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To cite this article: Holger Droessler (2018) Copra World: Coconuts, Plantations and Cooperatives in German Samoa, *The Journal of Pacific History*, 53:4, 417-435, DOI: [10.1080/00223344.2018.1538597](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2018.1538597)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2018.1538597>



Published online: 15 Nov 2018.



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# Copra World: Coconuts, Plantations and Cooperatives in German Samoa

HOLGER DROESSLER

## ABSTRACT

Since the mid-19th century, the copra trade has created challenges and opportunities for Pacific Islanders, including Samoans. In the wake of formal annexation in 1900, German colonial officials tried repeatedly to force Samoans to work on foreign plantations for wages. In this article, I argue that Samoans resisted these demands in two major ways. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of Samoans continued subsistence agriculture that offered greater control over their lives. On the other hand, Samoans selectively adapted to new economic circumstances. Occasionally, Samoans engaged in wage labour on Euro-American plantations to earn the cash needed for imported goods, government taxes and church donations. To circumvent the monopolistic practices of Euro-American traders, Samoans also founded copra cooperatives. These ultimately folded under coercion, but not without creating a crucial legacy for future anti-colonial resistance. In Samoa's world of copra, sweetness and colonial power were tightly bound together.

Key words: Samoa, Germany, capitalism, labour, copra, resistance

*E suamalie a niu 'a'ati.*

(The coconut is sweet, but it was husked with the teeth.)

Samoan proverb<sup>1</sup>

In June 1903, Samoan paramount chief, Mata'afa Iosefo, wrote a letter of complaint to the governor of German Samoa, Wilhelm Solf. Disturbed by recent reports, Mata'afa voiced the contentious issue of labour contracts for Samoans who worked on copra plantations owned by German settlers. Such contracts should be limited to one month, Mata'afa argued, because 'it is our custom that no one on

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*Acknowledgements:* I am grateful to the participants of the workshop on 'Valued Coconuts: Indigenous Voices' at the University of Otago, Dunedin, in January 2017 for spirited discussions and helpful feedback. Special thanks to Judy Bennett, April Henderson, Adrian Muckle, Damon Salesa and Lachy Paterson, as well as the anonymous reviewers of JPH for their careful reading and constructive criticism.

<sup>1</sup> Erich Schultz, *Sprichwörtliche Redensarten der Samoaner* (Apia: E. Luebke, 1906), 99.

these islands be engaged in menial labour'.<sup>2</sup> Mata'afa recounted rumours that Solf had allegedly planned to force Samoans into slave-like labour, allegations probably fuelled by several 'uncomfortable incidents' involving Samoan workers and Euro-American employers. In his letter, Mata'afa painted an idealized picture of the Samoan labour system: 'Since childhood, we have grown up in perfect freedom and everybody is allowed to work and sleep as he pleases because our Mother Earth provides all goods through her great fertility'.<sup>3</sup> He concluded his complaint by criticizing the colonizers for their blasphemous greed: 'The foreigners only want to gain money through the lives of others [...], because they do not at all know the love of God in heavens [*sic*]'.<sup>4</sup> In his defence of Samoan workers, Mata'afa clearly adopted some of the stereotypes about Samoan indolence and carefree living propagated by the colonizers, not to mention their Christian rhetoric. Even though Mata'afa purported to speak for all Samoans, his concerns about broken contracts and labour exploitation at the hands of Euro-American settlers were real. For the time being, Solf managed to dissipate these complaints in a heated *fono* meeting, but Samoans remained sensitive to the dignity of the labour they performed.

At the dawn of the 20th century, German officials envisioned a colony with Samoans working on foreign plantations for wages. Yet the overwhelming majority of Samoans continued subsistence agriculture that offered them greater control over their own lives and livelihoods. Because Samoans owned most of the land on which coconut trees grew, their surplus production dominated the copra export market throughout the colonial era. Their vibrant subsistence and cash crop economy provided Samoans with not only an insurance against environmental disasters, but more importantly, a strong foundation to protect their political and social self-determination against colonial demands. Samoans were thus able to respond to the introduction of a large-scale plantation economy largely on their own terms.

In this article, I argue that Samoans responded to colonial capitalism in two major ways. First, their subsistence economy allowed Samoans to retain much of their self-determination in the face of colonization, guaranteeing the continuity of their culture and the integrity of traditional social structures. More than just supplying a vital source of food, subsistence farming provided a kind of social insurance in times of crisis and the basis for anti-colonial resistance. Particularly in comparison with other colonized people at the turn of the 20th century, Samoans, by and large, managed to navigate the introduction of plantation agriculture on their own terms. As large tracts of Samoan land were sold to Euro-Americans over the course of the 19th century, long-grown social and economic structures such as the *matai* system and household-centred subsistence farming came under pressure, but survived through the colonial era. In colonial Samoa, at least, the traditional owners of the means of subsistence prevailed over the new owners of the means of cash crop production.

<sup>2</sup> Mata'afa to Solf, 25 June 1903, Federal Archive of Germany, Koblenz, Germany [hereinafter BArch] R 1001/3063, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Second, Samoans adapted to colonial capitalism by creatively exploiting new opportunities for trade and economic gain. Emboldened by a strong subsistence economy, Samoans only occasionally engaged in wage labour on Euro-American plantations, primarily to earn the cash needed for imported goods, government taxes and church donations. More importantly, Samoans also founded copra cooperatives to undermine what they – in many cases, rightly – perceived as monopolistic practices by Euro-American plantation owners and traders. Since domination structured resistance, Samoan copra cooperatives were an attempt to beat the colonizers with their own weapons. German and American colonial officials understood this fundamental challenge to their policy of extracting resources from the islands and sought to suppress the cooperative movement. Although the copra cooperatives eventually gave in under coercion, they helped form the nucleus of a more sustained challenge to colonial rule in the 1920s.

## COPRA WORLD

In the mid-19th century, the German trading house Godeffroy & Co began its business activities in the South Pacific, establishing its headquarters in Apia in 1857.<sup>5</sup> From Apia, Godeffroy expanded its trade in tropical fruit throughout Polynesia and into Melanesia and Micronesia. During its first years, Godeffroy relied on local Samoan producers to supply the increasingly valuable cash crops. In the mid-1860s, the young and energetic Godeffroy manager Theodor Weber took advantage of a long drought, a hurricane and a pest plague to acquire 12 acres of land from starving Samoans and set up the first cotton plantation.<sup>6</sup> During the global cotton famine caused by the US Civil War in the mid-1860s, a few Samoans had worked for wages on these cotton plantations.<sup>7</sup> By 1868 when the cotton boom was over, the firm already owned 2,500 acres, almost 1 per cent of the total land area of Upolu.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1880s, cotton remained a valuable export product for Godeffroy, which had been reorganized and renamed the Deutsche Handels- und Plantagenesellschaft der Südseeinseln (DHPG).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Schmack, *J.C. Godeffroy & Sohn, Kaufleute zu Hamburg: Leistung und Schicksal eines Welthandelshauses* (Hamburg: Broschek, 1938), 112.

<sup>6</sup> Doug Munro and Stewart Firth, 'Samoan Plantations: The Gilbertese Laborers' Experience, 1867–1896', in *Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation*, ed. Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro, and Edward D. Beechert (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Sven Beckert, 'Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War', *American Historical Review* 109: no. 5 (2004): 1405–38.

<sup>8</sup> Schmack, *Godeffroy & Sohn*, 145.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon R. Lewthwaite, 'Land, Life and Agriculture to Mid-Century', in *Western Samoa: Land, Life, and Agriculture in Tropical Polynesia*, ed. James W. Fox and Kenneth B. Cumberland (Christchurch, NZ: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1962), 143–4; Stewart Firth, 'German Recruitment and Employment of Labourers in the Western Pacific Before the First World War', PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1973, 61; Robert W. Franco, *Samoan Perceptions of Work: Moving Up and Moving Around* (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1991), 149.

By the 1880s, copra began to replace cotton as the main export to Europe and North America where it was processed into oil for soap and candles.<sup>10</sup> Driven by growing demand for copra, the DHPG dramatically expanded its plantation holdings by purchasing land from Samoan *matai*. Euro-American planters were so desperate for Samoan land (and regulations were so minimal) that Samoans were able to sell the same parcels of land to several buyers.<sup>11</sup> Samoans were divided over these escalating land sales to foreigners. Some feared that foreign ownership would undermine long-standing ways of life based on subsistence agriculture, whereas others welcomed the considerable profits they reaped from the sales.<sup>12</sup> These profits often came in the form of Western arms which *matai* used to gain an advantage over their rivals. The result was what Euro-American observers innocently called ‘civil war’, ignoring the fact that Euro-American traders and plantation owners actively supported different sides of competing Samoan lineages and supplied them with the means to succeed. A vicious cycle of selling land for arms ensued.

Throughout the 19th century, violent conflicts among competing Samoan factions, often fuelled by Euro-American colonialists themselves, had put severe limits on the time and resources Samoans could devote to subsistence agriculture, often resulting in famines.<sup>13</sup> During the turbulent decade of tripartite rule by Germany, Great Britain and the United States (1889–99), German diplomats in Apia regularly reported on the relationship between war and economic stagnation. Consul Biermann noted in April 1894 that during Samoan wars, subsistence production was interrupted, forcing many Samoans to consume their coconuts instead of selling them as dried copra. Even worse, the consul observed, Samoans had to be supplied with provisions from German plantations, which offered the only sources of food in times of war. As a result, Biermann concluded, the copra trade came to a halt, plantation output decreased, Samoan purchasing power declined, and imports and exports dropped.<sup>14</sup> Because continued warfare among Samoans – fuelled in no small part by the competing interests of the colonial powers – had a

<sup>10</sup> By 1890, copra exports from Samoa outpaced cotton exports by more than four to one and accounted for more than half of overall exports. Four years later, cotton cultivation in Samoa ended. BArch R 1001/2539.

<sup>11</sup> As a result of widespread fraud, a land commission installed by the colonial powers in 1893 recognized only 8 per cent of Euro-American claims to Samoan lands. Felix M. Keesing, *Modern Samoa: Its Government and Changing Life* (London, UK: G. Allen & Unwin, 1934), 259.

<sup>12</sup> Land became so scarce after this land rush in the 1880s that at the beginning of the 20th century, an acre of land sold for up to £500 (US\$100). *Ibid.* Around 1900, 1 US dollar was equivalent to 4 German Reichsmark or 4 shillings British sterling. The equivalents of all subsequent currencies are given in US dollars. In the 19th century, different kinds of specie had been circulating in Samoa, including American, Mexican and Chilean dollars, and German Reichsmark. See also Damon Salesa, “‘Travel-Happy’ Samoa: Colonialism, Samoan Migration and a “Brown Pacific””, *New Zealand Journal of History* 37: 2 (2003): 172.

<sup>13</sup> Peter H. Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), *Samoan Material Culture* (Honolulu, HI: The Bishop Museum, 1930), 546.

<sup>14</sup> Biermann to Caprivi, 30 April 1894, BArch R 1001/2539.

negative impact on agricultural exports, pressure to ensure political stability on the islands increased.

In December 1899, the unprecedented experiment in tripartite colonial rule came to an end and Samoa was divided into a German colony in the west and an American colony in the east. After decades of war, proxy kings and hundreds of casualties, an international treaty divided the Samoan Islands between Germany and the United States, while Great Britain withdrew in exchange for concessions elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

### GERMAN VISIONS, SAMOAN REALITIES

In contrast to many other Euro-American colonies at the time, Samoans under German and American rule were not directly forced to work for the export economy. It was the very strength of the Samoan subsistence economy and the military muscle it supported that forced colonial officials in both German and American Samoa to pursue a strategy of accommodation. This paternalist policy of ‘salvage colonialism’ was most visible in the German part of the colony. Governor Solf envisioned himself as the ‘father’ of his Samoan ‘children’: he protected them from the corrupting influence of Euro-American capitalist modernity, especially in the form of wage labour and consumer commodities.<sup>16</sup> In Solf’s eyes, his duty in Samoa was ‘merely to guard it as what it is – a little paradise – and to do my best to keep the passing serpent out of our Garden of Eden’.<sup>17</sup> Using the colony as a living experiment in social engineering, German colonial officials deemed Samoans worthy of protection from the brutal forces of colonial capitalism they had helped to unleash. Not incidentally, Solf’s policy also left Samoans firmly tied to small-scale agriculture and at a safe distance from the new opportunities that colonization opened up.

To satisfy the increasing demand for labour, contract workers from around the Pacific were recruited to work on Euro-American copra, cocoa and rubber plantations. Workers from Kiribati, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands had been coming to Samoa since the early Godeffroy days in the 1860s. Between 1885 and 1913, the DHPG recruited an additional 5,746 labourers from the newly established German

<sup>15</sup>On the Samoan tridominium, see Holger Droessler, “Colonialism by Deferral: Samoa Under the Tridominium, 1889–1899,” in *Rethinking the Colonial State*, ed. S. Rud and S. Ivarsson (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2017), 203–24.

<sup>16</sup>I borrow the term ‘salvage colonialism’ from historical sociologist George Steinmetz’s meticulous study, *The Devil’s Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 317–58. As Steinmetz points out (355), Solf leveraged his substantial ethnographic capital as an expert on Samoan culture to integrate the conflicting interests of non-German settlers, missionaries and his colonial administration. Crucially, the DHPG also supported Solf’s policy in exchange for continued access to cheap labourers from Melanesia. Firth, ‘German Recruitment’, 314.

<sup>17</sup>Cited by Lloyd Osborne in Newton Allan Rowe, *Samoa under the Sailing Gods* (London, UK: Putnam, 1930), xii.

colony in New Guinea to Samoa.<sup>18</sup> And after the formal annexation of German Samoa, a series of transports brought another four thousand Chinese contract labourers to Samoa.<sup>19</sup> Solf's less overtly confrontational native policy, partly enabled by the importation of workers from abroad, gained even more legitimacy in the eyes of Euro-American settlers and the colonial press when, in spring 1904, a revolt by the Herero and Nama in German Southwest-Africa led to the century's first genocide.<sup>20</sup>

But even under the official policy of salvage colonialism, colonial officials in German Samoa were constantly preoccupied with increasing copra production. Their concerns were understandable because Samoans themselves were, by far, the largest producers of copra on the islands. In 1896, Samoans produced as much as 80 per cent of overall copra exports on their family plantations.<sup>21</sup> The remaining 20 per cent were supplied by the DHPG, the largest foreign trading company operating in Samoa at the time. Given Samoans' preponderant role in copra production and their general unwillingness to work on foreign plantations, Euro-American plantation owners, traders and colonial officials devised different means to increase agricultural output (Figure 1).

Driven by the economic interests of German traders and plantation owners (especially the DHPG), the German colonial administration stepped up its pressure on Samoan farmers. On 31 August 1900, only a few months into formal annexation, Governor Solf passed a regulation that required every Samoan head of family to plant 50 coconut trees per year. On average, it took around six thousand mature Samoan coconuts to produce a single ton of copra. Samoan officials were appointed to inspect plantations on a regular basis and punish individuals who failed their quota.<sup>22</sup> This stricter policy was difficult to enforce, but did lead to a considerable increase in the number of coconut trees in German Samoa. In 1908, there were 455,280 coconut trees on German plantations, of which more than 90 per cent belonged to the DHPG.<sup>23</sup> Between 1900 and 1913, more than one million new coconut trees were planted in Savai'i and Upolu.

Over the same period, however, overall copra output did not increase significantly.<sup>24</sup> This was mainly due to the fact that most Samoans, although following the

<sup>18</sup> Hahl to Imperial Colonial Office, 16 November 1913, BArch R 1001/2313.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Tom, *The Chinese in Western Samoa, 1875–1985: The Dragon Came From Afar* (Apia: Western Samoa Historical and Cultural Trust, 1986), 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Samoanische Zeitung*, 23 April 1904. Commentators even speculated about deporting captured Herero fighters to German Samoa. *Samoanische Zeitung*, 16 July, 6 August 1904. On the German genocide of the Herero and Nama, see Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft: Der Kampf der Herero and Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus, 1884–1915* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966); Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds., *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen* (Berlin: Links, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Rose to Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 30 August 1896, BArch R 1001/2539.

<sup>22</sup> Solf, 'Notizen zur Landwirtschaft', BArch N 1053/6, 292.

<sup>23</sup> Schmack, *Godeffroy & Sohn*, 291.

<sup>24</sup> Total copra output in German Samoa rose only slightly from 7,792 tons in 1899 to 9,634 tons in 1913. See also Keesing, *Modern Samoa*, 300, 303.





FIGURE 1. Man in tropical forest. Source: Alfred Tattersall, *Samoa*, c. 1918, courtesy of Te Papa Museum, Wellington, NZ.

official dictate to plant new trees, did not substantially increase their workload and generally only produced and sold as many coconuts as they needed to survive and earn cash. Even so, Samoan stands of coconut trees covered three times the area of European copra plantations.<sup>25</sup> In line with Solf's salvage colonialism, Samoan

<sup>25</sup> Peter J. Hempenstall, *Pacific Islanders under German Rule: A Study in the Meaning of Colonial Resistance* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978), 70.



landholdings, on which subsistence farming depended, had come to be legally protected. To safeguard the 'natural fruit lands of Samoans', the Berlin Act of 1899 had prohibited the sale of all lands outside the municipal district of Apia.<sup>26</sup> In November 1907, a regulation passed by the German colonial administration confirmed this ban in principle, but enlarged the area in which the sale of Samoan lands was allowed.<sup>27</sup> From then on, no Samoan lands were to be sold outside a so-called 'plantation district', an area of roughly seven square miles around Apia where most of the foreign-owned, large-scale plantations were located. In addition, every Samoan was guaranteed at least 3.2 acres of land to cultivate. Its good intentions notwithstanding, the regulation clearly benefitted the largest landholder within the plantation district: the DHPG.<sup>28</sup> The German company now enjoyed a 'virtual monopoly of land which other Europeans could buy'.<sup>29</sup> A DHPG business report from 1907 duly noted that the company could now proceed to sell the majority of its uncultivated lands at a profit.<sup>30</sup>

Other strategies the colonial administrations pursued to increase agricultural production among Samoans included restrictions on Samoan visiting parties and the introduction of copra kilns. Samoans had a long tradition of visiting relatives and friends in other villages and islands to exchange news and strengthen the bonds of family and friendship. These visiting parties (*malaga*) often involved considerable expenses on the part of the travellers, who had to leave their plantations, and, even more so, on the part of the hosts, who were expected to provide the guests with food and accommodation. Because some of the *malaga* could last for weeks, the financial burden on both parties could be great. At the same time, *malaga* also allowed families suffering from food shortages to temporarily relieve their plantations and helped them manage local economic crises.<sup>31</sup> In any case, Samoans rarely approached cultural traditions such as *malaga* in purely economic terms. A Samoan *matai* interviewed by anthropologist Felix M. Keesing in the early 1930s defended this comprehensive outlook on life, shared by many Samoans:

The white people condemn many Samoan customs as being wasteful. Their idea is that customs that interfere with working and making money are bad. But such customs give pleasure to the Samoans and are almost their only form of amusement. To travel and to entertain those who travel makes life interesting. A life filled with nothing but work would not be worth living.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Richard P. Gilson, *Samoa 1830 to 1900: The Politics of a Multi-Cultural Community* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1970), 406.

<sup>27</sup> Keesing, *Modern Samoa*, 260.

<sup>28</sup> Hempenstall, *Pacific Islanders under German Rule*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Firth, 'German Recruitment', 242.

<sup>30</sup> DHPG Business Report 1907, City Archive of Hamburg, Germany [hereinafter StAH], 621–1/14, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Keesing, *Modern Samoa*, 293.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

Euro-American colonial officials had different views. Intent on making the new colony profitable, they saw Samoan *malaga* as a quaint nuisance at best, and an inexcusable waste of time and resources at worst. As a consequence, in 1903, Solf reached an agreement with the US naval administration in American Samoa that prohibited Samoans from going on *malaga* between Upolu and Tutuila. A comprehensive ban on all *malaga* would have violated Solf's overarching policy of paternalist rule.<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, Solf and other high-ranking colonial officials had themselves adopted the practice of visiting different parts of the colony, often to great effect. The ban on visiting parties eventually caused considerable opposition among Samoan *matai*, who saw one of their ancient privileges threatened. The first Mau movement led by Lauaki Namulau'ulu Mamoe in 1908 emerged partly in response to this ban on *malaga*, as did the second Mau movement against New Zealand rule in the mid-1920s.

The introduction of copra kilns by colonial officials was another attempt to increase Samoan copra production. Although the larger trading companies like the DHPG had been using copra dryers and kilns since the early 1890s, Samoans continued to rely on the traditional method of drying coconut meat in the sun.<sup>34</sup> Compared with sun-drying, kilns made the drying of coconuts more reliable and efficient. Three days of drying the coconuts in the sun could be reduced to one day in the kiln, using the shells as fuel.<sup>35</sup> Colonial officials followed the DHPG in giving preference to the so-called 'plantation copra' over the 'trader copra', primarily because of its higher quality and longer storage life.<sup>36</sup> In autumn 1907, a member of the German Committee on Colonial Economics recommended to the Imperial Colonial Office that they purchase copra kilns and rent them out to Samoans during the rainy season.<sup>37</sup> Shortly thereafter, a DHPG manager wrote to Governor Solf about the need to increase the use of copra kilns among Samoans. The DHPG, the manager noted, had

already repeatedly tried to induce the natives to sell their copra either green or in nuts in order to be dried in the kilns on the trading stations of the whites. These attempts unfortunately had failed due to the resistance of the natives.<sup>38</sup>

Sceptical of new technologies such as the copra kiln, Samoans continued to prefer their traditional method of drying coconuts in the sun. During the three days of drying Samoans constantly watched the copra to protect it from sudden rain or wandering dogs and pigs. Overnight, the copra was brought into the house and stored in

<sup>33</sup> Jocelyn Linnekin, 'Fine Mats and Money: Contending Exchange Paradigms in Colonial Samoa', *Anthropological Quarterly* 64: 1 (1991): 7.

<sup>34</sup> In 1902, the DHPG operated a total of 10 copra kilns in German Samoa: five kilns in Mulifanua, three kilns in Vaitele and two kilns in Vailele. Reinecke, *Samoa*, 194, 196, 198.

<sup>35</sup> Firth, 'German Recruitment', 61.

<sup>36</sup> Reinecke, *Samoa*, 206.

<sup>37</sup> Supf to Imperial Colonial Office, 7 September 1907, BArch R 1001/7991.

<sup>38</sup> Hanssen to Solf, 3 December 1907, BArch R 1001/7991, 9–10.

containers.<sup>39</sup> Sun-drying ran the risk of diminishing the copra's quality (especially during the rainy season) and it took longer, but this mattered little in a subsistence economy with abundant crops. Rather than blindly resisting technological innovation, Samoans deliberately held on to established ways of agricultural labour and refused to give up control over this crucial part of the production process. Besides, by keeping control over drying copra, Samoans also maintained the option of shortweighting Euro-American traders by soaking copra in water or adding small stones and sand to their deliveries.<sup>40</sup>

Despite attempts by the German colonial administration to increase copra production for export, the overwhelming majority of Samoans continued subsistence agriculture that offered greater control over their lives. Since Samoans owned most of the land on which coconut trees grew, their surplus production dominated the copra export market throughout the colonial era. Their resilient subsistence and cash crop economy provided Samoans with not only with an insurance against environmental disasters, but more importantly, a strong foundation to protect their political and social self-determination against colonial demands. Samoans were thus able to respond to the introduction of a large-scale plantation economy largely on their own terms (Figure 2).

## EARNING CASH

Occasionally, however, Samoans chose to enter into wage contracts on Euro-American plantations. Because most Samoans preferred working independently and selling their surplus to traders, wage labour on foreign-owned plantations remained the exception throughout the colonial era. As early as the 1850s, Samoans had worked on foreign plantations on a casual basis. They demanded wages equal to those paid to Europeans – US\$1 a day – which proved to be unprofitable for Euro-American planters, who preferred recruiting workers from other Pacific Islands. But even after 1900, Samoans continued to work for Euro-American plantation owners as temporary labourers and overseers. During acute labour shortages, Samoans could earn as much as three Reichsmark (75c) a day plus food working on Euro-American plantations. In 1901, Samoans indeed earned an average of \$1 for a day's plantation work, which was considerably more than what the DHPG paid its Melanesian workers (\$21–23 per year).<sup>41</sup> In neighbouring US-controlled Tutuila, Samoans also earned \$1 a day, including board.<sup>42</sup>

Business reports from German and British trading companies operating in Samoa at the turn of the 20th century provide documentation for the Samoan

<sup>39</sup> David C. Pitt, *Tradition and Economic Progress in Samoa: A Case Study of the Role of Traditional Social Institutions in Economic Development* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1970), 197.

<sup>40</sup> Reinecke, *Samoa*, 206.

<sup>41</sup> Firth, 'German Recruitment', 244. DHPG manager, Riedel, recounted that Samoans earned 3–4 Reichsmark (US75c to US\$1) per day, while their labour was not worth more than 1 Reichsmark (US25c) per day. Riedel, *Kampf um Deutsch-Samoa*, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Heimrod to J.S. Williams, 27 October 1904, US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, USA [hereinafter NARA-CP], RG 84, Vol. 52.



FIGURE 2. Copra Plantation. Source: Alfred Tattersall, *Samoa*, c. 1918, courtesy of Te Papa Museum, Wellington, NZ.

presence on foreign plantations. Reports from the Safata-Samoa-Gesellschaft (SSG) from 1905 and 1906 listed the number of Chinese and Samoan workers employed on its copra and cocoa plantations. In 1905, the SSG employed between 30 and 40 Samoan workers to cultivate its newest plantations. Roughly the same number of Chinese workers, whom companies like the SSG had eagerly recruited to Samoa, were supervised by Samoan, and later also white, overseers.<sup>43</sup> In the following year, more than 100 new Chinese workers joined the SSG workforce, while an unidentified number of Samoans continued to work for the company. As the business report from 1907 noted, for heavy labour, such as clearing bush, Samoans could only be hired on temporary contracts.<sup>44</sup> By the end of 1911, the SSG employed 187 Chinese workers, but managers still complained about the lack of manpower to cultivate existing plantations, let alone expand them. According to the business report from 1911, this perceived lack of workers had to be compensated for by hiring ‘expensive’ Samoans.<sup>45</sup> In addition to these temporary plantation labourers, two mixed-race Samoans worked as overseers on the SSG plantations.

<sup>43</sup> SSG Business Reports 1905, 1906, BArch R 1001/2493.

<sup>44</sup> SSG Business Report 1907, BArch R 1001/2494.

<sup>45</sup> SSG Business Report 1911, BArch R 1001/2496.

One of the SSG's competitors in cocoa production, the British-owned Upolu Rubber and Cacao Estates Ltd (URCE), also employed mainly Chinese workers on its rubber plantation in Alisa and on its cacao plantation in Tagamapua. Samoan workers performed contract labour for the URCE for higher rates than their Chinese counterparts. Apparently, these Samoan workers perceived the working conditions and their wages as adequate because a URCE business report noted that many Samoan workers re-engaged for one or two months after the end of their original contracts.<sup>46</sup> Samoan workers also worked for other foreign companies, such as the German Samoa-Plantagen-Gesellschaft (SPG) and the British Upolu Cacao Company (UCC), particularly cutting wild bush for new plantations.<sup>47</sup>

Working on Euro-American plantations, if only for limited amounts of time, posed considerable challenges to Samoan men. Timing, techniques and general labour discipline differed greatly between small Samoan family plantations and the larger commercial enterprises. Used to the tropical climate, Samoans tried to complete most of the heavy agricultural labour in the early mornings before the sun became too intense. By contrast, Euro-American plantations were larger in size, geared towards producing large amounts of cash crops and generally more strictly organized. Contract workers from Melanesia and China were specifically recruited to perform this kind of monotonous and exhausting plantation labour and tried to resist coercive measures as much as they could. Samoans, who engaged in casual wage labour, were not only unaccustomed to such a profit-oriented labour regime, but often arrived at the plantations already exhausted from their family labour in the mornings.<sup>48</sup> Agricultural techniques, too, were different. Whereas Samoans sold as much copra as they needed to buy clothes or food, coconuts on foreign plantations were usually not harvested before they had matured fully and fallen to the ground.<sup>49</sup>

As these examples show, Samoans did make use of the new opportunities of wage labour on Euro-American plantations, if only temporarily and selectively. Their choices depended on a range of factors such as the wages they received, the current copra prices, and their need for cash to buy imported goods and pay taxes or fines. Thus, when the end of World War I brought higher copra prices and higher wages, a greater number of Samoans engaged in wage labour on Euro-American plantations.<sup>50</sup> The cash earned from wage labour often flowed back into practices central to Samoan culture, such as organizing a *malaga*. Some enterprising Samoans even used their cash income to expand their own plantations. For most Samoans, however, working on plantations was not a sign of assimilation to Euro-American capitalism, but rather a way to manage, in Samoan terms, the economic and social changes wrought by colonization.

<sup>46</sup> Upolu-Cacao-Kompagnie, BArch R 1001/2499.

<sup>47</sup> Report on SPG, 30 March 1914, BArch R 1001/2500.

<sup>48</sup> Franco, *Samoan Perceptions of Work*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> German Consulate to Foreign Office-Colonial Office, 30 May 1900, BArch R 1001/2540.

<sup>50</sup> Franco, *Samoan Perceptions of Work*, 184–5.



## TAKING FRUIT

Beyond wage labour, Samoans also engaged with Euro-American plantation owners in a more direct manner: they took their crops. What Samoans saw as their right to make use of the natural bounty growing on their islands, settlers, who had come to Samoa to make a living by selling cash crops, interpreted as outright theft and a challenge to colonial authority. Samoans had been taking from foreign plantations ever since German traders acquired their lands in the 1860s. The taking of crops continued throughout the second half of the 19th century and into the colonial era, often more prevalent in times of war and when food was scarce. In 1886, German Consul Knappe reported that gangs of up to 90 Samoan men forcibly entered German plantations to steal crops. Plantation managers had complained that they could no longer protect their Melanesian workers who, in turn, were tasked with protecting the plantations against Samoan intruders. An investigation had been started, Knappe noted, and the entire village of Matafaga was fined 300 Reichsmark (\$75), or the current price for 1 ton of copra.<sup>51</sup> Because individual thieves were difficult to identify or arrest, punishment in the form of fines was usually levelled at the entire village that lay close to the plantation.<sup>52</sup> According to a DHPG manager, Samoans often gained access to foreign plantations under the pretext of intending to shoot pigeons, but then proceeded to steal crops.<sup>53</sup>

Three years later, reports of Samoan thefts from German plantations resurfaced. An acute food shortage had led to an increase in Samoans stealing fruit, German Consul Stübel reported. These thefts resulted in friction and, at times, violent encounters between the Samoan thieves and the Melanesian plantation workers. The DHPG manager in Vailele, Hufnagel, had been punched to the ground and seriously injured by Samoans looking for breadfruit, Stübel noted. Trying to defend their plantation, a group of Melanesian DHPG workers had retaliated in August 1889 by beating a Samoan man named Liku to death.<sup>54</sup> In the following months, Stübel continued to express concerns about the 'persistent anarchy', especially on the two largest German plantations in Vaitele and Vailele. According to the consul, Samoan men had been 'brutalized' by the ongoing civil war between Malietoa Laupepa, who had returned from exile in Jaluit in September 1889, and the reigning but disputed paramount *matai* Mata'afa. The DHPG estimated the damage done to its plantations by Samoan 'looting' as high as 80,000 Reichsmark (\$20,000), or roughly 28 per cent of overall profits for 1889.<sup>55</sup>

By October 1889, things had apparently calmed down. Thefts had become rarer, Stübel wrote in his monthly report, as the food shortage had subsided.<sup>56</sup> In

<sup>51</sup> Knappe to Foreign Office, 9 November 1886, BArch R 1001/2926.

<sup>52</sup> Biermann to Caprivi, 20 March 1893, BArch R 1001/2926, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Krüger to DHPG headquarters Apia, 9 March 1893, BArch R 1001/2926.

<sup>54</sup> Papalu to Stübel, 3 August 1889, NARA-CP, RG 84, Vol. 61; Stübel to Foreign Office, 13 August 1889, BArch R 1001/2926.

<sup>55</sup> Stübel to Foreign Office, 12 September 1889, BArch R 1001/2926, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Stübel to Foreign Office, 8 October 1889, BArch R 1001/2926.

1894, however, reports of Samoan crop thefts and clashes with Melanesian workers reappeared. Apparently, Consul Biermann noted, the sentences dealt out by the Imperial Court against thieves in the preceding years did not have the desired effect.<sup>57</sup> In August 1895, the DHPG management complained to the consulate in Apia about a series of new crop thefts on its plantations. The letter noted that Samoans had stopped stealing as publicly as they had done before and now used the early morning hours to do so. The DHPG also explicitly accused the mixed-race Samoan and US citizen Alfred Schuster and his family as a major instigator of the thefts.<sup>58</sup> In May 1896, Schuster was arrested by German DHPG employees and locked up in the plantation jail for one night.<sup>59</sup> Only in 1898 could Consul Rose happily report that thefts had declined again. He mentioned several reasons for this decrease: first, the Land Court had finally finished determining property boundaries; second, large parts of plantations had been secured with barbed wire to keep out roaming cattle; third, a more effective enforcement of prison sentences was in place to punish thefts; and last but not least, an extraordinarily rich harvest of food crops such as bananas and breadfruit had diminished incentives to steal crops elsewhere.<sup>60</sup>

Yet Samoans continued taking crops from Euro-American plantations even after formal annexation in 1899. Different conceptions of space and property among Samoans and their colonizers shaped this restive practice.<sup>61</sup> Samoans defined property in agricultural products on the basis of practical use instead of formal ownership. German and American traders and plantation owners, by contrast, had little tolerance for such a definition of property rights. After all, most settlers had come to Samoa to get rich by exporting cash crops. As a result, they were outraged at persistent Samoan incursions into their plantations and private property. The colonial administration in German Samoa asserted its power by protecting German property against thefts and severely punished violators. The fact that Samoans continued taking what they needed from the foreign plantations reflected the changing nature of the Samoan subsistence economy at large. As Euro-American capitalists bought up more and more land to grow cash crops, Samoans had less and less flexibility in food supplies. This limitation became particularly pressing in times of war or environmental disaster. Samoans understood these threats to their economic self-determination and fought back, following the logic of their own moral ecology.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Biermann to Caprivi, 20 March 1893, BArch R 1001/2926.

<sup>58</sup> DHPG to German Consulate Apia, 15 August 1895, BArch R 1001/2926.

<sup>59</sup> Blacklock to Chief Justice Ide, 5 May 1896, NARA-CP, RG 84, Vol. 51.

<sup>60</sup> Rose to Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 12 April 1898, BArch R 1001/2540.

<sup>61</sup> The global struggle over land ownership is explored in Andro Linklater, *Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Building on E.P. Thompson's ideas on the moral economy of peasants, historian Karl Jacoby has coined the term 'moral ecology' in his *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

## COPRA COOPERATIVES IN GERMAN SAMOA

Samoans had been cultivating coconuts for a long time, but by the mid-19th century Euro-American traders had come to dominate the export business. Together with British and French missionaries, German traders were the first to open trading stations in Upolu between 1830 and 1870. They gradually moved to monopolize the import and export of goods essential to the Samoan economy. In the eyes of Samoans, traders seemed to adjust prices for the copra they bought and the goods they sold at will. Therefore, Samoans had long been resentful of the domineering influence of Euro-American traders.<sup>63</sup> Samoans quickly realized that Euro-American traders deceived them by 30–50 pounds in every 100 pounds of copra they delivered at the trading stations.<sup>64</sup> Over time, Samoans devised various strategies to resist the power of the traders. For instance, they took out large amounts of credit from traders and deferred their payments indefinitely. Lack of effective legal enforcement of debt defaults, by and large, protected Samoans from punishment. Samoans also resorted to manipulating the quantity and quality of the copra they delivered to traders by soaking copra in water before weighing or mixing greener nuts of poorer quality with better nuts.<sup>65</sup>

A few years into formal colonial rule, Samoan producers launched a more fundamental attack on the monopoly of Euro-American traders on the lucrative copra trade. In 1904, a movement to found cooperative companies swept through German and American Samoa, with overlapping but distinct trajectories.<sup>66</sup> Another mixed-race Samoan took the lead in this challenge to the world copra had created: the German-Samoan Carl Pullack from Savai'i.<sup>67</sup> Under Pullack's leadership, the so-called '*oloa* movement – '*oloa* meaning goods or trade – aimed to wrest economic control over the copra trade from dominant Euro-American traders such as the DHPG. Copra cooperatives could build on a tradition of cooperative work groups – the male '*aumāga* and female '*auluma* – that have been central to Samoan society long before contact with Europeans. The central aim of this Samoan-run copra trading company – also known as the '*kamupani* – was to cut out the Euro-American middlemen, who profited from the labour of Samoans. Since Samoan producers closely followed changing copra prices in London and San Francisco reprinted in local newspapers, they were painfully aware of the fact that Euro-American traders underpaid them for their copra while, at the same time, overcharging them for imported

<sup>63</sup> Firth, 'German Recruitment', 245.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Lewthwaite, 'Land, Life and Agriculture', 149.

<sup>66</sup> For the subsequent Samoan challenge to US navy rule in American Samoa, see David A. Chappell, 'The Forgotten Mau: Anti-Navy Protest in American Samoa, 1920–1935', *Pacific Historical Review* 69: 2 (2000): 217–60. For an analysis of copra cooperatives in American Samoa, see Holger Droessler, 'Islands of Labour: Community, Conflict, and Resistance in Colonial Samoa, 1889–1919', PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2015, 74–7.

<sup>67</sup> On the crucial role of mixed-race people in Samoa, see Damon Salesa, "'Troublesome Half-Castes": Tales of a Samoan Borderland', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1997.

goods.<sup>68</sup> A slump in the global market price for copra from nine (2.25c) to five (1.25c) Pfennig per pound provided the final spark for the economic independence movement.<sup>69</sup>

In response to depressed copra prices, Pullack promised Samoan copra producers no less than 16 Pfennig per pound – a quite unrealistic if appealing figure.<sup>70</sup> Samoan leaders supported the ‘*oloa*’ as a way to regain political through economic power and campaigned for participation in the company as a patriotic venture.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, conflicts among white German settlers – especially between Governor Solf and the newly arrived plantation owner Richard Deeken – further encouraged Samoans in their attempts at economic cooperation.<sup>72</sup> Samoan cooperatives were part of a wider move towards cash crop cooperatives that swept across the world at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>73</sup> Similar to cooperative movements in other parts of the world, the Samoan ‘*oloa*’ movement was based on democratic decision-making, profit-sharing and mutual solidarity. Challenged by colonial capitalism, Samoans gave voice to their grievances by becoming subaltern capitalists themselves.

The Samoan cooperative movement not only posed an economic challenge to the most vocal part of the Euro-American population, but also threatened the political legitimacy of the colonial state itself. Given this profound economic and political threat, Governor Solf worked to undermine the legitimacy of the ‘*oloa*’. Colonial officials criticized the self-government of the cooperatives as mere window-dressing and directly threatened their leaders with punitive measures.<sup>74</sup> The colonial administration was also concerned about potential alliances between the Samoan ‘*oloa*’ movement and some of the newly arrived and vocal settlers who challenged the colonial administration on its handling of labour relations. In a letter to Solf from February 1905, Acting Governor Erich Schultz wrote that his fears that the ‘machinations of the Deeken clique would be an evil example for the natives’ had unfortunately materialized.<sup>75</sup> Deeken, the leader of these smallholding settlers, was even said to be the potential successor to Pullack as the manager of the ‘*oloa*’. Schultz added that there were rumours that Deeken was busy collecting signatures among Samoans for a petition against Solf.<sup>76</sup> It is not clear whether these rumours turned out to be true, nor did Deeken ever become formally involved in the predominantly Samoan-led ‘*oloa*’ movement. Seen from the governor’s mansion, however, the ‘*oloa*’ cooperatives were closely associated with challenges to colonial authority from white settlers.

<sup>68</sup> Keesing, *Modern Samoa*, 315.

<sup>69</sup> Hempenstall, *Pacific Islanders under German Rule*, 43.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 225, n36.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>72</sup> Firth, ‘German Recruitment’, 258.

<sup>73</sup> On cotton cooperatives, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2014), 338.

<sup>74</sup> BArch R 1001/3064, 92–4.

<sup>75</sup> Schultz to Solf, 2 February 1905, BArch N 1053/132, 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

In December 1904, the 'oloa company introduced a tax (*lafoga oloa*), ranging from four (\$1) to eight (\$2) Reichsmark, on all Samoans to finance its business activities.<sup>77</sup> The German colonial administration interpreted the cooperative tax as a direct challenge to its control over taxation and the copra trade. At the end of December, Solf strictly prohibited the payment of any copra tax to the cooperatives, sowing seeds of disunity among the supporters. When Solf left for a trip to New Zealand at the end of the year, the threat seemed on the wane. Solf's departure, however, sparked a revival in the cooperative movement. Rumours began circulating that Solf was conspiring with Euro-American traders against Samoan producers and had been recalled by the Kaiser.<sup>78</sup> One of the Samoan village mayors, Malaeulu, even ventured to encourage his fellow Samoans to 'scrape his [i.e. Solf's] body with *pipi* shells' if he continued to oppose the 'oloa.<sup>79</sup> Under heavy pressure, Schultz decided to arrest Malaeulu and another movement leader in late January 1905 for disturbing the peace and spreading false rumours about the governor. On 31 January, several *matai* broke into the prison in Vaimea and freed the two prisoners, as a sign of Samoan independence and solidarity.<sup>80</sup>

Meanwhile, internal conflicts within the movement were rising to the surface. Members of the Mata'afa faction quickly returned the freed prisoners to jail and pleaded to Schultz for a full pardon, which he refused. When Solf finally returned in mid-March 1905, the 'oloa movement was nearly defunct.<sup>81</sup> With a series of powerful speeches and a calculated show of strength, Solf exploited the divisions within the Samoan leadership and ordered the Samoan government in Mulinu'u to be dissolved. In suppressing the copra cooperatives, Solf succeeded in curtailing Samoan self-government more broadly.<sup>82</sup>

Although the German colonial administration ultimately managed to quell the spread of the 'oloa movement, ideas for greater Samoan self-determination survived and resurfaced after a few relatively quiet years. As one of the most gifted *matai* from Savai'i, Lauaki had been at the forefront of the original 'oloa movement before abruptly retreating from it when the administration's strong opposition became evident. Indeed, Solf and Schultz had been warned back then to send Lauaki into exile while they could, but Solf had decided to pardon him.<sup>83</sup> When Governor Solf left Samoa for another leave of absence in mid-1908, Lauaki revived the idea of a copra cooperative as part of a more general reassertion of Samoan political authority (*Mau a Pule*). A brief visit by the US navy's so-called 'Great White Fleet' to

<sup>77</sup> Hemenstall, *Pacific Islanders under German Rule*, 44.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Keesing, *Modern Samoa*, 87.

<sup>82</sup> Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1987), 80.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 48–9.



Pago Pago in August 1908 further encouraged Lauaki in his challenge to German colonial rule.<sup>84</sup>

Initially supported by Mata'afa, Lauaki made plans to reorganize cooperatives in Upolu and Savai'i. In a later testimony, Lauaki recalled that Mata'afa explained the plan to found an independent copra trading company at a meeting at his residence in Mulinu'u:

A large wooden shed would be erected in Mulinu'u here, for the receiving of all the goods and then disperse them to all the districts of Samoa. A large ship would be obtained for the purposes of bringing the goods from America.<sup>85</sup>

Two Samoan clerks were to organize production and trading in each district. Samoan producers would receive 4c per pound for their copra. Moreover, the copra cooperatives would set up an insurance against the risk of bad weather at the time when government taxes were due.

Lauaki's rebellion lasted longer than the initial 'oloa movement and was probably the most serious challenge to German colonial rule in Samoa. More than the 'rear-guard action' of a traditionalist minority, Lauaki's rebellion stood in a longer line of Samoan cooperatives. Ultimately, however, it too failed. Internal divisions between Lauaki and Mata'afa, along with Solf's return, brought an end to the rebellion. Like Mata'afa before him, Lauaki was arrested and sent into exile in Saipan in the German-controlled Mariana Islands. Although ultimately unsuccessful in the face of an alarmed colonial administration, copra cooperatives showed how Samoans developed a new vision to adapt to the rapidly changing world they found themselves in.<sup>86</sup>

Samoan cooperatives resurfaced under New Zealand occupation during World War I. Founded in 1914, the Toea'ina Club was an informal association made up of leading *matai* primarily to settle land and titles disputes.<sup>87</sup> The club also organized social events such as cricket matches and ran a copra trading business with its own motorboat, funded solely by Samoan capital. When economic losses and misconduct by the Samoan manager put the club in dire straits, the New Zealand military administration took over and in April 1916 dissolved the company.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup> An armada of brand-new US battleships was sent around the world by President Theodor Roosevelt to showcase the US navy's new blue-water capabilities, passing by Pago Pago on 1 August 1908. One of the main reasons Roosevelt sent the fleet around the world was to back up legal bars to Japanese immigration to the United States. On Lauaki and the fleet visit, see *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>85</sup> Statement by Lauaki to Williams, 27 February 1909, BArch N 1053/30, 148.

<sup>86</sup> A few years later, Apolosi Nawai founded the Viti Trading Company in nearby Fiji, in a similar quest for greater economic autonomy. For his activism, Nawai was twice sent into exile by the British colonial administration. Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 48–54; Timothy J. Macnaught, *The Fijian Colonial Experience: A Study of the Neotraditional Order under British Colonial Rule Prior to World War II* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982), 75–92.

<sup>87</sup> Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa*, 116.

<sup>88</sup> Lewthwaite, 'Land, Life and Agriculture', 161.

## SWEETNESS AND COLONIAL POWER

Solf's successor as governor of German Samoa, Erich Schultz, had used his spare time for ethnographic studies. One of the Samoan proverbs he collected highlights the bitersweet nature of coconuts: *E suamalie a niu 'a'ati* (The coconut is sweet, but it was husked with the teeth).<sup>89</sup> Like most proverbs, this Samoan example gives voice to a material practice. When Samoans lacked a *mele'i* (husking stick), they sometimes resorted to their teeth for husking coconuts. As Schultz dryly explained, 'this is not a pleasant procedure because of the toughness of the husk and often the teeth will suffer'.<sup>90</sup> In a similar fashion, the arrival of an export economy centred around the dried flesh of the coconut had its good and bad sides. While Euro-American trade interests played a large role in the colonization of Samoa, copra also brought new visions for economic and political advancement. In Samoa's world of copra, as in the proverb, sweetness and colonial power were tightly bound together.

<sup>89</sup> Schultz, *Redensarten der Samoaner*, 99.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*