

SALAMASINA
QUEEN OF SAMOA



Samoa history and tradition record the life of this honorable and illustrious lady, the most famous person in the early history of Samoa. She was Queen (Tupu) not just in name but as a real ruler in her Pacific island country.

While the Spaniards were crossing the Pacific in the 16th century searching for gold and new lands, Samoa was the scene of many interesting events. Foremost among them was the reign of Samoa's first Queen and absolute ruler.

Salamasina, "perpetual full moon" as she was described at birth because of the glow of her skin when rubbed with curcuma, was the offspring of Samoa's and Tonga's royal families. Combined in her investiture as Queen of Samoa were the two highest titles of the male line of royal descent in Samoa and the two highest of the female line. She became the only ruler of Samoa who held all four titles at the same time. The titles have since been invested in individual families connected to her line.

History records with astounding accuracy the reign of Salamasina as Queen, which lasted over 50 years, covering the greater part of the 16th century. It is said that even as a child she behaved and gave the impression that she meant to be Queen, and that her subjects felt that she was perfect.

She was groomed well for her role as ruler of Samoa by her foster mother and aunt who was herself of Samoan royal descent and also, according to legend, was a favorite of the all powerful war goddess Nafanua, renowned throughout Samoa. The principles of charity and justice were instilled in Salamasina, and it is said that during her rule she insisted on observing the dictates of virtue and propriety. Her personal dignity, her skill and tact in dealing with the chiefs, her relationship to all the great families of Samoa, her impartiality in meting out justice, and her natural beauty and charm, all combined to endow her with an influence and power that none dared challenge. She came to epitomize the supreme reverence and the highest of esteem, rare in royalty in the Pacific in those days. "An injustice may be quickly committed, but the consequences may be far reaching; we should never act heedlessly," she observed.

During her reign, Samoa was one of the most prosperous countries in the Pacific, and the whole country enjoyed peace and harmony. It was a land where the soil was extremely fertile and the sea provided amply for the people. "Peace," she said, "brings prosperity, contentment, and friendship, while war fosters dissatisfaction, poverty and hate." She believed so strongly in peace that she did all in her power to banish war from her country, and she succeeded in doing so. The long years of peace, order and friendliness had by degrees even softened the people's manners and even though there were feuds between families (as there still are today), they were infrequent. Often her appearance on the scene of trouble sufficed to set things right.

Salamasina's decisions in the affairs of state were hailed with respect and obedience and even the chiefs who claimed so-called heavenly descent accorded the Queen honor they would have given with great reluctance to a despotic ruler. She preserved her claim to being the people's Queen.

Many things changed for the better due to her wise and energetic administration. Idols and human sacrifices were abolished and wars for supremacy were a thing of the past. The union of Upolu and Savaii, which are the largest islands, was accomplished, giving Samoa a firm standing and guaranteeing the Queen's safety. The clans of Samoa were at last united under her rule.

In her determination to elevate the social standing of Samoan women, the Queen taught them self-respect, good manners, how to treat their husbands and bring up their children. She formed the Aualuma (association of unmarried daughters of the chiefs and orators of an important village) led by the Taupou (the village virgin), and these associations acquired such importance in the affairs of the villages that the position of womanhood in Samoa was greatly enhanced.

Salamasina encouraged the women to make siapo, the bark cloth of Samoa, and to weave the fine mats, 'ie toga, which played and continue to play an important part in Samoan life.

One of her most earnest endeavors was to put an end to an old practice which she considered to be a curse of the past, where the orators (tulafale) would interfere with the married life of the great chiefs. Because a chief's marriage with a girl of extensive family connections was a rich source of fine mats -- 'ie toga -- for the orators, they did not rest until the chief agreed to take another wife and then another. Untold misery was put upon the poor, discarded women, only to satisfy the greed of the orators for wealth in fine mats. Salamasina used all her power and influence to ameliorate women's lot by giving more permanency to the married state. Needless to say, the Samoan women applauded her. The orators, on the other hand, resented her interference, but they did not dare oppose the all powerful Queen.

An event that filled her with much joy was the marriage of her daughter to a descendant of one of the highest and most prestigious families of Samoa, a union brought about by mutual love and esteem, not by the schemes of the orators.

The Queen also instructed the villages to get organized and saw to the maintenance of their institutions. Communities that lagged in prestige tried to strengthen their positions through marriage or the bestowal of special privileges. Friendliness and good fellowship reigned everywhere and history claims that the Samoan people enjoyed an idyllic existence and that life was simply one long holiday.

In her old age, Salamasina looked with satisfaction on a country which, though not spared all the bitterness of life, had indeed enjoyed many blessings. She was adored by all and her monumental grave, which is still being taken care of by the families in the villages where she spent her last living days, is testament to her memory, which has survived the passage of over 400 years. There is not an orator in Samoa who does not know the history of Salamasina, the first Queen of Samoa.