

[Paper]

“Text Messages from the Grave”: Connecting the Mobile Phone with the Samoan Concept of *Va Tapuia*

Marion Muliaumaseali’i*

Abstract

How does the mobile phone connect Samoan people with kin in the afterworld? This article discusses the *va tapuia* (sacred space) and how the mobile phone becomes part of this ancient Samoan rhetoric. “Text messages from the grave” explores the collision of mobile technology and the Samoan belief of the space in-between (*va*) to demonstrate its social and cultural impact in Samoan villages. Albert Wendt describes *va* as “the space between, the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All” (Grace et al. 1999, 402). It is the space in between kin, family, and community where harmony and unity are prioritized (Lui 2003). The *va tapuia* is where sacred spaces of relational arrangements exist (Tui Atua 2009) and where the mobile phone allegedly connects to the afterworld.

Keywords

Samoa village, *va*, mobile phones, mediated spaces

Introduction

The mobile phone practices in rural Samoa are absorbed by the *va tapuia* because the intangible properties of *va* absorb different phenomena (Tui Atua 2009). As a result, the *va* has transcended the many transitions of ancient Samoa to the independent and modern nation it is today. I explore how the mobile phone has influenced the concept of *va tapuia* as a sacred space and respecting the space in between the present and the afterworld is highly regarded in Samoan culture. I review academic literature on Samoa’s polytheist beliefs pre-Christianity, thus bringing the context of an ancient belief to our understanding of the modern and Christian nation that Samoa is today. I explore how the ancient lineage of the *aitu* (Demigod) is deeply engraved in the way Samoa was ruled and its

* Director of Indigenography and Design, Inclusive Innovator and Independent Scholar

influence on leadership. This is contrasted with the way the *aitu* (ahh-ee-too) is portrayed in modern Samoa allegedly, sending text messages of instruction from the grave to youth to respect the *va tapuia*. The *aitu* giving instructions from the afterlife has become a predominant feature in urban legends.

“Island Breeze” a Samoan Village

Island Breeze is a typical¹ Samoan coastal village where many Samoan *fale* (open style houses) line the shore alongside canoes and fishing boats. The village is known for the cool breeze from the ocean that tempers the island’s hot and very humid weather and an apt pseudonym for this article: Island Breeze. With a population of less than 500 people, Island Breeze is located in a district with a population of 4,546 (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2013). The village is organized around a *malae*, a large open space where meetings are held, that faces the ocean. It is surrounded by homes ranging from the traditional *fale* to the conventional three to four bedroom house typically found in Western countries. Some houses are modest, while others reflect the “wealth” or high ranking of the families residing in them. Coastal villages are vulnerable to damage from seasonal cyclones and storms. In 2009, a tsunami destroyed most structures in the villages. There was an enormous loss of lives; homes, sustainable farming, and plantations (Wendt Young and Keil 2010). The devastation of the 2009 tsunami facilitated a series of new projects to enhance life in the village. The high chief of Island Breeze has a vision for the village to become an eco-friendly, sustainable village. That extends to building a local economy that is free from foreign aid and that is viable and stable. The chief has been met with much resistance since Island Breeze upholds Samoan traditions and protocols. The tension of implementing outward-oriented development goals within a traditional village hierarchy has caused the project to be halted several times. This tense environment is a contrast to the peaceful and inviting surroundings in which I set out to unpack a similar contrast of mobile phone practices in a traditional Samoan village.

Va, an Indigenous Concept of Space

One of the objectives of this article is to extend indigenous knowledge and world-views in relation to mobile phone usage. This is achieved by situating the concept of *va* in relation to the mobile media and communication literature on developing contexts, with an emphasis on rural areas. In the lead-up to the millennium, *va* had not been researched extensively (Ka’ili 2005), but in the first decade and a half of the new millennium, the study of *va* extends beyond anthropology and culture studies (Melani, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara, and Sabini 2010) to literature on mental health (Tamasese et al. 2005), the arts (Mila-Schaaf 2006), politics (Halapua 2003), education, (Airini et al. 2010; Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea 2014; Vaioleti 2006), health (Tui Atua 2009; Tamasese et al. 2005, 3) , and architecture (Refiti 2013) among others.

The Samoan concept of *va* is believed to have been around since the creation of the heavens (Tui Atua 2009). The *va* is spiritual (*va tapuia*), spatial, and harmonious (*va fealoaloa'i*) and in essence, it is a relational space that Samoans are taught to respect (*teu le va*). (Anae et al. 2010; Muliaumaseali'i 2017; Tiatia 2012; Grace et al. 1999) The first environment where a Samoan will learn about the *va* is in the home, within the *aiga* (family). Central to *fa'asamoa* (Samoan way of life), the *aiga* is a place of nurturing of language, customs, and values. Fundamental to the success of unity of the *aiga* is the *va*, a concept that governs relationships and the way in which one relates to the other.

The Va Tapuia

The *va tapuia* is defined as sacred spaces of relational arrangements. *Tapu* is a Polynesian word that means sacred or taboo. For Samoans, *tapu* indicates something that is subject to certain restrictions because it has a sacred essence that Samoans believe reinforces their connection or relationship with all things: gods, cosmos, environment, and self. The *va tapuia* refers to the space between man and all things living and dead.

Samoa's Head of State and Pacific scholar, His Excellency Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, says of the *va tapuia*:

It implies that in our relations with all things, living and dead, there exists a sacred essence, a life force beyond human reckoning. The distinction here between what is living and what is dead is premised not so much on whether a life force, that is, a *mauli* or *fatu manava*, exists in the thing (that is, whether a life breath or heartbeat exudes from it), but whether that thing, living or dead, has a genealogy (in an evolutionary sense rather than in terms of human procreation) that connects to a life force. In the Samoan indigenous religion all matters, whether human, water, animal, plant [or] the biosphere are issues of *Tagaloaalelagi*. They are divine creations connected by genealogy. (Tui Atua 2009, 116)

This is the space that my research investigates. I compare literature on ancient Samoa to other modern contexts that discuss the spiritual realm and technology.

Methodological Frameworks: Bringing Ethnography and Talanoa Together

This research brought together ethnographic approaches with an approach called *talanoa*, a Pacific practice is described by Tongan academics as “the ancient practice of multi-level and multi-layered critical discussions and free conversations” (Vaiioleti 2006, 24). *Talanoa* may occur in everyday conversation, while working together, doing chores around the house, or collaborating on a project. I found ethnography instrumental in my data collection, since being immersed in a traditional Samoan village gave me a deeper understanding of the context and “living” among the people gave me more access to their lives. An example of this access is that the villagers knew where I lived and that I was available to assist and work alongside them. This came to fruition through the opportunity to use participant observation when the Women's *Komiti* (committee) asked me to teach

them how to use computers, which became the main method in selecting participants for my interviews. Participant observation “is the central data collection technique in ethnography. It differs from direct or non-participant observation in that the role of the researcher changes from detached observer of the situation, to both participant in and observer of the situation” (Punch 2009, 157). These participatory techniques are seen as valuable in understanding a culture as well as effective in progressing social change as seen in Tacchi et al. (2003) in Sri Lanka (Slater, Tacchi, and Hearn 2003, 12–13)

Cleaning and Meaningful Conversations

Early in my fieldwork, when I was thinking of ways to become more integrated with the villagers, I stumbled across an urban legend that helped me to shape my thinking around this topic. It was a Saturday morning, and I was contemplating in which public areas of the village I could linger to get a feel for local activity. As I mulled this over during breakfast, my thoughts were interrupted by Alofa, my guide and support in the village. She and her nine-year-old daughter were passing by my house and decided to invite me to the local Catholic church for the women’s cleaning bee.

The Island Breeze Catholic church is on the shoreline and is the last occupied building at the end of the road. The buildings beyond it were ruined in the tsunami of 2009. Concrete foundations and broken structures lie amidst overgrown grass and fallen coconut trees. As we neared the church, its white and blue colors stood out, diverting my attention from the ruins to the quaint church building with a seating capacity for 200–250 people. The signature statue of the Virgin Mary stood in front of a modest veranda. Upon entry, one is confronted with a kaleidoscope of colors from the stained-glass windows facing the entrance. A crucifix with Jesus is evident, as are the many symbols associated with Catholicism. Other notable props are the church organ, a wooden stand for the priest, and two wooden chairs with silk covered cushions, presumably for the deacon and the priest. Alofa’s task for the day was to sweep the floor, so we set about our duties using the *salu*, a broom made with coconut fiber. As we cleaned, we had conversations about communication and the use of mobile phones in the church.

As we cleaned, our conversation led to the way that messages were communicated through folklore in ancient Samoa, a time where spirit beings or the *aitu* ruled the earth. I was curious about the urban legends² I used to hear about as a child and wondered if there were any stories floating around involving the *aitu* and mobile phones. Alofa looked at me quite seriously and said, “there has been an incident with mobile phones.” We sat down and she proceeded to tell me about how the *aitu* is unhappy with youth being on “free nights,” a promotion by one of Samoa’s mobile providers, Digicel, that offers customers free calls to any mobile from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m., provided they have used at least three minutes on a mobile call before 6 p.m. This was popular amongst the youth, and soon late-night conversations occurred unsupervised with many on the brink of breaching the *va*. Alofa described this breach as young girls running away with their boyfriends with

some getting pregnant. She added that it has also been detrimental to students' ability to perform at school, lacking energy to focus after being up all night.

The Night Belongs to the *Aitu*

The legend² began at the annual Catholic conference. This week-long event invites ministers and families from all over Samoa to stay on campus and participate in the conference, which includes guest speakers during the day and some evening sessions. Many of the religious denominations in Samoa hold these annual conferences as a means of bonding and encouraging ministers and members of the different branches. Alofa introduced the main character in her story as a Samoan teenage boy who was put in charge of babysitting the minister's children. Allegedly, the teen was always on his mobile phone, making use of the "free nights" throughout the conference and not paying much attention to the kids. One night, he reported that he heard noises like someone walking behind the house. The two-bedroom house was situated behind the main hall, close to the bush and yam plantation. Upon hearing the noise, the teen went outside to investigate and reported seeing two men over seven feet tall walking through the yam plantation. The teen hid behind a tree and watched as the (*aitu* disguised as) two men walked towards his hiding spot. As they neared his hideout, the teen reported suddenly going blind and feeling like someone or something picked him up by the heels. He reported dangling upside down, suspended in the air, and was carried a few meters before he was suddenly dropped to the ground. Alofa was very woeful as she recounted the rest of the story. The teen was found unconscious with foam around his mouth, waking to familiar faces from the conference looking at him with deep concern. The teen was dropped outside the main hall, where the conference was, and as he was getting familiar with his bearings, he received a text message from the *aitu*. It was in the Samoan language that translated to, "You think you can take over the night? What about us?" This story circulated amongst parents warning their children of the *aitu's* unhappiness with their night time activity on mobile phones. They cautioned them to not be awake all through the night talking or texting because the "night-time belongs to the *aitu*," and if they were caught "taking" their "territory" the same thing would happen to them.

This conference was held in 2012, and the free nights promotion had started around this time. I asked Alofa if she believed that this event took place or if it was a ploy adults used to scare their children into obeying the rules. Alofa responded that she believed the event happened, and although it can be seen as a means to control children, she and many Samoans believe that the *aitu* are real. Considering Samoans traditionally use stories to communicate a moral, for many, these legends are nothing out of the ordinary. Alofa was quite convinced this event took place. For locals, it is no surprise that Samoa's legends now include mobile phones. However, as a researcher observing the mobile's influence on the *va* (spiritual & relational spaces), the ancient custom of storytelling is juxtaposed with a sophisticated piece of technology that, according to Alofa, was being used by the

aitu to send text messages to the living. This raises questions as to why Samoans believe that a ghost character from a Samoan ancient myth uses a mobile phone to warn against staying up late at night.

Other encounters have made national newspaper headlines, such as alleged reports of ghosts appearing in pictures taken through mobile phone cameras. My participants had mixed feelings about the existence of ghosts or the aitu. Some acknowledged that they were part of Samoan mythology; others only recognize the God that they worship on Sunday. For the latter, the aitu were either demons or hearsay. This fusion of mythology and technology raised questions regarding the effects of mobile phones on the va tapuia. How did the inclusion of the mobile phone in the aitu rhetoric shape the way Samoans relate to the sacred space? This next section looks at ancient Samoa and the predominant worship of the aitu, which, although not practiced today, still “haunts” modern-day Samoans who continue to spread the legacy of the aitu.

Ancient Samoa

The legends of Samoa illustrate a belief that crossing over from the spirit world to the modern using technology is possible. This intriguing claim raises questions about why Samoa’s ancient belief in non-human gods, Atua (ahh-too-a) and those of human origin (Aitu) still influences behavior today and the mobile phone’s role in the va tapuias’ influence on the modern and material world. I seek to answer these questions by reviewing the literature on the ancient myths and legends of Samoa, especially regarding the spirit world’s extensive influence on chieftain leadership in gaining favor in battle and the wisdom to lead. I consider the contradiction that Samoans still believe in the aitu amidst the “heavy” cloak of Christianity and religion that envelopes the nation today. The history of these myths and legends, and Samoa’s conversion to Christianity, is further juxtaposed against the inclusion of the mobile phone in “modern” folk tales or urban legends. It brings context to the empirical evidence that indicates the aitu are using mobile phones to communicate.

The Origins of Samoa

Understanding ancient Samoa has required dual research in pre-historical evidence and the oral traditions of stories, poems, and songs passed on by word of mouth. The first writings about the origins of the Samoan people were produced by early Anglican missionaries between 1840 and 1870. In 1892, more translations from Samoan to English were published from the original (Meleisea and Schoeffel Meleisea 1987). These writings describe how Samoa was created by the god Tagaloa-fa’atupunu’u, meaning “creator” or “Tagaloalelagi” (Tagaloa, God of the sky) who dwelt in the expanse at a time that there was no sky or earth. Tagaloa used his environment to create the earth, sea, sky, people, and other gods (Meleisea and Schoeffel Meleisea 1987). It is the fundamental belief of

Samoans that they did not migrate from Southeast Asia but are the original people of Samoa. This belief helps us to understand how much influence the spirit realm continues to have on Samoans today.

O Le Aitu

Before Christianity came to the Pacific, Samoans were polytheist, believing in more than one god. Early missionaries to the Pacific deemed Samoa a godless nation as there was no physical evidence of temples of worship or buildings that supported the idea of congregational worship. In fact, Samoans believed in two main categories of gods: the non-human gods, Atua and those of human origin, half men/half gods, called Aitu. They are believed to be the spirits of loved ones who have passed away and dwell in the spirit underworld (*pulotu*) but who return among the living to exert their influence either negatively or positively. As polytheists, Samoans worshipped these ancestral aitu by demonstrating respect through actions and applying sanctity to many aspects of life. They believed that sacred events, influenced by the spirit of their ancestors, occurred everywhere and in everyday life. Early writings of the aitu indicate that its lineage is deeply engraved in the ways that ancient Samoa was ruled and how it is ruled today.

Island Breeze is governed by *fa'amatai*³ (Fairbairn-Dunlop 1998), where the village council, made up of the high chiefs and lower ranked chiefs; work in partnership with the Samoan government (Davidson 1967). In the early 1800s, villages revered gods and were known for their political and godhead alliances. Early writings by missionaries indicate that political-religious power is the basis of Samoan history. One of the most powerful gods was Nafanua, the goddess of war.

Nafanua was the child of Saveasiuleo, the spirit that rules the spirit underworld. He is half man, half eel. His wife, Tilafaiga, was his niece, the daughter of his sister. Many aitu were believed to be the result of incest, and such aitu were more powerful than their ancestors. Nafanua received more power because she was miscarried, or was *alu'alu toto* (a blood clot), and was buried but emerged in the form of an adult woman. She was hence given the name Nafanua, "hidden in the earth." Her reputation as goddess of war prompted high chiefs in different areas to pay homage to her in return for victory. Nafanua was known to take possession of high chiefs, and through her control, would lead the chief and the village to a victorious battle (Schoeffel and Gavan 1987).

Aitu were believed to belong to the family line. Offerings were given to these gods as a way for Samoans to call upon the aitu for their favor in battle. As Schmidt (2002) describes them, "The aitu were powerful and dreaded beings who must be appeased by offerings" (5). A chief by the name of Tamafaiga was possessed by Nafanua and became so powerful that villagers began bringing gifts and offerings to him as a form of worship. Tamafaiga was given the status "living god." Samoans believed the aitu belonged to a "mirror world" because they were able to transition between the afterworld and the living world. Many chiefs were afraid of being punished by the aitu who, although they lived in

the underworld, could appear in the material world to punish misconduct. As well as these godheads, Samoans believed in a great number and diversity of spirits. There was the spirit of the rainbow, boatbuilding, fishing, war, trees, nature, etc.: a god for almost every aspect of daily life. Samoans would seek the favor of the godhead of these specific activities, such as the god of fishing when they would set out to fish. The history of Samoans' belief in *va tapuia* and how they nurture their relationships with the *aitu* lends understanding to the legends circulating in Samoa today. Despite Samoa's declaration of "*Fa'avae ile Atua*," that "Samoa is founded on God," Schmidt (2002, 5) argues that "God" could be spelled with a small "g" acknowledging the origins and foundation of Samoa through the *aitu*. So how did the god of the *papalagi*, or white foreigners, come to Samoa and how did the "new" god's influence spread rapidly throughout Samoa to be known as the god that Samoa is founded on? Through the writings of the missionaries in Samoa in the early 1800s, we see the influence of the *aitu* at work even in the spreading of the gospel and the continued practice of having leadership in the village or government submitted to a godhead.

One God, One Nation

The arrival of missionaries from the Anglican London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1830 signaled the arrival of Christianity to Samoa. Samoans' belief that each leader required a spirit godhead to gain power meant that any high chief seeking to have any political strength needed to have a spirit godhead to worship. One high chief named Malietoa is etched in Samoa's history as the first Samoan to be converted to Christianity. It is believed that Nafanua herself had prophesied that Malietoa's godhead would come from heaven, "*e tali le lagi i lou malo*" (Schmidt 2002, 126), and so when John Williams and the first missionaries were received by *Malietoa at Sapapali'i*, a village on the island of Savai'i, it was seen as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Malietoa's alliance with the missionaries gave religious legitimization to his new regime. According to Schmidt (2002), this alliance was more political than religious, and the rapid spread of Christianity through Samoa came through gaining political alliances with other chiefs and territories.

The new faith was called "*lotu*," meaning "church" or "devotion." Samoans began to convert when they saw immediate results from the new god. People who were sick were healed and then converted. Missionaries challenged the *tapu* (taboo) on certain rules in the village, such as not eating from a cursed tree as death would follow. LMS attendants ate the fruit without consequence, thus challenging the local belief system and resulting in the lifting of the taboo. As a result, more conversions occurred, and eventually the shrines of worship were destroyed, and temples of worship were erected in their place. However, it is said that deity worship continued despite people's conversion to Christianity and Samoans would choose who to worship. As in many other places around the world, this persistence of local gods is very common.

Churches have become a central part of Samoan society. The three most influential

churches are the Methodist Church, the London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Roman Catholic Church. The Methodist Church began its ministry in 1828, two years before the London Missionary Society (LMS), who are known today as the Congregational Church of Samoa (CCCS). Officially, the conversion from a polytheistic religion to a monotheistic one was completed by 1850; however, there is still a widespread belief among Samoans today that religion came to Samoa through Nafanua's prophecy, which gave the new religion its power to eventually rule Samoa (Schoeffel 1987). The belief that Samoa was founded through the *Atua Tagaloa-fa'atupunu'u* is a rhetoric that frames Samoa's history and continues to shape the world view of most Samoans (Meleisea and Schoeffel Meleisea 1987). It is in understanding the history of ancient Samoa that brings context to claims that the *aitu* continues to give guidance and warnings, even to the point of texting from the afterworld through the mobile phone and why these alleged accounts with the underworld are not taken lightly in Samoan culture (Schoeffel 1987).

Mobile Phones, the Unknown, and Other Small Island Contexts

Media has also contributed to the circulation of stories and legends. Television, for example, helped people to push the boundaries of the tangible and intangible, particularly through themes of fantasy science fiction, the occult, and the unexplained. The relationship between media and spiritualism dates to the nineteenth century, where the first type of technology used to communicate with the dead was the telegraph. Sconce's (2000) work on haunting and the media, tracks the history of the association of old and new media with paranormal and spiritual phenomena in American culture. The book attempts to unravel some of the mysteries around humans' fascination with television, science-fiction, and unexplained paranormal activity. Sconce asks why, after 150 years of electronic communication, people still ascribe to "mystical powers to ultimately very material technologies?" (6). Sconce proposes that all media, from telegraph, radio to the television, and computers have a "living presence" that has the potential to connect us with other territories outside the natural human senses. As Sconce notes, "Fantasy narratives and human-interest stories allow us to consider that those realms might include the spirit world and other planets" (Sconce 2000, 6). It is through these more outlandish tales that Sconce helps us see the same governing ideas in more ordinary media. The spectrum that Sconce covers illustrates the fascination that humans have with technology and its connection with unexplained presences.

The concept of spirit beings from the underworld texting a living being to deliver a warning may seem bizarre, but in other contexts the idea of using the mobile phone as a communicative tool for spiritual connection is not unusual. One example of mobile phones and spirituality comes from the Philippines. Pertierra's (2013) research looks at how the internet and mobile phones are changing the communication landscape in the Philippines, "even relationships with the recently dead are being affected by this technology" (Pertierra 2013, 19). A passenger ferry carrying 116 passengers caught fire and sunk

an hour after leaving the shores of Manila. There were no survivors. An investigation into the incident reports that family members claimed to have received text messages from their deceased loved ones, sometime after the ship had caught fire and sunk. A hairdresser believes her regular customer sent her two missed calls to advise he would not make his regular appointment (common way to communicate). When the hairdresser was advised her client died the day before, she believed he was letting her know what had happened to him from the grave. Although Pertierra did not delve into this case study, it was used to illustrate the way that Filipinos think of new technologies and the way in which they are used to mediate transnational relationships and access to “worlds” beyond the local.

Urban Legends from the Field

The Aitu in the Billboard

This section is based on Ugapo (2013) reporting an urban legend in Samoa’s main newspaper, *The Samoa Observer*. There are reports of an apparition appearing on a billboard in a village located fourteen kilometers from the city. The paper’s online platform reported the village of Afega had erected a billboard in the center of the village that promoted good village relations, sponsored by the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD). The front-page story reported that the image on the billboard was of the village council, and an apparition described a “sad looking woman” appeared. The apparition initially began appearing behind the group of people; however, the report stated that she moved around the billboard: “At one point it is sitting on the lap of one *matai*,” this viewer explained; “in the next it is sitting in front of another *matai*, and soon afterwards, it is perching on the shoulder of another *matai*” (page 2). Spectators called the “sad woman” an *aitu* and some claimed that although they could see her with the naked eye, they were able to see her through the lens of a camera or camera phone. People speculated that the *aitu* appeared in response to some internal politics causing division in the village. Afega was at that time reviewing the village rule book, and members of the village who saw the *aitu*’s image claimed that the *aitu* was angry about the changes, stipulating those things from the past should not be “messed with” (page 2). The mayor of the village was forthright in stating that he suspected the editor of *The Samoa Observer*, Savea, made up the story since he and his family had been banished from the village. When questioned by a reporter, the mayor refuted this version of events, assuring the reporter that the villagers were not divided over anything and were in fact in agreement to review the village rules. His hypothesis regarding the image was that the billboard had been recycled, and the apparition was simply a mark from its previous use. The mayor continued to maintain that he did not believe this was an *aitu* and that he did not believe in ghosts (page 2). Only three people commented on the article in *The Samoa Observer*, but their comments summarize the range of opinions that I came across during my fieldwork:

#3 John 2013-03-19 12:35 This is like a movie . . . very interesting, and if it true, this means our ancestors are watching our every move everyday . . . something to think about . . . and the lesson here is . . . don't change the foundation that started in every villages. Its best to keep it that way, or someone might get mad.

#2 Tasi 2013-03-19 12:09 For a country that is founded of God, i'm surprised many of them actually believe this apparitions (in reference to the many people filling up my Facebook news feed about it), and for those that don't already know, on your phones there is actually an app that can photo edit and add the 'Ghost Effect.'

#1 Petelo 2013-03-19 10:10 All villages have issues at one time or another. Afega is no different. However, this aitu on the billboard would make for a great story for the next² Tulafale movie. Send³ Leopao Saili⁴ to converse with the billboard lol. (Ugapo 2013)

Two weeks after the article was published, a rival newspaper, the *Savali*, reported that *The Samoa Observer* had doctored the pictures, using a ghost effect application found on most smartphones. The *Savali* interviewed the CEO of the company that created the billboard and rebutted the mayor's allegation that the billboard was recycled. The CEO advised that digital images could only be used on clean sheets, and when the editor of *The Samoa Observer* was asked for his view, his response was "no comment" (Tavita 2013).

This article was cited by my interview participants, but their recollections are different from what the article stated when it was published two years previously. When I asked my participants if they had heard of any recent aitu stories, one participant mentioned that the aitu lives in the billboard that is advertising mobile phones. They cited the same village mentioned in the newspaper, but they were not sure what image was on the billboard.

Aitu Calling My Mobile Phone

Loretta is a 35-year-old full-time mother of two children who runs a small business selling vegetables from her home garden. She attends the local Christian Congregational Church, belongs to the Mother's Fellowship Group, and is a believer in Jesus Christ. Loretta did not complete high school and got married in her late twenties. When asked about her perspective on the aitu and the urban legends that exist about it, she advised that she used to believe that aitus existed, but since becoming a Christian she no longer believes in them. I explained to Loretta about the incident with the boy at the Catholic conference who received a text message from the aitu. Loretta then opened up about a phone call she personally received from an aitu. She said it happened in the early hours of the morning, between 1 and 3 a.m. Loretta woke when her phone started ringing. She checked the number and saw it was blank. I asked her if it said "private number," and she responded no, it was a blank screen. She did not want to answer the call, but it kept ringing and ringing, and it seemed that if she did not answer, it would wake up the household. So Loretta answered it, and when she said "hello," the reply on the other side was not a human voice but a high pitched electronic sound like one would hear when the television was not picking up the signal and it went grey and "fuzzy," making a lost transmission noise. Loretta became afraid and hung up the phone. She believed that it was the aitu try-

ing to tell her something, but she didn’t think about that phone call until her mother became ill later that week. Her mother lives in another village, and Loretta believes the *aitu* was warning her to go and see her mother.

Another participant, Fale (short for *Falefalega*), explained to me how her grandparents watch over her and guide her, even though their graves lie in the backyard of the main house. Her story begins one year prior to our conversation, at a time she was studying for her high school senior year exams.

It was a typical weeknight, and my duty after school was to do my chores and help prepare the dinner. We had family prayer before dinner, and then I would relax while my other siblings cleaned up. My final duty for the evening was to make supper of tea and pancakes for my parents. After this, I would then turn to my schoolbooks and because it was exam time I decided to work late into the night. I did my schoolwork in the *faleo’o* (traditional Samoan house), where I and my siblings slept as it was cooler than the main Western styled house. I used a kerosene lamp because everyone was asleep, so I couldn’t turn on the main light. The *faleo’o* is near the graves of my grandmother and grandfather, and although it has been a number of years since their passing, I always feel like they are “watching” me, I always feel their presence. On this night, I really believe they were watching me because as I was studying, I always felt I needed to look over the graves. It was the latest I had ever stayed up working into the night; I started to feel afraid. I remembered all the stories of the *aitu* from my childhood, and although it made me more afraid, I had to keep working because the exam was only a few days away. It was 2:50 a.m. and I was only halfway through my revision, my eyes were getting sleepy, and I kept drifting off to sleep. All of a sudden, a brisk breeze filled the *faleo’o* disturbing what was a still quiet night. I felt a chill up my spine as the kerosene light was snuffed out. I did not hesitate to end my study. I jumped up from my seat and somehow found my blanket on the *fala* (flax mat) and hid under it hoping that the *aitu* or the spirit of my grandparents would not scold me for staying up so late. (Recorded conversation, 2014)

When Fale explained this to her parents, they scolded her for staying up so late, especially on a school night, but they had mixed responses as to whether the kerosene lamp was snuffed out by the spirit of her grandparents or by nature. Fale’s father is religious and does not believe in the *aitu* or that spirits of the deceased will hover over their loved ones. He said that given the late hour, perhaps Fale’s tiredness caused her to imagine things. Her mother, on the other hand, is very superstitious and believes that her parents were watching over their granddaughter, making sure she would get enough rest for school the next day. Fale sides with her mother since she has always felt her grandparents’ presence in the wee small hours before dawn.

The Mobile Phone and the *Va Tapuia*

In understanding how the mobile phone influences the *va tapuia*, this article has looked at the history of Samoan mythology, the introduction of Christianity, and other intersections of technology with the spiritual realm. Based upon the legends and interpretations of my participants, I suggest that despite the mobile phone becoming part of the

aitu rhetoric, its influence on the va tapuia has been minimal. I make my argument based on the ancient belief that Samoans originated from the work of the god Tagaloa-fa'atupunu'u the creator and the definition of va tapuia as being the space between man and all things living and dead. (Anae and Mila-Schaff 2010). These beliefs persist despite the penetration of Christianity into Samoa. The va tapuia accommodates all things living and dead, and the mobile phone slots into these criteria. I further posit that questionable use of the mobile phone by the young has led to the aitu rhetoric being circulated by locals to restore the social order of village life and as a reminder of the ancient ways of *fa'asamoa* (the Samoan ways of being) endorsed by the va tapuia.

The writings of early missionaries give an account of a time in which deities and spirits ruled Samoa although they are not scholarly articles and the motivations for their writings are not clear, they provide an account of the relationships that early Samoans had with the ancestral aitu. Tagaloa existed before there was sky or earth and used his environment to create the universe and the earth, including the sea, sky, people, and other gods. Despite Samoa being a Christian nation founded on God, its relationship with the va existed before missionaries arrived in Samoa. Although Christianity spread rapidly throughout Samoa, it is believed that the goddess Nafanua prophesied that the arrival of a new godhead for Malietoa would come from heaven, preparing Samoa for this new god and for it to take its reign in Samoa.

The vignettes in this article not only illustrate this but highlight the societal anxieties around change and how the mobile phone is changing the way Samoans are communicating. Access by the young, once policed by adult supervision, is now surpassed by individual accessibility (Ling 2004) to the mobile phone, and the consequences have caused moral panic (Muliaumaseali'i 2017). The recurrence of the aitu rhetoric in these vignettes enforces the aitu's role of a guide to be "good" Samoan citizens (Muliaumaseali'i 2017).

Aitu in Everyday Activities

Samoans once worshipped a diversity of gods, such as gods of the rainbow, boatbuilding, fishing, and war. This pantheistic outlook helps us to understand why some Samoans think that the aitu has powers over mobile phones. Perhaps they believe that if there were gods of boat building in ancient Samoa, why should there not be a god of mobile phones who has the power to send text messages from the afterworld? The aitu are also perceived to be able to use their "powers" to transcend the afterworld and manipulate whatever they want. The mobile phone has, therefore, been adopted into Samoan folklore and urban legends, including the "text message from the grave" case I discussed earlier. The spirit guide knows what is best. The power relationship the aitu had with early Samoa was embedded in fear, and Samoans would appease the gods with gifts.

The stories of the aitu texting and taking up residence in billboards are warnings as to how people should behave. In the former, the teenage boy was admonished for being awake through the hours of the night, and neglecting his duties watching the children,

indicating the aitu’s dislike of the young occupying the hours they operate. There was speculation that the aitu on the billboard was unhappy with the proposed changes to village protocols that were part of its heritage. The aitu’s power to live in the “mirror world” and punish anyone, including high-ranking chiefs, gave the aitu influence over how their Samoan followers behaved. Even today, although for some the tales of the aitu are no longer “gospel” but urban legends, they nevertheless influence behavior. In the same way that Nafanua directed and guided her followers to victory in battle, the aitu is seen as a “guide” and represents a standard that followers should live by. It is this association with the aitu as a guide that leads me to hypothesize the circulation of urban legends involving aitu and technology to guide youth and remind adults of the Samoan way of life (Muliaumaseali’i 2017).

When asked whether they believe the aitu still exist today, my participants had mixed responses. Some stated that only early Samoans believed in the aitu, but now they believe in the God of the Bible. Others professed the Christian faith but still believed the aitu power was real. The majority felt that the urban legends were “made up” to “scare” the youth into behaving correctly, further supporting my hypothesis. Some thought this practice could help them to address the issues families were facing due to the questionable activities of youth on mobile phones. The story of the aitu texting the young man was well-known among those of the Catholic faith and was vaguely recognized by those of other denominations.

Most of my participants did not buy into the fact that the aitu had texted the young man; only a few were unsure if it were true. My participants also stated that they had heard of this story through the coconut wireless (like the “grapevine”), which is one component of the Island Breeze communicative ecology (Muliaumaseali’i 2017). Other news of the encounter was obtained through the radio or the case with the “aitu in the billboard.” However, as mentioned earlier, my participants’ accounts of the same story became more exaggerated than the original story in the newspaper. Their varied versions had the aitu manifesting and scaring people away. One participant’s version said the aitu murdered a person for being drunk and disorderly around the billboard. When I asked for details of the incident, they were not able to corroborate them because they had heard it through the coconut wireless from a relative who had visited from another village. Irrespective of what side of the argument they chose, my participants all felt that people who “misbehave” around aitu territory are testing the spirits, which is not a good thing. Again, the theme of respecting the aitu and abiding by the rules for fear of punishment is continuing.

Conclusion

This article has explored the urban legend I named “text messages from the grave” to understand why the mobile phone found its way into Samoan mythology and how its inclusion in folklore influences the va tapuia or sacred space. My research leads me to

conclude that the va tapuia is not changed in any way by the inclusion of the mobile phone in its rhetoric; rather, the moral panics and anxieties around mobile phone usage have increased the circulation of this rhetoric as a means to remind Samoans of the Samoan way of life (fa'asamoa) and return to the social order of Fa'amatai.

The va tapuia has transcended the many transitions that Samoa has undertaken—from polytheism to Christianity, colonisation to independence—and still its sacred relationship with Samoa remains. In ancient Samoa, the ancestral aitu had a major influence on Samoa's social, cultural, and political life, and their advice was often sought out. In this modern age of technology, we find the va tapuia accommodating the mobile phone to advise the youth to not be up all night on their mobiles because the nighttime belongs to the aitu. This rhetoric is consistent with the ways ancestral aitu would give warnings in ancient Samoa with the Samoan belief that the aitu live in the “mirror world” and transcend the afterworld and that of the living. Although not presently worshipped per se, the aitu still holds value for the Samoan people and according to my findings is revered and used in the form of storytelling or urban legends to influence behaviour that aligns with fa'asamoa (the Samoan way of life) and the social order of fa'amatai (village rule).

Notes

1. Samoa, which lies south of the equator about halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand, comprises two large islands, Upolu and Savai'i, and several smaller adjacent islands. The country has a total land area of 2,930 km², with a population of around 196,628, of whom two-thirds reside on the main island of Upolu.

2. Defined in this research as ancient myths (not restricted to urban areas) presented as a modern story with little or no supporting evidence that spreads spontaneously in varying forms and often has elements of humor, moralizing, or horror. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/urban--legend>.

3. A Samoan village structure is based on Fa'amatai, an Indigenous self-governing system that survived the period of occupancy by the German and New Zealand administrators, often agitating the foreigner's plans for full sovereignty.

4. The Orator (O Le Tulafale) was the first Samoan language film shot in Samoa with a Samoan cast and crew, and Leopao Saili was the main character in The Orator.

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