The War Between the Gods of 'Upolu and Savai'i

A Samoan Story from 1890

The political situation in Samoa at the end of 1890 was dangerous and complicated. Three Samoan chiefs—Mata'afa, Malietoa, and Tamasese—and papalagi (white) foreign powers were competing for control of the islands. The powers mixed in the Samoan quarrels and regularly used Malietoa as their pawn. The situation seemed ominous to the Samoans, who felt justifiably that a great war was impending and that foreigners would take over their land.

The underlying unrest broke to the surface with the delay of the arrival of the promised Chief Justice, who was to be appointed by the three European powers to decide differences between themselves and with the Samoan government. Terrible portents and greatly increased activity in the realm of the gods were observed. A story was told that explained the flood of terrifying signs: the aitu—the gods or ghosts—of 'Upolu were at war with those of Savai'i. Bad feelings had arisen over a dance competition and a cricket match. A great battle had been fought. A mass of wounded aitu had asked at a missionary's house for medical assistance. Aitu ambassadors were hurrying back and forth trying to enlist the most powerful gods as allies. At least one had refused because he had joined a Christian church and was forbidden to fight except in self-defence. The war was beginning to impinge on the human world, and a great cataclysm was expected. Meetings were held to discuss these portents and happenings.1

A Samoan-language version of this story has survived in Oskar Stuebel's Samoanische Texte: 'Kampf der Aitu von Upolu und Savaii', 'The Battle between the Aitu of 'Upolu and Savai'i'. A subtitle is provided: 'Eine Geschichte aus dem Jahre 1890', 'A Story from the Year 1890'.2 The text is a most interesting literary, historical, and intellectual document.

The Stuebel version of the story can be clearly differentiated from more traditional Samoan works. Besides its titular sentence, 'O le tala i le tava o Aitu o 'Upolu ma Savai'i, and conclusion, 'va i'u, it does not employ standard story form elements of the oral tradition, such as a general introduction. Nor is it a complex constructed of originally independent single-story units by a redactor.3 In fact, different events, which are related as episodes in the Stuebel text, were told as independent stories at the time, and these could vary to the extent of having different sides win.4 But the Stuebel text is not com-

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2 O. Stuebel, Samoanische Texte Unter Beihilfe von Eingeborenen Gesammelt und Übersetzt (Berlin 1896) 179 f.; German trans., 85 f.; subtitle, 83. I have supplied diacritical marks, where necessary. The Samoan text alone is reprinted in John Charlton (ed.), O Tu ma Tala Faa Samoa mai le Tusi a Oskar Stuebel 1896 (Pago Pago 1973), 19 f.


4 'Upolu in the Stuebel text; Savai'i, in the version given to Fanny Stevenson; Stevenson and Stevenson, Samoan Adventure, 16.
posed as a redactional joining of those individual stories. It presents the story as a unified narrative composed of many episodes.

The text is a marvel of storytelling. The narrative moves quickly with a sprightly, at times hilarious, tone. There are passages of great concentration and depth, but these need not be noticed as the story rollicks along.

The story differs also from the traditional genre of aitu story and the traditional representations of aitu battles, in which a single aitu is the centre of interest. In the Stuebel text, there are a great number of aitu—among them the famous and powerful Moso, Sauma'ea'e, Gegë, Nifoloa, and Soesā—none of whom dominates the others. The appearance of all these aitu in one story is unique, to my knowledge. The aitu are being used in a novel literary manner, an indication that a new stage in theological reflection has been reached.

This new manner of speaking of the aitu is the reason, I would argue, that Robert Louis Stevenson could write: 'Permanent spirits haunt and do murder in corners of Samoa; but those legitimate gods of Upolu and Savaii, whose wars and cricketings of late convulsed society, I did not gather to be dreaded, or not with a like fear.' In fact, even today, at least Sauma'ea'e and Nifoloa are feared and propitiated. The basis of Stevenson's opinion is, I believe, that the use of those aitu in the 1890 story, as told to him, was different from their use in traditional aitu stories, which inspire an immediate dread. In the story under discussion, the aitu have been put in a certain perspective. They are seen at one remove and can be handled at a distance, just as were Greek and Roman gods in late Classical times.

The 1890 text is remarkable also for its assimilation of post-contact elements: cricket, guns, barbed wire, Western medicine, and Christianity. These new elements are very significant in the story.

*The Text*

The story about the war of the aitu of 'Upolu and Savaii. The cause of the war of the aitu of 'Upolu and Savaii was that they did their dance [siva]: the aitu of 'Upolu lost, and the aitu of Savaii danced well. Then the aitu of 'Upolu said it would be good if they played cricket. So they played cricket. The ball was hit by Moso from Tuasivi [Savaii] and caught by Sauma'ea'e of 'Upolu in Manu'a [at the extreme opposite end of the island chain], so 'Upolu conquered [māo].

As a result, the war of the aitu of 'Upolu and Savaii was waged in the area between Salelavalu and 'Iva [Savaii]. The aitu of Savaii were on the landward wayside; the aitu of 'Upolu, on the seaward. Their battle was fought. The aitu of Savaii were then pursued and fled to Uliamoa

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1. E.g., 'Der Kampf des Aitu Gegë mit den Aitu von Savaii', Stuebel, Samoanische Texte, 177 f; cf. G. Pratt and John Fraser, 'Some folk-songs and myths from Samoa', Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales for 1892, 26: 264-301 [1892], 275-8. The group is emphasized in the latter and in the variant, 278-82, but a single hero can still be found, respectively, Losi and Tuile'uite.

2. Stevenson, In the South Seas, 202.

3. Ibid., 187: 'a fresh note, at once modern and Polynesian...'. The pā wāmaea, 'metal wall', in which or with which the aitu of Savaii make their fort, could be barbed wire, the use of which is mentioned by Robert Louis Stevenson, Vaialima Letters, Being Correspondence from R. L. Stevenson to Sidney Colvin, November 1890-October 1894 (London 1895), 167. Stuebel, Samoanische Texte, 84, explains it as a modern place name. The use of the article le before it would then be somewhat unusual. I have followed Stuebel in the text and provided my own interpretation in brackets. Of course, the place name could have been based on the use of barbed wire; the name is certainly unusual.

4. I have placed explanatory notes and key words within brackets in the text. Diacritical marks on place names are probably incomplete; no adequate reference work exists. When in doubt about names or translation, I have followed Stuebel. g is pronounced ng as in 'singer'.

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They carried their wounded there and made their fort. The aitu of 'Upolu came also to convey their wounded. Then the wounded of the aitu of Savai'i were brought down to the British pastor living in Satupa'i [Savai'i]. They went down in the night and knocked on the pastor's door. The pastor came to the door. The aitu said, 'We come to bring the wounded.' The pastor said, 'Fetch a lamp,' and the pastor saw the multitude of people laid down. Some had no heads, and they did not face him, but turned their backs. The pastor ran away. The aitu said, 'The red-assed pig! He ran away, but did not fetch some medicines. If, above, it had been ordained down that we had power over you, you would die.' Then the aitu of Savai'i prepared to convey their provisions here to 'Upolu. They captured a certain Samoan chief in Satupa'i'ea and struck him dead. Then they came to 'A'ana ['Upolu]. That night, a great quantity of taro was stolen in 'A'ana, and it was not known who did it. The aitu of 'Upolu assembled here in Luatuana'u ['Upolu] and waited for some aitu who had not come. They had gone to their villages to seek guns. As a result, the provisions did not arrive, and the aitu of Savai'i fled again. They were hotly pursued by the aitu of 'Upolu. Then the battle was waged yet again; it was fought all the way around 'Upolu. So the aitu of Savai'i went and made their fort at the Pā'umea [or: in/with the metal wall (barbed wire)]. The aitu of 'Upolu went to have a conference [fono] at Manusāmoa in Sa'aga ['Upolu], the place where Gégè lives. The decision of the aitu of 'Upolu was: 'We will go to the place where the elder [Gégè] lives to ask him whether he will just go on lying around. His church [Ekāēsia] should be put aside, and he should rise up [laga] to war.' It was known by the aitu of Savai'i that the fono of the aitu of 'Upolu had been held at Manusāmoa, so the fono of the aitu of Savai'i was not held at the Pā'umea [or: within the metal fence]. It was resolved to fetch the elder Nifoloa [Long Tooth]; his church should be put aside, and he should come to the war to be raised in Falealili'i. Nifoloa was unwilling [muatu]. He wanted to stay with his church. Then another ambassador went, and Nifoloa came. The war was then waged, which was to go as far as Falealili'i. The fleet arrived at the point called Mulitapiuli in Leilāgā. There the fono of the fleet was held. The decision of the fono was: 'When we arrive seaward of Sī'umu, let the advance be in a line abreast.' The ambassador of the aitu of 'Upolu went to the aitu in Aleipata, whose name is Soesā, so that he would come to the war. Soesā said, 'It is good, but let the ambassador go to say to Gégè that his church should be put aside and he should make himself strong [or: persevere] so that the defeated alliance [to'īla] of 'Upolu should rise up [laga].' Gégè said, 'It is good. Let the war be prepared. Let our war party stay on the landward path and let me go spread my net in the sea.' Then Gégè saw that the fleet of the war party of the aitu of Savai'i went forth. He then went landwards and said to his war party, 'Over there has come the fleet of the other side. I say the battle will come quickly enough. Continue to let the fleet go eastwards.' The fleet of the aitu of Savai'i went far towards the east. Then Gégè said, 'Watch well for an opening. I will go and wage battle and drive [them] into the net, and you follow me down.' He waged battle. They came close to the net. The aitu of 'Upolu rushed forth. Then the very big battle was fought. The aitu of Savai'i were pursued into the place where the net was. There were many who were killed, struck down because they could not flee, entangled in the net. Nifoloa thought that their side was in danger of being annihilated, so he should rush strongly into the net and tear it, and some aitu would live who would otherwise be annihilated. Nifoloa rushed forth. He tore the net. His tooth [nifo] broke; nevertheless, the place that was torn became a way out for his war party. As a result, the aitu of Savai'i were pursued, and the aitu of 'Upolu conquered [mafo]. It is finished.

The text can be interpreted on different levels. As a simple one-dimensional tale, it is very entertaining.

The political interpretation of the story is, however, inescapable. The three main aitu correspond to the three contending Samoan chiefs. Cricket matches were indeed used for war councils.9 Forts were built between villages. The picture of war and negoti-

* For the traditional root of this practice, see 'Der Speerwurfspiel. Kriegsverabredungen', Stuebel, Samoanische Texte, 215 f.
ations is very realistic. When one alliance defeats another, it becomes the mālo. The defeated alliance, the to'ilalo, must reconstitute itself through a new set of alliances, formed by a long and complicated process of deputations of ambassadors, negotiating conferences, and community meetings, fono. When the to'ilalo feels itself sufficiently strong, it rises in revolt, laga. If successful, it becomes the new mālo, and the defeated alliance, now the to'ilalo, begins the process again, sending out its ambassadors to find new allies, so that it can begin its own revolt and return to power. This process can be accelerated during the course of an indecisive war. Politics occupy much of Samoan life, and the many negotiating conferences and community meetings are one of its greatest pleasures.

Stevenson wrote, 'it is not hard to trace [these reports] to political grumblers or to read in them a threat of coming trouble; from that merely human side I found them ominous myself.' The atmosphere of the time was laden with justified fear, and the Stuebel text gives an accurate, acute, indeed excoriating picture of the times.

Papālagi culture, as it appears to the author in Samoa, is a contradictory mixture of silliness, utility, and danger. The church forbids war, and the trader sells arms. The real interest of the pastor for the aitu is the medicine he dispenses, not the religion. The pastor, for all his faith, proves a coward, when faced with the wounded aitu.

The Samoans, represented by the aitu, are pictured as ever divided. Instead of uniting to meet the challenge of the foreign powers, they are killing themselves off with guns provided by the papālagi, guns that render wars bloodier than before. The papālagi seem to be manipulating the Samoans, but live themselves a charmed life, untouched by the slaughter around them. Later, a chief was to ask, 'Why are we about to shed each other's blood while these white men sit in their houses and laugh at us? Why should they not suffer?'

The Stuebel text has an uncanny and prophetic grasp of the political situation. The theological dimension was, however, even more important for the author and the people. Of the unusual happenings, Stevenson wrote, 'But it was the spiritual side of their significance that was discussed in secret council by my rulers.' Fanny Stevenson wrote of her conversation with a Samoan servant:

After Henry's lesson in English the other evening, he told us that all the talk among the natives is of war. They are tired of waiting for the Chief Justice and believe he is not coming. He asked a good many questions about theology, which rather alarmed me, though Louis was quite ready with answers. I am always fearful of clashing with what the missionaries have taught and thereby unsettling the minds of natives. He particularly wanted to know if it was true that all heathen peoples who have not heard of Christianity are doomed to hell. He understood they were.

The difficulties of a practical bi-religionism are clear in the above passage and are developed interestingly in the 1890 story. Initially, the great aitu Gegē and Nifoloa do not want to fight for their alliances because of the teachings of the new religion to which

10 Stevenson, In the South Seas, 188. Bülow, 'Beiträge', 145: 'diese Sage, die augenscheinlich ein Gleichnis der gegenwärtigen politischen Verhältnisse in Samoa ist, nur eine, dynastischen Zwecken dienende Komposition ist'.
11 Compare Stevenson, Valima Letters, 87: 'Where there are traders, there will be ammunition; aphorism by R. L. S.'
12 The Stevensons were given a mild version of this very anti-papālagi episode, which one of their Samoan servants had the graciousness to doubt; Stevenson and Stevenson, Samoan Adventure, 24.
13 Ibid., 194.
14 Stevenson, In the South Seas, 188.
15 Stevenson and Stevenson, Samoan Adventure, 21.
they have been converted. Nifofoa must be forced to join the battle by the threat of
annihilation for his side. The great aitu are, as it were, mentally divided between their
traditional warrior ethic and their new creed.

But the conflict is not merely mental in the text. Even in its new manner of speaking,
the aitu still live, in however weakened a form. Samoa, therefore, has two living religions.
The author’s view of the relationship between the two is expressed in one of those
concentrated sentences that reveal a long association with the proverb form. When the
Christian missionary flees instead of offering medicine to the wounded aitu, they say to him,
‘ana ‘ua tonu iho i luga mātou te pule tā te oe po ‘ua ‘e oti, ‘Had it been ordained down from
above that we should have power over you, you would die’. The view expressed is that
above the two religions is a power that ordinates their relationship; that power has not
delivered the missionary into the hands of the aitu, but could in theory do so. Thus
the two religions exist side by side, but under a power that controls them both.

This is a most interesting religious theory induced from observed phenomena. That
is, the traditional religion was apparently in retreat and could not harm the mission-
aries. Nevertheless, that religion was still active and powerful. The new religion simply
denied the existence of the aitu. It could not itself, therefore, provide a mental frame-
work within which the perceived religious situation could be understood. The author
of the Stuebel text attempts to provide such a framework.

The author’s conception of the parallel existence of the two religions (under a higher
power) – rather than their being joined more consequently in a syncretic system – can
find a basis also in certain practices. Samoans still experience appearances of the tradi-
tional gods unaccompanied by Christian elements. Traditional Samoan literature is
still perpetuated with very little, if any, Christian influence, much less admixture. During
my year-long stay in American Samoa in 1972-73, traditional rituals seemed to be kept
separate from Christian ones. A few drops were poured from the kava cup explicitly
‘for the gods’. At a safoa‘i, the ordination ceremony for an important chief, I remarked
to my host that none of the village pastors were present. ‘We had a ceremony for them
last night’, he replied. Of course, more syncretic views and practical arrangements can
be found in Samoa (one papālagi pastor was experimenting with the use of the ifoga
ceremony of self-abasement in apology as a form of annual congregational confession),
and the author of the Stuebel text does posit a superordinate power – significantly
unidentified – that provides a point of ultimate unity.

The author describes the two parallel religions characteristically by emphasizing the
bad in each. The attraction of the missionary is his medicine, that is, the wonderful
Western technology, which so impressed the first Samoans to be missionized and which
also provided them with guns. But the missionary is cowardly and ridiculous. Similar-
ly, Christianity robs the great aitu of their fighting spirit.

Since on one level the aitu represent the Samoan people, the author’s criticisms of
the traditional religion naturally follow those he makes of Samoans: the aitu are killing
themselves off. The battles and deaths of aitu can be taken quite literally, as they are
in traditional stories and in the reports of religious phenomena being circulated at the
time. But one feels in the author a symbolic thrust: although the traditional religion
and culture are not yet dead, they are losing their power. Even in saving some of his
fellow aitu, Nifofoa breaks the long tooth for which he is named, and the net of Gegē
is torn. This portrayal of the death of the aitu is curiously similar in mood and means
of expression to the 19th century European theme of the death of the gods. For in-
stance, in *Les Chimères*, Gérard de Nerval gathers up the gods of previous cultures in order to clear the way for a new consciousness.

The author of the Stuebel text is a brilliant writer and thinker. His acute perception of, and deep feelings about, the situation in which he lives, are manifest. His literary ability is such that he accomplishes the feat of writing so vivaciously and hilariously that the unwary could miss his point, always a virtue in Samoan literature. He is a virtuoso at mixing different levels of realism and symbolism. Most important, he has invented a whole new genre and means of writing about the *aitu*, ones expressive of his historical situation. In this way, he provides a middle step between traditional Samoan literature and today's.

Historically, the Stuebel text represents a valuable expression of the mood and thinking of the Samoan people at the moment of its composition. However, one must not underestimate the significance of the religious phenomena that were the basis of this widely shared tale. They themselves can be seen as symptoms of the confusing and changing cultural situation, similar in their way to the sudden silence of the pagan oracles in the early Christian era or to the apparently spontaneous abandonment by a New Guinea group of its traditional religion.

Of the anguish of cultural transformation, the best possible outcome—which is very great—is that a genius nurtured in the traditional culture apprise himself of the new situation and create new thought forms and means of expression, which will be aids in understanding and articulation for the members of his own culture and indeed for others as well. This is the achievement of the author of this story of 1890.

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16 Bülow, 'Beiträge', 145, reports the rumour that the author was Lauaki (also spelled Lauati). Lauaki did in fact aid Stuebel, *Samoanische Texte*, 162. On this most important chief, see J. W. Davidson, 'Lauaki Namulau'ulu Mamoe: a traditionalist in Samoan politics', in J. W. Davidson and Deryck Scarr (eds), *Pacific Islands Portraits* (Canberra 1970), 267-99. Some support for Lauaki's authorship can be found in the fact that the story is told as if the storyteller were on 'Upolu. Moreover, the word used for church is *Ekalesia*, rather than the 19th century Protestant preference *lotu* (W. von Bülow, 'Die Samoanische Sprache von Heute', *Zeitschrift für afrikanische und oceanische Sprachen Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Deutschen Kolonien*, 3 (1897), 344-52, 345. This suggests that the author was a Roman Catholic or belonged to the Mata'aafa party.