 of whom were female and 64 of whom were male. Forty-one females had long hair, comprising 48.8% of the total, 31 females had medium length hair, comprising 36.9% of the total, and 12 females had short hair, which is 14.3% out of the total 84 females. Of the 64 males



observed, 59 had short hair (92%), three had medium length hair (5%), and two had long hair (3%).

## Hair Color and Texture

### Traditional Samoan Hair Color and Texture

Early male travelers to the Samoan Islands often mentioned the color and texture of Samoans' hair in their writings. German scientist and ethnographer Augustin Krämer describes

<sup>9</sup> Sier, Maureen, p 74. Quoting from Mageo, J. "Continuity and Shape Shifting: Samoan Spirits in Culture History." London: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Figiel, Sia. Where We Once Belonged. New York: Kaya Press, 1996.

the color of the hair as “by and large black to brownish black,” although he appears to have had a more difficult time nailing down the texture of Samoan hair: “... the overall picture... presents the Samoan as indeed having smooth hair however with a definite tendency towards curliness and short waviness.”<sup>11</sup> In an article from 1889, explorer Hervey W. Whittaker proclaims of the Samoan coif, “Their hair is straight, coarse and black, although one daily meets a number of bleached red-heads, artificially produced by the application of coral lime.”<sup>12</sup> In 1910, explorer John Hood described Samoan women’s hair as “by nature long and straight, harsh rather than coarse, and black in color.”<sup>13</sup> In Women of Polynesia, Terence Barrow, an anthropologist of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, describes the hair of the Samoans he saw as follows: “The hair is usually jet black but occasionally reddish in color and although it is sometimes wavy, it is rarely crinkled or frizzy.”<sup>14</sup> Each of these early writers agree that Samoan hair is, by nature, brownish to black, but that it is sometimes treated to make it appear lighter. Additionally, they all mention the texture as being smooth rather than coarse, but describe the wave of the hair as both straight and curly.

The traditional process of bleaching hair in Samoa involves applying lime from burnt coral to the hair, then treating the hair with salt water and allowing the hair to be exposed to the sun. Repeated processing of the hair in this manner leaves the hair with the reddish brown tint that many early visitors to the islands noted. This technique also served to clean the scalp and the hair prior to the use of soap and shampoo in Samoa.<sup>15</sup> By 1910, however, writer John Hood noted that this traditional process was dying out, and while one will frequently see Samoans with reddish tinged hair these days, it is not a result of the application of coral lime.<sup>16</sup> This traditional

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<sup>11</sup> Krämer, p 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Whittaker, H.W. “Samoa, the Isles of the Navigators.” *Century*, 38: 12-25, May 1889 p 13.

<sup>13</sup> Hood, John. “The Women of Samoa,” Feb, 1910, p 113.

<sup>14</sup> Barrow, 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Hood, 113.



process of bleaching is also used to bleach the hair used for the *tuiga*, or ceremonial headdress, and will be discussed more in depth later in the paper.

## Hair Color and Texture in Contemporary Samoa

According to interviews conducted with hairdressers in contemporary Samoa, coloring the hair continues to be quite popular, with many new techniques having been devised. Tasi Ulburg, a 17-year-old hairstylist from Tulipe's House of Beauty located in downtown Apia described modern hair coloring as follows: "When you walk around Samoa, you'll see a lot of people color their hair with ink for pens, liquid filled, or they'll use Kool-Aid. They'll do weird things just to get their hair colored here in Samoa. And they use baby powder [to lighten their hair] and it will come out blonde."<sup>17</sup> Some Samoans also go to a salon to get their hair professionally lightened, while others do so with home hair coloring products such as peroxide. Donna Funati, as New Zealand native who is the owner of Double D's Salon in Apia explained that most Samoans who color their hair wish to be blonde, "because it's so different from theirs. It's very difficult because it tends to go to orange. It takes a long, long time [with the bleach in] to get the hair any blonde color."<sup>18</sup>

Some older Samoans color their hair to cover up gray hair. Donna Funati explained that "[older women] still like to have their hair long, and most of them color it."<sup>19</sup> Yvette Schmidt, who also works at Double D's, clarified that "most people when they get old, they say 'Oh, forget it, let the grays come out.' Probably 30% of old ladies come in to treat their hair." Generally, older women living in villages do not color their hair, while those living in Apia who are closer to salons offering the service are more likely to color their hair to cover up grays.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ulburg, Tasi. Personal interview. 10 November 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Funati, Donna. Personal interview. 11 November 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, Yvette. Personal interview. 11 November 2004.

As texture is concerned, the general trend is towards straight hair, rather than curly hair.

Epesi Taito, a 14-year-old girl who lives and works at Tanu Beach Fales in the village of Manase, located on the island of Savaii, was born with straight hair, and claims that the majority of her family wishes they could have straight hair like hers.<sup>21</sup> All hairstylists interviewed noted that the majority of females who come in to change their hair texture want it straightened rather than curled. Yvette Schmidt explains:

The new trend now in Samoa, you've seen the beautiful black American hair, really straight, they want their hair like that. One client came in with a box of Dark and Lovely product, which is African American, with a photo on the front of really nice, silky straight hair, and they all want to look like that. We don't have many perms these days.<sup>22</sup>

This trend is not new, however. A book published in 1964 entitled Beauty Care and Poise for the Women of the Tropics explains, "most girls from the tropics will tell you that the chief problem with their hair is how to remove the natural curl so that they can indulge in modern styles of hairdressing."<sup>23</sup> This continues to be the main "problem" for female Samoans, in the sense that many who go to hairstylists do so to get their hair straightened. Hairstylist Donna Funati explains, "Because most of them [the Samoans] have curly hair, they all want it straight... Every person that comes in wants a blow wave straight."<sup>24</sup> The trend does not only apply to women. One male informant, Kitiona Tugaga, a 22-year-old male, reported that he had had his hair relaxed at a salon four times in his life to make his hair straight and smooth, and claims to have done this primarily to attract girls.

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<sup>21</sup> Taito, Epesi. Personal interview. 21 November 2004.

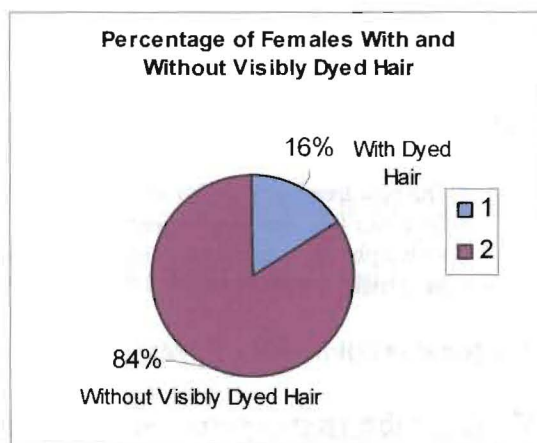
<sup>22</sup> Schmidt, Yvette. Personal interview.

<sup>23</sup> Mason, A. Beauty Care and Poise for Women of the Tropics. London: George G. Harrap and Co., Ltd., 1964, p 34.

<sup>24</sup> Funati, Donna. Personal interview.

## Results of Observations on Hair Color in Contemporary Samoa

While recording data related to the texture of Samoans' hair proved too complicated, as hair texture is difficult to observe and qualify, data was collected on the visible use of hair dye on Samoans' hair. Out of the 148 Samoans observed, 16 women and one man had observable dyed hair, usually in the form of reddish to blonde streaks. Of the 16 women, eight, or 50%, were of the middle age group (approximately 18- 60), seven, or 44%, were of the older age group (55 and above), and, one, or 6%, was of the younger age group (18 and under). This data serves only to describe the numbers of Samoans choosing to dye their hair an observable color, and does not include women who dyed their hair to conceal gray hair, which could be a statistically important group.



## Hair Styles

How did the bun become so popular in Samoa? To answer this question, one must go back to the times of the missionaries. The teachings of church encouraged women to grow their hair long, and to use it to cover their heads as a sign of modesty. Additionally, traditional Samoan beliefs warned against wearing one's hair down for fear of repercussions from the *aitu* and *teine sa*, which will be discussed more in depth later in the paper. Another factor is that the heat in Samoa makes it quite impractical to wear one's hair down. Tasi Ulburg explains that there are also cultural reasons why women usually bun their hair up—"In the Samoan way, girls shouldn't wear their hair down because it's called *failele*," which refers to women who have just had a baby and leave their hair down while caring for the child.<sup>25</sup> Grace Taito, who is 22 years

<sup>25</sup> Ulburg, personal interview.

old from Manase in Savai'i, adds another aspect to this explanation. She claims "[people] might think of you otherwise because you wear your hair down, like you want to show off. It's not usual for a girl to have her hair down in Samoa."<sup>26</sup> To wear one's hair down is to suggest immodesty, meaning that attention is desired from others, especially males, and an inclination to celebrate the individual. This is in conflict with the *fa'asamoa*, or Samoan way of life, which prizes community and collectivism, as well as moral purity, and shies away from individual recognition or pride.

Another popular Samoan women's hairstyle is the braided ponytail, which is most often seen amongst schoolgirls. Most schools in Samoa require boys to keep their hair short and girls to keep their hair tied back in a braid. By conforming to the desires of the teachers, schoolchildren show respect for their elders by complying with the required hairstyle. Another result of the homogenous hairstyle for girls is that boys are prevented from being distracted by girls wishing to attract attention by wearing their hair down in class. This requirement of a unified hairstyle for youth also demonstrates the values of collectivism and conformity traditionally prized by the *fa'asamoa*; children further adhere to these values by wearing a school uniform for the duration of their primary and secondary education.<sup>27</sup> The braid, or *fili*, is also seen at church gatherings that are not only religious in nature, but also social. Yvette Schmidt, who works at Double D's Salon in Apia explains that, in her experience, "the people in church, they look at you and some people are so judgmental, and they're like 'You should be having your hair nice.' I never see anybody in our church having their hair down. Even if it's short they have to pony it or braid it. I guess they respect the older people and *matai* (village chiefs)."<sup>28</sup> To style one's hair in a socially (and religiously) acceptable manner is to show respect to elders and

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<sup>26</sup>Taito, Grace. Personal interview. 21 November 2004.

<sup>27</sup>Taito, Epesi. Personal interview.

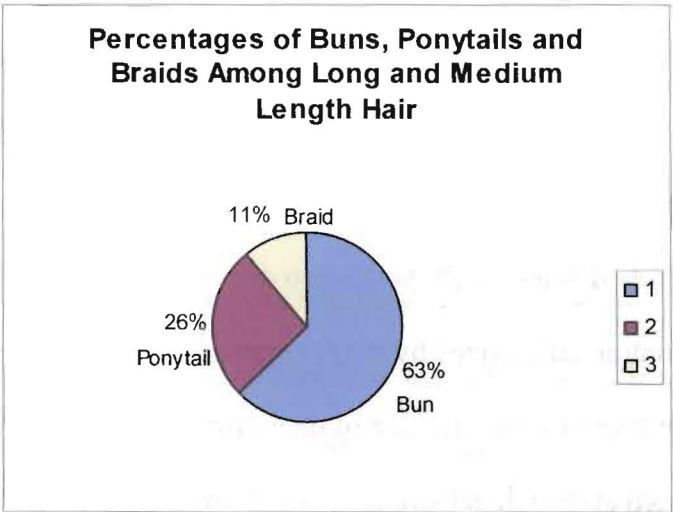
<sup>28</sup>Schmidt, Yvette. Personal interview.

to God; thus, to reject social norms governing the style of hair is to act as an individual in opposition to values of the *fa'asamoa*.

In spite of these traditional standards, some members of the younger generation think that a move towards contemporary hairstyles will be good for Samoans. Tasi Ulburg, a 17 year old from Apia, supports the move toward increased exposure to styles from New Zealand, Australia and the USA: “it’s good for them [Samoans] to get the styles that they’ve never seen before. They’ll have good taste instead of the ‘Samoan hairstyle’—the bun.”<sup>29</sup> Several informants noted that Samoans are quite responsive to trends, especially the men, who often take ideas from rugby players of varied nationalities on television.

Results of Observations on Hair Style in Contemporary Samoa

Of the 72 females observed with medium to long hair, 45 wore their hair in a bun, representing 62.5% of the total. Of the remaining females, 19 (26.4%) wore their hair in a ponytail, and eight (11.1%) styled their hair in a braid. Of the eight females with braided hairstyles, six were



18 or under, representing 75% of those with braids. This data supports the idea of the bun being the most common and traditional hairstyle for Samoan women and it is also interesting to note the lack of variation among hairstyles, as well as the absence of hair being worn down.

<sup>29</sup> Ulburg, Tasi. Personal Interview.

## The *Tuiga*

The *tuiga*, or *kuiga* as it is pronounced colloquially, is the traditional Samoan headdress worn by the *taupou*, or the ceremonial virgin daughter of a high chief. The *tuiga* is customarily made out of human hair, as well as other ornaments such as feathers and shells. Currently, *tuiga* are also made out of synthetic hair, horses' hair, and coconut fronds, and can be purchased in the flea market in downtown Apia and some souvenir shops in Apia, such as Aggie Grey's. The older women of a family traditionally construct them, and usually there is only one *tuiga* per extended family of a high chief, although not every family in Samoa owns a *tuiga*.

The *tuiga* is customarily made in pieces, or layers, so that the process of weaving the *tuiga* into a woman's hair involves several separate parts that only come together once each piece is woven in succession. The fact that the traditional *tuiga* was created in pieces also served to act as a protective device, ensuring that it could only be worn at family sanctioned functions, when each part of the family to which a piece of the *tuiga* had been distributed agreed to let the piece be used.<sup>30</sup>

The hair that is used for the *tuiga* is usually a very light brown to blondish color. Frequently children who are born with light hair grow their hair out for the main purpose of having it harvested later for the *tuiga*; for this reason, children with light hair are frequently prized for their golden locks. Regardless as to whether or not the hair that is harvested for the *tuiga* is light or not, it will undergo a traditional treatment to lighten the hair. After the hair is cut, it is treated with coral lime. The lime was traditionally used to lighten Samoans' hair, as previously discussed, not just for the *tuiga*. Once the cut hair has been treated, it is submerged in salt water, and then it is let out to dry in the sun. This process is repeated frequently to ensure

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<sup>30</sup> Tupua, Fuimaono F. Personal interview. 22 November 2004.

that the hair will be sufficiently lightened. Even after the hair is made into the *tuiga*, it will typically be re-treated once a year to preserve its golden color. The reason for treating the traditionally dark Samoan hair to become a golden color is so that the color of the *tuiga* will match the color of the golden Samoan skin after it is treated with coconut oil. The effect of this flow of color is that it complements the traditional Samoan dance, or *siva* that is performed while wearing the *tuiga*.<sup>31</sup> The *siva* is a traditional Samoan dance involving females and was traditionally performed by the *taupo*, or ceremonial virgin, but is now danced by any female who has been trained in *siva*. Most girls learn to *siva* at an early age in their families and in schools, and it is not unusual to see girls as young as three years old practicing the traditional dance.

During the *siva*, many cultural restrictions of Samoans are relaxed. It is a time to show off both beauty and talent. The gracefully body movements of the *siva* are accentuated by skimpy dress (usually a short *lavalava*), bodies adorned with lots of shimmering coconut oil, and long hair being worn down one's back. Flowers are often used to accentuate the hair. Young men, usually related to the dancer, will make spectacles of themselves while a female is performing the *siva* as a sign of respect—to take attention away from the main dancer is to take pressure off of her. One will also frequently see young men throwing themselves on the floor so that the female dancer will place her foot upon their back. This signifies the male's submission to the beauty and the grace of the female performing the *siva*.

The rule regarding who wears the *tuiga* is traditionally quite restrictive. Only the high *matai*, his or her daughter, and his or her son are permitted to wear the headdress. At present, however, the rules regarding who may wear it have been notably relaxed. One will frequently see the *tuiga* worn by performers during various tourist-oriented *fiafia*, or traditional Samoan celebrations. In one interview with Epesi, a 14 year old girl from Tanu Beach Fales in Manase,

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<sup>31</sup> Tupua, Fuimaono F. Personal interview.

Savaii, who was not a high *matai*'s daughter, Epesi related that she had worn the *tuiga* before, but once she had heard about the traditional regulations about who may and may not wear it, she stopping wearing the *tuiga*. Maila Sagota, a 23-year-old student at the University of the South Pacific Alafua Campus, and former Miss Samoa pageant contestant, related the legend of a performance in Pago Pago, American Samoa, where a *tuiga* was being worn by a man other than the high chief. Once the "imposter" put the headdress on his head, the normally light brown hair of the *tuiga* changed to black, signifying the misuse of the sacred object—"If the *kuiga* is not on the right person's head, it shouldn't be on that person's head, or something bad will happen."<sup>32</sup> Maila also told a story her grandmother had told her of the fate of a man who wore the *tuiga* when he was not the one who was supposed to do so. "In those days, a long, long time ago, in their generation, she said one of the men was beheaded because he was wearing the *kuiga* and he wasn't supposed to wear it, so the people of the village just came out and (makes motion of chopping)."<sup>33</sup>

Several informants suggested that the art of making the *tuiga* might be in danger of extinction. Fuimaono F. Tupua, a gentleman of a distinguished age who works at the Legislative Assembly, and is tremendously knowledgeable about Samoan culture, doubts there are any "old women" left who still make *tuiga*. He fears that in the next generation there will be few left who know how to make it.<sup>34</sup> Moelagi Jackson, holder of five *matai* (village chief) titles and proprietor of the Safua Hotel in Lalomalava, Savaii, still makes the *tuiga* the traditional way. She frequently makes them for Samoan families overseas who desire the *tuiga* for the traditional Samoan dance. Moelagi expressed frustration that her daughters would cut their hair and neglect to bring the hair to her to make *tuiga*; however, she also says that she occasionally receives gifts

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<sup>32</sup> Sagote, Maila. Personal interview. 15 November 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Tupua, Fuimaono F. Personal interview.



of hair from others who know that she uses it to make the ceremonial headdress.<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon of migrant families maintaining traditions even more intensely than those living in the home country themselves is commonly seen among cultural groups with migrant communities living abroad.

The modern *tuiga*, as stated previously, is currently most often constructed from materials other than human hair, such as horsetail hair or synthetic hair. It is also normally made in one piece, so that the tradition of sharing the *tuiga* among many parts of an extended family no longer occurs. Nowadays, the *tuiga* is used in cultural events, such as the Miss Samoa pageant, and in *fiafia* for tourists. While some Samoans believe that this broadening of the *tuiga*'s usage is good, mainly because it increases awareness of traditional Samoan practices and beliefs, others are of the opinion that to use the *tuiga* on untraditional occasions is a dishonor to its sacred role in ritual performances. During the presentation of this paper to students and faculty of the University of the South Pacific Alafua Campus, one student noted that it was a disgrace to Samoan culture for the *tuiga* to be used in contexts other than what it was supposed to be used for. He expressed his opinion that the sharing of Samoan traditions and culture was not reason enough to use the *tuiga* out of context.

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<sup>35</sup> Jackson, Moelagi. Personal interview. 21 November 2004.

# Hair and Tourism

## Images of Samoans in Tourism Literature

The images of Samoans used in tourism literature seem to hearken back to an earlier age, when men and women spent their leisure time at the beach, smiling, being playful, and wearing little clothing. The men are shown with “traditional” garments, looking jolly, while the women stand in the ocean, wearing only a *lavalava* (sarong), with their hair down and adorned with a



flower. If one were to travel the islands of Samoa nowadays looking for a similar scene, they would be unlikely to find it, as these visions of Samoa date back to earlier times, when explorers recounted tales of beautiful women with long, black hair billowing behind

them, wearing little clothing and appearing generally picturesque. The images seem to be a product of the collapsing of two time periods in Samoa—both pre-missionary, when women wore *lavalava* and were bare breasted (although the women in the images have their breasts covered for the market sensibility), and post missionary time, when they grew their hair long.

Although there have been criticisms that “most of the images [used for tourism] do not represent the real Samoa,” Sala Pio Tagilima, manager of marketing and promotions for the Samoan Tourism Authority, explains that these images serve a definite purpose that legitimizes their presently inaccurate picture of Samoa:

I think a lot of people, especially in Europe... their perceptions of Samoans, especially our women... include women with long black hair, with a flower in their hair, and in the background... very beautiful, natural environment backgrounds. So to us, we have to look at what their perceptions are and customize our images... You have to also look at the perceptions people have and you have to deliver a product, because they still understand that they can

come enjoy the beach with all of the beautiful natural surroundings. But I know they have criticized some of our images being staged or unnatural, but sometimes we have to bend some rules and try to be more creative.<sup>36</sup>

Tagilima legitimizes the staged and artificial nature of these images by maintaining that they are based on foreigners' traditional impressions of Samoa, thereby luring them to come and spend their tourist dollars. Europe is a main market of tourism in Samoa, and one reason Europeans are primarily being targeted with



these images is that they still maintain their pre-colonial ideas of the Pacific and its inhabitants. The Samoan Tourism Authority has decided to capitalize on these historic perceptions to draw tourists to the islands, despite the fact that the images do not represent the contemporary Samoa: "...When [tourists] come here, they would hardly see any of those women walking around in grass skirts, bare-breasted, with long hair. Nowadays things have changed, and our women are more conservative in the way they carry themselves and the way they dress up."<sup>37</sup> Whether or not it is morally acceptable for the Tourism Authority to inaccurately portray the people of Samoa is an issue that may gain more attention as the tourism industry continues to grow in Samoa.

### Hair in Contemporary Samoa and Tourism

Some Samoans are also concerned with how tourists from other nations perceive contemporary Samoans. Yvette Schmidt, a hair stylist at Double D's Salon in Apia, expressed concern about how tourists see Samoans and their hair today. In her opinion, it is important that

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<sup>36</sup> Tagilima, Sala Pio. Personal interview. 15 November 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

visitors to Samoa have a positive image of Samoa, and do not regard it as “backward.” To this effect, she remarks

To be honest, when I see a lot of [Samoans] in town, not even caring about their hair, it makes me want to just go “Oh, don’t you want to come down to our salon and get your hair done?” Because there are a lot of tourists around and they see [Samoans] so untidy with their hair. Especially in town, because everyone comes from the back villages to town, selling products, and the tourists are around.<sup>38</sup>

Tourists also see “traditional” Samoans during the *fiafia* presented by many hotels, including Aggie Grey’s in Apia, Tanu Beach Fales in Manase on Savaii, and Safua Hotel in Lalomalava on Savaii. During the *siva* dance in the *fiafia*, women have the opportunity to display their long hair, as well as the female Samoan tattoo, the *malu*. Women frequently appear wearing very short skirts with their bodies oiled to accentuate the tattoo. Similarly, this is an occasion when women have the chance to show off their long hair, usually adorned with flowers and coconut oil. This unique event allows women to ignore the cultural standards of modesty and conformity that normally govern their daily lives. As Grace from Tanu’s explains, “during the *fiafia*, Dad likes us to have our hair down. It’s the only time we can show off how long it is.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Schmidt, Yvette, personal interview.

<sup>39</sup> Taito, Grace, personal interview.

# Hair and Traditional Spirituality

## *Teine Sa*

Belief in the *teine sa*, or spirit women, forms an important part of indigenous beliefs in Samoa. Although there are many *teine sa* from various villages on the different islands of Samoa, three are very well known all over Samoa— Telesa from the village of Lepea, Sina-le-avele from the villages of Alaoa and Tanugamanono, and Saumaeafe, from the village of Sale'imoa. According to the Legend of Saumaeafe, she was conceived when a female *aitu*, or demon spirit, seduced a human male who thought her mother was human because she was so beautiful. Saumaeafe is described as being extremely attractive when she is happy, with fine “yellowish brown” hair.<sup>40</sup> When she is angered, however, her hair turns coarse and her beauty fades to reveal a wrinkled old woman. Saumaeafe attempts to seduce young men frequently. Should she succeed, she becomes extremely jealous of any other girl he pays attention to, and sometimes makes them ill or even kills the young man or the girl in her anger.<sup>41</sup>

A prime way to anger the *teine sa* of Samoa is to flaunt physical beauty, especially by wearing one's hair down. To avoid *teine sa*, one must also be careful to not brush one's hair at night. If a *teine sa* punishes someone because he or she was doing something displeasing to them, their victims become “delirious and possessed” and must seek help from a *taulasea*, a traditional healer.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, the family of the victim travels to the village of the offending spirit women to apologize for the misdeeds of the victim and hope that the *teine sa* will forgive them and stop possessing them.

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<sup>40</sup> Stuebel, C. Myths and Legends of Samoa. Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1976, p 94.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

## Hair and the *Teine Sa*: Personal Accounts

Yvette Schmidt, a hairstylist in her 20s who works at Double D's Salon in Apia, explains that the *teine sa* dislike women with light brown hair and those who wear their hair down. She recounts an experience when a *teine sa* visited a family member:

It's people who were naturally born with brown hair. Those are the ones they go after... I've had somebody in my family, back in the days when I was little, about 5 years old, she was born with naturally brown hair, and ... the *teine sa* took over her and that's what I heard from the people, it was her naturally brown hair, and long hair... You have to tie it up, because if you hang [your hair], they'll come after you.<sup>43</sup>

Maila Sagote, a 23-year-old student at the University of the South Pacific in Alafua recounts the rules about angering the *teine sa*: "If you have really long, long hair, and they [elderly women] see you hanging it, they'll be like 'Hey, bun your hair up' or 'That's not allowed, because you know, the *aitus*.' Here in Samoa, if they [*teine sa*] see you with your hair down, and you're pretty, they'll just do something to you."<sup>44</sup>

Grace Taito, a 22 year old from Manase in Savai'i, tells of an encounter between her aunt and the *teine sa* that occurred when she was a young girl:

One of my aunties here was visited... One night, late at night, she was sleeping and she saw two people, a boy and a girl, they were going on the road, and they were making a lot of noise. She said the girl was wearing a long white dress with her hair down and they were making a lot of noise, so she called, she said something bad to them. Then someone slapped her across the face, and in the morning, she had the handprint of the person on her cheek. She told mom in the morning and mom said it wasn't a person she was screaming at. The only reason they visited her is because she was loud and screaming. So now she knows.<sup>45</sup>

Grace's aunt offended the *teine sa* by speaking out against her for being loud. This serves to demonstrate that there are ways to offend the *teine sa* other than misbehavior related to hair. However, all methods to provoke *teine sa* are related in that they deal with conformity to social norms relating to appropriate behavior, such as not speaking badly to people, or not acting in an

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<sup>43</sup> Schmidt, Yvette. Personal interview.

<sup>44</sup> Sagote, Maila. Personal interview.

<sup>45</sup> Taito, Grace. Personal interview.

appropriate way for a female. When the norm is disobeyed, there could be potentially serious consequences.

Epesi Taito, a 14-year-old girl from Tanu Beach Fales in the village of Manase on the island of Savaii also offered a story about the *teine sa* that she had heard while she was growing up:

When girls have their hair down and just walk along the road, and if they have long, beautiful hair, then they're a target. There's a really popular story we usually hear. It's about a girl that had really long hair, and the *teine sa*, she was angry and jealous of her hair, so she cut off her hair and took it."<sup>46</sup>

In each of these accounts, the victim was violating customary social norms and was punished for doing so. By passing these stories down to children, the threat of the *teine sa* could serve as a way to prevent unacceptable behavior and increase behavioral control in the villages. While *matai* are traditionally responsible for enforcing village rules and norms (as we saw with the situation in the village of Lotofaga earlier in the paper) the threat of the *teine sa* helps enforce the rules as well. As an article in the **Samoa Observer** explains, "going through the list of what the *teine sa* would not like reflects conservative norms and mores traditional villages uphold;" values such as conformity, group support, modest behavior and respect for elders.<sup>47</sup> Thus, by deterring people from acting against social norms by using threats of repercussions from the *teine sa*, the *fa'asamoa* is preserved through this mechanism of fear. While the majority of those interviewed claimed not to believe in the *teine sa*, they nevertheless avoided doing things to anger them. When asked why, most replied that they did not want to anger their relatives or tempt fate, just in case the *teine sa* do exist.

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<sup>46</sup>Taito, Epesi. Personal interview.

<sup>47</sup>Tavita, Terry. "Samoa's Women With Spirit." *Samoa Observer*: November 9, 2004.

## Analysis and Conclusions

When two cultures with different values and ways of life meet, there is bound to be conflict while each culture begins to navigate through the many layers of differences and their implications for their daily lives. The same is true for Samoa and the missionary culture. When the missionaries came, Samoans adopted their Christian religion and the many rules and regulations that came along with it. At the same time, however, they did not fully shun their traditional religion, choosing to keep their hair up to ward off the *aitu* and the *teine sa*. While Samoans accepted Christianity in general, they did not accept every one of its regulations and rules. They opted to “Samoanize” it—to incorporate the new Christian religion into their own traditional beliefs and practices.

With Samoa facing increasing foreign influence, the Samoans are again being presented with new images from outside, of people with Western hairstyles. Television programs from New Zealand, Australia, and the United States show people with modern hairstyles, and a few informants expressed the opinion that the youth of Samoa have begun to succumb the pressure from others of their age group, especially from those who have lived abroad, to “modernize” their own look.

Some young people feel a sense of shame when foreigners see Samoans with traditional hairstyles. They do not wish their nation to be seen as old fashioned or backwards. While some Samoan young people feel a sense of pride in maintaining “traditional hairstyles,” others are thankful for the influx of new styles from television and movies. Yvette Schmidt explains:

I’m really happy about knowing these new things from overseas, especially from America, seeing the movies, and seeing all the stuff done to hair and all the styles. I think Samoan people should be looking at that, not to copy Westernized style, but welcome to the real world, it’s today, it’s 2004, those years are gone and past.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Schmidt, Yvette. Personal interview.



There are also Samoans who seek to preserve what is now considered the traditional way of men cutting their hair short and neat, and women growing their hair out long and tying it back in a bun. They feel the increased influx of foreign styles and pressure to modernize as a threat to the values of the *fa'asamoa*. When an individual expresses himself or herself through hairstyles other than the traditional buns, braids or ponytails, it can signify “showing off” and self-pride to others, especially in contexts where non-traditional styles are rarely seen. It can also signify disrespect to the older generation, who desire their younger relatives to wear their hair the “traditional” Samoan way. As May Sa’aga, the elderly director of a Christian school in Samoa explains, “I’m a very traditional Samoan person and people know about it because I always tell them... [Men] have to cut [their] hair nicely... I still like the traditional way.”<sup>49</sup>

Not all of the older generation shuns modernization concerning hair, however. As the stylists from Double D’s and Tulipe’s House of Beauty note, older men and women are using hair dye to cover up their gray hairs at a growing rate, especially in Apia. Donna Funati, Yvette Schmidt and Tasi Ulburg each commented during their interviews on the increasing variety of hair products such as dyes available to the consumer in Apia.

The escalating awareness of and access to modern foreign styles of hair have implications for the Samoan concept of beauty as well. While the bun, ponytail and braid, and variations of the three, were the only hairstyles I observed during my data collection, I have seen Samoans at other times during my research with their hair cut and styled in contemporary foreign styles. While there is an increasing influx of Western influence related to hair in Samoa, the styles of hair brought in by the missionaries show little sign of becoming obsolete in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>49</sup> Sa’aga, May. Personal interview. 24 Novemeber 2004.

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## Observations

McDonalds, 11/17/04 11:31am-12:01pm

McDonalds, 11/18/04 1:55pm-2:25pm

McDonalds, 11/22/04 2:18pm-2:48pm

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## Images

<http://www.kirklandphotos.com>

## Glossary of Terms

*aitu*- demon spirit in traditional Samoan religion

*fa'apatu*- a bun

*fa'asamoa*- the Samoan way, based on communalism and reciprocity

*failele*- a women who has recently given birth

*fiafia*- a Samoan gathering or celebration which includes dance and other performances

*fili*- braid

*foga*- the knot of hair worn on the top of head traditionally by male Samoans

*kuiga*- colloquial term for the *tuiga*, or Samoan headdress

*lavalava*- the Samoan sarong

*malu*- the traditional Samoan woman's tattoo that goes from the knees to the upper thighs

*matai*- a Samoan chief and leader of a household

*siva*- dance

*taulasea*- Samoan traditional healer, usually female

*taupou*- the village maiden or ceremonial virgin who is the daughter of a high chief

*tuiga*- the traditionally Samoan headdress, historically made out of human hair and worn for cultural events such as the Samoan *siva*

*tutagita*- the style of hair where the head is shaved except for a small tuft in the front

# Appendices

## Appendix A

For each female, data was recorded on hair length, style and if it was dyed or had a flower. For each male, data was recorded on hair length, if it was dyed, and if it was in the afro style. Each letter represents one person who entered McDonalds during the period of observation. Capitalized letters represent someone estimated to be between 18 and 55 years of age, lower case letters represent someone under 18, and capital letters in bold represent someone 55 years of age or older.

### Observation 1- McDonalds, 11/17/04 11:31am-12:01pm

#### Females

Long			C			f			J		L					Q			t		
Med	A	B						H	I		k		M	n	o	p		r	s		V
Short				D	E		G														U
Down																					V
Bun	A	B	C					H	I	J	k		M			p		r	s	t	
Pony												L		n	o						
Braid						f										Q					
Dyed				D	E																U V
Flower																					

#### Males

Short	A	B	C	D		F	G	h		J	K
Med					E				I		
Long											
Dyed											
Afro					E						

### Observation 2- McDonalds, 11/18/04 1:55pm-2:25pm

#### Females

Long	A		c	d	E	F						N				R	S	T	U		w
Med							G	H		j		L	M		O					V	
Short		B							I		K				p	Q					
Down																					
Bun	A				E		G	H				L	M	N	O		Q	R	S	T	

Pony				d		F													U	V	
Braid			c						j												w
Dyed	A	B							I		K				p						
Flower										K											

Long	X	Y			B	C	D	E
Med			Z	a				
Short								
Down								
Bun		Y	Z		B	C	D	
Pony								E
Braid	X			a				
Dyed					B		D	
Flower					B			

### Males

Short	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L		N	o	p	Q	R	S	T		V	W	X	Y
Med																									
Long													M								U				
Dyed																									
Afro																									

### Observations 3- McDonalds, 11/22/04 2:18pm-2:48pm

#### Females

Long		B	C		e	f			I		K		M	N	O		q			T		V		
Med				d			G			J		L				p		r	S		U		W	
Short	A							H																
Down																								
Bun		B	C				G		I	J	K		M		O					T		V		
Pony				d	e	f						L		N		p		r	S		U		W	
Braid																	q							
Dyed	A	B											M	N					S					
Flower		B																		T				

Long	X	Y		A		C	D	E
Med			Z					
Short					b			
Down								
Bun	X	Y	Z	A			D	E
Pony						C		
Braid								
Dyed								
Flower								

## Males

Short	A	b	c	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L		n	o	p	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	z
Med													M													
Long																										
Dyed																								X		
Afro																										

Short	a	B
Med		
Long		
Dyed		
Afro		

## Appendix B

Survey on Hair in Samoa- Laura Myford

1. How old are you? *E fia ou tausaga?*
2. Is your hair important to you? Why? *E taua o lou laulu ia te oe? Aisea?*
3. Is hair more important for men or for women? Why? *O le laulu e taua tele mo ali'i po'o le tama'ita'i? Aisea?*
4. How did you choose your hairstyle? *E fa'apeafea ona 'e filifili le auala (sitili) e teu ai lou laulu?*
5. Do you know any stories about the *teine sa* or the *aitu* that are related to hair? *E te silafia ni tala e uiga i teine sa po'o aitu e mafua i laulu?*

## Appendix C

Survey on Hair in Samoa- Laura Myford

1. How old are you? *E fia ou tausaga?*
3. Why do you think most Samoan women wear their hair long? *Aisea e fiafia ai tama'ita'i Samoa e fa'au'umi latou laulu?*

4. Why do you think most Samoan women wear their hair in a bun? *Aisea e fiafia ai tama'ita'i Samoa e fa'apatu o latou laulu?*
5. What do you think of women who wear their hair down? *O le a sou manatu e uiga i tama'ita'i e tautau I lalo latou laulu?*
6. How did Samoans wear their hair before the missionaries came? *E fa'apefea le teuga o ulu a tamai'ita'i a'o lei taunu'u mai missionare?*