

One day in June 2006, shortly after my daughter Tanya and partner Charmaine returned from a trip to Australia, we were talking about the Pacific Islands, and it emerged that although Tanya had been kayaking in Tonga's Vavau Archipelago, and had holidayed on Rarotonga and Aitutaki, she had never visited Samoa.

As I have noted in earlier work, I spent almost six weeks in what was then officially "Western Samoa" in 1955, studying agriculture and village life, with members of the staff of the Department of Geography of the University of Auckland, assisted by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. I had particularly enjoyed the experience, and the book which James Fox and I published in 1961 as a result of that visit and subsequent ones by staff and students of our department, ***Western Samoa: Land, Life and Agriculture***, remained in wide use for many years.

So when Tanya suggested a winter holiday in Samoa, I readily agreed to make another trip there in August 2006, and to take all my family (son Garth with his wife Vivienne, Tanya and Charmaine, and grandson Barnaby with his fiancée Joanna Gemmell), as well.

I was looking forward to the warmth – the winter of 2006 was unusually cold and frosty, and because of my age I was feeling it more than usual.

I was also particularly interested to see how the economy of Samoa, with its substantial agricultural base, had developed since it had become independent of New Zealand in 1962. And I especially looked forward to visiting Falevao, a village where I had spent much of my time, with university colleagues, in 1955, and perhaps meeting among its residents, one or two who remembered our visit.

First Impressions

Our first glimpse of Samoa was the eastern end of Savaii, then the north coast of Upolu. There were familiar sights – navy blue ocean outside the reef, the turquoise water of the lagoon, palm-fringed coastline and the bush-clad mountains of Savai'i's interior. The buildings at Faleolo airport were, however, completely new to me, as was the huge new Aggie Grey resort next to it, and as soon as we began our drive south across Upolu from the airport, I became aware of many more changes.

I saw no evidence in the wet of the island of the commercial plantations I had visited in 1955, some still managed by descendents of former German operators, and under the control by then of the New Zealand Reparation Estates organisation. There was little sign of tidy rows of coconuts in large plantings, and none of Samoans still processing copra on a commercial scale.

The villages seemed to have changed, in the sense that they were no longer typically Polynesian in style and appearance. In 1955, most fale were thatched and well maintained and new buildings were still, on the whole, traditionally built. Very few buildings, then, apart from churches, schools, and some official buildings, were built in palagi materials and style. A few traditional fale, however, were already being replaced by timber bungalows with corrugated iron roofs.

By 2006, almost all fale seemed to have corrugated iron roofs, often red – with rust, not paint; some had glass windows and curtains rather than open pillared walls with floor-length, hand-woven coconut fibre blinds. Although in most villages there were usually separate larger traditional-style fale for meetings, and some smaller ones for sleeping, cooking and cleaning, there were also many houses partly of imported timber and corrugated iron.

Pigs and chickens still snuffled and scratched around the houses, but many more houses appeared to have decorative gardens – bright flowers and shrubs, hedges and borders. There still seemed to be vegetable and fruit growing areas close to most villages.

There appeared to be still more churches than in the 1950s; or perhaps they were more conspicuous because they were often elaborate, freshly-painted and mostly rather better maintained than many of the houses. And certainly the schools were much larger and more obvious, many quite modern-looking, especially around Apia.

Another impression I had was that villages seemed more dispersed, with fale and gardens some distance from the traditional village centre, rather than being of more tightly clustered 'Haufendorf' style. Any some families seemed to have deliberately left the village to live half a mile down the road – I don't remember isolated scattered houses such as this in the 1950s. Such dispersion may well be a result of the freeholding of land, and the development of small separate commercial farming enterprises such as those we visited later in the week.

Sinalei Reef Resort

In 1955, the only hotel of note on Upolu was Aggie Grey's, in Apia, which I had never visited. The Sinalei Reef Resort, where we all stayed in 2006, was opened in 1996 in Siumu Village on the south coast of Upolu, by then made more accessible with new cross-island roads. The resort is well designed to fit into its reef-bound coastal landscape and to reflect traditional building styles. My room was very comfortable, with a view of gardens and of the waves breaking on the reef, and near to the main foyer and major facilities.

I wasn't so keen, however, on the high-walled open-air toilet and shower area (behind the bed-sitting room) into which I managed to lock myself on the first afternoon. Fortunately a fine traditionally-bound wooden ladder (meant to be used as a drying rack, I leant later) was leaning on the wall, and I managed to climb up and call over the wall to a passing staff member. Fortunately, too, I had my room key in my pocket; with this, he was able to unlock my front door and then to let me back into my bed-sitting room.

The resort swimming pool, filled by fresh water flowing over rocks from a cool spring, was refreshing, and big enough for comfortable swimming. The bar, cafe and restaurant all had the high curved ceilings of traditional fale, with intricately bound rafters held up by whole tree trunks. Staff members were charming, as gracious and kindly as I remember from village life in 1955. And the warmth of the weather, even with the passing showers typical of the southern coast, was a great comfort.

People

During our stay, we had several valuable encounters with people of interest, including the owners of Sinalei Reef Resort, Joe and Tui Annandale, and the general manager, Joe's sister Sose Annandale.

Joe Annandale (who has, I understand, been given the titles formerly held by my guide of fifty years ago, Tangaloa Leotele Te'o) spoke to me early in our visit. Unfortunately, however, at that stage I did not realise his responsibility for the district including Falevao, the village of my earlier stay. As he was absent at a meeting of matai for the latter part of our visit, I was not able to ask him about what had happened at Falevao or the other villages we had visited earlier. I am hoping, however, to hear from him shortly about some of these matters, thanks to the advantages of email communication.

Joe's wife Tui (formerly Schaffhausen), met my daughter Tanya in the organic gardens of the resort on our second evening there. Tui had been, it seems, a student of geography at the University of Auckland in the 1960s, and spoke enthusiastically of her studies. And Sose was a calm presence throughout our stay, as well as farewelling us on our last morning. The family team has clearly established a fine atmosphere in the resort through a combination of good personal relationships, much-appreciated staff wages and benefits, and professional development opportunities for staff, including the use of the New Zealand training personnel and the New Zealand National Qualifications Framework.

The Prime Minister of Samoa, the Honourable Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi was present at the Wednesday night fiafia at Sinalei with guests. One of the management staff, Eseta, insisted on introducing Tanya and me to him, and we had some discussion on agricultural issues in Samoa. My grandson Barney brought over a copy of ***Western Samoa: Land, Life and Agriculture***, published in 1961, to show him; the Prime Minister commented on its usefulness to the government and the nation at that time. The Prime Minister said he would ask his Minister of Agriculture to organise a dinner for me during our stay. Sure enough, the next day a formal invitation arrived for me, my son Garth and daughter Tanya, to a dinner at Aggie Grey's Hotel in Apia on the evening of Saturday 5 August.

The Minister of Agriculture, the Honourable Taua Tavaga Kitina Seuala, and the Chief Executive of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Seumanutafa M.F. Lakopo, and their wives treated us to a most delightful evening. We had access to a superb seafood buffet, and very interesting conversation about the current situation in Samoan agriculture and forestry, as well as broader economic and social issues.

As in New Zealand, the Ministry of Agriculture is subject to rather frequent restructuring – adding or removing fisheries and forestry in particular. Most recently, in Samoa, forestry and fisheries have been moved, I believe, to the natural resources and environment portfolio.

Garth was told about an exotic forestry experiment supported by New Zealand which was proceeding well, with trees due to be cut in their twentieth year because of their rapid growth rate, but which was wiped out by a cyclone in its nineteenth year. There was apparently no explanation of why there had been no sequential plantings, or attempts at further experiments. And Tanya talked with the CEO about the Prime Minister's interest in extending – or perhaps re-establishing – what would be a more appropriate term – organic growing practices throughout Samoa, as well as discussing education and language retention issues with Pau'u, the CEO's wife.

The next day, Sunday 6 August, we were joined for lunch by Sano Savea Malifa and Muliagatele Jean Maifa, the couple who own and publish the ***Samoan Observer***, a daily bilingual newspaper produced in Apia, Pago Pago and Auckland. Charmaine had made contact with them through their cousin, Toesulu Brown, one of her former colleagues at Auckland Girls' Grammar School. Again, we were able to extend our understanding of the issues and challenges facing Samoa today, as well as appreciate the passionate commitment these two and many others in public life have to the uniqueness of Samoa and its culture, and to the careful and continuing improvement of its economic and political life.

Both these meetings reinforced for me the importance of the extensive links between Samoa and New Zealand. These links are not so much the result of the earlier status of Samoa as a dependency, or of the granting of full independence in 1962, as to the migration to New Zealand of a significantly large proportion of its population, and the island nation's growing dependence on the earnings of Samoan residents in New Zealand sent home to families.

Another interesting, albeit distressing, issue was the continuing difficulties in establishing land-based export industries of any sustained importance. Problems have included the falling prices of copra on the world market, a blight affecting the talo crop, and difficulty in accessing investment capital for the development of processing facilities for canned fruit and fruit juice and dried fruit, which would appear to be obvious possibilities for increasingly health-conscious world markets.

Many of those who spoke to us during our stay also commented on the difficulty of motivating those young (and older) people who are not employed in the service industries associated with building and tourism to engage in hard work in gardens or plantations. With a usually benign climate, food readily available from the lagoon or trees around villages, and remittances from family members in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, those who lack western-style consumer ambitions do not seem to constitute an energetic or committed workforce.

Most export earnings now (apart from remittances from overseas family members) come from tourism, and from a growing noni juice industry (noni being the name given to the fermented juice of fruit from the nonu tree, traditionally used in several Pacific nations for its health-giving properties). Neither of these was foreseen by our team in 1955; it will be interesting to see what emerges in the next fifty years.

Eastern tour of Upolu

On Friday, we set out as a family in a minibus for the eastern area of the island, on a tour specially organised for us by Tapu Siuli Tuailmafua, the most obliging manager of the Green Turtle tour company, with Siake (Jack) as our driver and guide. The journey was planned to focus on land use and vegetation, to meet not only my interests in agricultural development, but also Garth's interest in forestry and Tanya's in organic cultivation.

Siake took us east along the coast through the Le Pupu Pue National Park where significant native trees such as mahogany and teak are being conserved and replanted with New Zealand assistance. Our first stop was a walk through a forest area to the Togitogiga Falls. A little further on we detoured to drive into Siuniu Village, one of those which I visited in 1955. It was a prosperous-looking and tidy village, with colourful modern-style fale and gardens – but because of modernisation it looked quite unfamiliar to me.

Next we stopped at a small property overlooking the beautiful Sopoaga Waterfall where a family has established a botanic garden, with common Samoan plants clearly labelled in Samoan, English and Latin, tidy garden plots of pineapple, talo and other vegetables. The man of the family demonstrated for us the production of coconut cream from the harvesting of the nut to a shared cup of the cream for our tasting.

In the Lotofaga Village district we visited a talo plantation and in Vavau a coconut oil business. Both were small family-run businesses, with production for home use, and surpluses for sale at the Fugalei Produce Market in Apia. Both are currently traditional and organic in cultivation, and only the simplest machinery is used in the oil-processing business – an electric grinder for shredding the coconut flesh, a large sheet-metal table over an open fire for drying the shredded flesh, and a hand press for extracting the oil from the desiccated shreds. Children as well as adults help in the processes (and apparently, as we observed, and as was later confirmed for us in discussion with educators, a significant number of children and young people are still not attending school regularly in some villages.)

After a stop for lunch and swimming at Lalomanu, looking out towards the islands off the south-east tip of Upolu, we headed north past the Afalili Dam. The development of four major hydroelectric projects, and the laying of water pipes and electric cables around Upolu, are noticeable changes with a significant impact on lifestyles in villages along the main island roads, as are the sealed roads around and across the island themselves.

From Te Mafa Pass we could see a large cattle farm in the north-sloping valley, and just north of Le Mafa Pass we drove up to a hilltop to look down on Fagaloa Bay, with its volcanic rock formations and the three remote villages visible on its eastern coastline. Our guide also showed us mamala trees, which have been found to contain a substance which suppresses the growth of the HIV virus. And throughout our journey, in bush areas, we were very aware of the meremia vine, which seems, with its rapid growth and large heart-shaped leaves to be smothering large areas of native vegetation, and causing even more problems than the mile-a-minute vine which was introduced to several Pacific islands by the US during the war to provide rapid-growth camouflage.

As we descended from Le Mafa we passed through the village of Falevao. Nothing I saw from the main road on the way through was recognisable from my earlier visit; however, I hoped that our expedition planned for the following day, with a guide related to families living now in the village, might prove illuminating.

Before reaching Apia we visited two well-known tourist spots: the Falefa Waterfall, and Piula Cave Pool, where Garth swam into the lava tube and reappeared some minutes later, to our relief, in the pool at the other end. Jack also took us through his village to see a sandspit where apparently some multinational company with a New Zealand engineer is planning to build a 12-storey resort – environmentally problematic, I would have thought, not to mention obtrusive, but locally approved, according to Jack, because of the employment opportunities it will offer.

In Apia itself we visited the Fugalei Produce Market, a thriving centre for the daily sale of fruit, vegetables, crafts and fabrics of all kinds, then stopped at the Green Turtle Tour Company lounge for a free ice cream. By good fortune, a young woman working there turned out to be the grand-daughter of Te'o, my guide on the earlier visit, and Garth managed to find out that her father actually remembered my previous visit, although it did not prove possible for me to meet him on this one.

On our way back to Sinalei, Jack detoured twice for us to look at two research centres for horticulture and forestry; however, at 4pm on a Friday afternoon we did not wish to disturb staff so our visits were cursory explorations without dismounting from our vehicle.

The search for Falevao

On Saturday morning, 5 August, our family went by taxi from Sinalei to Apia. I sat in the lounge at Aggie Grey's while the others visited the market. Tanya had visited the library in Apia earlier in the week, and found a young woman there with family in Falevao who was willing to take us to the village, and Garth had arranged to hire a vehicle and drive us there. So at lunchtime we picked up Merita Lenu'u from the library, and set out.

When we arrived in the village, Merita introduced us to a schoolteacher who said she was the daughter of Gagae (Gagae being the elderly man who had been living in the fale lent to us during our 1955 visit; he appears in a photograph on the cover of the subsequent book *Western Samoa* with his great-granddaughter, Falevao).

The teacher took us to see the grave of her father, a large tomb to the east of the main road not far from the school, and it immediately became apparent that, born in 1925, he had been far too young to have been the Gagae of our visit, who was in his 80s at that time. It also became clear from our conversation that Gagae was the title rather than a personal name, and the teacher's father may have been no relation at all to the Gagae we knew – or he might have been her grandfather or even great-grandfather.

We were unable to find any part of the village which looked familiar to me. Most of the houses were of more modern style, and even the layout of the village was unrecognisable. The teacher suggested that at some stage the village had been further up the valley towards Te Mafa Pass, and that it had moved north and nearer to the new main road. She took us to an area further south and west, up a long metalled road, where she thought the old village might once have been. But there was nothing to see there apart from one relatively modern bungalow in a paddock surrounded by bush.

So this part of my Samoan journey was very disappointing. We delivered Merita back to her village, Faleapuna, and returned to Sinalei, by the eastern road, crossing Te Mafa Pass once more.

Since my return home, I have written to Joe Annandale seeking information from him about Falevao's history during the last fifty years, and I am optimistic that we will be able to explain the apparent disappearance of the place where I spent such a pleasant time all those years ago.

Although the Falevao visit was disappointing, our Samoan visit as a whole was very successful. I appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences between Samoa in 1955 and Samoa in 2006, and I enjoyed spending extended time with my family in such a beautiful and comfortable environment.

As we were gathering in the foyer of the resort for our journey to the airport on Monday morning, Sose Annandale came out to farewell us. I told her that, if possible, I shall return to Samoa, and to Sinalei, to celebrate my 100th birthday in 2013!