



Rethinking the Colonial State

Colonialism by Deferral: Samoa Under the Tridominium, 1889-1899
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COLONIALISM BY DEFERRAL: SAMOA UNDER THE TRIDOMINIUM, 1889–1899

Holger Droessler

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the making of the colonial state in Samoa in the 1890s. The Samoan case offers new insights into the workings of the colonial state precisely because nowhere else were Euro-American colonial projects as intertwined with and dependent on local support. In an unprecedented experiment in colonial rule, German, British, and American officials shared control over the Samoan islands from 1889 to 1899. This so-called tridominium, I argue, served as a colonial strategy of deferral for Euro-American officials anxious to diffuse escalating conflict over the distant islands. Contrary to plan, ongoing tensions among German, British, and American interests allowed Samoans to maintain considerable political and economic autonomy. The main reason for the ultimate failure of the tridominium for Euro-American policy-makers lay in the uneven and incomplete exercise of colonial power over Samoans. Limitations in geography, people, and finance made the tridominium a weak colonial state. In addition, the lack of resources the respective metropolitan governments devoted to the distant archipelago in the South Pacific increased the relative influence of Samoan leaders and of the growing number of Samoans who joined the administration. Samoa in the 1890s serves as an important reminder that colonial rule was rarely clear-cut and never complete.

Keywords: Colonialism; diplomacy; labor history; Pacific; Samoa

Rethinking the Colonial State

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In April 1889, a few days before delegates from Great Britain, Germany, and the United States were to convene in Berlin to discuss the future of Samoa, British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury outlined his government's policy in the Pacific. "Samoa," Salisbury reminded his ambassador in Berlin, "matters very little to us and I strongly demur to an arrangement under which, for Samoa's sake, we shall quarrel either with the Germans or the Americans once a month. The greatest reform of all," he concluded, "would be to lay a cable from Auckland to Apia. So, and so only, we should get rid of the *furor Consularis*" (Cecil, 1921, p. 127f.). Salisbury was not alone in his desire to link the faraway South Pacific to the imperial center. Herbert von Bismarck, son of the Iron Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the German Empire, warned of continuing conflicts among Germany, Great Britain, and the United States over Samoa: "We may be annoyed many times yet by the self-sufficiency of the Consuls who, in the security and impunity of that great distance, invariably create or ferment disturbance" (cit. in Vagts, 1935, p. 685 n6).

As these high-level concerns show, distance from the metropole gave Consuls power, but also created problems. At the end of the nineteenth century, correspondence from Europe to Samoa could take up to six weeks. During that long silence, colonial officials often made their own decisions without explicit approval from their superiors in the distant capitals. For their part, decision-makers in the foreign and colonial offices sometimes deliberately withheld crucial information from their consular representatives in faraway places, such as Samoa. Under these circumstances, "a single official could have enormous impact on the direction of policy" (Steinmetz, 2007, p. 31).

Great distance from metropolises was only one factor that made colonial Samoa a special place. It was among the very few colonies that came under formal colonial rule of three powers: Great Britain, Germany, and the United States. Formed in 1889, this so-called "tridominium" lasted until 1899 when Great Britain withdrew. The western part subsequently became German Samoa and the eastern part American Samoa. Perennial conflicts among representatives of the three colonial powers during their decade of shared control over the islands provide evidence for the Janus-faced character of the colonial state in Samoa. Below the level of Euro-American diplomacy, Samoans remained in charge of a host of administrative and executive functions, particularly in the villages. Hundreds of Samoan intermediaries, ranging from tax collectors to clerks and interpreters, actually made the colonial apparatus function on an everyday basis.

This chapter explores the relationship between Euro-American colonial officials – themselves almost constantly at odds with one another – and Samoans in the colonial service. The Samoan case offers new insights into the workings of the colonial state precisely because nowhere else were Euro-American colonial projects as intertwined with and dependent on local support. Samoa under tripartite rule differs from similar cases (such as Fiji or the New Hebrides) in one crucial aspect: the simultaneous presence of not only one or two, but *three*

colonial powers. The tridominium, I argue, served as a colonial strategy to defer an answer to the contentious question of who should rule over Samoa. Contrary to plan, ongoing tensions among German, British, and American interests allowed Samoans to protect their ways of life by playing off one outside power against the other. As long as colonial officials continued to argue over the details of administration and the rights of their respective citizens, Samoans enjoyed a robust degree of autonomy.

The main reason for the ultimate failure of the tridominium for Euro-American policy-makers lay in the uneven and incomplete exercise of colonial power over Samoans. Limitations in geography, people, and finance made the tridominium a weak colonial state. In addition, the minimal resources that the respective metropolitan governments allocated to the distant archipelago in the South Pacific increased the relative influence of Samoan leaders and of the growing number of Samoans who joined the colonial administration. If colonialists depended on indigenous support to a greater extent the fewer resources they received from the metropole, colonial Samoa is a case in point (Robinson, 1972, p. 122). Samoa in the 1890s serves as an important reminder that, contrary to colonizers' beliefs, colonial rule was rarely clear-cut and never complete.

THE SAMOAN TRIDOMINIUM IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Despite its unusual legal features, the tridominium in Samoa has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Even recent scholarship on colonial rule in the Pacific has little to say about Samoa under the tridominium and thus fails to account for the particular dynamics of interimperial competition in Samoa and its effects on the ground (Lawson, 1996). The most exhaustive treatment of the Samoan tridominium remains Alfred Vagts's as part of his comparative analysis of Germany and the United States in the age of empire (Vagts, 1935, pp. 681–797). As a German-born historian who found refuge in the United States from the National Socialists, Vagts was drawn to this little-known experiment in German–American cooperation in colonial rule. Writing from an unabashedly Eurocentric and state-centered perspective, Vagts, in his 300 pages on U.S. and German entanglements in Samoa, had few kind words to spare for the tridominium. If he interpreted the Samoan tridominium as a failure in colonial governance in the eyes of metropolitan decision-makers (which it clearly was), Vagts deserves credit for putting this peculiar colonial arrangement back on the scholarly map. Decades later, a U.S.-born historian of the Pacific, Richard P. Gilson, offered a more sympathetic look at the condominium in his sweeping history of nineteenth-century Samoa (Gilson, 1970, pp. 396–433). In contrast to Vagts, Gilson was less interested in evaluating the Samoan tridominium as a particular form of colonial governance. Rather, Gilson's account

highlighted the tridominium's significance as a temporary solution to conflicts among Euro-American outlanders, dating back to the 1830s. This is also the verdict of Paul Kennedy in his influential analysis of Samoa in international relations (Kennedy, 1974, pp. 98–108). Kennedy, a British-born historian, devoted only a brief section of his magisterial study of the “Samoan Tangle” to the workings of the tridominium, stressing the complex diplomatic context in which German, British, and American policymakers interacted. Kennedy's conclusion that the Berlin Treaty should be seen as “a postponement rather than a settlement” (p. 97) prefigures my own interpretation of the tridominium as a colonial strategy of deferral. Like Gilson, Kennedy was no theoretician of colonial statehood, but his international sensibility usefully embedded the Samoan tridominium in a larger governance toolkit available to empire-builders of the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Kennedy took increased Euro-American political control over Samoa for granted, pointing to “the inherent weakness of the native political system and the patent inability of the Samoans to resist the encroachments of the white commercial interests” (p. 10). In Kennedy's colonialist logic, the presence of Euro-American traders in Samoa necessitated increased political control to create order on the islands. More recent scholarship on Samoa has moved away from these metropole-centered perspectives. Most prominently, New Zealand-born historian Damon Salesa has directed attention to the interstitial status of mixed-race people in colonial Samoa (Salesa, 1997, 2006). Part of a wider shift toward intimate relations and sexuality in the study of colonialism, Salesa's work emphasizes the geographic, social, and legal mobility of Samoans under colonial rule. Salesa argues that the colonial state established by the tridominium muddled the boundaries between individual and collective legal sovereignties, which allowed Samoans, Euro-Americans, and mixed-race people to bend the colonial rule of difference. In this and other respects, my chapter builds on Salesa's foundational scholarship by using the Samoan tridominium as a case study for rethinking the colonial state from the South Pacific.

WAR AND PEACE IN SAMOA BEFORE THE TRIDOMINIUM

Since the end of Tongan colonization of Samoa in the thirteenth century, Samoan politics was driven by chiefs (*matai*) competing for the possession of four paramount titles (*pāpā*), each based in a regional district. In the late nineteenth century, descendants of three major titled lineages competed for the paramountcy over all of Samoa: the Sā Malietoā, the Sā Tupuā, and the Sā Mata'afa. For Samoans, these long-standing chiefly rivalries, rooted as they were in generations-long genealogies, determined structures of political authority and land ownership. Since their arrival in the 1830s, Euro-American settlers

routinely underestimated the significance and complexity of these long-standing political divisions. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Euro-American diplomats actively sought to reduce the ambiguities of Samoan political leadership by imposing Eurocentric notions of unified royal authority. Depending on their own interests, Euro-American officials came to support a single contender to the Samoan paramountcy over others. Samoans, however, simply did not recognize the position of a central, unified “King” who would rule over all of Samoa. Throughout the colonial period, Samoan structures of political authority continued to sit uneasily with Euro-American efforts to centralize control in a single “King.” Far from being “inefficient,” as Euro-Americans at the time (and a number of historians since) have argued, the decentralized character of the Samoan political system made it more difficult for Euro-Americans to take control over the entire Samoan archipelago. Until the late nineteenth century, Samoa’s unitary system of dispersed power successfully frustrated more direct colonization efforts by the German Empire and its competitors. The three major colonial powers – Germany, Great Britain, and the United States – sought to create a more unified Samoan leadership to better discipline and control the islands. Mainly in response to increasing pressure from outside, Samoan leaders struggled to create a viable central government to protect their sovereignty, without discarding long-standing structures of authority (Meleisea, 1987, pp. 1, 42).

In 1857, Samoa became the headquarters of a Hamburg-based trading company (*Deutsche Handels- und Plantagengesellschaft der Südseeinseln*, or: DHPG), which specialized in the export of tropical fruit such as coconuts and cocoa. From the start, German commercial and political interests in Samoa were deeply enmeshed. DHPG manager Theodor Weber was appointed German Consul in 1861. In his new role, the enterprising Weber symbolized the intimate alliance between German trade and the imperial flag in the South Pacific. For decades to come, the company’s close relationship with German political representatives shaped the contours of the expanding system of colonial capitalism on the islands. In the late 1870s, the United States (January 1878), Germany (January 1879), and Great Britain (August 1879) signed treaties of friendship with Samoan leaders in quick succession. These treaties reserved important rights to the citizens of the Euro-American treaty partners: most-favored-nation privileges, freedom from import and export duties, extra-territorial jurisdiction, confirmation of land claims, and the right to build coal- ing stations (Gilson, 1970, p. 361). The British officials who negotiated the treaty insisted on the right of extraterritoriality for British subjects by referring to Samoan courts as “a grotesque burlesque on the administration of justice” (cit. in Kennedy, 1974, p. 18). To regulate conflicting jurisdiction over their respective citizens, the three powers entered into a Tripartite Convention in September 1879. Initially proposed by the British Governor of Fiji, Arthur Gordon, the convention created a new legal territory in Samoa: the municipality of Apia, controlled jointly by the three parties to the Convention. The

Convention also established a Municipal Board – consisting of the three Consuls and their three nominees – which was in charge of public order, sanitation, civil works, and harbor control.

The new municipal government fulfilled three larger purposes. First, it was designed to bring order to the bustling commercial activities of Euro-American traders and planters in and around Apia. Second, the municipal government established a neutral zone protected from ongoing Samoan civil wars. Third and most importantly, the new government undermined Samoan sovereignty over an increasingly crucial part of their islands. By splitting off the largest town and commercial hub from the rest of the islands, the Tripartite Convention threatened the most significant tax base for the Samoan government. Article VIII of the Convention vowed to preserve the territorial integrity even as it cut off the entrepot Apia from the rest of the islands. Even though the U.S. Senate never formally ratified the Convention, the United States and its imperial competitors thus assumed *de facto* legal sovereignty over the most important port in Samoa. For the next eight years, the Convention regulated the tripartite municipal government in Apia in the interest of Euro-American settlers while raising recurrent fears of military escalation in the distant metropolises.

Over the course of the 1880s, civil wars among Samoan parties – fueled, in large part, by the presence of competing colonial powers on the islands – led to ever-increasing involvement of American, British, and especially German officials in the political, social, and economic affairs of Samoans. Regular news about events in Samoa was reaching London, Berlin, and Washington since at least the 1870s. Yet, public attention increased dramatically when Otto von Bismarck's so-called "Samoa Bill" was defeated in the German Reichstag in early 1880. Later that year, Malietoa Talavou, bearer of one of the four paramount chiefly titles, passed away, pulling the islands into a bloody succession crisis. Peace finally returned to Samoa in summer 1881, but only to give way to a period of political instability marked by changing alliances among Euro-American officials with antagonistic paramount *matai* and their supporters. Diverging economic interests further exacerbated political tensions among German, British, and American diplomats. German officials, in particular, were interested in a more centralized and stable Samoan government to ensure the prosperity of the large German plantation holdings on the islands. The predominantly British and American traders, by contrast, had a stake in continuing military conflict among Samoans as prices for imports increased. Not surprisingly, their diplomatic counterparts were worried that the colonial powers would be dragged into full-scale war.

In June 1887, delegates from Great Britain, Germany, and the United States convened in Washington, DC, to negotiate a more sustainable colonial arrangement in Samoa. However, the perceived and real predominance of German interests – especially in trade – combined with Anglo-American disagreements prevented a more lasting solution. Anticipating the mandate system of the

1920s, U.S. President Grover Cleveland and Secretary of State Thomas F. Bayard proposed a system of government based on a substantial degree of Samoan self-determination under Euro-American guidance. German and British diplomats, however, dismissed this proposal as a product of American naiveté (Vagts, 1935, p. 639). Samoans themselves were never asked to join the debate.

Shortly after the inconclusive Washington Conference, Tamasese Titimaea was crowned as the new “King” over all of Samoa. Most Samoans, however, disputed Tamasese’s ascension to power because he failed to unite all four paramount titles. Undisturbed by Samoan objections, German warships declared war on Malietoa, Tamasese’s most formidable challenger to the Samoan paramouncy. With substantial support from the German Navy, Tamasese managed to defeat Malietoa and his supporters in September 1887. To remove a constant source of trouble, German officials deported Malietoa and his chief advisors to the atoll Jaluit in the distant German Marshall Islands. In December 1888, German troops attacked the supporters of another of Tamasese’s contenders, Mata’afa Iosefa. Underestimating the skills of the Samoan warriors and the challenging terrain, they suffered over 50 casualties and had to retreat. German troops eventually prevailed, but not without serious damage to their reputation and considerable public outcry in the German Empire. In January 1889, U.S. Consul William Blacklock called for warships to defend U.S. interests against the escalating shelling by German ships. On March 11, 1889, three U.S. battleships under the command of Rear-Admiral L. A. Kimberly arrived in Apia harbor. Events seemed to spin out of control as the decades-long proxy conflict threatened to turn into all-out war between Germany, Great Britain, and the United States with Samoans in the line of fire. Then, on March 14, 1889, nature intervened when a heavy typhoon sank nearly all of the European and American war ships that had been dangerously eyeing each other in the harbor of Apia. Ninety-two Germans, 63 Americans, and hundreds of Samoans lost their lives in the cataclysmic storm. Under shock, the colonial powers decided to return to the negotiating table at a conference in Berlin in the summer of 1889.

THE BERLIN CONFERENCE, 1889

From the 1870s to the late 1880s, the three colonial powers had operated with an implicit understanding that none “endeavor to acquire any privileges in the group of islands without the consent of the others” (German note to Salisbury, 1885, p. 11). In the summer of 1889, this implicit understanding was made explicit. In yet another conference held in one of the distant capitals, the delegates managed to come to an agreement within the time it took to receive news from Samoa: six weeks. On the eve of the Berlin Conference, Salisbury had

proposed a split of the three Pacific islands of strategic interest: Samoa would go to Germany, Tonga to Great Britain, and the United States would annex Hawai'i. Given already entrenched U.S. interests in Hawai'i, U.S. officials flatly rejected Salisbury's proposal. With this radical solution off the table, most of the remaining disputes could be settled quickly because they had already been worked out in advance. In essence, the Berlin Act confirmed the status quo codified in the individual friendship treaties of the 1870s. On top of these existing treaty rights, the Berlin Act established new rights for the treaty powers, again without consulting the inhabitants of the islands, who had repeatedly called for British annexation throughout the 1880s (Kennedy, 1974, p. 88f.). As a consequence, the results of the first international conference held in English were never translated into Samoan.

Among its innovations, the Berlin Act of June 1889 established a Land Commission to settle outstanding land disputes that had bedeviled consular relations for quite some time. To prevent new ones from arising, the sale of Samoan lands to foreigners was prohibited. The Berlin Act also banned the importation and sale of arms, ammunition, and alcohol by and to Samoans. The center of commerce and Euro-American settlement, Apia, remained a separate jurisdiction, as established earlier by the 1879 Tripartite Convention. Outside of the municipality, the Euro-American Consuls retained their respective jurisdictions. As a new supervisor of the municipal district, the Berlin Act created the office of the Municipal President, who was to be appointed by the three powers and also served as advisor to the Samoan King. Most consequentially of all, the Berlin Act imposed Malietoa Laupepa on the Samoans who overwhelmingly supported Mata'afa, a rivaling paramount chief who had gained a following through his successful military campaigns against the German Navy. By and large, however, Mata'afa's supporters did not dispute this executive decision by the consular powers (Davidson, 1967, p. 65). A newly created Supreme Court with a Chief Justice, also appointed by the treaty powers, was to settle all legal matters, including the highly contested question of royal succession. Finally, the Berlin Act established an imbalanced tax system which allotted taxes and custom duties collected within Apia to the exclusive use of the municipal government. The Samoan government, by contrast, was required to raise its revenue outside of the municipal district by collecting head taxes, license taxes, and other taxes directly from Samoan taxpayers – a daunting task, given Samoans' notorious resistance to paying taxes. The hollowing out of the office of the Samoan King, who, in addition, had to call on all three treaty powers to request military aid, kept the Samoan executive branch deliberately weakened, despite long-standing attempts by both islanders and outsiders to centralize the government. As Gilson put it, the Berlin Act "imposed upon Samoa a government it could not afford" – both financially and politically (Gilson, 1970, p. 404).

The patchwork of legal powers established by the Berlin Act intensified existing and created new tensions among the treaty powers. Most significantly,

no fewer than three different institutions – the Supreme Court, the consular courts, and the Samoan government – were in charge of deciding civil and criminal lawsuits involving Euro-Americans and Samoans. These entangled jurisdictions made equal application of laws difficult, particularly for non-Samoans. In addition, the Berlin Act established an intricate system of check and balances, which made effective governance all but impossible. The most glaring example was the Municipal Council, which consisted of the President and six members elected by taxpayers. Yet, regulations passed by the Council needed to be approved by the three Consuls, who also enjoyed the right to propose amendments. In cases where the Council and the Consuls failed to reach agreement, the Chief Justice was to have the last word. The President, too, was required to follow directions issued jointly by the three powers (Davidson, 1967, p. 63). Hence, despite ostensible reforms, the Consuls retained much of their influence over the executive and legislative process in the municipal government.

All in all, however, the new system of explicit tripartite rule was seen by most Euro-Americans as a slight improvement on the existing state of affairs. From a Samoan perspective, the Berlin Act accelerated the gradual loss of Samoan sovereignty that had been going on for decades. To be sure, the treaty powers announced their respect for the “independence and neutrality of the islands of Samoa” in the treaty’s very first article. But, in reality, the Berlin Act reduced Samoa to a Euro-American dependency. Or at least so it seemed.

THE TRIDOMINIUM, 1889–1899

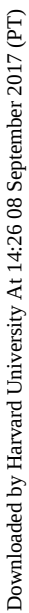
The tridominium over Samoa was a distinctive legal construct. Under this unprecedented scheme of colonial governance, sovereignty over the dozen Samoan islands and its 35,000 people was split not along territorial lines, but shared equally among the three empires. Given the increasing territorialization of capital and colonial rule in the age of empire, tripartite rule over Samoa was a remarkable departure, particularly for the United States. Ignoring George Washington’s powerful warning of “entangling alliances” with European powers a century earlier, U.S. diplomats in 1889 took a giant step toward full membership in the imperial club.

From its establishment on paper by the Berlin Act in June 1889, the tridominium was faced with logistical challenges. It took months – and in the case of some top administrative posts even years – until the new administrative apparatus came into place. For example, the new Chief Justice, the Swede Conrad Cedercrantz, was appointed as late as October 1890 and assumed his new office the following January. Even worse, the German candidate for Municipality President, Baron Senfft von Pilsach, was not appointed until December 1890 and did not arrive in Samoa until May 1891 (Kennedy, 1974, p. 100). Finally,

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municipal district remained in dispute until the very end of the tridominium. As Damon Salesa has shown, one of the central challenges of colonial governance lays in the tensions between individual and collective legal sovereignty (Salesa, 2006, p. 74). On the one hand, the presence of three colonial powers in Samoa until 1899 marred attempts to implement a single and coherent set of laws that would govern all of the different individuals living on the islands. The traditionally high mobility of Samoans further complicated the introduction of such a unified legal framework. On the other hand, due to the limited reach of colonial and military officials, Samoans living outside of Apia did not come in contact with Euro-American laws except when they ostensibly defied them. Even then, powerful *matai* could step in and use their clout to negotiate punishment according to Samoan laws. And since legal sovereignty was attached to individuals rather than collective groups, colonial officials had difficulties developing laws that would apply to all Samoans at the same time. This murky legal middle ground allowed Samoans freedoms unimaginable in other colonial contexts at the time. *Extraterritoriality* claimed by the treaty powers for their citizens assumed a different meaning for the majority of Samoans who lived *outside* of the municipality of Apia and hence, out of reach of colonial jurisdiction.

Faced with a mobile population, Euro-American consuls quickly realized the drawbacks of tripartite rule. For decades, Euro-Americans living in Samoa had been changing their national affiliations to avoid military service or legal prosecution, and the Berlin Act did little to improve matters. Overburdened with responsibilities and underequipped with resources, Consuls had a hard time keeping track of their restive subjects. In Salesa's apt distinction, the Consuls "wielded a very specific authority but very little specific power" (Salesa, 2006, p. 76). Lacking a comprehensive administrative apparatus, the Consuls were dependent on Samoans for political cover, logistical support, and service labor. The only effective tool for projecting power in the Consuls' hands was their ability to call on warships during emergencies. The colonial correspondence shows that they made use of the threat quite regularly. But if colonial sovereignty meant the ability and willingness to police people in a delimited territory, then the so-called "Great Powers" were hardly sovereigns in late nineteenth-century Samoa.

Only two years into the tridominium, the royal succession conflict flared up yet again. In June 1891, Tamasese Titimaea's death re-opened the rivalry between the Malietoa and Mata'afa royal lineages. Civil war broke out in July 1891 between Malietoa Laupepa and Mata'afa, who joined forces with Tamasese's supporters. While Malietoa Laupepa sought legitimacy as the rightful title holder of the A'ana district (*Tuia'ana*) through the proper distribution of fine mats, Mata'afa established a rival government at Malie, the traditional home of the Sā Malietoa. After two years of on-and-off fighting between the rival parties, Mata'afa was finally defeated, detained by German forces, and exiled to Jaluit in the Marshall Islands. In the eyes of many Samoans, however, Malietoa Laupepa's victory was tainted by his support from German and

British warships. And even though Mata'afa was forcibly removed from Samoa, another contender to the *Tuia'ana* soon emerged on the scene: Tamasese Titimaea's son, Tamasese Lealofi. Backing their young paramount chief, Lealofi, members of the Sā Tupuā lost no time in challenging Malietoa Laupepa and his foreign supporters. As had been the case throughout the nineteenth century, Samoan rivalries determined the fate of the political system imposed from outside.

In the eyes of many Samoans, the return of violence among competing Samoan lineages threatened the very legitimacy of the tridominium. In a letter-to-the-editor of the *Samoa Times* from June 30, 1893, an unnamed Samoan government official (*faipule*) emphasized his disappointment with the Berlin Treaty: "The Three Powers have abandoned us. They asked us to sign a treaty. Then we signed it because we were told it was good and that there would be no more fighting in Samoa [...] What has been the use of the Treaty? It has caused us trouble." The letter concluded with an ominous warning: "The Samoan people have had respect for the foreigners, but it is about to blow away as the wind" (*Samoa Times*, 1893). If, in the eyes of Euro-Americans, the tridominium deferred an answer to the controversial question of who would rule over Samoa, Samoans themselves were much more interested in its role in securing peace on the islands.

Warfare did not only have a devastating impact on plantations and trade, but also undermined the effectiveness of legal protection. During times of civil war, Euro-Americans living outside of Apia could not rely on the legal protection of the tripartite government. Despite this gap in Euro-American legal sovereignty, attacks on Euro-American property remained rare. In these instances, U.S. authorities were helpless in defending their citizens' property rights, not the least because a U.S. Navy ship had not visited the islands for years (Vagts, 1935, p. 788). Continuing tensions among the treaty powers benefitted Samoans who could continue to pursue their own political ambitions. As the American trader and Vice-Consul Blacklock noted in June 1894: "The Samoans, loyal and rebel, enjoy the existing state of affairs; it's like a grand festival to them. No taxes; no laws; no order; everything free for the taking, irrespective of who the rightful owner is. Foreigners may complain, and do, but that is the end of it; there is no redress" (Blacklock, 1894). In the eyes of Euro-American observers, political conditions did not improve markedly in the months to follow. By the end of 1894, British Secretary for the Colonies, Lord Ripon, noted that "the present tripartite administration is unworkable and that it is hopeless to expect any good government in Samoa as the result of so absurd a system" (cit. in Kennedy, 1974, p. 106). And in 1897, DHPG manager Beckmann even went so far as to claim that he preferred annexation by any power over continuation of the tridominium (cit. in Kennedy, 1974, p. 108).

One of the biggest administrative challenges proved to be the controversial head tax. Funding issues dated back to the Tripartite Convention of 1879, which had split off Apia and its substantial tax base from the rest of the islands.

In the fall of 1887, the German-backed Tamasese-Brandeis government introduced a poll tax, which proved highly unpopular among Samoans and contributed to growing political unrest among Tamasese's rivals. Pushed by German interests, Tamasese, in October 1887, also abolished the municipal government in Apia, which had been administered jointly by German, British, and American diplomats since 1879. The renewed effort to collect taxes under the tridominium was designed to address the continuing tax imbalance and, more importantly, to increase overall tax revenue. The main aim of the head tax was to raise revenue for the Samoan government, but also to create an incentive for Samoans to enter into wage labor. It was the robust nature of the Samoan subsistence economy that made the introduction of a head tax feasible in the first place. For cash-strapped Euro-American officials in Samoa, head taxes were a way to kill two birds with one stone: they raised funds for the colonial administration and, at the same time, promised to secure a constant supply of labor to produce exports.

As they had before, Samoans resisted the head tax, introduced by the tridominium, as best they could. Nobody likes paying taxes and Samoans were no exception, especially because the head tax was supposed to finance a centralized Samoan government imposed from outside on their existing political system. In his 1893 letter of complaint quoted above, the anonymous Samoan government official referred to “rebels” against the Samoan government who sought support by criticizing the new head tax: “the white man’s Government is not good, let us have our own Government as in past days, then we will not be compelled to pay taxes for our women and children” (*Samoa Times*, 1893). To add insult to injury, this new Samoan government was headed by Malietoa Laupepa whom most Samoans rejected as the legitimate holder of the four paramount titles. To American (and British) diplomats, the Samoan rallying cry of “no taxation without representation” should have sounded familiar. Besides, memories of Tamasese’s unpopular head tax, forcibly collected by German warships, were still fresh on the minds of many Samoans (Davidson, 1967, p. 65). The Samoan officials tasked with collecting the head tax posed a second challenge. Given far-flung kinship obligations, many Samoan tax collectors found it difficult to do their jobs, even if they were motivated to do so. As a result, the collection of the head tax remained irregular and incomplete until the very end of the tridominium. German Consul Rose reported in April 1897 that, apart from a stronger demand by Samoans for imported goods, a stricter enforcement of the head tax would help to increase planting activity among Samoans. Rose suggested collecting the head tax more regularly and comprehensively, which would motivate Samoans to work (Rose, 1897). When the German and American colonial administrations re-introduced a head tax in 1901, they encountered more success.

Whatever they did, Euro-American Consuls depended on Samoan help (Droessler, 2015, ch. 5). Most visibly to the consuls, Samoans worked in the consular offices as interpreters and clerks. Without the multilingual skills of

their Samoan administrators, Consuls could not hope to communicate their policies to the wider Samoan population. Samoans also served as village mayors (*pulenu'u*), district judges (*fa'amasino*), tax collectors, and policemen (*leoleo*). Given this great degree of Samoan self-determination and local autonomy, Euro-American claims of colonial rule in reality turned out to be limited to the municipality of Apia. Below tripartite rule in the capital, an extensive system of Samoan self-administration throughout the villages applied predominantly Samoan laws in honor of Samoan sensibilities. Most Samoans who joined the colonial service came from powerful titled lineages and used their new careers to promote the interests of their families. One of those who took advantage of the new opportunities under the tridominium was Afamasaga Maua (Saga for short). A powerful *matai*, Saga joined the municipal police force in Apia in the 1890s and would remain in office after Germany took control of Upolu and Savai'i in 1900. As a substitute for the official translator, Saga did such an excellent job that German Governor Wilhelm Solf promoted him to be official translator. In February 1903, Solf even made Saga his private secretary and advisor on Samoan matters. Saga's remarkable career climbing the ranks of the colonial service made him not only one of the most influential, but also one of the highest-paid Samoans of his generation. In his role as translator and advisor, Saga would go on to become an important mediator between the German colonial administration and Samoan interests until the end of German rule in 1914 (Hiery, 2004, p. 267). Without Samoan administrators like Saga, the tridominium could simply not function. The central role Samoans played in the everyday administration of the tridominium is clear evidence that Samoan structures of authority (such as the *matai* system) formed the backbone of the system imposed by Euro-Americans.

The final unraveling of the tridominium was also driven by Samoan politics – a testament to the resilience of indigenous power. In August 1898, Malietoa Laupepa suddenly passed away. His young nephew, Malietoa Tanu, claimed the kingship and was backed by Tamasese Lealofi, Great Britain, and the United States. In response, the German Navy brought back the still widely popular Mata'afa from his exile in Jaluit a month after Malietoa Laupepa's passing. Mata'afa's sudden return resulted in a full-blown succession crisis. Following the letter of the Berlin Treaty, it fell on the Chief Justice to decide which paramount chief should rule over Samoa. This arrangement entirely ignored Samoan political tradition according to which the four paramount chiefs struggled to unite all four chiefly titles. Ignoring the subtleties of Samoan politics, Chief Justice William L. Chambers, an American, ruled on New Year's Eve 1898 that Mata'afa was disqualified from the kingship, and that Malietoa Tanu should become king. The Germans and Mata'afa supporters reacted with public outrage. War broke out again between members of the Malietoa and Mata'afa lineages, lasting from January until April 1899. The treaty that had been designed to bring peace to Samoa had utterly failed, as Apia again descended into war.

German and American warships were called to shell the opposing factions into submission. Coastal villages were bombarded almost daily in late March 1899. Only in April did Mata'afa agree to a truce. Overall, six British and five American sailors were killed in the military confrontations, while hundreds of Samoans lost their lives in the fighting. Mata'afa went on to defeat Malietoa Tanu, reestablishing himself as the legitimate ruler of Samoa. German officials, however, rejected his title as king, which led the consular powers to abolish the idea of a unified Samoan kingship altogether. Continuing intrigue among the three colonial powers set the stage for the final split-up of the islands in December 1899. Echoing Salisbury's and Bismarck's earlier warnings about Samoa's dangerous isolation, the new Chief Justice Henry Ide, another American, suggested that the return of civil war could have been avoided if the islands had been linked to metropolitan governments by cable (Ide, 1899).

In the end, shared rule over Samoa could not contain long-standing tensions among the treaty powers. Most importantly, the tridominium was unable to reconcile the competing and divergent interests pursued by Germany, Great Britain, and the United States in the South Pacific. The German Empire, which had the greatest economic interests in Samoa, was the most aggressive of the three powers. Since the large DHPG plantations needed peace to prosper, officials in Berlin and local consuls alike pushed for a more unified Samoan government to guarantee stability. Meanwhile, traders, most of whom were British and American, profited from war as prices for imports – in particular, arms and ammunition, but also food – skyrocketed. As the escalating global conflict between fixed, agro-industrial capital and merchant capital played itself out in Samoa under tripartite rule, German plantation owners had the most to lose. In addition, Samoa had acquired great symbolic value in German colonial discourse, particularly evident after the German Navy suffered heavy losses in 1888.

Great Britain had to contend with forces of its own. Policymakers in London saw Samoa as a bargaining chip in Britain's global struggle for influence, which contrasted starkly with Germany's small but very real material interests on the islands. More often than not, London was distracted by more severe crises in other parts of its global empire, from Egypt and South Africa to India and even nearby Fiji. In part, the tridominium dragged on as long as it did because London had to take into account the public opinion of two of its neighboring dominions: New Zealand and Australia. Their respective sub-imperial ambitions in the South Pacific were often cited by British officials as obstacles in the way of compromise over Samoa (Ross, 1964).

The United States, finally, doggedly defended its interests in a coaling station in a strategically important location. U.S. officials levied this circumscribed interest, guaranteed in the friendship treaty of 1878, to gain the respect of European imperial powers, while ostensibly protecting tiny Samoa from Old World designs. Only after the swift victory against Spain in 1898 and the

annexation of Hawai'i did U.S. interests in Samoa assume wider significance for U.S. imperial strategy in the Pacific. Given these conflicting imperial interests, the treaty powers were bound to clash during the decade of shared rule over Samoa. For Samoans, the presence of three, instead of only one or two, colonial powers on their islands made annexation by any one of them virtually impossible.

Despite its shortcomings, the tridominium did achieve a few successes, at least in the eyes of Euro-Americans. Most significant among these was the final settlement of long-standing land disputes among European and American settlers. The Land Commission, set up by the Berlin Act, did not begin its real work until 1893, but managed to finish this formidable task by the end of 1894. The total area claimed by Euro-Americans amounted to 1,690,000 acres, or more than twice the overall land area of Samoa. In the end, the Commission confirmed 135,000 acres of Euro-American land claims, or around eight percent of the total claims (Davidson, 1967, p. 64). Even though much of the overblown land claims by Euro-American settlers was discarded, the Land Commission confirmed the rightful ownership of more than a third of all cultivable lands in Samoa to settlers. More consequential for the Samoan economy, this third included nearly two-thirds of cultivable land in the plantation belt stretching west from Apia (Keesing, 1934, pp. 260–280). The confirmation of this massive land grab by the tridominium did not only affect the Samoan subsistence economy, but also its political vitality, because northwestern Upolu was traditionally home to the seats of Samoan political power. Thus, even as the Land Commission solved the long-standing political problem of conflicting land claims, it also legally confirmed the decades-long process of land alienation in Samoa (Meleisea, 1987, p. 45).

As Salisbury had intended from the start, the tridominium turned out to be a strategy of deferral for the treaty powers, “a postponement rather than a settlement” (Kennedy, 1974, p. 97). This was exactly the original purpose of a condominium in ancient Roman and European feudal law to which the Samoan tridominium can be traced. According to Roman law, a *condominium* (lit. shared right of ownership) referred to “a right of *dominium* over a *res* whereof the party having that right had some form of control [...] However, the *socii* had some claim, also, on that thing” (Van Warmelo, 1944, p. 194). More specifically, the members of the condominium enjoyed a *ius prohibendi*, “whereby they can prohibit one joint owner from doing anything whereby the interests of the other *socii* are, to some extent, harmed” (Van Warmelo, 1944, p. 125). With its emphasis on pragmatism, Roman law connected individual ownership (*dominium*) with possession of the thing. The *condominium* preserved this close association of ownership with possession, but introduced the crucial limitation that one member’s individual right of ownership ended when another member’s right of ownership was infringed upon. In early modern Europe, the *condominium* developed into a more coherent legal instrument designed to deflect

tensions among competing sovereigns during the time when ownership of a thing transitioned from one owner to another. The term *condominium* itself would not enter the vocabulary of international law until the beginning of the eighteenth century, first coined in German around 1700 and then adopted into English around 1714 ([Online Etymology Dictionary](#)). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the condominium had become a relic from an earlier legal order, which had, by and large, vanished from international law.

It was in the context of Euro-American colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century that these ancient legal concepts received renewed currency, not the least because many of the pivotal decision-makers had legal training which included Roman law. Given its roots in Roman property law, “rule over a thing” (*dominium*) influenced the ways colonial officials and legal experts thought about the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Colonial rule would eventually include rule over different “things”: land, sea, natural resources, and human beings. With its distant origins in Roman law, the condominium reemerged as a legal instrument that could be used to deflect growing tensions among colonial powers, especially in the Pacific. The other major case is the Anglo-French condominium over another group of Pacific islands 1,400 miles west of Samoa: the New Hebrides (today’s Vanuatu). Shared British and French rule over the New Hebrides began in 1906 and lasted until independence in 1980 ([Miles, 2014](#), ch. 4). In an age driven by the dynamism of nationalist imperialism, the return of the condominium seems surprising only at first glance. Vagts, for instance, argued that the Samoan tridominium was an exception in the age of empire ([Vagts, 1935](#), p. 684). In contrast, my analysis emphasizes the suitability of the tridominium as a colonial strategy of deferral. In fact, the condominium offered a flexible legal framework for competing members to exercise joint rule, while, at the same time, safeguarding their respective individual rights of ownership. Throughout the brief life span of the Samoan tridominium, the three treaty powers were constantly trying to change the status quo to their advantage, but managed to avoid direct military confrontation. As a successful strategy of deferral, the tridominium regulated the transition of colonial rule over Samoa from three to eventually two powers in 1899. After this decade of transition, the ancient legal instrument finally became obsolete. And in the wake of World War I, the mandate system under the newly created League of Nations adapted to the failures in colonial governance, such as the Samoan tridominium, by awarding its mandates to single powers ([Pedersen, 2012](#)).

COLONIALISM BY DEFERRAL

Overall, the colonial state established by the tridominium in Samoa was weak, inconsistent, and largely dependent on local support. Despite its limited success

in confirming foreign land claims, the tridominium was widely seen as ineffective, at least by Euro-American diplomats who sought more control over the distant islands. Before Samoa was linked up to the telegraph in the beginning of the twentieth century, the islands remained isolated from metropolitan decision-making and the ready projection of military power. The distance from metropolitan support, along with the discontinuity of colonial rule as a result of quickly rotating officials, added to the bargaining power of the Samoans. Even at its most effective, the colonial state erected by the tridominium remained dependent on Samoan administrators, from the clerks in the consular office to tax collectors in the villages. Most importantly, Samoan structures of authority continued to shape the ebbs and flows of island politics, posing a formidable limit to the reach and intensity of colonial power under the tridominium. Political power was buttressed by economic factors. With their vibrant subsistence economy, Samoans enjoyed regular food supply in times of prolonged warfare. For its tax revenue and value as a colony, the colonial state depended on the economic vitality of Samoa's plantation economy. As the biggest non-Samoan producer of copra, the German company, the DHPG, was the largest contributor to the municipal government and, thus, wielded great power over policymaking. But because Samoans provided the majority of cash crops, they were able to maintain a substantial degree of autonomy in the face of outside pressure. Samoans also had acquired a large amount of arms since the 1860s. Taken together, these sources of power enabled Samoans to protect themselves from more direct colonial exploitation, at least for the time being.

As the experiment in tripartite rule in Samoa in the 1890s shows, colonial governance had many facets. Colonial governance is best understood as a constant struggle over the legitimacy and exercise of power among metropolitan elites, colonial officials on the ground, and the colonized populations. Shared rule in Samoa involved many different actors: consuls, navy captains, metropolitan governments, trading companies, and, not least, Samoan administrators. This shifting triangle of colonial governance played itself out in various fields of contestation: from politics, law, science, religion, social relations (particularly sexual relations), labor regimes, the environment to popular culture. Far from being unidirectional power vectors emanating from the metropole to the colony, the practices of governance were both highly fragmented and constantly receptive to conditions on the ground and to trans-imperial influences. It was these local, order-creating practices of governance — such as collecting taxes, policing crime, or confirming land claims — that constituted the colonial state in Samoa in the 1890s. As U.S. historian Alfred McCoy recently noted about the fragmentary and porous character of U.S. colonialism overseas: “Lacking detailed directives from the metropole, these colonial states [e.g. in Samoa] were thus open to diverse global and local influences, making them veritable hothouses for the creation of new, hybridized forms of governance” (McCoy, Scarano, & Johnson, 2009, p. 25). This emphasis on the inherent

instability of colonial governance is particularly pertinent to the case of Samoa under the tridominium.

More generally, Samoa during the tridominium urges historians of colonialism to rethink their perspective and terminology. In fact, the Samoan case reinforces recent critiques of “indirect rule” or “collaboration” as useful analytical categories. As New Zealand-born historian Colin Newbury and others have pointed out, scholars who rely on the concept of “indirect rule” often perpetuate the euphemistic self-descriptions of colonial administrators (Newbury, 2003). Like other Pacific islanders in the nineteenth century, Samoans experienced the effects of indirect rule in very direct ways. At the same time, they exploited the new opportunities opened up by colonization, and incorporated new administrative structures into existing lineage systems. Moreover, Samoans were far from unthinking “collaborators” with the tripartite colonial apparatus. Since the actual reach of consular power remained restricted to Apia and the surrounding municipality, many Samoan villages continued to be governed by local custom. The limits of “collaboration” became particularly evident when Samoans who had joined the newly established colonial administration were sent to collect taxes from their fellow villagers. By refusing to pay taxes (and holding on to subsistence farming), Samoans safeguarded their economic autonomy against the imposition of a new administrative structure from outside. In Newbury’s terminology, patron-client relations that long predated Euro-American colonization continued in the new colonial system introduced by the tridominium (Newbury, 2003, p. 262). Long-standing structures of authority among Samoans were not simply replaced or marginalized by the tridominium, but rather supplemented. The tridominium’s reach and intensity remained limited because metropolitan resources were not forthcoming and because Samoans managed to retain political and economic power, particularly outside of Apia.

If modern statehood requires the establishment of a monopoly of violence over people in a defined territory, then the Samoan tridominium was a peculiar kind of colonial state. Rather than force this specific historical form into a theoretical model, it is worth pointing out some of the features of the tridominium which it shared with other governance structures. First, the tridominium was an international treaty among three of the most powerful empires of the time that was recognized by other empires with interests in the Pacific, such as the French. The tridominium was not recognized as an actor in international relations independent of the interests of the three treaty powers. But, at the same time, it constituted a colonial state in Samoa, however weak or inconsistent. Responding to calls from both diplomats and settlers, the tridominium established new forms of legal sovereignty within Samoa, particularly over Euro-American subjects. These legal claims were part and parcel of larger state- and identity-making projects at the time, especially in the German and American imperial centers. The tridominium also increased longer-standing Euro-American efforts to wrest the means of violence from Samoan hands and

“pacify” recurring conflicts. Since Euro-American Consuls had to rely on an occasional show of force by visiting warships, the monopolization of violence remained incomplete throughout the 1890s.

In light of these particularities, the colonial state erected by the Samoan tridominium meant different things to different people. For German, British, and American diplomats, the tridominium served as a convenient strategy to defer an answer to the explosive question of who should rule in Samoa. For Euro-American planters and traders living in Samoa, the tridominium offered greater clarity in the tangle of overlapping and often conflicting legal claims, especially related to land purchases. While not officially part of the colonial state, Euro-American residents in Samoa played an important role in colonial governance. As settler-colonialists elsewhere, they desired freedom not only from indigenous people but also from metropolitan control. Hence, the “Beach” – the long-time resident settlers, traders, and beachcombers – resented the colonial apparatus erected by the tridominium as an unwelcome intrusion from outside. Finally, for most Samoans, the tridominium impacted their lives only occasionally and in limited ways. For the hundreds of Samoans who joined the administrative staff of the tridominium, the new colonial state even opened up new avenues for personal advancement and, eventually, collective resistance.

BEYOND THE TRIDOMINIUM

In December 1899, a trilateral convention divided Samoa between Germany and the United States, while Great Britain gained exclusive rights over nearby Tonga and further German concessions in the Solomon Islands. Samoa, now, too, had been sliced up among the colonial powers. Ever mindful of the Empire’s global ambitions, Salisbury had once wondered whether colonies or Consuls were worse for a “peacefully minded Foreign Office” (Cecil, 1921, p. 55). In the case of Samoa, Great Britain had finally done away with both. In 1900, the two biggest western islands of Upolu and Savai’i became German Samoa, a protectorate soon under the sway of Governor Wilhelm Solf’s policy of “paternalist preservationism” (Steinmetz, 2007). Meanwhile, the United States took control over the major island in the east – Tutuila – which to this day remains an unincorporated territory.

After the formal take-over by Germany and the United States in 1899, colonial control increased markedly. Under Solf’s policy of “salvage colonialism” in German Samoa, Samoan cultural practices were tolerated and even promoted, while colonial officials stepped up their control over political matters through a flurry of regulations (Steinmetz, 2007, p. 331). In U.S. sociologist George Steinmetz’s summary, the German colonial state erected at the beginning of the twentieth century “was trying to preserve the Samoans’ *social* structure, while destroying their *political* system” (Steinmetz, 2007, p. 332). American Samoa,

under formal U.S. Navy rule, underwent a parallel transformation, but the reach of the colonial administration remained more limited (Chappell, 2000). Once within clearly demarcated colonial borders, Samoans lost much of their power to play off one colonial power against another (Maier, 2016). But, as labor strikes and anti-colonial resistance in the early twentieth century would show, Samoans found other ways to challenge colonial rule.

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