‘To be like God’: Reflections on the Nature of the Samoan Matai

Anthropologists would characterize the Samoan matai as a titled head of a ‘family’ (‘āiga) who is normally appointed for life and whose role corresponds to that of a pater familias, an elder, and a steward. This description, however, falls short of the fundamental meaning of the institution, since matai, as masters of the divine and creative word, have the power to maintain and continue the social and cultural order through the creation of other matai and even kings (tama-a-āiga). Or, as one matai has put it during a council meeting (fono): “A matai was like God” (reported by Derek Freeman in 1978). Such a statement can be understood against the background of myth as a rational, yet non-Cartesian ontology. To reconstruct myth as an explanatory tool is tantamount to recovering a past which still bestows meaning on the present.