

From Tongan Meeting House to Samoan Chapel:

A Recent Tongan Origin for the Samoan Fale Āfolau

SHAWN S. BARNES AND ROGER C. GREEN

IN A RECENT PAPER, BARNES AND HUNT HAVE REVIEWED EVIDENCE FOR A STRONG, long-standing and direct connection between Sāmoa and Tonga before European contact.¹ In this paper, we seek to provide a case study of Sāmoa-Tonga interaction by indigenous agency. We will show that the Samoan *fale āfolau* (long house) is convincingly interpreted as an historic introduction from Tonga, with Samoan modification, which served as an early Christian chapel design. A Tongan origin for the *fale āfolau* is an especially contested viewpoint in present-day Sāmoa, where many consider it to be a truly indigenous design.²

Traditionally, Samoa has had two types of large houses used for public gatherings, the *fale tele* (Figure 1) and the *fale āfolau* (Figure 2). The traditional designs for these house styles can still be seen around Sāmoa today. Consensus, both in commonly held tradition and academic literature, tends to hold that these two styles of houses have been part of Samoan culture from time immemorial.³

In-depth descriptions of the construction intricacies of both the Samoan *fale tele* and *fale āfolau* have been given by others.⁴ Both houses serve as meeting houses in more recent times; the round *fale tele* featuring a centrally placed post or set of posts, and the more elongated or oblong *fale āfolau* supported by a double set of peripheral posts. We wish to focus only on the construction differences that affect the inner space of these two structures and thus their resulting functions.

¹ Shawn S. Barnes and Terry L. Hunt, 'Samoa's pre-contact connections in West Polynesia and beyond', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 114:3 (2005), 227–66.

² A.E. Allen, 'Space as social construct: the vernacular architecture of rural Samoa', PhD thesis, Columbia University (New York 1993), 222; F.N.F. Tupua, *O Le Suaga A Le Vaatele (The findings of the Big Canoe)* (Apia 2002), 274; F.L. Higgins, *The Samoan Fale* (Apia 1992).

³ Allen, *Space as social construct*, 222; Tupua, *O Le Suaga A Le Vaatele*, 274; Higgins, *The Samoan Fale*.

⁴ Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), 'Samoa material culture', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, 75 (1930), 11–24; A. Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: an outline of a monograph with particular consideration of German Samoa*, vol. 2 (Auckland 1994 [1901]), 260–78; W.C. Handy and E.S.C. Handy, 'Samoa house building, cooking, and tattooing', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, 15 (1924), 4–13.

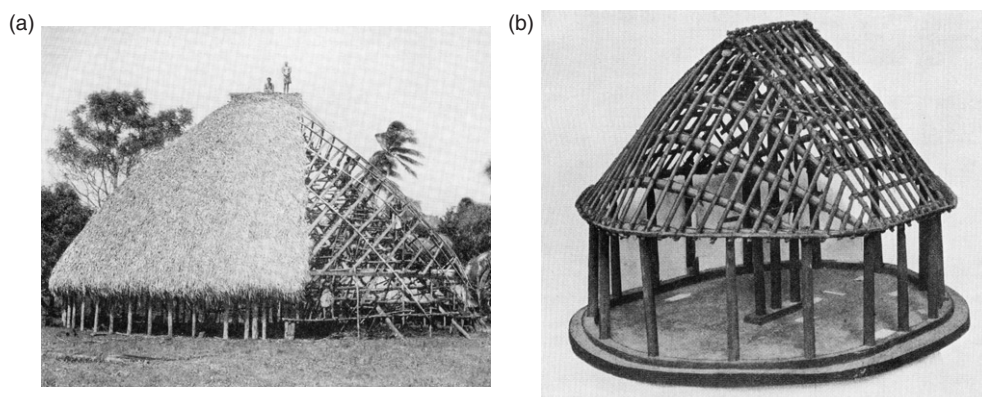


FIGURE 1: (a) Photograph of a *fale tele* under construction and (b) a model of the *fale tele* interior. From A. Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: an outline of a monograph with particular consideration of German Samoa*, vol. 2 (Auckland 1994 [1901]), 268, 266.

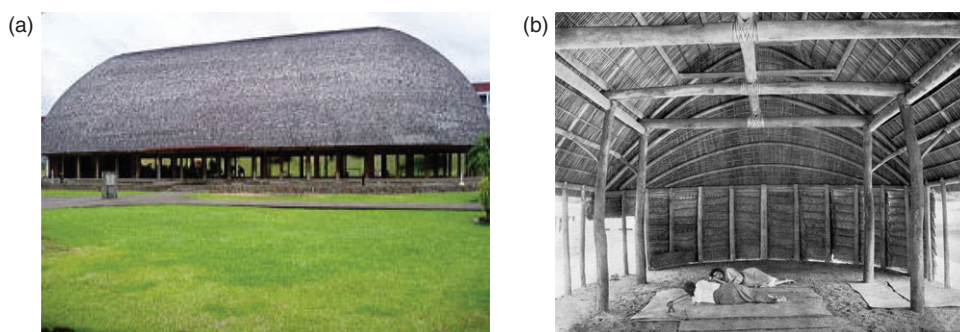


FIGURE 2: (a) A modern Samoan *fale āfolau* on the campus of the National University of Sāmoa (photograph taken by Shawn S. Barnes) and (b) an interior view of a small *fale āfolau*, from E. Scheurmann, *Samoa: Ein Bilderwerk* (Konstanz 1927), plate 45.

The Fale Tele

Strictly speaking, *fale tele* translates to ‘big house’ in Samoan. However, it is more commonly referred to as ‘round house’, because the design layout of its large size also necessitates its round or slightly elliptical shape (Figure 1).⁵ The ridgepole of the *fale tele* is supported by one to four (but usually three) posts, which are placed in the centre of the structure (Figures 3c and 5). The *fale tele* can be built to quite a large scale. In the 1830s, one *fale tele* in the village of Lealatele was reported to hold more than 1,000 people.⁶

⁵ G.B. Milner, *Samoa Dictionary* (Auckland 1993), 57.

⁶ A. Buzacott, *Mission Life in the Islands of the Pacific* (Suva 1985 [1886]), 83.

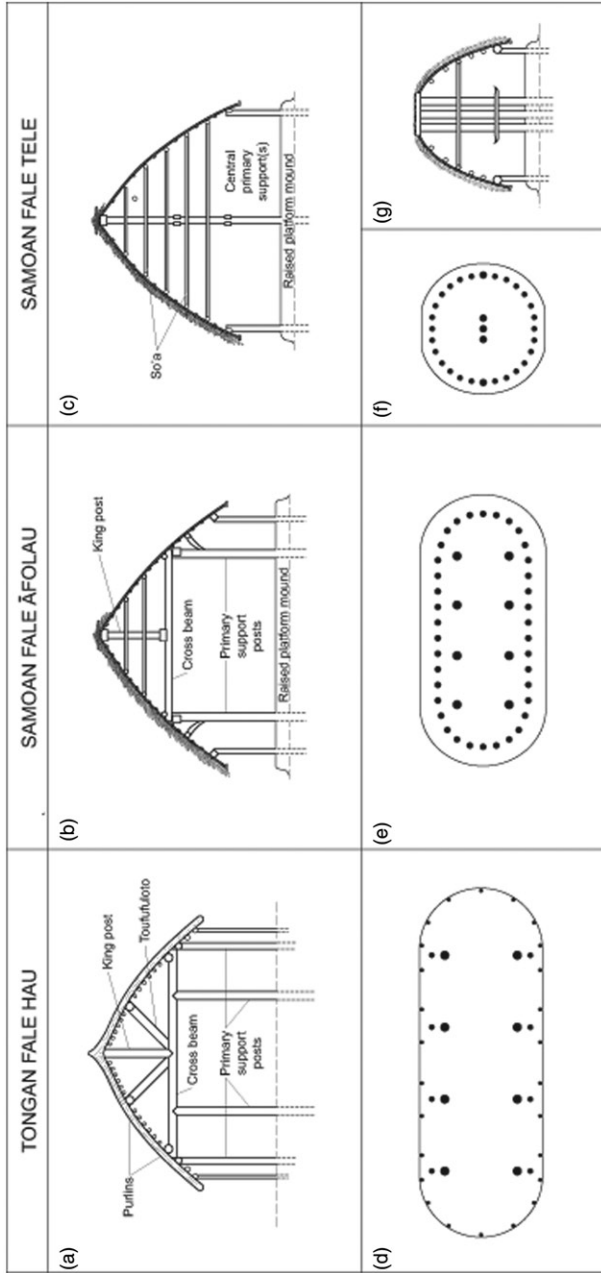


FIGURE 3: Comparative illustrations for the traditionally named, large sized 18th and early 19th century Tongan and Samoan house forms: a, b, c — latitudinal cross-sections of each named type; d, e, f — their ground plans showing the principal posthole arrangement typical of each; g — a longitudinal cross-section of the Samoan *fale tele* showing the common three-central post arrangement. Drawn by Seline McNamee, University of Auckland.

Early visitors to Sāmoa often recorded the presence of *fale tele* with admiration. La Pérouse, the first European to land on the islands, offered the first (and very brief) recorded description of such a house in 1787.⁷ John Williams, one of the first European missionaries to arrive in Sāmoa wrote in 1830:

The spacious houses erected for public entertainment are firm and neatly put together. They are between a round and oval. Two or three large posts are placed in the ground to support a short tahuu or ridge pole about from 6 to 10 feet long. Rafters and thatch are placed upon this ridge pole the cross way of the house supported by posts and a wall plate at the side. This forms the middle of the house. They then form two round ends to the short piece of the building which forms the middle fixing their rafters and thatch endways . . . Those large buildings are generally open all round and covered with mats for flooring. They are from forty to fifty feet long and about thirty or five and thirty feet wide. The dwelling houses of the natives are of the same shape but much smaller and lower.⁸

It is important to note that Williams described all Samoan houses as being of round design, the actual residence houses being smaller, but of similar shape. No mention is made of the oblong *fale āfolau* (see below).

Nine years after Williams's description, Wilkes tells us:

The work in which the Samoans show their greatest ingenuity, is in the construction of their native houses and particularly of their fale teles or council-houses, some of which are of large dimensions. They are built of the wood of the breadfruit tree, and these are the two modes in use, their own, and that borrowed from the Friendly Islands. The true Samoan house is slightly oval; those of the Friendly Islands are oblong. They may be said to consist of three parts, the centre, and two ends; the former is erected first. For this purpose the three centre posts, which are 25 or 30 feet high, are usually first raised; on these rests the ridge pole. A staging or scaffolding is now erected, nearly in the form of the roof, which serves for ladders and to support the roof temporarily . . . On one, and sometimes on both sides of the centre-post of the house, is a small circular hearth, enclosed by stones of larger size; this is the place for burning the dried leaves of the cocoanut, which serves them for light at night.⁹

Wilkes noted the traditional construction of the *fale tele*, but also a new and non-native oblong house design borrowed from the Friendly Islands (Tonga).

Rev. John Stair, a missionary in Sāmoa from 1838–1845, writes of that time:

The Samoan house is generally elliptical, but at times circular, when it resembles an immense beehive. The roof is supported by three centre-posts, and a number of smaller ones are placed under the eaves about three feet apart. These are usually about four or five feet in length. Formerly only the elliptical and circular forms were used by the Samoans in the construction of their dwellings, but latterly many houses have been built after the Tonga model, which is found better adapted to resist the high winds so common at one season of the year. These, called *afolau*, are often built in a very substantial manner, the centre part of the roof being supported by a double

⁷ J. Dunmore (ed.), *The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse 1785–1788* (Cambridge 1995), 394.

⁸ R. Moyle (ed.), *The Samoan Journals of John Williams 1830–1832* (Canberra 1984), 251.

⁹ C. Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, vol. 2 (Saddle River, NJ 1970 [1845]), 146–7.

row of posts and cross-beams, from which rise centre-posts, in addition to those which support the eaves.¹⁰

Here, Stair is explicit about the distinction between the traditional Samoan *fale tele* and the recently imported Tongan *fale āfolau*.

The missionary Thomas Heath, in writing about ‘the large house of chiefs, built for business and for the entertainment of travelling parties’ also distinguishes Samoan and Tongan house forms:

Then there are sometimes three, sometimes four sets of cross beams at different heights, tying the two opposite roofs together and serving also as additional supports by being fixed to the upright centre-posts which they cross . . . The form of the proper Samoan house is slightly oval; those of an oblong shape are built after the Tongan fashion.¹¹

We shall return to the distinction between, and the origins of, both the *fale tele* and the *fale āfolau*, but we must first discuss the form and function of the *fale tele*. The observations quoted above give the basic design of the 19th-century Samoan *fale tele*. A single row of outer posts encircle and support the outer ring of the round roof while between one and four (usually three) posts support the center (Figures 3c and 5). This basic design is attested to by many early observers, such as by Murray in 1837,¹² by Lundie in 1840,¹³ by Jackson in 1840,¹⁴ by Erskine in 1849,¹⁵ and by Turner in the 1840s.¹⁶

In the descriptions quoted above, the function of the *fale tele* is described as a place of formal meeting (*fono*) and of public entertainment. In Davidson’s review of the layout and composition of Samoan villages at the time of missionary contact in the 1830s, she noted various missionary terms for *fale tele*, such as assembly house, government house, large house, big house, great house, large round house and large dancing house.¹⁷ These were places of functional public entertainment, especially in the form of dancing, accommodation for visiting parties (*malaga*), reception of strangers (including missionaries as village guests) and council houses. In respect of the last function as council houses (*fono*), the *fale tele* was considered property of the highest titled figure in the village.¹⁸ Every central section of coastal settlement had at least one, and sometimes more, large houses, according to the number of high chiefs in the village.¹⁹

We now turn to the house design that our early observers recognised as a recent importation from Tonga.

¹⁰ J.B. Stair, *Old Samoa* (Papakura 1983 [1897]), 105.

¹¹ T. Heath, ‘The Navigator’s or Samoan Islands’, *The Polynesian*, 1:17 (3 Oct. 1840), 65.

¹² A.W. Murray, *Forty Years’ Mission Work in Polynesia and New Guinea* (London 1876), 50.

¹³ G.A. Lundie, *Missionary Life in Samoa* (Edinburgh 1846), 108.

¹⁴ J.A. Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise among the Islands of the Western Pacific* (London 1967 [1853]), 413.

¹⁵ Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise*, 45.

¹⁶ G. Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia* (Papakura 1984 [1861]), 257.

¹⁷ J.M. Davidson, ‘Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840’, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 78:1 (1969), 63 fn 109.

¹⁸ Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 148.

¹⁹ Davidson, ‘Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840’, 63–4.

The Fale Āfolau

In Sāmoa today, one can still find examples of the *fale tele*, but they are becoming increasingly rare.²⁰ Today, the *fale āfolau* (long house), either in its traditional or modern incarnation, is the more common form of structure used for meetings, accommodating guests, or for day-to-day life.

Fale āfolau is commonly referred to as a 'long house' in Samoan (Figure 2). Characterised by two sets of posts around the house and kingposts supporting the roof, one set of posts encircles the exterior in the same manner as in the *fale tele*. The second set of posts of the *fale āfolau* are arranged in a rectangular fashion in the interior and support the ridgepole through a set of tie-beams and kingposts (Figure 3b). As a result of this layout, the ends of the *fale āfolau* can be continually elongated by the addition of more sets of interior posts, tie-beams, and kingposts, creating a longer house with the same width, while the *fale tele* is obligated by its central-post construction design to expand in all directions.

Both these house types feature rounded ends, which Hiroa recognised as being of pre-missionary status to West Polynesia.²¹ These he contrasted with the quite different round-ended forms of Central-East Polynesia, which are of post missionary age.

By the time of the first systematic material culture studies of Sāmoa, in the early 20th century, the *fale āfolau* had become very common and a mainstay of Samoan architecture.²² The ubiquitous presence of the *fale āfolau* design in early 20th-century Sāmoa, and the linguistic association of the modifier 'āfolau' with a sea voyage or canoe house, prompted Te Rangi Hiroa to argue that the *fale āfolau* design was older and ancestral to the *fale tele*, going so far as to suggest that the *fale āfolau* was introduced to Tonga from Sāmoa.²³ However, he was contradicted by his Samoan informants, who explained to him the design of the first house built in Sāmoa, the house of the Samoan god Tagaloa, as a *fale tele*.²⁴ This oral tradition of the *fale tele* constituting the original Samoan house was confirmed by Holmes.²⁵ However, a commonly held contemporary view in Sāmoa posits the *fale āfolau* as a very old Samoan design, as traditional and ancient as the *fale tele*.²⁶ We argue that the *fale āfolau* was introduced from Tonga after La Pérouse and Williams (who recorded no structures of the *fale āfolau* design), but before Wilkes, Stair and Heath, who recognised its recent importation. This suggests an importation of the *fale āfolau* design in the 1830s.

Where, then, is the home of the *fale āfolau*? As we have seen, Wilkes, Stair and Heath explicitly state a Tongan origin. Burrows has shown the presence of

²⁰ R. Neich, *Material Culture of Western Samoa* (Wellington 1985), 9.

²¹ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), 'Samoan material culture', 512–13.

²² Peter (Te Rangi Hiroa), 'Samoan material culture', 7; Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: an outline of a monograph*, 262.

²³ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), 'Samoan material culture', 7–10.

²⁴ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), 'Samoan material culture', 83.

²⁵ L.D. Holmes, *Samoan Village* (New York 1974), 52.

²⁶ Allen, 'Space as social construct', 222; Tupua, *O Le Suaga A Le Vaatele*, 274; Higgins, *The Samoan Fale*.

kingposts and tie-beams to be an architectural feature unique to West Polynesia.²⁷ This style of house and roof construction has also been ethnographically documented for Fiji.²⁸ While the *fale āfolau* design may possibly have originated in Fiji, we argue that it was introduced to Sāmoa via Tonga.²⁹ This would be in agreement with the view of Barnes and Hunt that, at least for the periods of time best remembered in oral tradition, there has been a much stronger direct connection between Sāmoa and Tonga than Sāmoa and Fiji, with Tonga playing an intermediary role in West Polynesia.³⁰

The design of the *fale āfolau* is similar to the *fale hau* and *fale fakamanuka* of Tonga. The *fale hau* (Figures 3a and 7) is known as either the ‘king house’³¹ or ‘kava house’.³² This was the largest type of building observed among Tongans at the time of European contact and was the structure used for public gatherings, kava ceremonies, and later for Christian church services.³³ The *fale hau* is recorded by McKern as consisting of 6–10 large interior posts and being over 100 feet long and 50 feet wide.³⁴ The *fale fakamanuka* is a similar type of Tongan house but of smaller scale. This type of house shared most of the same basic design features as the *fale hau* and *fale āfolau*. Its name literally means ‘in the fashion of Manu‘a’, the easternmost island group in Sāmoa.³⁵ This could be interpreted to imply a Samoan origin for this Tongan house design, but, as we have seen, no evidence of the *fale fakamanuka* design has been found in the Samoan early historic record nor, as we will lay out below, in an archaeological context within the Samoan archipelago which would secure its pre-1830 age.

The 18th-century *fale hau/fakamanuka* style, which, we argue, became the *fale āfolau* style in Sāmoa after 1830, is often referred to in the early accounts of Tonga.³⁶ In 1777, Cook described the Tongan long house:

The dimensions of the middling one [house] is about thirty feet long, twenty broad and twelve high. It is properly speaking a sort of roof or shade, rounded at the ends, reaching to within two feet and a half (or at most three) of the ground all round, under which they creep in. It is supported by strong posts plac'd commonly at equal distances a little within the edge, which others laid along their tops and some laid

²⁷ E.G. Burrows, ‘Western Polynesia: a study in cultural differentiation’, in W. Kaudern (ed.), *Etnologiska Studier* (Gothenburg 1938), 29.

²⁸ S. Freeman, ‘The centre-poled houses of western Vitilivu’, *Domodomo*, 4 (1986), 3; A.R. Tippet, ‘Fijian material culture’, *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, 232 (1968), 155.

²⁹ Here we note that J. Field (‘The evolution of competition and cooperation in Fijian prehistory: archaeological research in the Sigatoka Valley, Fiji’, PhD thesis, University of Hawai‘i (Honolulu 2003), 276–8) has made a case for an ultimate New Caledonian origin for centre-poled houses in Fiji where the Fijian form is found late in prehistory.

³⁰ Barnes and Hunt, ‘Samoa’s pre-contact connections in West Polynesia and beyond’.

³¹ S. Tuita, ‘Towards a Tongan architecture: a commentary from a Tongan perspective’, BArch thesis, University of Auckland (Auckland 1998), 47.

³² D.H.R. Spennemann, ‘*Ata A Tonga Mo Ata O Tonga*’, PhD thesis, University of Auckland (Auckland 1989), v1.2, 15.

³³ Tuita, ‘Towards a Tongan architecture’, 47–8; Spennemann, ‘*Ata A Tonga Mo Ata O Tonga*’, 15–6.

³⁴ W. McKern, ‘Tongan Material Culture’, Honolulu, Bishop Museum Archives. MSSC McKern box 1.2 (1921), 10–106.

³⁵ Tuita, ‘Towards a Tongan architecture’, 47–8; Spennemann, ‘*Ata A Tonga Mo Ata O Tonga*’, 15–6.

³⁶ Allen, ‘Space as social construct’, 217.

across from these, which again have perpendicular ones rising from the middle to support the top ridge.³⁷

Other early visitors, such as Forster in 1774,³⁸ Ellis in 1777,³⁹ Malaspina in 1793⁴⁰ and Mariner⁴¹ in the first decade of the 19th century confirm both the basic layout and the indigenous status of *fale hau* design in Tonga. An early visual record of Tongan *fale hau* labelled *K* can be seen in an illustration by Isaac Gilsemans of Tasman's visit to Nomuka in 1643.⁴² The settlement portion of the drawing clearly shows a large and oblong-shaped open-sided house identified in the text as a ceremonial *belay*, very distinct in both size and shape from the other common dwellings that form the remaining settlement. Moreover, this singular form of *fale* is situated within an elite compound, whose perimeter is delineated by a timbered palisade within which courtyard only one among the other more ordinary houses has also been placed. Nor does there appear to be any reliable mention of the *fale tele* house design in early Tonga. The only mention by any early visitor to Tonga of a house structure with a central post in the *fale tele* fashion has been shown to be suspect.⁴³

Proto-Historic House Design in Tonga and Sāmoa

In the paragraphs above, we have shown that, at the time of first European observations, in the late-17th century and early-18th centuries the *fale hau*, a Tongan house whose construction was similar to that of the Samoan *fale āfolau*, was a common design for large community meeting-house functions in Tonga. In contrast, the *fale tele* served that purpose in Sāmoa. We now turn to archaeological evidence, which attests to the antiquity of these house designs in both Sāmoa and Tonga.

Tongan Houses in an Archaeological Context

Tonga currently presents major lacunae in the archaeological record. Thus, despite field surveys of its surface structural remains, easily identifiable dwellings, either in the form of outlining curb stones and associated pavements, or of raised housing platforms or mounds, have proved elusive. Nor have excavations, even those concerned with the period from the 16th to 18th centuries, provided telling

³⁷ J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook On His Voyages of Discovery*, vol. 3: *The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery*, pt 2 (Cambridge 1967), 935.

³⁸ G. Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, vol. 1 (Honolulu 2000 [1777]), 441.

³⁹ W. Ellis, *An Authentic Narrative of a Voyage performed by Captain Cook and Captain Clerke in His Majesty's Ships Resolution and Discovery*, vol. 1 (New York 1969 [1782]), 64.

⁴⁰ P. Herda, 'A translation and annotation of the journals of the Malaspina Expedition during their Stay on Vava'u, Tonga, 1793', Masters thesis, University of Auckland (Auckland 1983). 95.

⁴¹ J. Martin, *Tonga Islands: William Mariner's Account* (Tonga 1981 [1817]), 360.

⁴² W. Eisler, *The Furthest Shore: images of Terra Australis from the Middle Ages to Captain Cook* (Cambridge 1995), 88–99.

⁴³ The account in G. Vason, *Life of the late George Vason of Nottingham* (Nuku'alofa 1973 [1810]), 120 has been questioned by E.N. Ferdon, *Early Tonga as the Explorers Saw It* (Tucson 1987) 21.

TABLE 1. Measurements for an unusual kind of housing outlined by stone curbing archaeologically attested by sole examples from each of three islands in the Tongan group*

Site	Length (m)	Breadth (m)	Source
Pukotala, Ha'ano Island	11	6	Burley (1992)
Tatafa Island	10	6	Burley (1992)
Hamula, Tongatapu Island	10	6	Green and Terrell (1965)

*Data drawn from D.V. Burley, 'Archaeological research in the Ha'apai Islands Kingdom of Tonga: a report on the 1990 field season', unpublished report (1991), on file in Prime Minister's Office, Nuku'alofa; and R.C. Green and John Edward Terrell, field notes made from a short field survey of Tongan fortifications on Tongatapu in 1965, held by Green.

information about Tongan housing in the centuries immediately before European contact. Given this lack of data, perhaps it is not surprising that archaeological observations from surveys in that group of islands record just four examples for the use of aligned stones laid on their edges as curbs outlining oblong or oval house forms of some size. Not only is the function of these somewhat uncertain, but also each is from a different island — Ha'ano, Tatafa, Nomuka and Tongatapu. The three for which there are measurements appear in Table 1. The sole Tafata Island example may well be *Sia hinefaitehina* (a god-house) — one identified by Gifford⁴⁴ for the pigeon god, *Foliakiipulotu* — presumably erected by one of that island's elite, Malupo.⁴⁵

Given the substantial gaps in the archaeology record, the most informative sources on pre-contact Tongan housing therefore rely almost entirely on the historical descriptions of early European observer texts, plus a limited number of exterior views of Tongan housing by draughtsman on those voyages. For the interior architectural details and superstructure of the *fale hau* itself (see Figures 3a and 7), fortunately, there is a scene from Cook's voyage illustrating the interior of a large example of a *fale hau* crowded with people in 1777, in the centre of which sits the Tongan chief Poulaho drinking kava (Figure 7). For our purposes, this illustration firmly attests to the presence of buildings of the *fale hau* design in Tonga from the mid-18th century.

On the general subject of housing, Dye lamented that McKern had little to say about house platforms in his 1929 monograph on *The Archaeology of Tonga*.⁴⁶ Moreover, like others such as Kirch, Davidson and Spennemann who have conducted such surveys in the Tongan Island group, Dye too found he had great difficulty in distinguishing possible house platforms on the basis of surface remains from the more numerous low earthen mounds commonly used for graves.⁴⁷ As a consequence, fairly elaborate schemes have been developed for the

⁴⁴ E.W. Gifford, 'Tongan society', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, 61 (1929), 310.

⁴⁵ D.V. Burley, pers. comm., 2006

⁴⁶ T. Dye, 'Appendix C — Archaeological Investigations on Tafahi Island', in P.V. Kirch, *Niutopotapu: the prehistory of a Polynesian chiefdom* (Seattle 1988), 282.

⁴⁷ P.V. Kirch, *Niutopotapu: the prehistory of a Polynesian chiefdom* (Seattle 1988); J.M. Davidson, 'Archaeological investigations in two burial mounds at Atele, Tongatapu', *Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 6 (1969); Spennemann, 'Ata A Tonga Mo Ata O Tonga'; Dye, 'Appendix C'.

classification of mounds and platforms in Tonga.⁴⁸ In contrast, for the proposed house platform class of McKern, few surface features have been identified from which to infer the presence of dwellings or larger habitations beyond the occasional stone door sills and infrequent remnants of stone alignments. Indeed, from the largely pre-missionary descriptions up to the 1790s, most of the early kinds of housing seem to have had interiors covered in part by woven flooring mats resting directly on the ground surface. Thus their floors lacked any of the common kinds of internal flooring devices employing fine water-worn gravels or raised stone pavements found in Sāmoa. This means that what is needed, ‘when the archaeology of Tonga’s recent past comes into its own’⁴⁹ are extensive area excavations of the earth and midden deposits in the habitation zones of archaeological sites dating from the last millennium.

Spennemann began such an excavation on Pangaimotu, off the coast of Tongatapu, discerning various possible posthole patterns in a four by four metre square.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the limited extent of area investigated is insufficient to support a claim by Spennemann that the short arcs of posthole patterns exposed really permit one to infer the presence of pre-contact oblong-shaped house types of some given size, much less those of *fale hau* dimensions with their typical double set of interior posts.

Samoan Houses in an Archaeological Context

In terms of archaeological evidence for housing design, the situation in Sāmoa has proved to be in contrast to the limited information gleaned from the Tongan archaeological record. Ancient signs of former housing revealed by surface outlines delineated by curb stones, gravelled interior fills, raised house platforms in stone, and stone, earthen mounds and terraces supporting house structures have been widely recorded and many have been excavated and dated. Even a category of ‘household units’, with surrounding boundary walls linked by pathways, has been developed.⁵¹ Yet, in these fairly exhaustive and ongoing archaeological surveys of many regions within Sāmoa, no unambiguous evidence indicative of a pre-1830s *fale āfolau* design has yet been found.⁵²

However, in addition, there is a major sampling bias in archaeological data bearing on evidence for the *fale tele*, especially for the very large guest, community or public meeting house.⁵³ This relates in particular to archaeological survey records and/or excavations yielding plans for postholes of

⁴⁸ Kirch, *Niutopotapu*, 41–69.

⁴⁹ Dye, ‘Appendix C — Archaeological Investigations on Tafahi Island’, 282.

⁵⁰ Spennemann, ‘*Ata A Tonga Mo Ata O Tonga*’, vol. 1, 35 and Fig.7.17.

⁵¹ R.C. Green, ‘Retrospective view of settlement pattern studies in Samoa’, in T.N. Ladefoged and M.W. Graves (eds), *Pacific Landscapes: archaeological approaches* (Los Osos 2002), 140–6 and Fig. 10.

⁵² J.M. Davidson, ‘Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey’, in R.C. Green and J. M. Davidson (eds), ‘Archaeology in Western Samoa’, *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 232.

⁵³ Green, ‘Retrospective view of settlement pattern studies in Samoa’, 142.

buildings comparable with those examples described in the early historic literature compiled by Davidson covering most examples noted by European observers in various coastal regions throughout Sāmoa, beginning in 1787.⁵⁴

Early Historic Recordings of Samoan Houses

It is thus fortunate that some of these historic records from the 1830s to the 1850s within the Samoan group exist in the form of descriptive texts, complete with measurements, which can be joined to a few illustrations of a quality comparable with those for Tongan housing. These assist greatly to fill in the coastal sampling gap in the archaeological evidence. That gap, of course, is due in large part to the destruction of the much older, yet still visible remains for former housing within modern coastal Samoan villages and the difficulty of conducting extensive investigations in those villages, which might provide excavation records of a much earlier coastal settlement and associated house forms.

One turns initially to the pictorial record for 1838 and the sole village settlement that once dominated the head of the embayment that forms a harbour for today's port city of Apia. When this settlement was first visited by Williams in 1832, after coming ashore with much ceremony, he repaired to its *fale tele*, typically described as its 'large government house' to converse with its chief. Although this proved capable of holding an estimated 100 people, 80 of whom, including its chief, attended an impromptu Christian service within it the next day to mark his acceptance of this new religion, the initial offer by the chief during Williams's visit to hold an evening's entertainment in it to include sung night-dancing was respectfully declined.⁵⁵

Six years later, two of the artists accompanying d'Urville's 1838 visit to Sāmoa made a set of sketches, later turned into lithographs for this same coastal settlement of Apia.⁵⁶ The one by the artist Lebreton of its main square (*malae*) featured a centrally situated open-sided *fale tele* with perhaps another of this kind lying somewhat to its rear (Figure 4). This impressive building, admired by the captain as a masterpiece of native industry, has its interior construction preserved in detail through the efforts of the artist Goupil (Figure 5). It serves to confirm the structural arrangements of a central post grouping and supporting horizontal *so'a* for the Samoan *fale tele*.

The summary Williams provided for the larger-size buildings visited in various coastal settlements in 1830 and 1832 are the most informative available from the initial period of missionary contact and invaluable for giving dimensions to those oval to round and fairly spacious coastal house-like structures used for entertainment and public meetings: 'they are generally open all round &

⁵⁴ Davidson, 'Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840', 63–4; Davidson, 'Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey', 234.

⁵⁵ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 151, 168, 170.

⁵⁶ S. Tcherkézoff, *First Contacts in Polynesia: the Samoan case (1722–1848)* (Canberra and Christchurch 2004), 90–1 and captions to Figures 4, 5 and 6.



FIGURE 4: 'Central square of Apia, Island of 'Upolu', Sāmoa 1838. From tome I, plate 81 of Dumont d'Urville's *Atlas pittoresque* to accompany his 10 volume *Voyage au pôle sud et dans l'Océanie* (Paris 1846). (Scanned by and published with the permission of the Hocken Library of the University of Otago in Dunedin.)

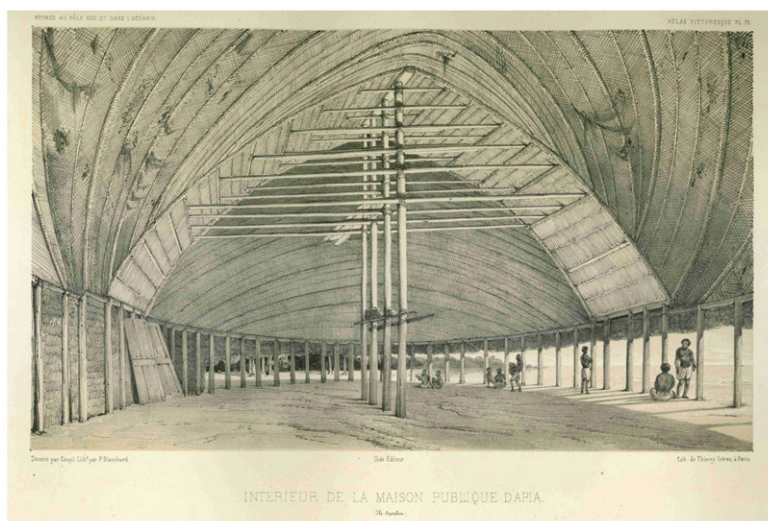


FIGURE 5: 'View of the inside of the meeting house of Apia, Island of 'Upolu', Sāmoa 1838. From tome I, plate 71 of Dumont d'Urville's *Atlas pittoresque* to accompany his 10 volume *Voyage au pôle sud et dans l'Océanie* (Paris 1846). (Scanned by and published with the permission of the Hocken Library of the University of Otago in Dunedin.)



FIGURE 6: ‘Huts of the Natives in Apia, Island of ‘Upolu’, Sāmoa 1838. From tome I, plate 72 of Dumont d’Urville’s *Atlas pittoresque* to accompany his 10 volume *Voyage au pôle sud et dans l’Océanie* (Paris 1846). (Scanned by and published with the permission of the Hocken Library of the University of Otago in Dunedin.)

covered with mats for flooring. They are from forty to fifty feet long and about thirty or five and thirty feet wide’.⁵⁷

In contrast to the *fale tele*, Williams spent almost no time in describing ‘the dwelling houses of the natives’, except to note they were of ‘the same shape but much smaller and lower’.⁵⁸ Here again, an 1838 sketch by Goupil of ‘The huts of the natives in Apia’ (Figure 6) comes into its own in providing numerous visual representations of these smaller round and oval dwellings, rendered with enclosed sides and doorways, situated back from the beach among the trees along one side of a tidal stream. It proves harder, however, to ascertain more precisely their general dimensions from any of the pre-1840 texts by explorers, traders, whalers or missionary observers. For additions to that topic, one has to turn instead to commentary from the interval of the 1840s to 1860s.

From the commentary about Samoan housing in this period, it is evident that Wilkes in Manu‘a in 1839, G. Turner during a residence in Sāmoa beginning in 1843 and Hood from a brief visit in 1862 were describing a rather general run of houses constructed in the *fale tele* style, which on the whole were treated as residences.⁵⁹ Turner differentiated the residential buildings inhabited by chiefs as those sited on metre-high raised platforms built in stone in contrast to those of the ordinary inhabitants, which rested on low rough stone and smooth pebble pavements covered in mats standing only 20–30 cm above the ground surface.

⁵⁷ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 251.

⁵⁸ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 251.

⁵⁹ Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 66–7, 94; Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, 256–75; T.N. Hood, *Notes of a cruise in H.M.S. ‘Fawn’ in the Western Pacific in the year 1862* (Edinburgh 1863), 32.

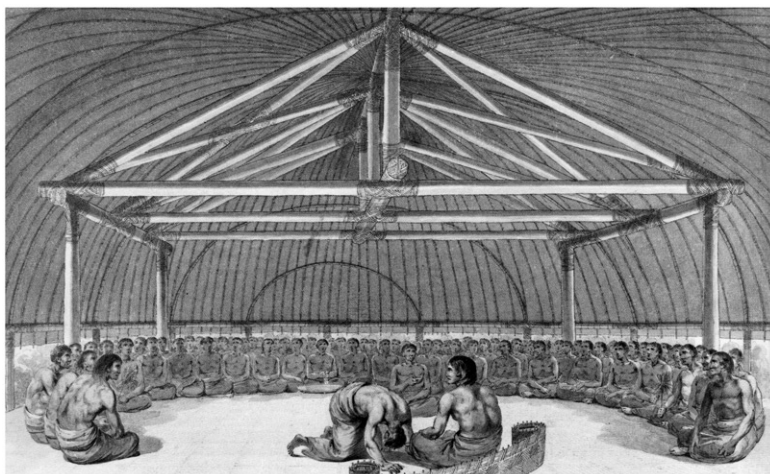


FIGURE 7: ‘Poulaho, King of the Friendly Islands drinking Kava’, Tongatapu 1781. From R. Joppien and B. Smith, *The Art of Cook’s Voyages*, vol. 3: *The Voyage of the Resolution and the Discovery, 1772–1775* (Melbourne 1987), 318. (Published with the permission of Oxford University Press.)

Wilkes, too, described the house of the chief Tuimanu‘a as being 9.1 m in length and situated on a platform 1.2 m high, in a village where most house platforms of its inhabitants were just 60cm high. The various dimensions in the four sources are of structures whose diameters range from 9.1 m to 10.7 m, and possess circumferences of around 30.5 m. As such, they just overlap with the small (9.1 m by 12.2 m) end of the width/length range outlined by Williams above for those functioning as public buildings, and which he viewed as similar to, though in general of a larger size than, the smaller buildings of this kind that served as residences of both chiefs and ordinary inhabitants.

Converting all three of these observations to approximate floor areas under cover, a range from 74 m² to 90 m² stands as common observations, with some of the largest *fale tele* dimensions on the evidence of Williams reaching 132 m². Davidson’s analyses of archaeologically attested floor areas among dwellings in six inland Samoan settlements yield mean figures in a range from 23 m² to 37 m², with only the houses in the mid-island high status village of Vaigafa reaching a mean of 45 m².⁶⁰ Even the largest within that important village, moreover, possessed a floor area of only 68 m², thus not remotely within reach if the 90 m² or more of floor area seemingly ‘required before a *fale tele* could be identified with confidence’.⁶¹ This outcome confirms an all too evident bias in the archaeological data, one not at all surprising, given that none of the observations derives from coastal situations.

⁶⁰ Davidson, ‘Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey’, table 27.

⁶¹ Davidson, ‘Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey’, 234.

Even if ordinary ‘huts’ or ‘native houses’ in coastal settlements were of a lesser size, as the limited historical texts and visual observations indicate, reducing them to less than half of a 74–90 m² size range necessitates the adoption of a rather unlikely proposition. A rather more obvious option with far greater warrant is to propose that, in general, dwellings of all types in the settlements situated inland, in most cases related sections that formed socio-political parts of the more populous coastal units, were in general of lesser size. This would indicate, as Davidson believed, that the present archaeological sampling of houses was not comprehensive enough to cover the full range of outcomes.⁶²

Size Comparisons of Historic and Proto-Historic Samoan Houses

Figure 8, assembled for the named settlement sectors in the inner part of the Falefā valley, compiles sizes and shapes of domestic structures. Two major clusters, A and B based on the dimensions of recorded dwelling remains, are indicated. Those of cluster A, representative of a fairly common kind of inland dwelling, are surprisingly small in size. However, enough among these, involving 11 entries, are based on excavation data to be certain they possessed roofs supported only by perimeter posts. As such, they conform to Buck’s smaller size of dwelling in which the Samoan method of supporting the ridgepole on the curved rafters alone, termed *fa’asoata*, is best applied.⁶³

Cluster B contains the data representative of the larger size of inland dwellings, though they too are far smaller than what one might expect from the coastal observations made in the mid-19th century. Following Buck’s classification of Samoan building types, and McKinley’s interpretation of this particular form of dwelling, they were ascribed to the *fale o’o* category, because they possessed median post supports for the ridgepole.⁶⁴ As Williams and Turner both indicated, in style of construction, their features were in large part similar to the more grand and functional specialised public buildings or *fale tele* described in the contact histories.

In addition to an increased size of those in cluster B over those of A, one major distinguishing feature, indicated by a sufficient number of excavated archaeological examples, is that they employed one or sometimes two central posts in their roof construction, along with the usual perimeter uprights. A prime example is displayed in the excavation plan of a late-18th-century dwelling from the settlement of Leuluasi designated house I that derives from the final pre-contact occupation E at site Le-12 (Figure 9).⁶⁵ An even more oval-shaped

⁶² Davidson, ‘Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey’, 234.

⁶³ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), ‘Samoan material culture’, 12–13.

⁶⁴ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), ‘Samoan material culture’, 11–12; J.R. McKinlay, ‘Excavations at Sasoa’a: the historic phase’, in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), ‘Archaeology in Western Samoa’, *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 28.

⁶⁵ J.M. Davidson and J. Fagan, ‘Excavations at SU-LE-12, Leuluasi’, in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), ‘Archaeology in Western Samoa’, *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 81 and Fig. 46.

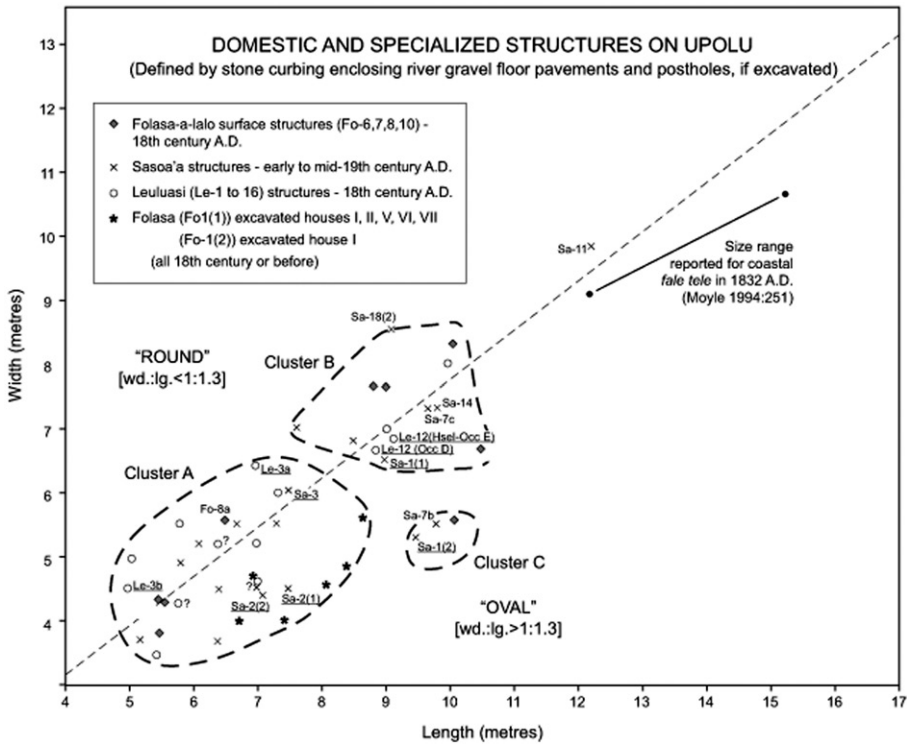


FIGURE 8: Dimensions of pre-1850 AD house outlines in the inland part of the Falefā Valley on the island of ‘Upolu, Sāmoa. Those with numbers are discussed in the text and if underlined have been partially or fully excavated revealing their interior posthole patterns. Other examples are a series of successive excavated houses found in a site in Folasā, Fo-1, each one indicated by its posthole pattern. Drawn by Seline McNamee, University of Auckland. Data sources: J.R. McKinlay, ‘Excavations at Sasoa’a: the historic phase’, in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), ‘Archaeology in Western Samoa’, *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 28; J.M. Davidson, ‘Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey’, in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), ‘Archaeology in Western Samoa’, *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 234.

excavated example of this kind of dwelling with a central post, site Sa-1(2) occurs in cluster C, with a floor area of 42 m^2 comparable with the houses in cluster B. Perhaps four of these more formally roofed and spacious dwellings were present around 1838: three in Leulasi after Christian settlement; and four in Folasā-a-lalo around the end of the 18th century (Figure 8, clusters B and C). A reconstruction of an equivalent kind of dwelling of this type appears possible from the Davidson and Fagan data for a multiple number of successive dwellings during the 16th to 17th century occupation D of site Le-12.⁶⁶ The outcome,

⁶⁶ Davidson and Fagan, ‘Excavations at SU-LE-12, Leuluasi’, 78–9 and Fig. 45.

LEULUASI SITE SU-Le-12: OCCUPATION E-HOUSES I&II

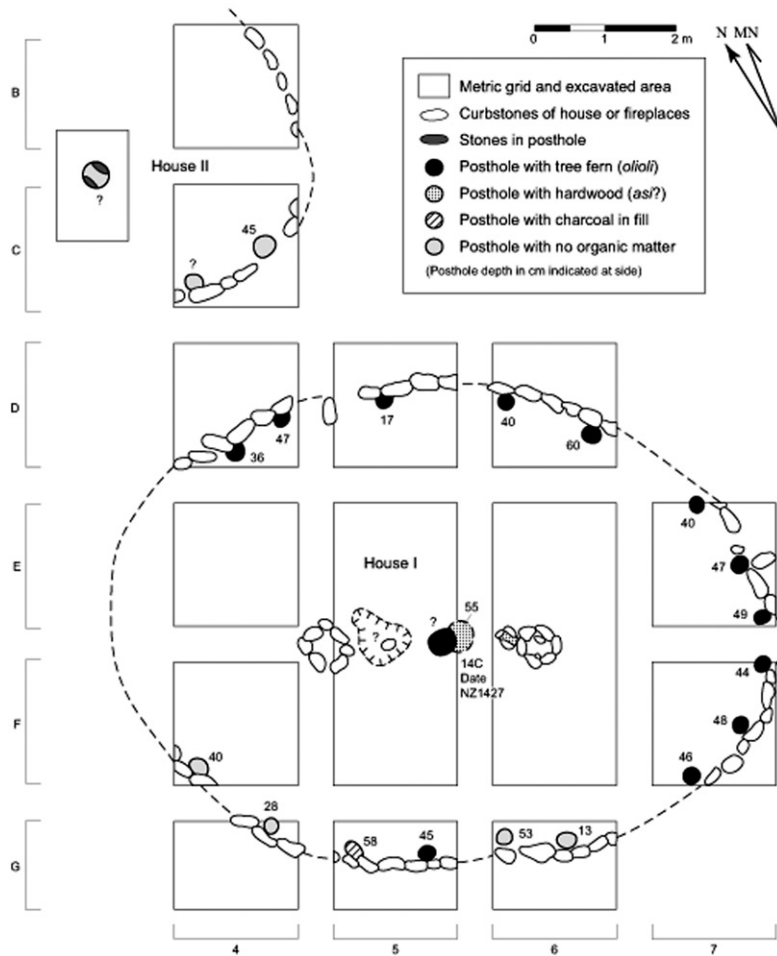


FIGURE 9: The excavation plan of site Le-12 with its postholes, four of them dated to the 18th century occupation E of the traditional settlement of Leuluasi. While typical of inland *fale o'o* in the upper part of the Falefā Valley of 'Upolu, Sāmoa, its features and setting suggest this example is better interpreted as one of the small size of former *fale tele* once found inland. Drawn by Seline McNamee, University of Auckland, based on J.M. Davidson and J. Fagan, 'Excavations at SU-LE-12, Leuluasi', in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), 'Archaeology in Western Samoa', *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 81 and Fig. 46.

portrayed in plan in Figure 10 as having two central posts, one of them dated, suggests that an even earlier example of the same *fale o'o* type may very well have existed at this site during this interval. If judged a reasonably acceptable reconstruction, it stands as a further and older indication for the antiquity of this form of dwelling construction in Sāmoa.

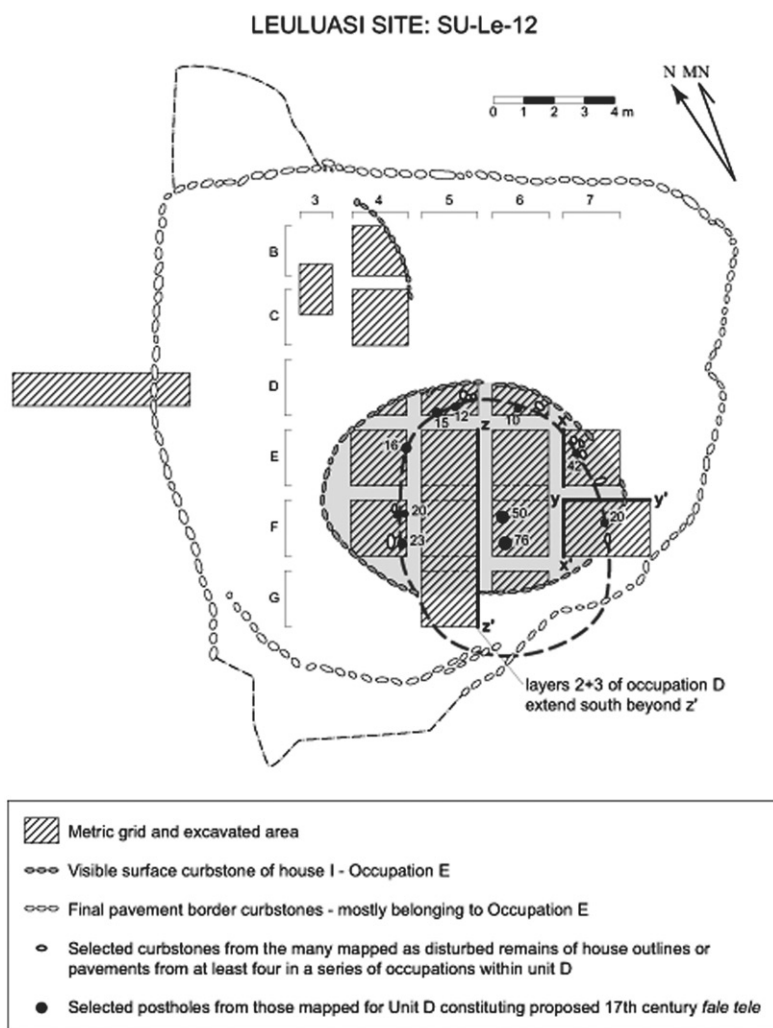


FIGURE 10: Indications at Leuluasi site Le-12 of the surface evidence for 18th century houses I & II of occupation E, in relation to the excavation evidence for selected features of occupation D, associated with a probable *fale o'o* dated to the 16th to 17th century. This too warrants interpretation as one of the smaller inland kind of *fale tele*. Drawn by Seline McNamee, University of Auckland, based on J.M. Davidson and J. Fagan, 'Excavations at SU-LE-12, Leuluasi', in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), 'Archaeology in Western Samoa', *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 81 and Fig. 46.

Davidson observes that Saso'a house 2 of site Sa-11, with a floor area of approximately 95 m², was the largest structure of its kind recorded by archaeology of that time in Sāmoa and the only one which fell within the size range provided for *fale tele* in the 1830s (range of data displayed as a line in the upper right quadrant of Figure 8).⁶⁷ Certainly, without excavation, this remains

⁶⁷ Davidson, 'Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey', 234–5.

a possible interpretation for its type and function. However, as we argue in this essay, the aversion Samoans displayed to using *fale tele* as permanent venues for Christian services,⁶⁸ when coupled with the fact that Sasoa‘a had become one of the mission settlements with a school according to a listing made by Mills in 1838,⁶⁹ makes another view equally necessary to entertain. This is that site Sa-11(2) may have served as the chapel for the 50 plus inhabitants estimated for Sasoa‘a at this time by Davidson.⁷⁰ That structure, very much larger than any other in this much more nucleated historic period settlement, may have been built in the *fale āfolau* style which by that date had become the fashion for such buildings.

In short, the question why *fale tele* appear to be absent from Sāmoa’s archaeological record despite their ample attestation historically now seems to have the beginnings of an answer. Buck, in the course of providing more recent dimensions of length extending over a far greater size range than representative of *fale tele*, states that their length begins at a low end in the range of 9.7 m.⁷¹ This observation from the first part of the 20th century may, in addition, have applied for quite a few centuries before. Thus, it may well have always been fairly close to the mark for the smallest *fale tele*, and as such is certainly not that far off the length of 9.1 m for house I at Le-12, in the settlement of Leuluasi. This would mean it is largely toward the higher end of documented *fale tele* lengths for the first part of the 20th century, reaching by then to 16.7 m and demonstrating that some of these public village structures have, in the last 100 years, grown significantly in their dimensions. In that case, the bias for the mid-19th century has been in the dominantly coastal nature of most observations of housing during the early period of consistent contact which go in concert with the knowledge that observations on still inhabited settlements inland seldom occur in the records after 1830, because most of a rapidly declining Samoan population had already fairly quickly moved to the coast.⁷²

The Origin of the Fale Āfolau in Sāmoa

We have shown above that the *fale tele* is well attested to in both the archaeological and early historic record. However, there is no evidence for the *fale āfolau* design in Sāmoa before 1830. The *fale āfolau* design appears to be of Tongan origin and a historic introduction to Sāmoa. However, by the time of the first published surveys of Samoan material culture in the early 20th century, the *fale āfolau* had become a standard of Samoan architecture and was so prevalent

⁶⁸ Davidson, ‘Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840’, 68.

⁶⁹ J.M. Davidson, ‘Samoan structural remains and settlement patterns’, in R.C. Green and J.M. Davidson (eds), ‘Archaeology in Western Samoa’, *Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 2 (1974), 5.

⁷⁰ Davidson, ‘Introduction to the Upper Falafa Valley: the site survey’, 235.

⁷¹ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), ‘Samoan material culture’, 8.

⁷² Davidson, ‘Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840’; R.C. Green, ‘Protohistoric Samoan Population’, in P.V. Kirch and J. Rallu (eds), *The Growth, Regulation, and Collapse of Island Societies: archaeological and demographic perspectives from the Pacific* (Honolulu 2007), 203–31.

TABLE 2. Full membership in the Wesleyan church in Tonga*

Year	Full members
1829	31
1830	72
1831	516
1832	1,422
1833	3,456
1834	7,451

*These are not simply people who were attending worship, but people who had converted, proved themselves through a trial period, and had been confirmed as full members of the church. From A.R. Tippett, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia* (Chicago 1971), 88.

that it appeared to have been a traditionally Samoan design.⁷³ We now explore the question of why the *fale āfolau* design was introduced and embraced in Sāmoa. The answer begins with the introduction of Christianity to Tonga.

Christianity in Tonga

Organised Christianity was introduced to Tonga in 1797 with the arrival of the first London Missionary Society (LMS) ship, the *Duff* and ten missionaries.⁷⁴ However, the LMS was neither well prepared nor well received at this time and officially abandoned the mission in Tonga by 1800. Wesleyan missionaries first arrived in 1822 and, after a rocky start, the Wesleyan mission was firmly established by the 1830s.⁷⁵ Indeed, there was an explosion of Christianity in Tonga during the 1830s, as shown in Table 2.

In order to accommodate the worship of these many new converts, chapels had to be constructed. The first recorded LMS chapel on Tongatapu was erected at Nukualofa by two Tahitian teachers, Hape and Davida. This chapel was built in the typical European LMS design for East Polynesia. It had fully enclosed walls plastered with coral lime. However, this first chapel does not seem to have been accepted by the Tongans. When Williams saw it in 1830, it was in a state of disrepair and was being used as a school while a native chapel was being built nearby.⁷⁶ When Williams returned in 1832, he saw this newly completed chapel and noted that, after the first failed attempt at a European style chapel, the new one was of indigenous Tongan design and in the *fale āfolau* style. After leaving

⁷³ Buck (Te Rangī Hiroa), 'Samoa material culture', 11–24; A. Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: an outline of a monograph*, 260–78; Handy and Handy, 'Samoa house building, cooking, and tattooing'; Burrows, 'Western Polynesia: a study in cultural differentiation'.

⁷⁴ S. Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga* (Canberra 1974), 25–7.

⁷⁵ S. Latukefu, 'The Wesleyan mission', in N. Rutherford (ed.), *Friendly Islands: a history of Tonga* (Melbourne 1977), 114–7.

⁷⁶ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 44–5.

Tongatapu, Williams saw the same kind of *fale āfolau* style churches in the Ha'apai group and at Niuatoputapu.⁷⁷

Having started with the pre-Christian *fale otu'a*, but needing a building of greater capacity, the Tongans tried a European design but quickly abandoned it for a native *fale āfolau* style. The design then moved northward and quickly became established throughout Tonga. Indeed, when Erskine arrived in Tonga in 1849, he described a Christian church that was simply a converted *fale hau*.⁷⁸ McKern later recorded in 1921, the presence of the oldest surviving churches in Tonga, which were all of the *fale hau* style.⁷⁹ There does not appear to have been any difficulty, either structurally or culturally, in converting the traditional Tongan *fale hau* into a Christian chapel. As we shall see, this was not the case in Sāmoa.

Christianity in Sāmoa

Beachcombers and runaway sailors began to introduce vague forms of Christianity in Sāmoa in the early 19th century, but none achieved real permanence.⁸⁰ The first popular semi-Christian movement, the Siovili cult, began around 1830.⁸¹ The first 'official' introduction of Christianity to Sāmoa came in 1830 with the LMS missionary John Williams. However, it is important to note that the Wesleyan missionary Peter Turner claims that Tongans had been travelling to Sāmoa to spread the Wesleyan faith for years before Williams's arrival.⁸² Turner claims that these indigenous Tongan converts had spread the faith to over 60 villages in Sāmoa in the years prior to Williams.

Before arriving in Sāmoa in 1830, Williams stopped in Tonga and observed the work and *fale āfolau*-style chapels of the Wesleyans there. Williams's host in Sāmoa, the chief Mālietoa of Sapapālī'i, was receptive to the new religion and, during the 1830s, Christianity spread rapidly throughout the archipelago.⁸³ However, the introduction of Christianity not only meant a change of gods to be worshipped but also a change in the houses in which to worship.

In pre-Christian Sāmoa, local or family gods were worshipped in small huts of no real distinction. The prestige of the god was apparently not dependent on the glory of the chapel in which it was worshipped. While admittedly biased, the missionaries are unanimous in their descriptions of these pre-Christian god-houses as small and simple.⁸⁴ These tiny houses simply would not do for large-scale Christian worship. The early missionaries were adamant about the

⁷⁷ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 201.

⁷⁸ Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise*, 113.

⁷⁹ W.C. McKern, 'The Archaeology of Tonga', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, 60 (1929), 91.

⁸⁰ Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, 104–5.

⁸¹ J.D. Freeman, 'The Joe Gimlet or Siovili cult: an episode in the religious history of Samoa', in J.D. Freeman and W.R. Geddes (eds), *Anthropology in the South Seas* (New Plymouth 1959), 185–200.

⁸² P. Turner, *Journal of Peter Turner, Book 4 and 5, January 1836–June 11, 1839*. (Laie 1992), 32.

⁸³ M. Meleisea, *Lagaga: a short history of Western Samoa* (Suva 1987), 57.

⁸⁴ Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, 257; Stair, *Old Samoa*, 105; Murray, *Forty Years' Mission Work in Polynesia and New Guinea*, 50.

need for large, well-built chapels, often equating the conversion of a village to its erection of a chapel.⁸⁵ Hence, with Christianity came the need to erect large places of worship capable of holding hundreds of people. In the construction of these places of worship, the early missionaries gave preference to native construction over European design.⁸⁶ As Williams states in 1830:

I gave a decided preference to the Samoa buildings above the Tahitian as being more substantial and being better adapted for a place of worship than the Tahitian the Tahitian house being long and narrow these nearly round. Beside the Samoa houses are thatched with the sugar cane leaf and require a greater pitch to the roof than is given in the Tahitian construction. In addition to these advantages another is that the natives in all the settlements know how to build houses of their own construction...⁸⁷

The fact that indigenous inhabitants of Tonga and Sāmoa were in regular contact in the early 19th century is supported by a wealth of early historic and oral traditional evidence.⁸⁸ The potential to use this connection to convert other islands to Christianity was not lost on the missionaries of the time. In a letter to London in 1829, the missionary Thomas West writes:

If Tonga becomes Christianized, we have good reason to believe that not only the Haapais and Vavai will receive the truth, but we shall obtain access to Fiji and the Navigator Islands [Samoa]. There are men at Tonga from each of these places...⁸⁹

Here we see missionaries in Tonga in direct contact with Samoans (living in Tonga) as early as 1829. At the same time as these Samoans may have been returning home, they were joined by a northward movement of Tongans. Tippett notes that, in the mid-1830s, as Tongatapu was slow to convert to Christianity, the northern islands were much more eager.⁹⁰ He suggests that this *en masse* conversion in the north began a northward movement of converts that eventually reached Sāmoa before any permanent European missionaries had been established there. Dyson suggested that many newly converted Tongans moved north to Sāmoa and married into Samoan families.⁹¹ As evidence of this movement, Williams records meeting a canoe of some 130 Tongan converts on their way to Sāmoa in 1832.⁹² Both the northward-moving Tongans and the Samoans living in Tonga at that time would have been very familiar with the *fale āfolau* chapel design. This knowledge of a new structure for a new purpose would be crucial as Samoans were confronted with a need for a new type of building to worship in.

⁸⁵ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams 1830–1832*, 145, 154, 166; Murray, *Forty Years' Mission Work in Polynesia and New Guinea*, 104.

⁸⁶ Lundie, *Missionary Life in Samoa*, 187.

⁸⁷ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 141–2.

⁸⁸ Barnes and Hunt, 'Samoa's pre-contact connections in West Polynesia and beyond'; N. Gunson, 'The Tonga–Samoa connection 1777–1845', *Journal of Pacific History*, 25 (1993), 176–87.

⁸⁹ Quoted in A.R. Tippett, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia* (Chicago 1971), 255.

⁹⁰ Tippett, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia*, 118–27.

⁹¹ M. Dyson, *My Story of Samoan Methodism* (Melbourne 1875), 10.

⁹² Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 177.

Unsuitability of the Fale Tele as a Christian Chapel

As we have seen above, and as Williams implied, the *fale tele* would be the obvious choice for a Samoan Christian chapel, as it is the only traditional Samoan building capable of holding so many people. However, two issues prevented the *fale tele* from becoming the model for the Samoan chapel.

The first issue is structural. The central posts of the *fale tele* serve as an obstruction if a single person is addressing a large gathering, as is the case with a Christian sermon. This obstruction would interrupt the processional space required of early Pacific chapels and can be seen in a comparison of the interior space of the *fale tele* and *fale āfolau* in Figures 3b and 3c or 5 and 2b.⁹³ The *fale tele* serves very well as a meeting place where several people, all possible participants in the discussion, are seated in a circle around the central posts in traditional Samoan fashion. In this case, all participants have an approximately equal view of each other and, following Samoan custom, the central post only blocks the view of the person sitting directly opposite (and hence of equal rank) to them.⁹⁴ However, if a Christian church service were held in a *fale tele*, an observer on the opposite side of the house would have a post in their line of sight to the pastor who, as God's servant, would outrank everyone in attendance.

The second issue is cultural. As we have seen, the *fale tele* was historically reserved for the reception, accommodation and entertainment of guests.⁹⁵ There seems to have been a great reluctance on the part of Samoans to having religious services conducted in the *fale tele*, and this may be related to the structural issue mentioned above.⁹⁶ As Williams commented in 1832:

They [Samoans] objected to hold worship in the large publick building [*fale tele*] of the settlement as it is the house in which all their dances and heathenish games are carried on.⁹⁷

The Samoan Chapel: The Origin of the Fale Āfolau in Sāmoa

As a consequence of structural deficiencies and the Samoans' reluctance to employ the *fale tele* as a chapel, a new type of large building needed to be erected that could serve as a place of worship. As evidence that the *fale tele* was not used as a place of worship, visitors to Sāmoa in the 1830s and 1840s almost unanimously note a distinction between the large house used for public reception

⁹³ A.L. Refiti, 'Making spaces: Polynesian architecture in Aotearoa New Zealand', in S. Mallon and P.F. Pereira (eds), *Pacific Art Niu Sila: the Pacific dimension of contemporary New Zealand arts* (Wellington 2002), 219.

⁹⁴ A.L. Refiti, pers. comm. 2005.

⁹⁵ Lundie, *Missionary Life in Samoa*, 108; Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 251; Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 80; Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise*, 36; Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, 256.

⁹⁶ Murray, *Forty Years' Mission Work in Polynesia and New Guinea*, 50; Davidson, 'Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840', 63; J. Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Seas* (London 1838), 345.

⁹⁷ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams 1830–1832*, 127.

and the chapel used for religious services.⁹⁸ Indeed in 1832, Williams records *fale tele* and chapel as being distinctly different buildings at Tutuila, Manono, Sapapāli'i, Faga, Āmoa and Satupa'itea.⁹⁹

After Williams's brief visits to Sāmoa in 1830 and 1832, the next resident European missionary did not arrive until 1835.¹⁰⁰ This left several years when Samoans, with the aid of recently arrived Tongan converts and Samoan converts formerly resided in Tonga, were left to their own devices in developing Christianity. The first 'official' chapel was built at Sapapāli'i by the Tahitian teachers Williams left behind in Sāmoa. As in Tonga, it appears that this first chapel was built in the typical European LMS design for East Polynesia, with enclosed, plastered walls. When Williams returned in 1832, he first stopped in Tutuila and found a typical LMS-style chapel there. He was told that a man from that village had been to Sapapāli'i, seen the teachers' chapel there and copied the design on his return to Tutuila.¹⁰¹ However, just as Tonga had experimented with the LMS plaster-wall style only to reject it, Sāmoa seems to have abandoned the LMS style in favour of the newly arrived *fale āfolau* style from Tonga.¹⁰²

Peter Turner, the first missionary to live more than a few weeks in Sāmoa, came via Tonga in 1835 to spread the Wesleyan faith. He brought with him several Tongan teachers, who were eagerly requested and assigned to villages around Manono and Savai'i.¹⁰³ In the 1840s they were followed by Wesleyan-ordained, native Tongan missionaries and even by the king of Tonga (most probably Taufa'ahau), who visited Samoa in 1842.¹⁰⁴ As Williams had planted the seed of Christianity with his two visits in 1830 and 1832, Turner found a fertile ground for conversion to the Wesleyan faith. Dyson claims that from 1835 to 1836, Turner was able to convert 13,000 Samoans to the Wesleyan faith, noting that 'during this time, eighty churches were built in as many villages'.¹⁰⁵ Remarking on a new chapel he and his Tongan teachers were helping to build in the village of Satupa'itea, Turner noted in his diary: 'It will far exceed all the chapels I saw while at Tonga, both for beauty and largeness.'¹⁰⁶ This boom in chapel construction corresponded to both the influx of Tongans in Sāmoa arriving to preach the faith and the homebound movement of Samoans who had lived in Tonga.

⁹⁸ Lundie, *Missionary Life in Samoa*, 108; Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, 80; Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise*, 36; Turner, *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, 256.

⁹⁹ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 108, 115, 116, 145, 146, 166–7.

¹⁰⁰ Meleisea, *Lagaga: A Short History of Western Samoa*, 58.

¹⁰¹ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 108.

¹⁰² It is possible that the native teachers initially had been successful in building a chapel in the *fale tele* style at the end of a pier in the village of Sapapāli'i. It was seen by Buzacott in 1834, who said it was circular in form but its interior construction, vital to its classification, is unclear from his account. Buzacott, *Mission Life in the Islands of the Pacific*, 157.

¹⁰³ Dyson, *My Story of Samoan Methodism*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ T. West, *Ten Years in South-Central Polynesia* (London 1865), 201–2.

¹⁰⁵ Dyson, *My Story of Samoan Methodism* (Melbourne 1875), 19.

¹⁰⁶ P. Turner, *Journal of Peter Turner, Book 4 and 5, January 1836–June 11, 1839* (Laie 1992), 61.

The Fale Āfolau Becomes Integrated into Samoan Culture

When missionaries and early visitors described the first post-LMS style chapels, they described the typical oblong or rectangular *fale āfolau*.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Hiroa himself noted that ‘some of the older churches [in Sāmoa] are large long houses [*fale āfolau*]’.¹⁰⁸ Membership in Christian churches exploded in Sāmoa in the late 1830s and 1840s. In 1842, Buzacott wrote that he was ‘filled with joy at what he had seen in the Navigator’s Islands... the churches appeared to us to have sprung up like Jonah’s gourd’: both Christianity and *fale āfolau* style chapels had become nearly universal.¹⁰⁹

As technology developed, so did the Samoan chapel. The first stone chapel in Sāmoa was built in 1841 at Solosolo.¹¹⁰ By the 1850s, true European-style chapels with enclosed walls, windows and pulpits began to become popular with the arrival of large groups of European missionaries. It would appear that these new styles of chapel design were adopted at the expense of the *fale āfolau* style. However, with the familiarity of the large open interior space of the *fale āfolau*, and the knowledge of how to construct it, the style was adopted in the form of later dwelling and meeting houses, ironically, often replacing the original *fale tele* style. This explains why, when Krämer (1994), Handy and Handy (1924), and Buck (1930) wrote the first works on Samoan material culture, the *fale āfolau* was described as a standard design for dwelling and meeting houses.¹¹¹

Innovations of the Samoan Fale Āfolau

As Samoans in the 1830s were presented with the need for a new type of large house of worship, the northern movement of converted Tongans, Wesleyan teachers and Samoans residing in Tonga at that time provided an alternative to the *fale tele* as a chapel. The Tongan-style *fale āfolau* allowed a clear line of sight between the congregation and the pastor and, being an introduced design, was not subject to the traditional use restrictions and taboos of the *fale tele*. However, instead of importing the Tongan design wholesale, Samoans made their own modifications.

Large Tongan house designs share the same basic layout as the Samoan *fale āfolau*. However, there are two major differences. First, Samoans removed the woven mat walls of the Tongan *fale hau*, as the climate in Sāmoa is significantly hotter. The second difference is evident in the interior structure of the *fale hau* and indicated by the presence of *toufufuloto* (Figure 3b), a pair of supporting collar beams on the Tongan *fale* which extend from the center of the tiebeam up to the

¹⁰⁷ Lundie, *Missionary Life in Samoa*, 80; Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 116; Erskine, *Journal of a Cruise*, 35; Murray, *Forty Years’ Mission Work in Polynesia and New Guinea*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), ‘Samoan material culture’, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Buzacott, *Mission Life in the Islands of the Pacific*, 163.

¹¹⁰ Davidson, ‘Settlement patterns in Samoa before 1840’, 68.

¹¹¹ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), ‘Samoan material culture’, 11–24; Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: an outline of a monograph*, 260–78; Handy and Handy, ‘Samoan house building, cooking, and tattooing’, 4–13.

roof purlins at a 45° angle.¹¹² This is in contrast to the *so'a* (Figure 3c) of the Samoan *fale āfolau*, which are a series of horizontal beams that parallel the tie beam below it, are perpendicular to the king post, and may be quite numerous.¹¹³ How did this distinction arise between the Tongan and Samoan design of the *fale āfolau*? Not unsurprisingly, the most parsimonious answer lies in the design of the Samoan *fale tele*. The *so'a* of the *fale tele* also lie horizontal, and their number may be an indicator of the owner's prestige. Hence, *fale tele* may, and usually do, have many *so'a*, particularly when the house performs high status functions beyond that of an elite habitation. When the *fale hau* was imported from Tonga to Sāmoa, it appears that Samoans adapted the indigenous horizontal *so'a* design used in the *fale tele* to create the new *fale āfolau* structure.

Importation, Integration and Innovation

Green has argued for a 'Triple I' (intrusion, integration, innovation) model for the diffusion of the Lapita cultural complex through the Western Pacific.¹¹⁴ The Triple I model features the *intrusion* of an Austronesian-speaking population, with their associated material culture, into the Papuan-speaking Bismarck Archipelago region, followed by the *integration* of the Austronesian cultural suite in the region, with local *innovation* from within. In the example of the *fale āfolau*, we clearly see Samoan innovations to the Tongan long house (the replacing of the angled *toufufuloto* support beams in favour of the traditional Samoan *so'a* and the removal of woven mat walls) and the integration of the *fale āfolau* style in Sāmoa (its early-20th-century commonality attested to by the early Samoan material culture studies). However, the *fale āfolau* appears to have been less of an intrusion and more of an importation. It appears that Samoans, having been intimately familiar with Tongan culture, practices and architecture, chose to import and adopt a Tongan house design, which they were probably already familiar with owing to long-standing interaction, in response to the newly arrived need for a large, unobstructed house of Christian worship.

THE EARLY MISSIONARIES recorded most of the new Samoan chapels as being designed and constructed by Samoans themselves.¹¹⁵ It is important to remember that the construction of the early *fale āfolau* chapels was not, with the exception of the first LMS style chapels, a European introduction. However, we would argue it is a Tongan one, modified by Samoans. Being absent from the archaeological and the pre-1830 historic record, the *fale āfolau* was imported into Sāmoa from Tonga in the 1830s as a Christian chapel design. It then spread

¹¹² T. Kaloni, 'Tongan: fale', in P. Oliver (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Cambridge 1997), 1224.

¹¹³ Allen, 'Space as social construct', 167.

¹¹⁴ R.C. Green, 'The Lapita cultural complex: current evidence and proposed models', *Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Bulletin*, 11 (1991), 295–305; R.C. Green, 'Lapita and the cultural model for intrusion, integration, and innovation', in A. Anderson, and T. Murray (eds) *Australian Archaeologist: collected papers in honour of Jim Allen* (Canberra 2000), 372–92.

¹¹⁵ Moyle, *The Samoan Journals of John Williams*, 280; Buzacott, *Mission Life in the Islands of the Pacific*, 163.

quickly and widely throughout Sāmoa, was eventually replaced by other European chapel designs, but remained as a dwelling and meeting house. By the 20th century, the time of the first material culture studies in Sāmoa,¹¹⁶ the *fale āfolau* style had become so common, it appeared to be the traditional standard.

It is important to note that there are no direct European participants in this transfer of ideas about house design. The introduction of Christianity, which necessitated a new house design in Sāmoa, was European, but the diffusionary agents who provided that new design need not have been.

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ABSTRACT

While evidence for a strong, long-standing, and direct connection between Sāmoa and Tonga before European contact is well known, this paper provides a case study of Sāmoa–Tonga interaction by indigenous agency. It shows that the Samoan *fale āfolau* (long house) is convincingly interpreted as an historic introduction from Tonga, with Samoan modification, which served as an early Christian chapel design. A Tongan origin for the *fale āfolau* is an especially contested viewpoint in present-day Sāmoa, where many consider it to be a truly indigenous design.

¹¹⁶ Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), 'Samoan material culture', 11–24; Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: an outline of a monograph* (Auckland 1994), 260–78; Handy and Handy, 'Samoan house building, cooking, and tattooing', 4–13.

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