

## THE JOURNAL OF THE POLYNESIAN SOCIETY

[Home](#)[Browse](#)[Search](#)[Links](#)[Short Link](#)[The Polynesian Society](#)[Feedback](#)[Conditions  
of Use](#)

Volume 3 1894 &gt; Volume 3, No. 4, December 1894 &gt; 'O Le Fale-o-Le-Fe'e': or ruins of an old Samoan temple, by the Rev. John B. Stair, p. 239-244

JPS

[Back to Search Results](#)[Previous](#) | [Next](#)- 239 

## "O LE FALE-O-LE-FE'E": OR, RUINS OF AN OLD SAMOAN TEMPLE.

By *The Rev. John B. Stair (Late Vicar of Christ Church, St. Arnaud, Victoria, formerly of Samoa).*

THE priesthood of Samoa were of different classes and of varied influence, so that, although having no idols or idol-worship in later generations as in other groups, their influence was great and widely felt. The Tahitians were accustomed to scoff at this absence of idolatry, and call them the "Godless Samoans"; but, they were happily free from the tyranny of human sacrifices, and, to some degree, also of the lascivious worship that prevailed amongst the Tahitians, and devastated many other fair and beautiful groups. Still, for all that, the religious system of the Samoans was extensive and galling in its oppressiveness; "lords many, and Gods many," abounding and crushing the people with their exactions and superstitious fears. *Aitus*, or spirits, of varied dispositions and power, were numerous, filling the people with alarm and dread.

The priesthood, *Taula-aitu*, or "Anchors of the spirits" (from *Taula*, an anchor, and *Aitu*, a spirit), may be subdivided into four classes, viz.: Priests of the war-gods, Keepers of the war-gods, Family Priests, and Prophets or Sorcerers. Of these, the *Taula-aitu*, or "Anchors of the Spirits," had great influence, and were consulted upon all warlike questions. They invoked the assistance of the various war-gods, of whom the most celebrated was *Nafanua*, a female deity revered by the whole people; and who, in conjunction with *Savea-sio-lee*, may be looked upon as the national gods of war of Samoa. In addition to these, however, each separate district had its own special war-god or gods. As for instance:


Name of god:	Reverenced by:
● <i>le Tamafainga</i> .	"Manono" and "● <i>le faasaleleanga</i> ."
● <i>Tui-o-Pulotu</i> .	"Fangalea," and part of "Upolu."
● <i>Tuitau</i> .	"Falealili."
● <i>Tui-lee-nu'u</i> .	"A'ana," and "● <i>le Tuamasanga</i> ."
● <i>le Fe'e</i> .	"A'ana," and <i>Faleata</i> .
<i>Aitu-i-Pava</i> .	" <i>Le Faasaleleanga</i> ."
<i>Tui Fiti</i> .	" <i>Matautu</i> ," and " <i>Gaga'eole-mounga</i> ."
<i>Nafanua</i> .	" <i>Gagaife-o-le-mounga</i> ."

Sepomalosi,

"Leone," and "Pangopango."

Moso, and

Tui Atua.

- 240 

It was one of this class, *Taula-aitu*, the representative of the war-god of *Manono*, ● *le Tamafainga*, that usurped the regal power of the islands, on the death of the last king of his line, *Safe-o-fafine*; and, who reigned until his tyranny became unbearable, when he was killed by the people of *A'ana*, in 1829.

The *Tausi-aitu-tau* (keepers of the war-gods), (or, as they were further called, *Vaa-faatau-o-aitu-tau* warships of the war-gods), had also very great influence. To their custody were committed the objects supposed to be inhabited by the district war-gods. These emblems, or symbols were various, and had different names. The fleets of *Manono* were accompanied by two of such, *Limulimuta* and *Samalulu*; the former a kind of drum, and the latter a pennant or streamer, which floated from the masthead of the sacred canoe. In the district of ● *le Tuamasanga* the emblems consisted of the *pu*, or conch shell, called, ● *Aitulangi* (gods of the heavens). The same symbol was used by the warriors of *Matautu*, on *Savaii*, whilst at *Fangaloa*, in *Atua*, the symbol of the god's presence was a large box, or chest, placed upon the canoe of the priest of the war-god, and accompanied the fleet into battle. Another significant emblem used by the warriors of the latter place resembled a broom, or besom, which was carried, like the broom of Van Tromp, at the masthead of the war-priest's canoe. The *pu*, or conch shell, was always carried by the keeper of the war-god on land, when the *Tuamasanga*, or *Matautu*, were engaged in battle; but the other emblems were only taken in the canoes.

The *Faleaitu*, or spirit-houses, were objects of great reverence. Some *aitus*, mostly the war-gods, if not entirely so, were honored with them. These spirit-houses were also called ● *le Malumalu o le aitu* (the Temple of the god), one of which, of more or less dignity, was usually found in every settlement. They were generally built in the common circular or elliptical shape, and, although there might be nothing in their finish or build to distinguish them from other houses, they were always regarded with reverence, and even with dread; so that, for a long time after the arrival of the Europeans, the natives were accustomed to resent any intrusion upon their sacred precincts. These temples, or spirit-houses, were always in charge of the keepers of the war-gods, who, in addition to their other titles, were called *Vaa Taa* (war-ships).<sup>1</sup> The emblems of the god were always placed in these temples, and given into the care of the keepers.

When the *Taula aitu* (priests of the gods) were consulted professionally, they were accustomed to visit these temples for the purpose of advising with the god, who was supposed to enter into the symbol or emblem of the deity and then deliver their answers to the questions asked. The spirit-houses were usually placed in the principal *Marae* of the village, and were built of similar materials to those of ordinary dwellings. They were usually built upon raised platforms of stone (*fanua tanu*), varying in height and dimensions according to the respect felt towards the god by the builders. These stone platforms were made, and the houses built, by the united labour of those interested, whether of a family, or village, or district.

- 241 

One interesting exception to the usual style of building these spirit-houses came under my notice shortly before leaving the islands, in 1845.

● *le Fale o le Fe'e* (the Temple of the *Fe'e*), the war-god of *A'ana*, Upolu, was formerly a place of great renown and importance, but of late years its glory has departed. Its history was described to me in such a way, that I determined to visit it and see for myself the marvels described. Not only were there the remains of the temple of the god, but quantities of coral that he had carried up from the reef into the mountains lay scattered on every side. I found that comparatively few had actually visited the spot, but the name of the place was familiar as also the wonderful stories of the famous *fale ma'a*, or stone house of the god. The large blocks of coral, requiring several men to lift them, were scattered about the temple, and which the god had carried up from the reef single-handed.

At last, meeting a man who seemed to have a good knowledge of the place, I arranged to visit it. My friend, J. C. Williams, Esq., the British Consul at Apia, volunteered to accompany me, several influential natives from my own district, and also of Apia, gladly going with us. We started from Apia in good time, full of eager curiosity. Several miles inland we reached a point of interest, as the track led directly through the great fortress or ● *lo*, of ● *le Vaemaunga*, deserted at that time, but which had played an important part in many a struggle of the past. We found the ● *lo* of considerable extent, and protected by the steep sides of a precipice or deep ditch, and an embankment of

earth. In time of war, the gap through which the road passed was closed by a strong stockade, and defended by a large body of troops.

As we neared the spot of our search the footpath wound down the steep sides of a precipitous mountain into a valley, the bottom of which formed the bed of a mountain torrent, which, fortunately for our excursion, was dry at the time of our visit. Crossing this valley, a short distance brought us to another river-bed, down which a small stream was quietly threading its way among the smoothly worn blocks of lava scattered over the torrent bed. We followed its upward course for some little time, when our guide suddenly sprang upon the bank, and glancing around the spot near which he stood, hastily exclaimed, "● *lenei le fale, o le Fe'e* (here is the house of the *Fe'e*). We followed, curious as to what would meet our view. My first impressions were those of disappointment, since little could be seen but the thick growth of brushwood and forest trees which covered the spot; but these feelings soon gave place to others of a more pleasing character. Our guide commenced in good earnest to clear away the brushwood and undergrowth that covered the place, and as we all joined in the work the ground was soon cleared, and the remains of the far-famed *Fale-o-le-Fe'e*, or house of the *Fe'e* were laid bare before us.

We soon discovered that the house had been built of the usual round or elliptical shape, but that the builders, whoever they were, had substituted slabs of basalt for the wooden posts usually placed to support the eaves, as is the case almost universally with the Samoans; so much so, that I believe this is the only known instance of a departure from this rule. Whatever had been the character of the roof formally used, it had long since perished, and the centre slab of stone

- 242 

that supported it had fallen, whilst the place of the roof itself was supplied by two large forest trees which covered the ruins, and whose far-reaching and strongly buttressed roots were spread out over the site of the floor of the house.

We found twelve or thirteen of the smaller stone posts still standing, but the large centre slabs lay broken in the middle of the circle. The outer posts, which were still standing, were about four feet out of the ground, whilst the centre slabs appear to have been originally about twelve or thirteen feet in length, fifteen or eighteen inches in width, and seven or eight inches thick. The ends had been inserted in the ground, and I imagine that, when placed upright, another slab had been laid horizontally upon them, from which other slabs or posts were raised to support the roof. Several of our party had seen these centre slabs standing not long before, and could thus testify to their appearance. It was said that lately some young fellows, hunting wild pigs, had passed the spot, and amused themselves by pelting the slabs and throwing them down.

Fortunately they left another interesting relic of the olden times intact. At about six or eight feet on the left-hand-side of the ruins was a small stone platform, or seat, still remaining, and which was perfect. Whether it had been used as a seat for the priest, or altar, was hard to say; but from the sloping stone support at the back, I fancy it had been used as a seat by the priest. I have also thought it may have been used as a coronation seat, or post of honor, at the inauguration ceremonies of a chief's installation.

The house had been forty-eight feet in length by forty-five in breadth. One portion of the floor of the house had been covered with a pavement of neatly placed slabs of stone; but these had begun to be displaced. As I looked upon this relic of bygone ages, many questions arose; foremost of which came the thought, from whence had these huge slabs of stone been obtained, and how had they been wrought by the natives, with their absence of tools, into their present shape? The former question was soon answered, for close at hand were masses of the same kind of basaltic rock exposed from the side of a precipice, and from which large quantities had evidently been quarried. I might have been puzzled to answer the other question as to how the slabs had been wrought, had I not known that the Samoans adopted a very simple but ingenious plan to split and rend similar stones. That particular kind of basalt, especially, splits easily, and a heavy blow soon rends a detached block; but when the natives require to split the solid bed rock, they clear off the mould that may be on the surface, kindle a fire upon it in the direction in which they wish the fracture to run, and then, when the stone is sufficiently heated, they dash cold water over the heated surface, and their work, so far as rending the rock is concerned, is accomplished. I looked with interest upon these relics of the past, and longed to know more of their history than it was possible to obtain. I made a rough sketch of the old seat and remains of the house, the natives looking on the while, and apparently wondering what there could be in the scene to so deeply interest me. Another question would naturally arise, as to how such huge masses of stone could be moved such distances as they sometimes were. In the present case the distance was not great, but the blocks were too heavy to be lifted, in many cases. I think there can be no doubt they were always shifted, or dragged, on rollers or

- 243 

small sleds; removed and relaid as needed—an old world method of removing heavy burdens that was found in common use in this distant portion of its boundaries.

After we had satisfied our curiosity at the old ruin, our guides, anxious to make good the whole of their statements, drew my attention to the so-called coral, said to be found in the bed of the torrent, and which formed one great marvel of the story. It was said to be of three different kinds, and all brought from the reef. It was in vain we told them it was not coral at all, but a substance formed in the neighbouring stream. They laughed at our statement; but could scarcely believe their eyes when I split one of the blocks of the so-called coral in half and showed them various leaves and small twigs embedded in it, asking them at the same time if they had ever seen such coral as that on the reef. That revelation seemed to confound them, but they still stoutly contended for the old story.

From thence they led us up the bed of the stream to show us what they called the larger blocks of coral, but which proved to be calcareous spar of a more compact formation. Failing to convince us here, they conducted us to the spot where the *amu*, or branch-coral was to be found; but, on getting there, we were disappointed to find that a portion of the rock had fallen down since our principal guide was last there, and filled the place where the *amu*, or branch-coral, had formally been found. This place had been a large natural basin at the foot of a precipice, into which the stream fell from above, forming a small cascade, and in which these calcareous formations had evidently been deposited. These latter pieces had certainly very much the appearance of real branch-coral, so that I did not wonder at the general and long sustained delusion; but the faith of our native companions seemed utterly staggered upon our finding some of the so-called coral, or, as they proved to be, stalactites, actually forming upon the surface of a portion of the rock, similar to the substance which had been for so long a time mistaken for coral. It seemed hard to destroy such a long-cherished delusion, but so it was to be, and from that time forth the doings of the *Aitu* seemed to be sadly at a discount.

The little that we could gather about this old ruin was this:—The god, or *Aitu*, in the form of a cuttle-fish (*o le Fe'e*) was stated to have been brought from Savaii, by a woman, to Apia; but, on reaching that place he made his escape from the basket in which he was carried, and following the course of the mountain torrent bed, he had reached this spot, far inland, where he took up his abode, and in process of time made the place famous. He certainly had selected a romantic spot, and there was much connected with it to awe the mind of the beholder when under the influence of dread. Even as we looked upon the surroundings, there was much to arrest attention. The high mountains on either side of the valley; the mountain torrent, and frowning precipice, combined with the solemn grandeur and stillness of the place, all seemed to mark it as a fitting residence for such a mysterious personage; and, as a consequence, a strong feeling of sacredness and mystery had long been attached to the spot.

### A Samoan Chief's Mountain Burial Place.

On the summit of one of the neighbouring mountain tops the burial place of some chiefs of high rank of *le Vae maunga* district

- 244 

was pointed out to me by my guide, as an object of interest, where for many ages the heads of various chiefs had been interred, to save them from molestation and insult in time of war. I listened with great interest to his description; but, it was getting late, and we had a long journey before us to the coast, so that I was obliged to defer my visit to the spot until another opportunity, a purpose which I was unfortunately unable to carry out.

At length, and after a lapse of some fifty years, the circumstance is again brought to my recollection in a peculiar manner. During the last few months an old friend, and one of the very few old Samoan Missionaries now left, the Rev. S. Ella, of Sydney, but formerly of Samoa, brought under my notice a paper that he had read before the Etymological section of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, at their Adelaide meeting, in which he alluded to some remarks of the late Mr. Handley Sterndale, respecting some remarkable stone remains he had discovered, many years since, whilst rambling in the interior of the island of Upolu, Samoa, which are described in the first number of the Journal of the Polynesian Society.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking of Mr. Sterndale's discovery, Mr. Ella says:—"Whilst rambling in the interior of the island, he came to a lofty spur of a mountain, with a volcanic centre. He crossed several deep ravines down which flowed mountain torrents. One of these ravines had been converted by the hand of man into a fosse. In some parts it was excavated; in others, built up at the sides with large stones; and, in one place he found a parapet wall. He climbed up this gully, and passed through a narrow opening in the wall unto a level space before him, where he made the discoveries he spoke of."

Amongst other remarkable stone relics he found, "a conical structure of huge dimensions, about 20ft. high and 100ft. in diameter, built of large basalt blocks, some of which he considered to have been above a ton weight, which were laid in even courses. In two places near the top he marked what appeared to have been entrances to the interior. He

entered a low cave or vault, choked with rock and roots of trees. He found appearances of narrow chambers within. Mr. Sterndale thought that the pyramidal structure at one time formed the foundation of some building of importance. Many other foundations of 10 ft. high were near it. He also observed a number of stone cairns, apparently graves, disposed in rows."

I feel quite satisfied that these small cairns, of which Mr. Sterndale speaks, were, as he supposed, graves, in which were buried the heads of various chiefs interred, after the custom so common to the Samoans, and that this spot which he visited on that occasion was the burial place pointed out to me, or one similar to it. And, further, on reading his description of the country he passed over before reaching it, I think he must have traversed the route by which we journeyed. Our descriptions, though written so widely apart, seem to tally. It also seems probable that the masses of rock he describes as forming the great structure he alludes to, were procured from the same precipice, or quarry, of which I have spoken.

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare the Maori *Waka*, a receptacle for the god, or as a name applied to a priest, as the medium of communication with the gods. An illustration of the use of the word *Waka* as a receptacle, will be found in this volume, page 203.—Editors.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. H. B. Sterndale's description will be found in Vol. I., p. 62, of this Journal.—Editors.