

# PACIFIC STUDIES

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Vol. 43, No. 1

June 2020

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## INTRODUCTION

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### WOMEN, POWER, AND PLACE IN POLYNESIA: ARTICULATIONS FROM SAMOA AND AOTEAROA, NEW ZEALAND

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#### Introduction

*I want my legs as sharp as dogs' teeth—  
wild dogs,  
wild Samoan dogs,  
the mangy kind that bite strangers (1)*

The potent forces of Tagaloa gave formation to the void, through lands and oceans, skies and underworlds. Through the womb of a mortal woman, Tagaloa transferred his divine mana into the human race. Sending his daughter Tuli down in the form of a bird, who turned maggots that had appeared from a rotting vine into living men and women.

Sinataeolelagi, another daughter of Tagaloa, bore the sun as her child, named La, to her mortal husband Tafa'i. Every day La returned east to his mother's home in the heavens before moving west again in the evening to rest.

When the concentration of mana is so significant, *aitu*, supernatural beings born as blood clots, originate. *Saveasi'uleo* was an *aitu* who ruled *Pulotu*, the spirit underworld. He had the upper body of a man and the lower body of an eel. His wife was *Tilafaiga*, another *aitu*. She and her twin sister *Taema* had swum from Samoa to Fiji and returned with the instruments for tattooing, a practice they introduced to Samoa. The child of *Tilafaiga* and *Saveasi'uleo* was born as a blood clot and buried, later emerging as an adult woman. Her name was *Nafanua*.

At a time of war on the island of Savaii, *Nafanua* led the people of the west against the people of the east and defeated them. Following her victory she apportioned political authority over the various districts of Samoa among the chiefs who came to pay homage to her. On the island of Upolu, rivalries were also breaking out and the support of *Nafanua* was sought once more. *Nafanua* won again, and in so doing conquered all of Samoa.

The ancient archetype of the Samoan woman, as portrayed by *Tuli*, *Sinataeolelagi*, *Tilafaiga* and *Nafanua*, is one of immense strength and mana yet also grace, sensitivity and vulnerability. She is a complex woman with many sides and layers, but her defining quality is one of power: not only the power to give birth to mankind but also a procreative power; the power to form ancient customs as well as the features of the universe. This power of the Samoan woman, in its unwieldy, complex and contemporary form, takes centre stage... (Lopesi 2019)

This special issue endeavors to create a new intellectual space where we can celebrate Polynesian womanism, to propel us to an empowering space, and to celebrate the power of women who are mothers, sisters, chiefs, and leaders of families. These gender scripts reveal resilient role models of indigenous agency that have come down to us from time immemorial through the stories and experiences of our matriarchs—our mothers and grandmothers, great ancestresses and goddesses. They are presented as a star path for the complex social dynamic encompassing notions of Samoan and Maori womanism, gender, leadership, and familial relationships as a cultural reference. The term “womanism” is a relatively new thread in feminism. It was first coined by the black poet and activist Alice Walker in 1983. Frustrated by the lack of diversity in the feminist movement, she defined womanists as black women who were “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Phillips 2019).

Womanism manifests five overarching characteristics: it is antioppressionist, it is vernacular, it is nonideological, it is communitarian, and it is spiritualized (2). Philosophical debates on womanism for women of color cross various and sometimes contesting paradigms and have a long and complex history.

Five papers and a poem in this special issue present a set of Samoan and Māori insights, so this issue is not representative of all Polynesian women or Polynesian womanism as a whole. However, Schoeffel's paper reaches back in time to a pan-Polynesian question of whether there were differences in the status of women in Eastern and Western Polynesia (p 47). We examine the discourses of Samoan and Māori notions of Polynesian womanism and explicate some strategies through which these discourses perform an entitled female identity. Subverting the general identity assigned to women by western society, the discourses of our ancient Polynesian cultural references open a space in which young Polynesian women are empowered and enacted as the sacred carriers of life—the life force of our families from time immemorial, entitled to support, respect and self-respect, a voice in our society, and leadership positions. In offering a call for renewed understanding of the contexts of practice and the possibilities of subversion, it is hoped that this understanding may attract intervention support and resources for Polynesian women who feel disempowered and who are victims of the overpowering western androcentric forces of colonization, Christianity, and capitalism. Schoeffel's article (p 47) revisits a puzzle in Polynesian culture history that despite cultural similarities, there are apparent differences between Western and Eastern Polynesia: in the latter, there are ethnohistorical accounts of women as antithetical and polluting to all sacred things, beliefs that appear to be only faintly articulated in Western Polynesia. Her paper reminds us of the work of Alan Hanson and Neil Gunson in contesting and refuting interpretations of ethnohistorical accounts that women were contaminating and socially marginalized. Given the evidence that Polynesian women were, in the past, goddesses, great chiefs, and mediators between heaven and Earth, life and death (Schoeffel 1987), there is a need for a critical analysis of Christian teaching and representations on the role of women. Why, for example, do the major Protestant churches in Samoa remain stubbornly behind their mother churches in other countries by refusing to ordain women or to allow them other leadership roles in the churches?

For Māori women, Polynesian womanism is embodied in the *moko kauae* and in *te kopu o te wahine* (the body of the woman) who “will always walk this land, which carries the bones of our forebears, and enfolds the placenta of our newborns. He mana a whenua: he mana wahine—this is who we are. This is our power; the assertion of influence and identity, the claiming of time and space. The assurance of continuity,” writes Te Awakotuku (p 7). The theme of resilience and continuity in Māori *kuia* is carried through in Ore's article (p 27),

in which she applies the recent development in the theory of nostalgia to empirical studies on Māori women, Māori women in tertiary education, and Māori well-being. She aptly demonstrates that these women negotiate kinship relations of up to four generations as they take on tertiary education, which is articulated by their metaphor of “filling up the other kete” (the basket of knowledge) and argues that this metaphor epitomizes how these women embed their memories in Māori practices, including learning Te Reo Māori (the language) to overcome their ambivalence toward tertiary education and ameliorate well-being. Following Weedon (1987), we seek to integrate individual experience and social power in a theory of subjectivity. In this paradigm, subjectivity is defined as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” Weedon (1987: 32). Thus, the performativity of gender offers an important contribution to the conceptual processes of subversion that occurs through the enactment of an identity that is repeated in directions that go back and forth, which then results in the displacement of the original goals of dominant forms of power.

Among the contributions that focus on Samoa, Anae’s study (p 83) describes how the power of matai tamaitai (mistress of the family) weakened in postcolonial Samoa is active in the transnational space. In the context of her study, transnational women matai have been liberated from the shackles of male-dominated church and local and national political governance in Samoa, which as a place, and as homeland, is suffering from the effects of colonialism, neocolonialism, Victorian-era versions of Christianity, and the neoliberal rollercoaster world we live in.

Lilomaiava-Doktor’s research (p 61) clearly shows how, on the one hand, Samoan women have adapted and transplanted their power or power-sharing roles into new social and political structures imposed by colonialism and the church. On the other hand, colonialism and Christianity have imported a brand of patriarchy that has distorted and limited women’s participation in decision making. While Lilomaiava-Doktor’s research points to improvements in the status of women, these tend to benefit those with higher education status and salaried employment in government and the private sector, those in urban areas, and those overseas.

Karlo Mila’s poem *Papatuanuku* (p 114), a paean to Papatuanuku as “Goddess that is all maunga, all muscle, all soft slopes, fertile flat surfaces” and “the mothership of all female elements,” describes the tensions between male and female—“And as much as ‘the man’ tries to bind you, bend you to his will. You will resist. That is one of your many legacies.” She describes a womanism in which “‘Dominion over’ [by men] doesn’t feature in any of our epistemologies.”

These papers are the product of three consecutive meetings (2017–19) from Hilo, Hawai‘i, and New Orleans to Aotearoa, New Zealand, of the Association

for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO). There we engaged in talanoa (Halapua 2000; Vaioleti 2011) to debate and enact Polynesian womanist power. One of our contributors is Ngahua Te Awakotuku, who wore the mantle of keynote speaker at the ASAO meeting held at the University of Auckland in New Zealand in 2019. Not all contributors to these sessions completed final papers, but the sessions were remarkable events attended by many Pacific scholars. There was overall consensus about the overlooked agency of Polynesian women, the need for further exploration of womanist paradigm, an investigation of the meaning of “women’s equality” and of globalist definitions of social justice and human rights from indigenous perspectives, and findings from current research on Polynesian women in modern and transnational contexts.

In this special issue, we have signaled the importance of considering discourse analysis and issues of identity formation for current scholarship and struggles around how disempowered Polynesian women may perceive themselves and how society perceives them (Anae 2017). Global discourses currently focus on women’s exclusion and victimhood, and it is true that Polynesian women rightly feature in these conversations. However, our papers suggest that cultural and historical contextualization should inform such discussions. There is also need for a wider space for the consideration of an alternative, more empowering and entitled identity than the widespread stereotype of women as powerless and subservient to men that restages Polynesian women not only as the carriers of life and the life forces of genealogies but also as chiefs and political leaders in their own right, especially in transnational spaces.

## NOTES

1. From Lopesi (2019: 1). The title refers to the malu, the Samoan female leg tatau (tattoo) that encompasses the upper thighs down to just below the knees. The malu symbolizes the unlimited power that exists across the spectrum of womanhood.

2. Phillips (2006: xxiv–vi). Of special note is the inclusion of spirituality in black womanism, which is largely absent from western feminist discourse.

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