

O Le Fogava‘a e Tasi: Claiming Indigeneity through Western Choral practice in the Sāmoan Church

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Abstract

Indigenous performance of Native Sāmoa has been constructed through colonized and decolonized systems since the arrival of western missionaries. Today, the western choral tradition is considered a cultural practice of Sāmoan Indigeneity that exists through intersections of Indigenous protocol and eurocentric performance practice. This paper will explore these intersections through an analysis of Native Sāmoan understandings of gender, Indigenous understandings and prioritizations of western vocal pedagogy, and the Indigenization of western choral culture.

Introduction

Communal singing plays a significant role in Sāmoan society. Much like in the greater sphere of Polynesia, contemporary Sāmoan communities are codified and bound together through song. In Sāmoa, sa (evening devotions), Sunday church services, and inter-village festivals add to the vibrant propagation of communal music making. These practices exemplify the Sāmoan values of aiga (family) and lotu (church). Thus, the communal nature of these activities contributes to the cultural value of community (Aae, 1998). European missionaries introduced hymn singing and Christian theology in the 1800s; this is acknowledged as a significant influence on the paralleled values of Indigenous thought, as both facets illustrate the importance of community (McLean, 1986).

Today, the church continues to amplify the cultural importance of community, and singing remains an important activity to propagate these values. In Sāmoa, singing is a universal activity. The vast majority of Native Sāmoans grow up singing in the church choir, and many Indigenous schools require students to participate in the school choir. Communal vocal music is practiced and cultivated throughout the cultural fabric (Engle, 1993).

In this paper, I will investigate the intersection of pre-missionary Sāmoa and the evangelized Sāmoa of the 19th century through the lens of communal singing. I will then outline the musical style and performance practice of Sāmoan choral music. Finally, I will discuss the dissonance of performance practice concerns regarding choral tone quality in Sāmoan approaches to choral and hymn singing.

The Evangelization of Native Sāmoa

The London Missionary Society (LMS) began the evangelization of Polynesia in Tahiti in 1797. Once LMS missionaries established a presence in Tahiti, an expansion towards Sāmoa began as Native Tahitian converts began missionary work in the Cook Islands. Soon Cook Islander missionaries made their way to Sāmoa (Stillman, 1993). Once LMS missionaries secured their presence in the 19th century, American missionaries began to arrive from New England. Music was a central component of the missionary message and integral to the process of evangelization.

Before evangelization, two significant forms of vocal music prevailed: a monophonic melody that was passed down by rote from one generation to another and a monophonic chant that

was improvised in melody and narration (Densmore, 1934). These two vocal forms served the cultural functions of communicating genealogy and mythology; of notifying people that work, meals, and prayer were beginning; and of notifying them about larger events such as war, sanctuary, or seasons. Sāmoan music decoded culture and propagated societal structures.

The introduction of hymn singing in the 1830s also fell into two individual categories. In the early nineteenth century, missionaries taught the Native populous strophic, homophonic hymns of either British or American origin. Once acculturation and skill developed, American evangelical and gospel settings in verse-chorus form were introduced. Throughout the rise of these genres, missionaries utilized pre-existing English and American hymns, translating these texts into Sāmoan and disseminating the selections through hymnals. Thus, the genre of *pese lotu*, or Sāmoan church music, was codified (Densmore, 1934).

The pedagogy of hymn tunes was starkly different between LMS missionaries and American missionaries. The LMS pedagogical framework consisted of rote teaching. The original hymns they distributed did not include musical notation, only text. There is presently no evidence that LMS missionaries developed the music literacy of Native Sāmoa, which remained an important subject in the evangelizing of Sāmoans. To the contrary, American hymnals included musical notation, often with introductory materials on musical rudiments. American missionaries relied on these hymns as source texts as they introduced to Sāmoans singing schools modeled after New England practices. By the end of the 19th century, solmization had become a common tool for teaching musical literacy in Sāmoa (Stillman, 1993).

Texture, Gender, and Modern Performance Practice Concerns

On many other Polynesian islands, evangelization resulted in violence and even the deaths of some missionaries; however, in Native Sāmoa, evangelization was seamless. John Williams, the first missionary to arrive in Sāmoa, observed that before evangelization, there was a pantheon of 120 personal and communal gods and goddesses that were deeply rooted in the elements of nature (Macpherson, 2011). A large number of modern Sāmoan Christians argue that this pantheon represents the many facets of one greater being. Therefore, at its core, they argue that Sāmoan religion was monotheistic. Also, the values that surrounded the previously converted Sāmoa closely paralleled the philosophies of Christ, such as the values of family and community. In essence, modern Sāmoan Christians believe that pre-western Sāmoa practiced an Indigenous Christianity that was culturally familiar to the LMS missionaries (Enright, 2001).

Even today, the parallel ideals of what is Indigenous and what is Christian remain closely related. The cultural impetus behind the Indigenous practice of communal Sāmoan folk song and the singing of Sāmoan hymns are closely linked to the values of *aiga* and *lotu*. Because of the cultural importance of community, individual contribution to group output is regarded as an expectation. For example, because singing typically occurs in communal or choral settings, it is traditionally considered rude or conceited to sing alone without first receiving the permission of a church elder or a *matai*, a chief (Engle, 1993).

It was not until the 1980s that western instruments began to be interwoven within choral settings in Sāmoa. This is mainly due to the model of the organ within Sāmoan churches. Most churches use a 1988 Yamaha model, which is mainly used as an opportunity to include accompaniment for church hymns (Tuiasosopo, 2005). However, while the organ is now a prevalent component in church services, choral anthems are still traditionally done without organ

accompaniment. This performance practice concern has been codified since the intersection of Indigenous practice and missionary thought. It was not until the 2000s that the use of the synthesizer arose as a common instrument within Sāmoan choral music. While the organ does not traditionally accompany choral anthems, the synthesizer is an accepted addition to contemporary sacred Sāmoan choral works, and it is also played in tandem with the church organ to accompany church hymns (Burrows, 1934).

Unlike Western practice, vocal parts within a Native Sāmoan church community are not assigned based on vocal range. Instead, choral parts are assigned on the criteria of gender, age, and marital status. Women identifying individuals are assigned to sing alto or soprano; male identifying individuals sing tenor or bass. Single female individuals sing alto, and male bachelors sing tenor. Meanwhile, married females are given the part of soprano, and married males sing bass (Thomas, 1981).

Depending on different textures and forms, more practices arose. At times a fa'asala is needed, in which a single vocal line is sung by an elder or group of elders. This vocal line is a practice of respect to the elders of the community. For congregations with an abundance of young men, directors might assign an usu, where women identifying individuals present a melody, an ato, where pre-pubescent young men sing above their collective passaggio, and a malū, where the elderly men sing the lowest part (Tuiasosopo, 2005).

The philosophy behind voice parts, gender, age, and marital status within the Sāmoan choir is rooted in the indigenous cultural perspective. Native Sāmoans believe that the elders should not only be revered, but that the elders are also responsible for sheltering and protecting the youth of the community. Therefore, the elders sing the outside parts of the divisi, providing protection to the youth (Tuiasosopo, 2005).

Indigenous Sāmoa houses a third gender expression as well: the fa'afine. Individuals who identify as fa'afine are male at birth, but embody a gender expression that is both masculine and feminine. Fa'afine play an integral role in Native Sāmoan culture, as they serve as song leaders in a variety of ceremonial ritual and rites. Likewise, fa'afine have an important role in a church choir, as many are called upon to sing solo or descant parts within the choir (Mageo, 1992).

Western Influence and Indigenous Priority in the Sāmoan Church Choir

The Western idea of pitch and melodic accuracy does not transfer to the Native Sāmoan criteria for musical excellence. Therefore, melody inaccuracy and pitch inconsistency are embraced within the Indigenous choral community. The cultural prioritizing of music stems from the homogeneity of Sāmoan songs before Western contact. Creativity and originality came from improvisation and the attention to text. Within a choral context, the singer usually thrives on creating personal variations within the choral context of a hymn setting. This practice has been codified as an advanced technique, as this pushes the limits of community-minded musicianship (Densmore, 1934).

Because Sāmoan hymns are not dynamic and printed Sāmoan choral music is limited, it is a codified practice to have the conductor decide the distribution of dynamics (Stillman, 1993). Ethnomusicologists have reported an overall dynamic median of forte singing with minimal growth or decay, with the exception of reflective or prayer songs during times of meditation or benediction (Sholin, 1974).

The treatment of text remains of the utmost importance to the cultural nucleus of Native Sāmoa and Sāmoan choral culture. While melody and harmony are consistently manipulated and

changed by the individual, rhythm is the primary vessel for textual clarity. Thus, rhythm must be observed with paramount care and accuracy (Williams, 1975).

A Search for Identity: The Native Voice Within The Choir

The timbre of Sāmoan choral singing has evolved rapidly over the last 50 years. Twentieth-century descriptions of Sāmoan choral singing have been recorded as quite nasal and robust, with a complete absence of vibrato (Sholin, 1974). This description has been attributed to an Indigenous replication of Western singing, where Native voices have attempted to recreate the timbre and vocal habits of missionary singing (Stillman, 1993). The Indigenous female voice, however, has the opportunity to find strength within the male-dominated hierarchy of Sāmoan culture. Previous observations have described the speaking and singing timbres of Sāmoan women as starkly different from each other. When the Sāmoan woman is singing, her voice takes on a shrill quality. This is an attempt to fulfill the need to exert one's individuality in a blatantly community-oriented society. Therefore, Sāmoan women have developed this unique and special way of singing.

Today, Sāmoan music embraces a wider spectrum of vocal timbres. Many choirs now adhere to a *bel canto* technique among other Western tone qualities and techniques. This can partly be explained because many Sāmoan choral ensemble conductors do not identify as Sāmoan. This cross-cultural circumstance can potentially result in the discord of a conductor's personal bias of prioritizing musical facets outside of the Sāmoan ideal. In contrast, many younger Sāmoan singers identify this new style of singing as a way to rebel against a sound that sought to mimic voices that were not Sāmoan. Therefore, this wider spectrum of sound is a beckoning back to one's Indigeneity (Williams, 1975).

An ethnomusicological perspective does not decide what constitutes an authentic Sāmoan sound; instead, the Indigenous Sāmoan community at large makes this decision. Therefore, if the Sāmoan community stands behind the development of vocal timbre, there is little to argue. However, because the vast majority of choral conductors identify as non-Sāmoan, this creates a cultural conundrum in trying to understand what is authentic in the performance practice of Sāmoan choral singing.

Accessing Repertoire

While the distribution of Sāmoan choral music is mostly insular due to the performance practice of the repertoire and the advocacy of cultural preservation, there are resources available for the choral conductor outside of the Sāmoan cultural sphere wishing to access and perform this music.

One such resource is the website <https://www.pouesimusic.com/paul-pouesi>. This website is managed and upheld by the Pouesi family, who are pillars of the Sāmoan choral and church community. This website includes popular Sāmoan hymnals and choral anthems from two of the family members Dr. Paul Pouesi and Ioselani Pouesi. These works are widespread amongst the Sāmoan choral community today. Conductors have the opportunity to preview and purchase this repertoire and request a free copy for their own work and study (Pouesi, 2008).

Dr. Paul Pouesi is also one of the first Native Sāmoans to receive a doctoral degree in the field of ethnomusicology. Conductors are also able to access folksong transcriptions from his doctoral thesis on the website. According to Dr. Pouesi, many of these folksong transcriptions were borrowed by early missionaries from old English hymnals, giving the conductor the

opportunity to experience this musical intersection between Indigenous folksong and church hymns (Pouesi, 2008).

A Final Intersection

Lindsey Ta'upu (2017), a Sāmoan choral conductor located in Rarotonga, states that the development of the choral sound is still innately tied to Indigeneity because the value of community is still treasured in Sāmoan choral culture. She states,

There is no outside pressure to change my vision to a western one. Absolutely not. I feel empowered to reference my culture, my family, and my language to make decisions behind the podium. If an idea comes that is coined as western, it is easily made Indigenous if I make sure that the knowledge is filtered through my elders and community. That is the power of our Native performance practice. We are able to withstand the tests of time because we hold our elders' experiences and judgment as a powerful resource. As long as we continue to cherish our conversations with our elders in our artistic processes, as long as we defer to their wisdom, as long as we look backward before moving forward, there will always be Sāmoan choral music.

Ta'upu's (2017) ideas present an essential dilemma for non-Sāmoan choral conductors looking to create an informed performance of Sāmoan choral music. Western training and critique have implanted a series of cultural biases on tone quality and pedagogy. However, how does one overcome this bias for the sake of cultural allship and respectful scholarship if Sāmoan choral culture openly welcomes an expanded global view of choral tone for the purpose of community? Also, knowing that protocol and connection to a community of elders are tenets of Sāmoan choral culture, what does allyship look like for non-Sāmoan identifying conductors? Do we have a responsibility to aid in the preservation and propagation of this repertoire? Or should our roles be ideated in different ways? Understanding that the Sāmoan choral worldview is expansive and rooted in community, ethical conductors have the responsibility to stand behind the performance practice wishes of the Indigenous population.

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