

WESTERN POLYNESIA'S FIRST HOME FOR THE AGED:
ARE CONCEPT AND CULTURE COMPATIBLE?*

ABSTRACT. In 1975 Western Polynesia's first home for the aged, called Mapuifagalele, was established in a village just outside Apia. The home was operated by the Little Sisters of the Poor and housed 83 elderly Samoans of both Catholic and Protestant faith. This paper outlines the traditional Samoan patterns of aging and the high priority placed on family care for elders. In discussing the home and its residents, we consider ways in which what might appear to be an incompatible institutional concept has been adapted to fit the local cultural configuration. We also speculate on a variety of factors which may or may not be responsible for the acceptance and on-going operation of a facility of this type.

Key Words: Samoan, flexibility, traditional culture, family responsibility, institutional care, religious influence.

The Samoan archipelago lies in Western Polynesia, 2,200 miles from Hawaii and 4,500 miles from New Zealand. The island group is divided politically into Western Samoa, an independent nation previously under the control of Germany and then New Zealand, and American Samoa, an unincorporated territory of the United States. American Samoa consists of seven islands (six inhabited) with a total of only 76 square miles of land. Its main port and administrative center is Pago Pago. Western Samoa consists of nine islands (only four inhabited); its land area is ten times that of American Samoa and its population (roughly 160,000) is approximately five times that of the American group. The capital and principal port of this constitutional monarchy is Apia, a town of some 26,000 people.

Ninety percent of the people of the Samoan archipelago are fullblooded Polynesians, and the majority of them live in small seaside villages where they engage in subsistence agriculture and fishing. Cash cropping in Western Samoa and wage labor in American Samoa have recently become alternative solutions for getting a living, however. There is a good deal of cultural homogeneity throughout the entire archipelago but there are also differences resulting from the different political histories and economic situations of the various islands. There are but two major urban areas — the villages of Utulei, Fagotogo, and Pago Pago on Pago Pago Bay in American Samoa, and Apia on the island of Upolu in Western Samoa.

Apia is a very old community, having had considerable numbers of European residents since the middle of the 19th century, and it presents a very different lifestyle from that in the smaller rural villages. There is a fair amount of wage labor (although salaries are much lower than in American Samoa) in government and private industry, and there is a great deal of

cash cropping in copra, cocoa, bananas and coffee in the hinterlands. Apia has numerous hotels and restaurants, department stores, banks, and shipping facilities. Most of the governmental offices are located here. There is a hospital and numerous schools, but at the time of our research Western Samoans were required to pay tuition for their children's education and a nominal fee was charged for hospital care.

Generally it might be said that Samoa has remained more culturally conservative than other Polynesian societies, and since World War II Western Samoa has retained a more traditional, less modern flavor than American Samoa, where special efforts toward modernization were established as government policy during the 1960s. It was also during the 1960s that a great deal of migration began to take place. In Western Samoa young people were leaving for New Zealand and in American Samoa there was a substantial movement to Hawaii and California for schooling, jobs, or just plain adventure (Rhoads 1981).

In 1975 a surprising institutional development appeared on the Western Samoan scene — a home for the aged. This paper will discuss the traditional Samoan social system and how it relates to the elderly and the compatibility of a home for the aged in this cultural environment.

THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE

In spite of the modern developments taking place in Samoa's urban centers it must be understood that Samoa has in general remained a somewhat traditional society with age-old systems and values governing the social structure and social interaction. Even among migrants to California, we have found *fa'aSamoa* (the Samoan way) is highly respected although not always convenient to adhere to.

The adhesive which holds Samoan society together is the *matai* system. This is a system of extended family organization which takes its name from the family head, the *matai* (or "chief") who is responsible for directing the day-to-day affairs of his household and who holds the traditional extended family title, which might either be designated as that of chief (*ali'i*) or orator (*tulafale*). As head of the extended family (*'aiga*) he (they are generally male) is entitled to sit on the village council, represent his family, and perform civic duties appropriate to the nature of the title. The household in which the *matai* resides may be one of many households occupied by members of his extended family. While all family houses and lands are owned communally by the family, the *matai* exercises considerable leadership in determining the uses to which the land is put and in assigning labor tasks and caring for the needs of all his family. The position of family head is an elected one, and the *matai* is chosen by his kinsmen on the basis of intelligence, industry, wisdom and, in recent times, education and wealth.

Even if contrary to reality, there is a fiction that the *matai* is elderly, and he is often referred to by his family as the "father" or as "the old man." Most *matai* acquire their titles in middle age, however, but are then required to assume the attributes of one advanced in age. Margaret Mead quotes one young *matai* as follows:

. . . Always, I must act as if I were old. I must walk gravely and with measured step. . . . Old men of sixty are my companions and watch my every word, lest I make a mistake. Thirty-one people live in my household. For them I must plan. I must find them food and clothing, settle their disputes, arrange their marriages. There is no one in my whole family who dares to scold me or even to address me familiarly by my first name. It is hard to be so young and yet to be a chief (1928: 36).

Matai are thus thought of and must behave as though they were elderly because age demands respect in Samoa and therefore bolsters the authority of the family head. Actually relative age is a salient aspect in the authority hierarchy of kinship. Older kinsmen always have authority over younger kinsmen and a sibling who is 15 years or more the senior of another must be addressed as "father" or "mother" rather than "brother" or "sister." In regard to relative age Mead has pointed out that

Within the household, age rather than relationship gives disciplinary authority. . . . The newest baby born into such a household is subject to every individual in it, and his position improves no whit with age until a younger child appears on the scene. . . . Any older relative has a right to demand personal service from younger relatives, a right to criticize their conduct and to interfere in their affairs (1928: 40–41).

ROLE AND STATUS OF THE ELDERLY

In Samoa one frequently hears from both young and old that "old age is the best time of life." Old age is defined functionally, not in terms of years lived, but by one's capacity to operate as a fully productive adult. But defining old age in Samoa is a tricky business. If Samoans are pressed, they will respond that old age starts sometime between ages 50 and 60, but they continue to be productive individuals long after that because they are permitted less strenuous work activities and they assume more advisory roles.

The tasks carried out by old people are purely voluntary; they can sit and do nothing if they so desire. Their activities are regarded as vital to the functioning of the society and not merely unimportant busywork. Simmons records, "In Samoa it was the special responsibility of the old people to stay about the house supervising the children and giving advice" (1945: 203). The old women instruct the young concerning weaving techniques in the making of baskets, mats, fans and houseblinds, and old men instruct the young in the techniques of fishing, house and canoe

construction, the production of sennit (a twine of braided coconut-husk fiber), and the intricacies of etiquette and political maneuvering.

The elderly also assume special responsibilities in their church. They sit with the small children and keep them quiet and orderly, serve as deacons or lay pastors, and elderly women devote considerable time to the cleaning of the church and the maintenance of its altar hangings. While elders do a good deal of babysitting because they enjoy small children, families believe that this should not become an onerous task and therefore they assign much of this responsibility to the baby's older siblings. In European terms, there is no such thing as retirement for most Samoans. Old age is merely a time when work activities are altered to match the strength and interests of the aged.

Old people are valued in Samoa, first, because they have lived longer and experienced more than others, and secondly, because there is a reciprocal obligation to cherish and care for them. As one informant put it, "We should be kind to them, because when we were small they loved us and took care of us. If a child goes away and never writes back to the parents, the parents and other relatives say that child hasn't paid a cent of his debt."

As a person's age increases, the family care increases. It is not only a duty but a privilege to care for old people and some informants who had no elderly relatives living with them expressed regret that they did not have the opportunity to care for an aged kinsperson. It is not unusual for an elderly person to be given a separate sleeping house of their own and have one or two grandchildren assigned to sleep by their side to attend to their every need or wish. On many occasions the authors have witnessed such arrangements, and have observed the tender loving care of the children. They brought them the best food the household could offer on a woven tray, brought them cool drinks, coals from the cookhouse to light their tobacco, they bathed them and lovingly tucked them in at night. Special food is often prepared for them by the family. Old men and women without teeth will receive their bananas, taro and breadfruit boiled and mashed until it is soft. Informants in the more traditional villages maintained that "Parents come before wives, and if there is a shortage of food, the elderly are fed first. Generally, the sons provide food and money for the care of the parents, but parents may be taken in and cared for by their daughters" (Holmes 1958: 57).

Traditionally it was considered a criminal act punishable by fine, title removal or even banishment to abuse or even neglect an old person. Some idea of the reverence the society had for the aged can be gleaned from the fact that the Samoans' highest god was referred to as "old grandfather Tangaloa of the Heavens" (Turner 1884: 77). There is also strong social pressure within this society to care adequately for the aged. One young informant stated, "If we don't help the old people they might go around

asking for food and the people who give them food will criticize the whole family. Someone should stay and take care of the old people because they come first in Samoa and babies second."

It is generally agreed that, in the most traditional villages of Samoa, aged Samoans are well endowed with family prerogatives. For example, when there are property exchanges on a variety of ceremonial occasions the old will receive more *lafo* (gifts). An old chief will be given a finemat of better quality and prestige than other younger chiefs of exactly the same rank.

It should be noted that the concern for the welfare of elderly Samoans is not, however, related in any way to property control. It has been observed in many cultures, including the United States, that the aged often ensure family solicitude by a kind of "blackmail" wherein they threaten to exclude non-attentive family members from the inheritance of land or other forms of wealth. Such pressure is not possible in Samoa where land and most other property is owned communally by the entire extended family and cannot be transferred or disposed of without the kin group's unanimous consent.

While it is generally true that the older a person becomes, the greater the respect accorded to them, it is also important to consider the personality and the character of the elder in question. The degree of respect is, in other words, somewhat influenced by the qualities of the individual. A person who is particularly admired will find that people will overlook their forgetfulness or even childishness. People will make allowances for their weaknesses.

In comparison to the United States where old age is usually defined as a "problem" rather than merely a condition or a life stage, it is unique to find a culture where the elderly speak of the advantages of age. Old age was described by our elderly informants as "a time when you get better food and greater care;" "a time when people come to ask about ceremonial matters and ask your advice about family and village decisions" (Holmes 1972: 76-77). Margaret Mead quoted a young *matai* who said that one "... should always have an old man beside him, who even though he is deaf and cannot always hear his questions, can still tell him many things" (1928: 192-193).

THE CHANGING SOCIAL SCENE

It must be noted, however, that in urban areas in both Western and American Samoa modern ideas have threatened the traditional respect patterns enjoyed by the elderly. Although in such communities the *matai* principle theoretically still governs family relations, there is generally less respect for this traditional institution today. Families tend to be less

unified and cohesive, and household composition is often extremely fluid, consisting of a wide assortment of relatives who have come to the urban area for purposes of employment or schooling. Crime, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism and personality deviance are proportionally higher in urban areas. In such areas a greater percentage of family members are working outside the home, emphasis on a money economy is a threat to food sharing practices, and there is a growing fear of change among the elderly. While better transportation and increasing access to luxury items make their lives easier in the urban centers, the new lifestyle makes them apprehensive. The more acculturated young people today often disagree with the opinions of the elderly and tell them their ideas are old-fashioned and not in line with modern ways. Even though some criticism of the elderly is tolerated within families, young people are still required to show respect when dealing with old people outside the immediate family.

Our knowledge of this strong family-oriented context of Samoan aging and our former experience with Samoans hardly prepared us for an event of April 1975 in Western Samoa — the opening of a home for the aged. While this country was experiencing some change related to modernization, it seemed an unlikely spot for the introduction of an institution more typical of more modernized societies where the aged segment of the population is considerably larger. People aged 60 or older made up only 4.26% of the Western Samoan population in 1971 (Government of Western Samoa 1975). The establishment of this anomalous institution, Mapuifagalele (Haven of Peace), raised a myriad of questions about aging, tradition, and change in Samoa.

MAPUIFAGALELE

In late 1976 we arrived in Western Samoa to do research at the home, with the goal of understanding if a home for the aged was a logical development in this culture, and why or why not? The building of this home had been the special project of Cardinal Pio Taofinu'u, Bishop of Samoa and the Tokelaus, a native Western Samoan whose residence is adjacent to the new institution. The Little Sisters of the Poor, a Catholic order devoted to care of the aged, were responsible for its operation. Prior to our arrival, correspondence with the Mother Superior had suggested only that migration of young people away from Western Samoa might explain the need for the home.

The physical facility is well-suited for the climate and the aged clientele. The Samoan islands are tropical and hence perennially hot and humid, with frequent rainfall. The traditional Samoan house is very open — an oval-shaped structure with a thatched roof supported by numerous houseposts and with floors of coral pebbles. Woven blinds can be lowered

around the sides to form temporary walls for protection from the elements when necessary. This openness allows cooling by the ocean breezes and also gives inhabitants a ready view of passers-by and village events. A quasi-outdoor lifestyle is characteristic of this culture.

Much of the newer housing is built of concrete blocks or wood frame construction and tends to be more closed in. This is almost universal in American Samoa, but Western Samoa retains traditional housing to a greater degree. Mapuifagalele seems to have combined modern materials with as much openness in design as possible. It is not air-conditioned but has some features which facilitate easy circulation of air. The residents' rooms are arranged along both sides of corridors. Each room has two tall louvered windows on the exterior wall and a shorter window and a doorway on the opposite wall. There are no solid doors in place on residents' rooms, only a curtain for privacy. This system of interior and exterior windows provides excellent cross-ventilation. The same type of window arrangement applies in the dining room. Since there is a sidewalk adjacent to the entire facility and it is covered by the broad extension of roof, only the most extreme blowing rain would necessitate closing windows.

The rooms are furnished with single beds and cabinets for personal belongings. Curtains of brilliantly hued cotton fabric with floral design have been used, providing a very Samoan touch in room decor. These same materials have long been preferred for making the Samoan *lavalava* (wrap-around skirt-type garment) worn by both sexes and for shirts, blouses, and dresses. Even the beds had pastel flowered sheets in the women's wing although plain white was used for the men.

There are two large round buildings connected by a covered, but open breezeway, and each of the larger structures has wings which extend in an angular fashion on each side. One of these buildings houses the administrative offices, the kitchen, dining room, a small clinic, and the sisters' quarters. Two wings — one for men, the other for women — containing single occupancy rooms for residents, bath and toilet facilities, lounge areas furnished with chairs and television sets, and infirmary areas are attached.

The other large building is the chapel, which is completely open except for a wall which encloses about one-third of the structure. Carved posts support the high roof. The chapel is beautifully decorated with Samoan tapa cloth designs on the walls, and the altar, made of a local hardwood, is draped with a finemat, the most highly valued article of Samoan property. There is also a life-sized carving of Christ as a talking chief, complete with fly whisk, orator's staff and ceremonial *lavalava* (wraparound). A large crowd can gather in the sanctuary in relative comfort due to this open design.

One of the wings attached to the chapel houses couples, who have

much larger rooms than other residents. There were also some additional single women living in this area. The laundry, maintenance shop, and a few sleeping rooms for aides are located in the other wing. The breezeway connecting the chapel and the administrative building is the setting for many activities — parties, movies, and other secular activities requiring a lot of space, and it is quite compatible with the outdoor lifestyle familiar to Samoans.

Mapuifagalele is also well-suited to the physical changes that often accompany advanced age. With the exception of the sisters' quarters, which are above the administration area, the entire structure is on a single level. At no point is there a need for residents to step up or down to move about. The floors are tile throughout the buildings and the breezeway area has a smooth cement floor. The covered sidewalks mentioned above permit residents to walk about outside regardless of weather. These are advantageous features for residents in wheelchairs, too. The average village, on the other hand, would present obstacles in the form of dirt or pebble footpaths, possibly rough terrain, and perhaps hills to negotiate.

The home cannot be categorized as a nursing home, although there are separate nursing areas in both men's and women's wings of the facility. About 25% of the residents were housed in those areas at the time of our research. As might be expected in a residential setting for older persons, there were some chronic health problems among the other residents, but most were fully ambulatory and quite able to participate in the activities available. Given the incidence of dementia among residents of similar institutions in the United States, Mapuifagalele had surprisingly few residents who showed evidence of this problem. The home is perhaps best described as a combined assisted care and nursing facility.

THE RESIDENTS

In the first 18 months of operation the staff at Mapuifagalele had provided care for over 100 persons, including some who had subsequently died or left the home for other reasons. During our research the home was at full capacity with 83 residents — 38 men and 45 women. Although there was a stated policy that persons admitted should be at least 60 years of age, there was evidence of flexibility in actual admissions. It must be understood that in a developing country like Western Samoa, where concern with statistical records is a fairly recent development, precise age may be difficult to establish. This is even more likely for very old individuals, and especially so where old age is more a matter of one's ability to function than chronology. Based on the records available, residents' ages ranged from 56 to 98, with an average age of 75. An especially interesting case was that of an elderly couple who had been allowed to bring a retarded

middle-aged daughter (age 45) into the home with them. In another instance a physically handicapped adult child was admitted along with her mother but returned to relatives in the village at her mother's death.

Admission was not restricted to Catholics, although three-fourths of the residents were Roman Catholic and one-fourth Protestant, including two Congregational Church of Samoa pastors. Several of the male residents had been catechists who had spent a lifetime serving the Catholic church as lay clergy. Since it is the policy of the church to transfer these people from village to village, they never have the opportunity to put down deep roots and develop close family ties. When they are old and ready to retire from full-time service, they often feel that they have no place to go. Mapuifagalele's religious affiliation is undoubtedly an attraction for these individuals.

While most of the residents were admitted singly there were several married couples in the group as well. It seemed that in almost every case, the husband was in poorer health than the wife; and records indicated that in such situations a woman would quite likely return to the village at the death of the husband. This had happened in several previous cases.

Further evidence of the flexibility in the operation of Mapuifagalele is seen in the case where a husband, requiring more intensive nursing care, had been moved into the men's infirmary; his wife, who exhibited symptoms of dementia, was upset by being separated from her spouse and was then moved into the men's wing to be near him. This is an interesting situation. Samoans do not have a strong couple orientation; husbands and wives do not sit together in church, for example, or a woman or man may live in the islands while the spouse resides elsewhere with a migrant family member for an extended period. Women prefer the company of female relatives for social activities. We can only speculate about the case in point here, but perhaps being closer to a husband at Mapuifagalele provided a needed element of stability in a very non-traditional setting, especially for a confused individual.

THE STAFF

The residents were being cared for by eight nuns, who also lived in the facility, and by young Samoan women who worked as aides. Only one of the Sisters was Samoan; the others represented various countries — two from the United States, and one each from England, Spain, India, Australia and New Zealand. Each had her domain of responsibility, e.g., kitchen, laundry, couples' wing, and four were trained as nurses (two registered nurses and two licensed practical nurses). All spoke fluent Samoan and routinely conversed with the residents in that language. The fact that the Sisters lived in the home and were thus on hand more or less

all the time, provided a continuity of care and, in a sense, a system of quality control that probably occurs rarely in similar settings elsewhere.

The Samoan women who worked as aides were trained by the sisters to perform their assigned duties. The tradition of care for the old coupled with what Gray (1960: 171) called "generous care of the sick" seems to have brought about an affinity for nursing care as an occupation for many Samoan women. American navy physicians noted the concern for the sick and decided to establish a nurses' training program in American Samoa early in their administration there. As a result many migrant women in the United States have found employment in hospitals and homes for the aged and are especially valued in the latter institutions (Ablon 1970). The young women in Western Samoa seemed equally competent and committed.

Perhaps the most unique feature of Mapuifagalele is that residents are required to pay nothing to live there, and most bring few or no personal possessions with them when they arrive. The home depends entirely on donations for its operating funds; one Sister is responsible for soliciting local support, and she, always accompanied by one of the other Sisters, spends several days each week visiting in villages and asking for contributions. Western Samoa is such a poor country that few families can afford to give money; some do make gifts of food instead. Merchants in the town of Apia were providing some assistance, but the bulk of the financial support for the institution in late 1976 was coming from Catholic organizations overseas.

LIFE AT MAPUIFAGALELE

There was a well established routine at Mapuifagalele, but it was carried out with such a sense of informality that one could hardly feel oppressed by it. As it is a Catholic institution, Mass is the first order of the day, though there is no pressure on residents to attend. This was the policy with any of the home's activities, religious or social. Protestants and Catholics alike are quite faithful in their chapel attendance, and doctrinal differences seem to bother the worshippers very little. Mass was followed by breakfast, with free time in the morning for residents until lunch at midday. Most took naps in the early afternoon. About four o'clock another church service, called *lotu*, was scheduled; one of the resident catechists usually conducted this service. Supper was served about six o'clock.

Regularly scheduled entertainment activities were the Friday afternoon card games and movies shown about every two weeks in the evening. The latter were provided by a local hotel which screened films for guests and then shared those deemed appropriate for use at Mapuifagalele. The

movies we viewed with the residents were not always understood by them due to cultural differences but were invariably enjoyed, including such unlikely productions as *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *Blazing Saddles*. The latter prompted one of the Sisters to comment, "I guess we can be thankful they don't understand the language so well." The favorite film during our stay there was *The Ten Commandments*, even though the reels were inadvertently shown out of proper sequence.

Various occasions also provided opportunities for *fia fia* (parties), often organized by church groups or village organizations. A *fia fia* would typically involve refreshments of some kind, music provided by a local band (sometimes from a high school), dancing, and perhaps a speech or two. Some of the home's more agile residents invariably take advantage of these occasions to demonstrate their undiminished skill at dancing. One of the advantages of age in Samoa is more freedom of expression in dance (often leaning toward the vulgar or suggestive), especially for women, who in younger years are expected to be more reserved.

Between scheduled activities residents are free to pursue whatever interests they wish. A great deal of socializing goes on among residents; we often saw several of them in a room engaged in animated conversation. Men sometimes play card games and seem to enjoy following the proceedings of the Western Samoan Parliament which are broadcast by radio. There are television sets located in each of the lounge areas for those who wish to watch. The only signal available is from the American Samoan station, which broadcasts a variety of taped NBC news and entertainment programs.

A few of the women engage in more utilitarian activities such as helping in the laundry or the kitchen or pulling weeds around the grounds near the building. In the United States such pursuits might well be prohibited by statute or at least discouraged by fear of legal recriminations by families in case of accident. They do conform precisely with the pattern of activity normally open to the aged in Samoa. The aged can work or not, depending on strength, opportunity, or individual inclination.

Men seemed a bit limited in their options for more "productive" pursuits, largely due to prestige factors. There are appropriate roles for an aged man — participating in the village council as a titled man or an advisor, for example — but there is little option for such activity at the home. Many of them do not have the strength to help with some of the maintenance tasks that are available. This is not unlike what happens to men in the village setting, where old age allows somewhat less continuity of roles than for women (Mead 1928).

Not only are people permitted to engage in work if they wish, but the staff exhibits a fair degree of tolerance for eccentricities of the residents. One very old woman, for example, preferred sleeping on a woven mat on the floor of her room rather than on the bed, and we frequently observed

a man walking down the hill toward the ocean, where he preferred to take his baths.

A council-like mechanism has developed for the resolution of personal conflicts and infractions of policies. Such meetings include both men and women, with one of the men acting as spokesman. Meetings are patterned after village council procedures for handling grievances and adjudication, and discipline of residents follows traditional lines. The Sisters, while always aware of the issues, are not participants in the meetings.

Visiting policy for family members was very flexible; they could come at any time. The Sisters did try to discourage evening visits under normal circumstances out of respect for the residents who favored an early bedtime. Sunday was the most popular day for family visits and they brought food (usually cooked) from home for the old folks. Sharing of food is an important tradition among Samoans, and the Sisters had incorporated this into the routine by pooling the Sunday food gifts for the evening meal on that day.

Because child care is an important responsibility of the aged, especially women, and Samoans have such affection for small children, it was not surprising to learn that some of the women residents really missed having grandchildren around. A Sister reported that one of the women had asked if her four grandchildren could come to stay with her and sleep under her bed. Of course this was not possible, but a grandchild could spend a day if the resident grandparent was able to take full responsibility for the care and supervision of the youngster. During our stay we observed such visits, which seemed to add a "home-like" atmosphere to the institution.

The residents of Mapuifagalele could make visits to their family also, even for extended periods. A few were away during part of our research period as it was the Christmas holiday season. There is a concept in Samoa called *fa'alavelave*, which is, according to Milner (1966: 103), "anything which interferes with normal life and calls for special activity." It refers to a large number of events, e.g., weddings, funerals, matters related to a chief's title, or illness. Given the size of the Samoan *'aiga* (family), *fa'alavelave* can occur frequently. These are typically family matters that would likely provide incentive for a visit home by an old person residing at Mapuifagalele. We learned, however, that a few residents found their new home a convenient respite from some of the more stressful occasions, and chose not to become involved.

There were residents who had returned to their villages, apparently to die. In general, the sisters tried to discourage trips away from the home for more seriously ill residents, sometimes without success. They had found in a few cases that men had insisted on going back to their families and died shortly thereafter. This was interpreted by the Sisters as a wish by the old person to die at home among family. There is a long-standing belief in Samoa that this is indeed where one should die because to die elsewhere

means that one's spirit will be troublesome to the living. Also, one's *mavaega* (dying wish) should be heard by the family. The limited access to telephone service in many outlying villages along with distance and travel conditions make it unlikely that a last minute transfer could be made successfully. An elder with strong feelings about these death customs might well choose to make an early return to the village in spite of satisfaction with life at Mapuifagalele.

Many remain in the institution until death however, and the Sisters have attempted to adapt to Samoan custom when a resident is dying. Residents all know when someone is seriously ill and they come into the room to sit around the bed and pray or just keep vigil. We were told that the coffin is sometimes on hand at these times and is admired by the other residents. A special mortuary room has also been established where the residents can pay their respects to the deceased. They also respond with singing. These activities associated with death permit the home's residents to participate in ways typical of a normal village setting.

CONCLUSIONS

When we approached the study of Mapuifagalele and its residents in 1976 we did so with a number of nagging questions. We were aware of the priority that Samoan families placed on keeping their elderly near them and the sacrifices that were often cheerfully made by household members in order to ensure that its senior members were well cared for and well respected. The presence of an institution designed to care for the aged seemed incongruous in this culture. We were unable to determine with any certainty that there had been any real demand from the society for this home. The impetus seems to have come from the Cardinal, who first thought of providing a place for aged catechists. He indicated that so many other people approached him about problems with their aged family members that he felt there was a much broader need.

Although we had been told by the Mother Superior that Mapuifagalele was needed due to the volume of migration of family members out of the islands to New Zealand and other countries, with no one left to care for the aged, this appeared unsupportable. The size and structure of Samoan extended families made us believe that it would be exceedingly unusual for any elderly person to lack family support. This was the case in American Samoa, where migration was much less restricted than in Western Samoa. Among the residents at Mapuifagalele there were a few never-married individuals, who nevertheless had family available, and the majority of other residents had offspring and other family living locally even when a child or two lived overseas.

The economic status of Western Samoa may have been a contributing

factor in the establishment and acceptance of this institution. The vast majority of families were still involved in subsistence agriculture, and wage employment that was available provided very little income. Families of nine or ten members were the norm, and many of those children. With the increased emphasis on the value of education and the lack of tuition-free schools, it is possible that the needs of the young were assuming more importance and competing with needs of the old (Rhoads and Holmes 1981).

The more we learned about the residents and their apparent satisfaction with this new way of life, the more we tended to believe that being at Mapuifagalele was more often the elder's idea than the family's. Some residents were plagued by requests from family members to return home with them. We were told by some of the old people that their families were embarrassed to have them living at Mapuifagalele because people in the village undoubtedly had ill feelings about their letting others care for the old person. There were cases which illustrated the role of the aged in this situation — where they had acted very much on their own to enter the home and even dissembled in order to hide their actions from the family. One man had come from the island of Savai'i to visit relatives on Upolu and took the opportunity to move into Mapuifagalele. He was well settled before his family in his home village knew what had happened. In another case, when the institution was filled to capacity, a woman from a nearby village heard that there had been a death during the night and arrived early in the morning requesting that she be given the now vacant room.

From the old person's point of view, the attraction of the home may well involve prestige associated with living there, a very important priority in Samoan culture. After all, it was not everyone who could live on the grounds where a Catholic Cardinal (the only one in the Western Pacific) maintained his residence. And the fact that the home was a church sponsored and operated institution may have made a great difference. While Samoa is predominantly a Protestant society and in some villages very antagonistic toward denominations other than London Missionary Society (now Congregational Church of Samoa) religious institutions and religious personnel of any stripe are respected in the extreme.

Village pastors and catechists often have more actual authority and more prestige in village affairs than high chiefs. In most villages the *faiifeau* (village spiritual leader) is not even required to provide or cook his own food. Village families take turns providing meals for the *faiifeau* and his family. Samoans also are very devoted in their outward expressions of their faith. Elaborate prayers precede most meals, and most families conduct evening worship services in their homes when scripture is read, hymns are sung and prayers said. During this evening vesper time village members are not even permitted to walk through the village.

Samoans maintain that old age is a time when one thinks about God

and prepares to meet Him, and where better might this be done than in a place like Mapuifagalele. The magnificent chapel is open 24 hours a day; a Sister told us that there was at least one male resident who would probably spend all his time there if not encouraged to do other things. Because of its size and proximity to the Cardinal, the chapel is also the scene of special services such as the ordination of young priests. It is doubtful if a home for the aged built by the government of Western Samoa would attract any residents at all unless it had a religious emphasis.

Some of the people living in the home were there for medical reasons. Mapuifagalele has a well-stocked dispensary and Sisters trained to provide health care. Some of the residents were brought into the home at the urging of the Sisters or in some urgent cases with pressure from Cardinal Pio. This often involved cases of malnutrition (a surprising situation in view of the Samoan ideal of providing the best food for the elderly), and ailments such as ulcers, diabetes, and hypertension, which required special diets. In these cases the Sisters had been successful in convincing the families that close supervision of diet and lifestyle was required and could be better ensured at Mapuifagalele. There is no question that some of the residents were in better health than would have been the case had they remained in the village, but it is equally likely that some families acquiesced out of respect for the Sisters rather than agreement with the solution.

Recent correspondence with the Mother Superior now in charge at Mapuifagalele revealed that some changes have occurred since our investigation. There is more Polynesian representation among the Sisters, with two Samoans and one from the island of Niue now on staff; the rest are from Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Services available to residents have been expanded by the addition of a physiotherapy department and an occupational therapy room. Bath and toilet facilities have also been improved. These changes in the physical facility have been incorporated at the expense of bed space for residents, but this is apparently less problematic than might be expected due to a significant decline in demand for admission.

While in 1976 the home was not only full with 83 residents plus a waiting list for admission, we were surprised to learn that they now have only 65 beds and 15 of those are empty. Furthermore, the fifty current residents — 25 men and 25 women — have an average age of 85, a significant increase over the average of 75 we found previously. The denominational make-up of the residents is much the same as before, with about 20 percent Protestant and the remainder Catholic. Other information provided indicates that the basic operation and activities of the home are the same.

We can only speculate about what might account for this reduced demand. It cannot be that there has been a decline in the number of

elderly in Western Samoa; census figures indicate an increase to about 5 percent of the population (Government of Western Samoa 1981). The higher average age of residents more closely approximates what can be observed in nursing institutions in the United States, and it might also be inferred that perhaps Mapuifagalele is now being utilized by only the most frail of the aged. At the time we were there, it was obvious that quite a few of the residents could have functioned very well in the normal family setting. This suggests that there may have been an element of novelty in living at Mapuifagalele in the early years of its existence and now that this has worn off, it serves a group who have needs that are difficult for families to meet.

Whatever the situation may now be, we found Mapuifagalele to be well-adapted to the needs of the people it serves. And now a new, but similar puzzle is on the horizon. To the east in American Samoa, the Poor Sisters of Nazareth are scheduled to open their new home for the aged, designed to provide care for 60 persons, in the spring of 1987. Questions remaining to be answered are: does American Samoa's greater exposure to Westernization and modernization provide an ever stronger incentive for such an institution, which is still in contradiction with basic Samoan cultural values, and how will it be received?

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