

Preservation through Visual Anthropology and Training

Case Study from American Samoa

This paper describes an effort in cultural preservation through visual anthropology (specifically ethnographic video production) in American Samoa, a tiny island group in the middle of the South Pacific, which shares a common 3,000-year-old cultural history with the neighboring islands of the independent state of Samoa. Samoans (living in American Samoa, Samoa, and overseas countries) constitute one of the largest single groups of Polynesians in the world.

On the whole, Samoans pride themselves in their Samoan cultural identity and refer to their culture as a “living culture.” There is a pervasive desire in both Samoas to preserve or continue the Samoan culture in the face of change. In American Samoa, which has experienced the most change in lifestyles and values, due mainly to its strong ties to and economic dependence on the U.S.A, the basic traditional social order still holds. Why? Because American Samoa’s chosen status as an unincorporated and unorganized ter-

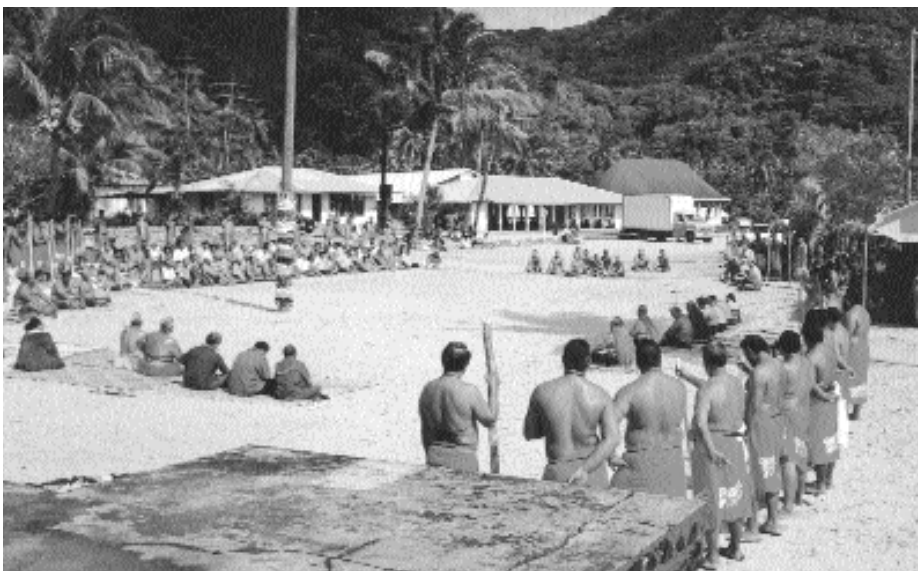
ritory of the United States allows American Samoa to have its own constitution that can legally perpetuate the traditional chieftain (*matai*) system and its associated communal land tenure system. Nonetheless, American Samoa is experiencing cultural change and a loss of traditional ways and knowledge as young people, influenced by television, education, and living overseas, incorporate more American lifestyles and values.

The American Samoa Community College (ASCC) is the only institution of higher learning in American Samoa, and one of its missions is to instill and perpetuate an understanding of Samoan culture and traditions through its curriculum and activities. ASCC hired me as a trained visual anthropologist to work in its Samoan and Pacific Studies Program (SAMPAC) to develop a program of ethnography and visual anthropology that would support this mission. The program is now three and one-half years old. We have been extensively involved in three basic activities: ethnographic and oral history documentation, which has provided the raw material for the ethnographic video archive at ASCC; training students in ethnographic video production; and production of final ethnographic videos for use in the classroom and for broadcast on local television.

My intent is not to describe and evaluate this entire program of activities, but rather to offer several important insights gleaned through this work that may be helpful to those interested in using video as a tool in the field of cultural resource management and preservation.

It is pertinent first to define our terms. The term culture has

Saofa'i (title investiture) of High Chief Gaoteaote at Vatia, Tutuila, American Samoa. Photo by the author.



been defined in a variety of ways for the last 100 years by anthropologists, but for this article I will simply define culture as referring to the more or less shared and collective ways of thinking, behaving, communicating, and living that bind a group of people together in a common identity. The phrase “preservation of culture” is problematic because culture represents a dynamic and fluid process of patterned human interactions. Perhaps a more accurate term would be cultural continuity. However, we can talk about preservation and management of cultural resources, which in turn can enhance cultural continuity and identity in a community.

Cultural resources include objects (buildings, utilitarian everyday items, works of art, etc); places/spaces associated with cultural activities; and people, in whose minds cultural and historical knowledge is kept and through whose behavior culture is manifested. These different types of cultural resources are all interdependent. If you preserve a cultural object, but not the knowledge of its value and use, you only have partial preservation. A community may cease to perform certain rituals and ceremonies if the associated sacred places have vanished. The records (textual, visual, and auditory) kept in and of a community represent a fourth type of cultural resource. The cultural resource value of these records stems from their “ethnographic-ness”—their ability to reveal cultural information.

Visual Anthropology as

Cultural Resource

Visual and audio records of people in their communities, conducting ceremonies, using technologies, interacting, and telling their memories and understanding of their lives are about as close as one can come to actual preservation of culture. While culture changes, these records remain fixed. These records may be a cultural resource to the communities from which they are extracted only when they are made available and promoted for such use. I will describe here two of a handful of projects we have conducted at ASCC that can help demonstrate this role. First, however, it is relevant to provide a little more background on visual anthropology.

Visual anthropology, a growing sub-field of cultural anthropology, has primarily been concerned with the use of visual media (i.e., still film, motion film, and video) documentation as a tool either in the research of a people’s culture—raw footage analogous to ethnographic

field notes; or in the representation, description, and interpretation of a community and their culture — ethnographic films analogous to ethnographic monographs. Whether using visual media or not, or any other methods, the anthropological emphasis has been on extracting information from a community (typically an exotic non-Western one) with which to produce something (ideas, a book, a film...) for a Western audience. The materials generated have not historically been made readily available to the communities from which they were extracted. Their potential value as a cultural resource for these communities was, therefore, not being realized. Evidently, anthropologists did not see this use as a priority.

Before my employment at ASCC, I had spent several years producing ethnographic videos and films concerning contemporary Samoan society and culture in a transnational context (Samoan islands and U.S. mainland). These videos went into educational distribution, but I was frustrated to see that they were not reaching the Samoan communities through this distribution method. So I had to make my own concerted efforts for the videos to be seen within the Samoan community, both stateside and in the islands, where they could have more of a community impact. My employment at ASCC has offered a great context to develop visual anthropology projects that become cultural resources in the community, which is where I feel they can realize their greatest social value.

There is not enough space here to describe all the various projects we have conducted, but I would like to describe briefly two projects done in 1998. Comparing and contrasting these projects will reveal the difference between documentation and documentary and their complementary roles as cultural resources.

The first project was an ethnographic field school, which was funded with a grant from the National Park Service Cultural Resource Training Initiative. This grant helped launch our whole ethnographic and visual anthropology program through the purchase of digital video equipment, the training of students, and the establishment of a Samoan ethnographic video archive using materials produced during the field school. It was a three-week field school, eight days of which were spent in the village of Vatia on Tutuila in American Samoa doing the field-work and documentation. The other days

Students and instructors of the 1998 American Samoa Community College Ethnographic Field School. Photo by the author.

(before and after the field-work) we used for initial training, and for post-production cataloging and transcribing of interviews. Eighteen students completed the training, four of which were paraprofessionals from Micronesia involved in the work of cultural and historic preservation there. The rest of the students were young Samoans at the college.

Ethnographic Documentation

One of the outcomes of the field school was a two-hour video that documents the ceremonial investiture of a high chief title of the village. This was an extremely important and rare village (as well as district) event. It involved the transfer and distribution of a huge amount of wealth—food, money, fine mats (the traditional currency of ritual exchange)—over several days of ritual gift-giving, as well as the performance of a large scale sacred *ava* (kava) ceremony. All 18 students were involved in the documentation of this event. The documentation footage, which was shot from five different video cameras in five different positions, was later edited together so as to faithfully as possible represent what actually took place without losing any of the significant parts of ritual or oratory.

The village then invited us to show this video to a group of *matai* (chiefs) and youth in the village. About 40 people of Vatia village were able to attend the screening, which was held in the Methodist church of Vatia. In the question and answer period following the screening many of the villagers asked their chiefs about the purpose and meaning of various rituals in the ceremony. It is doubtful that such an educational discussion would ever have taken place without such a screening of the video. The screening established the context for the discussion to occur; and the video documentation reminded people of what took place, and in some cases revealed things that they had not realized were there or had taken place. This experience in turn stimulated questions and discussion about symbolic meanings of different aspects of the ritual. Screening the video in the village helped to realize the video's value as a cultural resource in a



community's efforts toward cultural continuity. The cultural resource value of this video has since been realized several more times, including a year later when several of Vatia's chiefs watched and studied the video carefully as part of planning another ceremony.

We can call this type of video "documentation" because its value comes from its faithfulness in representing whole events. Furthermore, it makes no attempt to interpret or interrelate data. We cannot assume, however, that video documentation has no bias—that it is objective representation. Every angle, long shot, or close up has an implicit point of view—certain things are made more important or significant by how they are cinematically framed, and some important though minute objects or actions may elude the videographer's attention. Yet, documentation must strive to keep the integrity of single events intact, and should avoid cutting out any actions or words that participants deem to be integral to that event.

The Ethnographic Documentary

In contrast to ethnographic documentation is the ethnographic documentary, which may have a strong ethnographic theme (it is trying to depict and interpret a culture) and as such intentionally takes a point of view on the subject. The contrast is almost analogous to the contrast between observational field notes and a final ethnographic book. Footage of various people, places, and events are intercut with interviews and narration to tell a story, explore a theme, and convey a message or an interpretation from the filmmaker to an audience about a socio-cultural

subject. The ethnographic filmmaker integrates segments of ethnographic documentation to both elicit and reveal socio-cultural themes and information. The film (or video) documentary, like the video documentation, can also serve an important role in cultural continuity, but this role is realized differently as the following example will demonstrate.

One prime example of a documentary that we produced as a cultural resource at ASCC was our 1998 production of *Malae: Sacred Ground*. This video was collaboratively co-produced at ASCC by the Office of Forestry, Division of Agriculture, Human and Natural Resources (Land Grant) at ASCC and the SAMPAC program. My role was as a production supervisor. Local people trained in broadcast journalism were hired to help write, shoot, and edit the video. (The fact that they were Samoans conversant in their culture helped to balance the fact that they were not specifically trained in the tenets of ethnographic film production.)

Malae: Sacred Ground was specifically produced with the goal of stimulating the people of American Samoa to consider the preservation of a threatened cultural resource — their *malae*. *Malae* are the open ceremonial grounds that traditionally every Samoan village must have. As one interviewee stated, “*Malae* are the heart and soul of each village.” In recent years, many of the village *malae* in American Samoa have become smaller due to development and population growth, as well as a decreased public value of their cultural and historical significance.

The video aims to remind (or inform) Samoans of the importance of village *malae* in Samoan culture and history; and evaluate the social and environmental issues surrounding the diminishing of village *malae* (at least in some areas). The video incorporates and juxtaposes early historical stills of village *malae* (acquired with assistance from both the American Samoa Historic Preservation Office and American Samoa Archives) with images of those same *malae* today, interviews with village chiefs and scholars of Samoan culture, scripted narration, and other relevant footage.

American Samoa’s public television station broadcast the documentary several times, and the village mayors at their monthly meeting have reviewed and discussed the program. We are currently planning a repeat broadcast followed by a public forum of village mayors and government department heads discussing the issues presented in the video. Video copies are also being distributed to all relevant government departments as well as schools. This distribution should increase community awareness of the issue, which may help effect the preservation of village *malae*.

In contrasting documentation with documentary we can see how both forms, though constructed quite differently, can serve complementary roles in efforts to promote cultural continuity. The first form realizes its value through keeping events as whole as possible so that records of the past can be researched and studied to increase understanding. The second form reaches its value by stimulating and motivating people to care more about preserving a valuable cultural resource — in this case, *malae*.

Conclusion

My work as ethnographic specialist/instructor at American Samoa Community College continues with many more projects involving oral history, legends, sacred sites, traditional uses of resources..., which are proving to play a useful educational role in the college as well as the community as a whole. Although historically the majority of ethnographic filmmaking and documentation has not been performed with the aim of serving the communities at which it was undertaken, it has been my goal as an ethnographic filmmaker to reverse this trend, at least here in American Samoa. I find it exciting to produce ethnographic documentaries that may have a direct positive impact in the community.

Micah Van der Ryn is a visual anthropologist who received his training at the University of Southern California. He currently teaches in the Samoan and Pacific Studies Program at the American Samoa Community College. He has conducted fieldwork in American Samoa, independent Samoa and with Samoan communities in California. Tatau: What One Must Do and A Chief in Two Worlds are two of his ethnographic documentaries that are currently in distribution.