Samoa’s new national leader has followed a complicated route to his position of eminence. Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Tupuola Tufuga Efi is no stranger to New Zealand, or to numerous other places, for that matter; but the intricate details of the career of Samoa’s recently appointed Head of State, with its mingling of customary practice and modernity, are less well known. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to chart his political history.

While he may have started with the advantage of privilege, his path to his present high office has not been an easy or automatic progression. Any society is a complex organism but Samoa’s is more complex than most. From top to bottom it is shot through with a nuanced criss-cross of ranks and statuses, each of which carries a title that also serves the holder as a personal name. The titleholder, as is abundantly illustrated in the present instance, is thereby identified not just as an individual but as one who occupies a particular niche, and with it a role, within a family or district or in the nation.

At the apex of the hierarchy are the tafa’iifā, or royal, titles of Tui A‘ana, Gatao‘itele, Tamasoali‘i and Tuiatua, which is that currently held by the new appointee to Samoa’s paramount office. Top level politics had long centred on the sometimes bloody, and always resolute, competition for these titles between the two main family lineages of Malietoa and Tupua. The latter of these groups embraces the Mata‘afa, Tuimaleali‘ifano and—of immediate relevance here—Tamasese lines (Gilson 1970: 58-62, Meleisea 1987: 11).

Thus, in view of this historic rivalry, when Samoa became independent on 1 January 1962 it was deemed fitting and expedient that the honour of being the first Head of State (O le Ao o le Mālō) of the new nation should be jointly shared for life by the leaders of each lineage. These were Tupua Tamasese Mea‘ole and Malietoa Tanumafili II. On the death of one, the constitution provided that the survivor would reign alone. After that, the tenure of the office was to alternate between the two families for five year terms (Davidson 1967: 372; Boyd 1968: 155-5, 1969: 260-62).

Tanumafili II, who died on 11 May 2007 at the age of 94, retained his position for 45 years. To no one’s great surprise his successor, appointed by the Fono or Parliament, was Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Tupuola Tufuga Efi. He is the elder son of Mea‘ole, one of the two original office holders, who died in 1963 and whom Professor J.W. Davidson, a family friend and the founding father of the academic study of Pacific history, described as “the architect of Samoan independence” (Davidson 1963: 41, 1967: 42-49).
The new Head of State was born Olaf (or Efi) Tamasese in Apia in 1938. As well as exalted status he also inherited the family custom of active involvement in politics. His maternal grandfather, Olaf Nelson, whose title of Taisi he holds, was a wealthy businessman and the leader of the Mau, the Samoan nationalist movement that challenged the New Zealand colonial regime. And on the paternal side, his father’s brother was killed in 1929 in a demonstration supporting the same cause (Laracy 1998: 376-77, Field 1984: 154-56).

The family was strongly Catholic (NZH 1992). From the local Marist Brothers’ school young Olaf/Efi Tamasese continued his education in New Zealand, at St. Patrick’s College, Silverstream, from 1955 to 1957, and then went on to university in Wellington (Ewart 1991: 116). In both establishments he was familiarly known as “Tam”. Unfortunately, with the death of his father he had to abandon his law studies in 1963 and return to Samoa to manage family affairs. Then politics called. In 1965, as Tufuga Efi, he entered Parliament as Samoa’s youngest MP, and in 1976 he became the country’s youngest Prime Minister (Davidson 1967: 429, AS 1977). As Tupuola Efi he held that office until 1982 (AS 1982; Meleisea and Schoeffel 1983: 95; Tuimaleali‘ifano 2006: 27-9, 38-45).

Under Tupuola’s energetic direction Samoa experienced an innovative, but not always welcome, programme of accelerated rural development (AS 1977, NZL 1979). Like similar well-meant initiatives under the colonial German and New Zealand administrations, however, this irritated the more conservative village interests. Tupuola’s regime was also assertively and courageously outward looking. In 1976, during the Cold War, he invited a Russian delegation to attend the annual independence celebrations, and he also opened diplomatic relations with China (Savali 1981). The next year, in a further display of sovereignty, he had Samoa admitted to the United Nations. Except for the latter, these measures generated considerable disquiet among many of the village elders in that intensely religious country, who saw contact with Communism as flirting with Godlessness (Meleisea and Schloeffel 1983: 100-5, CT 1984).

But it was the hard line he took in 1981 against public servants who went on strike for three months over massive pay demands that did most to pull the electoral mat from beneath his feet (PIM 1981a, b; Meleisea and Schoeffel 1983: 105-12). In the election of 1982 he was ousted by Va‘ai Kolone of the Human Rights Protection Party, a group formed in 1979 with considerable Malietoa support. While continuing in Parliament as leader of the opposition, in November 1986 Efi was accorded the tama ‘āiga (literally ‘the son of the family’) title of Tupua Tamasese. It is the senior one of his lineage. And just one month later he received the royal title of Tuiatua, by which he is officially known today (Tuimaleali‘ifano 1998: 98-99).
As with his earlier titular promotions, there were other family claimants, so these advances were contested. Indeed, they had eventually to be validated in the Land and Titles Court. As a result of these proceedings, by 1987 Efi could reportedly quip that “the coffers of the Nelson family have been emptied”. Even so that did not ensure his political longevity (Tuimali’ifano 1998: 94-99).

In 1991 he finally left Parliament after losing his seat in Samoa’s first election held under universal suffrage (NZH 1991). Hitherto, only matai (chiefs) had been eligible to vote. Politics’ loss, though, has been to the benefit of that nobler calling of historical enquiry. Since leaving parliamentary politics, Efi Tamasese has devoted much of his energy to the scholarly investigation of Samoan traditions, history and culture. He has published three books and a solid corpus of informed, insightful and critical analyses of his country’s past in reputable academic journals. He has also held fellowships at Australian, American and New Zealand universities, and has contributed valuably to conferences.

In the light of both pedigree and of performance Olaf/Efi has a fine record and brings vast wisdom to his new job. He has personally experienced the most critical moments of Samoa’s post-independence history, even presiding over some of them, and has independently earned an estimable reputation as a scholar. With Tuiatua as its O le Ao o le Mālō, Samoa and its interests are in good hands for the time being.

In another, if somewhat less exalted context, Tuiatua is also in some very good company. The Polynesian Society is honoured that Samoa’s new Head of State has accepted its invitation to become its patron succeeding the late Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu, and founding patron (in 1892), Queen Liliuokalani of Hawai‘i. In this role he joins his old New Zealand schoolfriend, Tumu Te Heuheu.

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NOTES

1. This is a documented, and slightly revised, version of an article that was originally published in the New Zealand Herald of 28 June 2007 under the title “Name says it all for new leader”, in anticipation of the impending “Royal visit” of Tuiatua (Sunday Star-Times, 2 December 2007).

2. On 2 July 1997 the nation of “Western Samoa” legislatively re-designated itself as “Samoa”.

3. That result was determined in an electoral petition hearing in the Supreme Court. The Chief Justice, A.J. Ryan, not only found against Tuiatua but awarded $3000 costs against him. “In the matter between Moananu Salale and Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi,” 20 November 1991. Copy of judgement in my possession (H.L.).

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