

Pacific Communities in Transition

ANTH03010 (3 credits)

Samoa: Social and Environmental Change in Oceania

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course examines how Pacific Island communities, grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values, adapt to the interrelated forces of globalization, development, colonialism, and social change. Indigenous epistemologies are central — not supplementary — to understanding the transformations these communities face, particularly as traditional subsistence economies evolve toward cash economies.

Students explore the principles of fa'a Samoa and other Indigenous Pacific worldviews while analyzing contemporary challenges through direct community interactions, including an immersive five-day village homestay in Samoa and a field component in Fiji. The course critically examines how Christianity, capitalism, and global connectivity have shaped Pacific identity, social organization, gender roles, education, and environmental sustainability, while highlighting enduring Indigenous resilience and agency.

Lectures and discussions are conducted in cooperation with the National University of Samoa and with support from local professionals and knowledge holders. Because sessions depend on the availability of guest lecturers, specific weekly topics are flexible within each module framework.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Describe Indigenous Pacific values and epistemologies, and assess how these are negotiated amid economic and social change.
2. Identify and critically analyze the influences of Christianity, colonial histories, and modernity on traditional Pacific cultures.
3. Demonstrate understanding of Indigenous knowledge as a living, adaptive system supporting sustainable community resilience.
4. Analyze personal and community experiences in Pacific village settings through Indigenous and cross-cultural frameworks.
5. Evaluate a significant aspect of history, politics, gender, environment, or another issue in Samoa and the Pacific through discussion and written work.

6. Conduct critical research on a global process (colonialism, development, globalization) impacting Samoa or other Pacific communities, with Indigenous perspectives central to the analysis.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English.

Instructional Methods

SIT's teaching and learning philosophy is grounded in the experiential learning theory developed by Kolb (1984; 2015) and informed by various scholars, such as Dewey, Piaget, Lewin, among others. Experiential learning theory recognizes that learning is an active process that is not confined to the formal curriculum; "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). Learning involves both content and process. Learning is holistic and happens through various life experiences upon which students draw to generate new ways of knowing and being. Learning involves a community and is a lifelong endeavor. Learning is transformational. The suggested four step-cycle of a *concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation* embedded in the experiential learning model is not linear and might not always happen in that specific order, as any learning is highly context dependent. These stages of taking part in a shared experience; reflecting on that experience by describing and interpreting it; challenging their own assumptions and beliefs to generate new knowledge; and ultimately applying new knowledge, awareness, skills, and attitudes in a variety of situations and contexts are important for students to engage in to become empowered lifelong learners.

Required Texts

The following two texts anchor the entire course and should be read before Week 1:

- Hau'ofa, E. (2008). The Ocean in Us. In *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Thaman, K.H. (2003). Decolonizing Pacific Studies: Indigenous Perspectives, Knowledge, and Wisdom in Higher Education. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 15(1), 1–17.

See the course schedule for a full listing.

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

1) Participation (10%)

This includes active involvement in lectures, readings, discussions and excursions using the following criteria:

- Attendance - promptness to class and positive presence in class.
- Active Listening - paying attention in class and during field excursions, asking appropriate questions, showing interest and enthusiasm (this includes body language), entertaining contradictory perspectives, taking notes.

- Involvement in Class Discussions - either in small or large groups, sharing knowledge. This means challenging yourself to speak up if you usually don't, and also means allowing others to speak if you are a person who tends to dominate class discussions.
- Group Accountability – positive participation in the group during field excursions and classes; not keeping others waiting.
- Displaying Respect – culturally appropriate interaction with hosts, SIT program staff, SIT lecturers and communities.

2) Weeks 3-7 Critical Video Analysis Portfolio (five 500-word reflections) 50%

3) End of Week 10 Final Exam (2 hours, closed book) 40%

Assessment

Participation (10%)

Critical Video Analysis Portfolio (50%)

Final Exam (40%)

Attendance and Participation

Due to the nature of SIT Study Abroad programs, and the importance of student and instructor contributions in each and every class session, attendance at all classes and for all program excursions is required. Criteria for evaluation of student performance include attendance and participation in program activities. Students must fully participate in all program components and courses. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the academic director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, may impact grades, and could result in dismissal from the program.

Late Assignments

Students may request a justified extension for one paper/assignment during the semester. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. If the reason for the request is accepted, an extension of up to one week may be granted. Any further requests for extensions will not be granted. Students who fail to submit the assignment within the extension period will receive an 'F' for the assignment.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+

64-66% D
below 64 F

Program Expectations

- **Show up prepared.** For an interactive course to succeed, you must be present, on time, and have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Being prepared with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone. Moreover, the content of this course is learned collaboratively, meaning that when a student isn't here, they take away from everyone's opportunity to learn. The only way to maximize our collective learning potential is if we are all here contributing. Valid reasons for absence -- such as illness -- must be discussed with the academic director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, may impact grades, and could result in dismissal from the program
- **Submit assignments on time:** SIT Study Abroad programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. The curriculum is designed to build on itself and progress to the culmination (projects, ISP, case studies, internship, etc.). It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program.
- **Bring your curiosity:** Ask questions in class. Engage the guest lecturers, as these are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak. Remember, there are no foolish questions, and your inquiries might help others in class who have similar ideas/thoughts. By actively participating and showing curiosity, you demonstrate respect for our guests and contribute to creating a dynamic learning environment for everyone.
- **Maintain academic integrity:** As members of a learning community, we all want to submit work that reflects our own ideas and efforts. Even if it is unintentional, plagiarism can have serious consequences. Before you submit each assignment, ask yourself these questions:
 - Did I reference ideas, quotes, phrases, or facts I read about in a book, article, or website, without citing the author and year of the source where I read about them?
 - Did I paraphrase by changing only a word or two or moving the words around?
 - Did you answer "yes" to any of the above questions? If so, you are committing plagiarism and need to give credit to appropriate sources before you submit your assignment
- **Principled Disagreement:** Learning often involves discomfort. Some discomfort can facilitate personal and collective growth. You, your peers, guest lecturers, instructors, and local constituents, have diverse experiences, values, beliefs, affiliations, and identities. Reflecting on these differences can be emotionally challenging, even when it deepens self-awareness and mutual understanding. In this course, we aim to encourage brave spaces where principled disagreement is encouraged rather than avoiding difficult conversations. *This is challenging work, and we will inevitably make*

mistakes. Our goal is to thoughtfully critique ideas rather than attacking individuals. We aim to embrace productive discomfort and minimize unproductive discomfort, striving for principled disagreement.

- **Content Considerations:** Some texts and activities you will encounter in this course delve into sensitive topics that may be emotionally and intellectually challenging. Our classroom is a brave space where we can engage with challenging ideas, question assumptions, and navigate difficult topics with respect and maturity. As possible, I will flag content and activities that are especially graphic or intense, so we are prepared to address them soberly and sensitively. If you are struggling to keep up with the work or participate in the course because of the nature of the content and activities, you should speak with me and/or seek help from counseling services.
- **Our social identities** -- Our social identities - race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual identity, religion, mental and physical ability, size, national origin, citizenship status, and more -- shape how we are perceived, represented, and treated. They also influence what knowledge and learning is deemed valuable and legitimate. To challenge hegemonic paradigms and perspectives, this course intentionally includes readings, topics, videos, and assignments from authors and perspectives of diverse backgrounds. However, there may be gaps we have overlooked. Your constructive feedback is always welcome on how to make this course more inclusive and transformative.
- **Storing Your Work:** Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available to despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.
- **Course Communication:** Although the course calendar provides a broad overview and the general sequence of work and assignments for the course, what we accomplish in class will vary, and revisions to the calendar will be posted at the course site. You will need to check the course site regularly. You are responsible for letting me know about any network-related problems that prevent you from accessing or submitting assignments.
- **Classroom recording policy:** To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field

study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Modular Framework

The course is organized into four thematic modules, each spanning approximately two weeks of lectures. Because guest lecturers are scheduled based on availability at the National University of Samoa, specific lecture topics are slotted into whichever module they best fit. This flexibility ensures that every lecture enriches a coherent conceptual arc without being locked to a fixed week. Overnight excursions and site visits supplement each module with direct field experience.

Module	Thematic Focus	Lecture Topics (flexible)	Excursion Links
Module 1 Foundations of Identity & Worldview (Weeks 1–2)	Pacific epistemologies, fa'a Samoa, colonial encounter	Indigenous knowledge systems; fa'a Samoa values and protocols; Samoan social structure (matai system); Christian encounter and cultural transformation; oral traditions	Falefa valley (cultural heritage); Sataoa (traditional land-sea relationships)
Module 2 Economy, Society & Globalization (Weeks 3–4)	Economic transitions, cash economies, identity under globalization	Subsistence to cash economy; remittances and migration; tatau and material culture; hybridity and cultural syncretism; diaspora identity	Savai'i island (sustainable development context)
Module 3 Gender, Social Change & Wellbeing (Weeks 5–6 incl. village stay)	Gender, family, health, education and lived experience	Gender roles (traditional and contemporary); fa'afafine and LGBTQ+ Pacific identities; health systems and wellbeing; language revitalization; decolonizing education	Amaile village 5-day homestay (immersive fa'a Samoa experience)

Module 4 Resilience, Environment & Pacific Futures (Weeks 7–8 + Fiji)	Environmental change, community resilience, comparative Pacific contexts	Climate vulnerability in Pacific communities; Indigenous environmental stewardship; community- led development; urbanization and diaspora; comparative Pacific identities (Fiji)	Manono Island (island ecosystems); Fiji 10–12 day field component (identity, environment, resilience)
---	---	--	---

Module 1 — Foundations of Identity & Worldview

Conceptual Focus

This module grounds students in the conceptual vocabulary of the course. It establishes Pacific epistemologies — particularly fa'a Samoa — as legitimate and sophisticated knowledge systems, not simply cultural background. Students examine the matai system, oral traditions, aiga obligations, and the historical encounter with colonialism and Christianity as transformative (not simply destructive) forces.

Possible Guest Lecture Topics

- Introduction to fa'a Samoa: values, protocols, and the matai system
- Pacific oral traditions and Indigenous epistemologies
- Colonial contact and missionary influence on Samoan social life
- Samoan social structure: aiga, nu'u, and church

Suggested Module Readings

- *Hau'ofa, E. (2008). The Ocean in Us [core reading — re-engage with Module 1 lens]*
- *Vaai, E. (2011). Dynamism and Resilience: Samoan Social Structure and Cultural Change. Suva: Pacific Theological College.*
- *Macpherson, C., & Macpherson, L. (2009). A Brief History of Samoa's Engagement with Global Forces. Auckland: David Ling Publishing.*
- *Thaman, K.H. (2003). Decolonizing Pacific Studies [core reading — foundational]*

Module 2 — Economy, Society & Globalization

Conceptual Focus

This module traces how Pacific communities have navigated the transition from subsistence to cash economies, and how globalization has reshaped identity, material culture, and social relations. Key themes include hybridity (cultures neither fully traditional nor fully 'modern'), remittances, diaspora, and the tatau as a living marker of identity under global pressure.

Possible Guest Lecture Topics

- Subsistence agriculture, fishing, and the emergence of cash economies

- Remittances, migration, and their effects on village life
- Tatau, tapa, and material culture as living tradition
- Cultural hybridity and syncretism in contemporary Samoa
- Tourism, development, and economic sovereignty

Suggested Module Readings

- Gegeo, D.W. (1998). *Indigenous knowledge and empowerment: Rural development examined from within. The Contemporary Pacific*, 10(2), 289–315.
- Macpherson, C., & Macpherson, L. (2009). *A Brief History of Samoa's Engagement with Global Forces — chapters on economic transformation.*
- Suaalii-Sauni, T., & Fulu-Aiolupotea, S.M. (2014). *Decolonising Pacific research, building Pacific research communities and developing Pacific research tools. Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 55(3), 331–344.

Module 3 — Gender, Social Change & Wellbeing

Conceptual Focus

This module examines how social change manifests in the lives of individuals and families — through shifting gender roles, evolving definitions of health and wellbeing, the politics of LGBTQ+ identity in the Pacific, and struggles to maintain language and culture through education. The five-day village homestay anchors this module with immersive, embodied learning.

Possible Guest Lecture Topics

- Gender, family, and changing social roles in Samoa
- Fa'afafine: gender, identity, and cultural recognition
- Pacific health systems, mental health, and wellbeing
- Indigenous education models and language revitalization
- Decolonizing curricula in Pacific schools

Suggested Module Readings

- Mafale'o, T., et al. (2024). *Decolonising qualitative analysis: Collectively weaving understanding using talanoa and fa'afaletui. Qualitative Research*, 24(4).
- Suaalii-Sauni, T., & Fulu-Aiolupotea, S.M. (2014). *Decolonising Pacific research — re-read with gender lens.*
- Thaman, K.H. (2003). *Decolonizing Pacific Studies — return to education section.*
- *Selected readings on Pacific gender identities (libguide — fa'afafine, LGBTQ+ Pacific)*

Module 4 — Resilience, Environment & Pacific Futures

Conceptual Focus

The final module draws course threads together through the lens of resilience — environmental, cultural, and communal. Students examine climate change vulnerability in

Pacific communities while resisting a victimhood frame; instead, Indigenous agency and community-led adaptation are foregrounded. The Fiji field component provides comparative perspectives across Oceania, examining how different island communities negotiate identity, environment, and modernity.

Possible Guest Lecture Topics

- Climate vulnerability and Pacific Island communities
- Indigenous environmental stewardship and traditional ecological knowledge
- Community-led development and climate adaptation
- Urbanization, diaspora, and Pacific futures
- Comparative Pacific identities: Samoa and Fiji

Suggested Module Readings

- *Latai-Niusulu, A., Binns, T., & Nel, E. (2020). Climate change and community resilience in Samoa. Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, 41(1), 40–60.*
- *Pedersen Zari, M., et al. (2024). Nature-based solutions for urban climate change adaptation in Te Moananui Oceania. 4th Pacific Ocean–Pacific Climate Change Conference.*
- *Hau’ofa, E. (2008). We Are the Ocean — full re-read as synthesis.*

Excursions & Field Learning

Overnight excursions and site visits are integrated into each module as primary learning experiences. The following table maps each excursion to its module focus and provides suggested pre-/post-readings.

Site	Duration	Focus & Learning	Suggested Readings
Falefa Valley	Overnight	Cultural heritage: aiga structures, oral history, traditional architecture, sacred sites, storytelling with community elders	Vaai, E. (2011). Dynamism and Resilience; Macpherson & Macpherson (2009) – social structure chapters
Sataoa (Mangrove Conservation)	Overnight	Coastal ecology meets cultural stewardship; traditional resource management; community conservation governance	Gegeo, D.W. (1998). Indigenous Knowledge and Empowerment; Pedersen Zari et al. (2024) – nature-based solutions
Savai'i Island	Overnight	Sustainable development and ecotourism: land use, volcanic heritage, Samoan village economy, tourism and culture tensions	Macpherson & Macpherson (2009) – development chapters; supplementary ecotourism readings (libguide)

Manono Island	Overnight	Island ecosystems and no-car culture; traditional fishing practices; community sustainability; environmental observation	Latai-Niusulu et al. (2020) – community resilience; Hau’ofa (2008) – ocean connectedness
Amaile Village Homestay	5 days	Samoa identity and traditional structures: matai governance, daily fa'a Samoa rhythms, gender roles, family obligations, participant observation	Mafile'o et al. (2024) – talanoa and fa'afaletui; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) – decolonising Pacific research
Fiji Field Component	10–12 days	Comparative Pacific identity: Indigenous Fijian communities, Indo-Fijian relations, colonial legacies, environment, resilience across Oceania	Hau’ofa (2008) – We Are the Ocean; Thaman (2003) – Decolonizing Pacific Studies; supplementary Fiji readings (libguide)

Full Bibliography

- Gegeo, D.W. (1998). Indigenous knowledge and empowerment: Rural development examined from within. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 10(2), 289–315.
- Hau’ofa, E. (2008). *The Ocean in Us*. In *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Latai-Niusulu, A., Binns, T., & Nel, E. (2020). Climate change and community resilience in Samoa. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 41(1), 40–60.
- Macpherson, C., & Macpherson, L. (2009). *A Brief History of Samoa's Engagement with Global Forces*. Auckland: David Ling Publishing.
- Mafile'o, T., Vaka, S., Leau, K., Satele, P., Alefaio-Tugia, S., & Fulu-Aiolupotea, S.M. (2024). Decolonising qualitative analysis: Collectively weaving understanding using talanoa and fa'afaletui. *Qualitative Research*, 24(4).
- Pedersen Zari, M., et al. (2024). Nature-based solutions for urban climate change adaptation in Te Moananui Oceania. 4th Pacific Ocean–Pacific Climate Change Conference, May 2024.
- Suaalii-Sauni, T., & Fulu-Aiolupotea, S.M. (2014). Decolonising Pacific research. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 55(3), 331–344.
- Thaman, K.H. (2003). Decolonizing Pacific Studies. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 15(1), 1–17.
- Vaai, E. (2011). *Dynamism and Resilience: Samoan Social Structure and Cultural Change*. Suva: Pacific Theological College.