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Lepea

That Model Village in Samoa

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Nearly one hundred years ago Samoa was invaded by New Zealand—the first territory taken by the Allied Forces from the Germans who had occupied the western islands since 1899. The New Zealand Administration instigated following the First World War, a programme of model villages, but only two were completed. The most well known is Lepea. This paper investigates the social and political influences that brought about the design and subsequent re-modelling of the village that is now considered by the general public to be an outstanding example of Samoan architecture. But how did this imposed village type become iconic? What is currently regarded as an exemplar of the “traditional Samoan village” has another side to it, another story.

Polynesians have a different concept of time, place and value to that of the European colonisers. It can be found in the notion of va, which is a relational world distinct from the modernist material world.¹ Relationships towards people and the land are in a constant state of flux and these relationships cannot be given a value or an owner. “New” traditions and stories, retold over generations, are woven in to this and others while other traditions and stories are forgotten. The past is another strand woven into the future along with other parts. This is Polynesian history.

In this paper the village of Lepea will be located and contextualized then key players involved in the redesign, construction and subsequent rebellion identified. The political movement the Mau will be introduced as an essential component in the current perception of the village by the general public.

The paper will give an historical context to Lepea, from a Polynesian perspective, revealing inconsistencies that may challenge traditional both Western and Polynesian histories and concepts of heritage.

1. Albert Wendt, “Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body,” *Span* 42-43 (April-October 1996), 17.





Figure 1: Aerial Photo of remodelled part of Lepea. Google Maps.

Lepea

The village of Lepea, part of the Tuamasaga district, is located on the coastal plain of northern Upolu, 3km southwest of Apia harbour. For the last hundred years Lepea has been considered part of metropolitan Apia. The land surrounding Lepea has been shown as subdivided on surveys dating from the German occupation, indicating that land in the district had been in the process of individualization for some time before 1900. The bulk of the village lies between Vaitele Street (Main West Coast Road), Papaseea Road and Tulaele Street. The exact boundaries of the village are unclear as some surrounding properties periodically affiliate themselves with the village.

The main *malae* (a large open space similar to a town square), the commonly accepted location of the remodeled village, lies on the northeastern corner of the site at the intersection of Vaitele Street and Papaseea Road. The Fuluasou River passes through the centre of the village heading north towards Vaiusu Bay.

The remodelling of Lepea was completed in 1926 and the success of the village was widely publicised in New Zealand who were still dealing with the aftermath of the Spanish Influenza tragedy. The work appeared to show Samoa was reaching a turning point into attaining financial independence, as this *Evening Standard* article reports,

following the instructions of the Administrator, Sir George Richardson, the chief Faumuina started over a year process to remodel the village of Lepea The village presents a fine picture with its new fales formed in a semi-circle and a huge, malae, much bigger than a football area, in the centre. All the cookhouses and sanitary conveniences lie well behind.

The big fales and the orderly arrangement of the houses are sure to benefit the health of the people of the village. Sir George Richardson complimented the Faumuina and his people on being the first in the field with a new village Some people had said he would not be able to get the Samoans to remodel their villages, but he was glad to find that these people were mistaken ...²

2. "Model Native Village," *Evening Post* (Wellington), July 16, 1926, 8.

Three Key Players

There are three key players involved in the remodelling and subsequent political uprising in Lepea.

General Spafford Richardson:

General Richardson was the third administrator from New Zealand following the British instructed, New Zealand executed, World War One occupation of Samoa from German rule. New Zealand had performed terribly in the preceding years allowing a vessel carrying passengers infected with the Spanish influenza to enter Samoa, decimating the population. Therefore by the time, as part of a League of Nations Class C Mandate, Richardson took his post in Samoa he had the very difficult task of regaining the trust of the Samoan people.

As a country mandated under the rule of New Zealand following the First World War by the United Nations Act in Geneva 1921, Samoa was financially reliant on the New Zealand government who in turn left Samoan daily running costs and infrastructure programs grossly underfunded. To remedy this, Richardson proposed to increase the production of copra plantations seized from the German Administration. However in realising this income would not be adequate he then set about the economic redevelopment of Samoa.³

3. General G. S. Richardson, letter to J. D. Gray Esq., Secretary for External Affairs, 1923, ref. IT1 445 EX 79/78, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

Figure 2: Three key players. From left to right, General Spafford Richardson, Faumuina Fiamē, Taisi Olaf Nelson. Sources, respectively: ref: 1/2-019614-F, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand; http://www.janeresture.com/samoa_pict_history/index.htm; and *The Truth about Samoa* (Auckland: National Printing Co. Ltd., 1928).



At present the future does not look very bright—the Reserve Fund of the Crown Estates will apparently be absorbed during the ensuing year; our loan monies for public works have been expended and I shall have no money to do anything with other than what we get from our Customs Revenue. The key of the situation is to get the Natives to work and cut more.⁴

4. General G. S. Richardson, letter, 1923.

Richardson sought to utilise the influence of the *Fono of Faipule* (Committee of Representatives) to open lines of communication with the “natives.” A creation of the German Administration, the *Fono of Faipule* were assigned an advocate for each district, their original purpose was to disseminate information for the German Administrator and to bring any concerns of the natives to their attention. It was not until 1926, that the *Faipule* were given the power to execute laws and punishments by the New Zealand Administration.

High Chief of Lepea, Mata’afa Faumuina Fiaame Mulinu’u I

Among locals and the Administration, Faumina was a very well respected and influential man. He was initially supportive of the reforms planned for Samoa; however his affiliation with *afakasi* (being of half Samoan, half European decent) businessman and Mau leader Taisi Olaf Frederick Nelson may have had some influence in changing his view. The first incarnation of the nationalist movement the *Mau a Pule* appeared during the time of the German Administration 1899-1914 under Governor Wilhelm Solf. Mau leader Lauaki Mamoe rallied the villages of Savaii to reject the control of the Germans. As a reaction to resistance and protest, Solf engaged the German military to isolate the island and drive the Mau leaders out of hiding. This culminated in high chief Lauaki being exiled to Saipan in 1909. The Mau remained as a smaller more underground movement during the New Zealand administration until the fires of resistance were again inflamed following the Spanish influenza epidemic.

Taisi Olaf Frederick Nelson

Olaf Frederick Nelson was the son of a Swedish trader and Samoan mother; he had become a very successful businessman and political leader in Samoa. Nelson was viewed by Richardson’s

Administration as a political agitator who was inciting rebellion amongst the Samoan people. To *Mau* supporters he was viewed as an advocate, speaking up for Samoans against the Administrations reforms. Nelson shared a close friendship with Faumuina that would eventually lead to Lepea being drawn into the spotlight as the base of the resistance movement against the New Zealand Administration. Ironically Richardson was later to rename his celebrated model village “the synagogue of the lying prophet”⁵ in reference to the *Mau* rallies held by Nelson on Lepea’s vast malae.

5. G. S. Richardson, “article written in Samoan newspaper ‘Savali’ newspaper July 1927,” quoted Mandated Territory of Western Samoa (Report of the Royal Commission concerning the Administration of.), *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, Session I A-04b, 1928.

Health Regulations

In a Mandate Report of Government in 1924 Richardson outlined building regulations in an attempt to improve living conditions for the Samoans.

I have conceived the idea of model villages: plan of a suggested village is attaches hereto. Copies of this plan have been distributed all over Samoa. The Natives are particularly interested, and some villages have already started to remake their villages on the lines suggested. There are many ideas in this plan which cannot be carried out for some years, but they will at least give the Natives some object and some interest in their lives which will, I think, cause them to produce more from their plantations than they now do.⁶

6. General G. S. Richardson, “Model Villages,” extract from personal letter to Sir Francis Bell, November 21, 1924, ref. IT1 208 EX 15/7, Archives New Zealand.

Richardson, being a military man, proposed a village plan modelled on the temporality of a military camp addressing immediate issues such as water quality and market access. Rather than seeking to urbanise the Samoan population Richardson’s motivation was more focused on hygiene and with a concern to increase the village’s capacity for production.

A striking similarity can be drawn from Richardson’s desire for healthy and sanitary conditions in the villages and the influence of the British Empire’s other colonial endeavors (which always depend on the military) in the tropics. The Cantonment or permanent military encampment was at the forefront of colonization in India during the 1800s and 1900s. According to Anthony King, in his book *Colonial Urban Development*, military space specifically in the tropics was of particular concern with regards to hygiene and illness.⁷ The main premise surrounding the design

7. A. D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power, and Environment* (London: Routledge, 1976).



and fabrication of these settlements was the control of air—which was believed to transmit illness—primarily malaria (literally, “bad air”).

Excessive mortality was ascribed to what, in the mid 19th century, were termed “zymotic” diseases—diseases perceived as being caused by a process analogous to fermentation ... Malaria was thought to be dependent on the interaction of three environmental elements, heat, moisture and vegetable decomposition.⁸

8. King *Colonial Urban Development*, 108.

It was assumed that the three components that contributed to the occurrence of disease were transported through the upper respiratory system. The removal of one of these three aerial infectors it was thought would greatly reduce the chance of infection: “stagnant water, excreta, decaying vegetable matter and ‘exhalations’ from the human body were also considered instrumental in causing zymotic disease.”⁹

9. King *Colonial Urban Development*, 109.

This concern for the purity of air gave rise to many proposals aimed at increasing the airflow and air quality around military barracks by increasing the spacing between buildings and the volume within them to reduce the amount of air re-inhaled.

According to King the cantonment sought to separate themselves from the natives in the belief that the reasons for their poor state of health were both “environmental and behavioural.”¹⁰ The environmental concept was the quality of water air or vegetation; the behavioural, being how one interacts with these environmental factors. The colonialists believed that it was the combination of poor environmental quality and behaviour i.e. cultural practice (of the “natives”) that was to blame for the poor state of health.

10. King *Colonial Urban Development*, 115.

Fifty years later and thousands of kilometres away in Samoa, Richardson’s values were strongly influenced by his British military background and their beliefs about hygiene in the colonies and developing nations. In accordance to this, Richardson devised a set of health regulations that required houses to have building consents and to be constructed to a particular standard. He also sought to regulate the spacing between buildings and functions; this, in conjunction with the individualisation of land tenure put serious fractures into the Samoan concept of land ownership and spatial theory both of which are conceptually linked to the notion of *va*.

Figure 3: Diagrammatic Plan of Samoan Village for 300 Persons, November 21, 1924. Source: General G. S. Richardson, IT1 208—EX 15/7, Archives New Zealand.



Proposed Village Designs

As part of his village remodelling scheme Richardson proposed a series of possible village layouts that were strongly symmetrical and always located along a road. Many of these plans show no regard for Samoan spatial needs, particularly the *malae*. One plan showing a village by the sea depicts no allocated open space at all.

Richardson’s “diagrammatic” of a typical remodelled village gives some insight into his planning approach and the strong influence of his military background and the notion of the cantonment. The quality of drinking water is emphasised by showing a river leading to the sea drinking water is taken from the top of the stream, further down, drinking water for animals then closer to the beach a bathing pool is proposed. Latrines along the beach-front are located well away from the mouth of the river.

Richardson’s plan shows a cemetery proposed on the outskirts of the village. A road that leads up to the plantations further separates it. Traditionally family members are buried close to their former dwellings and extended family. The bodies of the dead and living share the same space; the more prominent deceased closer to the *malae*, still at the forefront of daily life. The isolation of the cemetery is a Eurocentric introduction and could be seen as relating to the colonial fear of disease and disposal of the dead.

The copra drier is placed along the road that leads to the plantations forming a production line leading to the jetty and the main road. The village copra fale is clustered with the other



production/utility buildings also boarded and locked. This aspect is emphasized; as such security measures are not usual behavior in Samoan life.

The hospital is shown close to the seaside quite isolated from the rest of the village and strangely remote from the main road. This could be a reaction to the contagious nature of many of the diseases plaguing the Samoans at the time.

Richardson was interested in controlling the amount of leisure time that villagers partook in considering the time spent as unproductive. Similarly the time spent on cultural activities, funerals, title giving.¹¹ Centered on the open space is a cricket pitch and on the opposite side of the road a basketball court. A church at the top of the malae and a “large fale” at the opposite side of the space, allows an axiality that creates a duality of the church and the state (or secular) activities. The fale it is assumed would operate the same as a town hall or other community building.

Strategically placed between the church and the meeting house a union jack is flying placing the British establishment at the heart of village operations, giving the crown it would seem - higher status than the religious or secular institutions.

The *malae* being unnamed, as a space of cultural significance, is totally denied.

New Lepea

The remodelled village currently takes up about 20 percent of the overall site and has been extended across Vaitele Street. A visual connection is formed through the common colour scheme of blue roofs and white painted rocks around the *paepae* (stone foundation).



11. “Native Lands,” Mandated Territory of Western Samoa (Report of the Royal Commission concerning the Administration of.), *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, Session I, A-04, 7-9, 1926.

Figure 4: Maota Lepea, May 2011 (photograph by the author).

Maota Lepea (the house of the high chief) is the largest building on the site and the only building painted white within the model village. *Fale tele* (traditional Samoan round meeting house) radiates either side from the *maota*. Behind each *fale tele* lays a *fale palagi* (European style house) where day-to-day living takes place. The majority of the blue roofed *fale* are unoccupied and unfurnished except for children playing and perhaps washing hanging. Directly opposite the *Maota Lepea* is the *Fale Komiti* (Committee House) that is used by the *matai* (leaders) of the village to discuss the daily functioning of the village.

The *malae* in Lepea is remarkable for its size. Looking at the *malae* in detail there can be seen depressions showing where *fale*s were once located—in a tighter cluster than the site is currently occupied. The builders of the remodelled village (reputedly to have been completed in just one year) are yet to be identified however could be assumed that most skilled expertise would be local as there were already many *afakasi* (people of mixed European/Samoan descent) builders trained in European timber construction through church building projects.

What makes this village unique is the crossover of European and Samoan Construction methods. There are other examples of *fale afakasi* hybrid architecture in Samoa, however Lepea is the only one on a village scale that was planned and constructed as whole project. This presents new dynamics not only within the architecture of the buildings but the spaces between them and how the village functions as a whole.

Maota Lepea

Maota Lepea is a two-storey structure on concrete pile foundations; most of the lower story is unoccupied. The upper level is the main meeting space and dwelling of the high chief of Lepea. Stairs lead directly up to the second level from the *malae* space that lies on an axis that directly bisects the *malae*. The upper level is a timber weatherboard structure with a band of casement windows along the front. The oblong floor plan follows the shape of the roof, which, although it follows the traditional *fale* roof shape, is in fact a mixture of traditional lashing, western wood joints and arched struts reminiscent of colonial timber churches. Band sawn members are chamfered on the corners with smaller details carved in and enlivened with painted contrasting colours.





Figure 5: Interior Roof Space of Maota Lepea (photograph by the author).

While the perimeter walls of Maota Lepea are western, (weatherboard and casement windows), the steep centre of the fale roof is clad in traditional thatch (but more recently has been clad in corrugated iron).

Maota Lepea is the supreme example of how introduced architecture attempted to break down the influence of the *fa'a Samoa* (Samoan tradition). What initially seems to be a “Samoan fale” style building in fact operates in a very different way. The rounded ends and steep pitched centre of the roof indicates, from the outside that there is a strong influence of Samoan architecture. Even within the *Maota* itself there is a presence of lashing and the roof structure seems to follow that of the traditional three parts the centre and two curved *tala* ends and the *soa* rising up into ceiling void. However what occurs below the roof negates this intention.

The plan is oblong but inside the ends are squared to create two semi circular private living spaces at each end. This gives a row of posts along either side but no posts along the short ends. Skirting the steep fale roof is a lower pitched metal roof that conceals the fale deep inside the building. The cloaked nature of the *maota* contradicts the transparency of the *fono*. The visual permeability of the fale is what gives the *fono* its legitimacy and a tangible connection between the matai and the people they serve. Presently the *fono* of *matai* is held every week in the *fale komiti* directly opposite the maota, on the other side of the road. The *fale komiti* is an open style *fale palagi*.

This imposed architecture reflects the disconnectedness of the decision/law making process, which was taken from the village

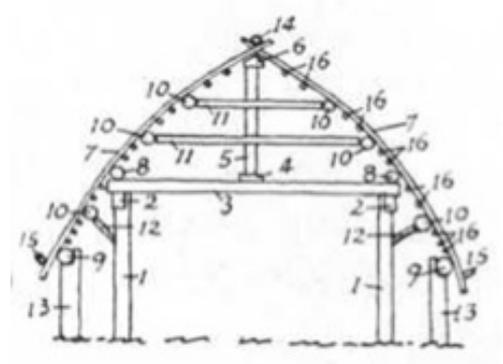
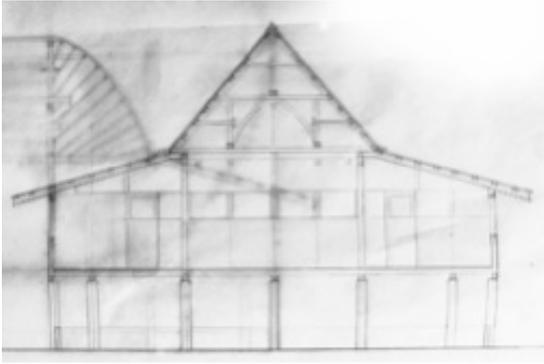


Figure 6: Cross Section of Maota Lepea showing meeting space deep inside the floor plan of the building and steep pitched “Samoan” centre with fa’a se’e (lean-to) surround shown in comparison to Buck’s section of a fale afolau (long house). Sources: (L.) sketch by the author; (R) Te Rangi Hiroa (P. H. Buck), *Samoan Material Culture* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 1930), 20.

fono and assumed by the administration through the *Fono of Faipule* whose members were not selected, nor came from, the area they represented; but were instead appointed by the New Zealand Administration.

Architecture

Polynesia’s first exposure to western architecture was naval, planked boats, nailed, turned timber, fabric sails, brass fittings, the sophistication was impressive. On land, initial “settlers,” deserters, whalers, prospectors and then missionaries were most often housed in native accommodation.¹²

The first examples of western architecture built in Polynesia were the dwellings and churches of the missionaries, bringing with them new technology culture and beliefs regarding architecture and construction.¹³ Before western architecture and land ownership, the construction process traditionally involved all members of the village to provide skills ranging from the hard physical labour of moving rocks to the weaving of mats for the floor.¹⁴ A side effect of western style architecture was the breakdown of people’s roles within the construction process. With the western construction process, as with other daily routines, Christian led European thinking influenced the village. Consequentially came the marginalisation of women and their roles as skilled crafts people.¹⁵

As Rebecca Stevenson notes, the effects of new technology are more than material: “technology, of course, also includes the mental template that activate the behaviours that lead to the creation of the technological structures,” indicating that technology is inextricably linked to tradition and culture.

12. Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of the Pacific Islands* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

13. Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 186.

14. Augustin Krämer, *The Samoa Islands*, vol. 2, *Material Culture*, trans. Theodore Verhaaren (Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1995).

15. Lorna Kaino, ed., *The Necessity of Craft: Development and Women’s Craft Practices in the Asia Pacific Region* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1995).



Land Tenure

Richardson championed the European concept of land tenure that individualises land ownership in an effort to free up land that stood unproductive due to the complications involved in having multiple owners: “I am convinced that the existing Native land laws or customs will retard its development, and therefore, in their own interests, as well as in the interests of the Territory, these laws should be changed.”¹⁶ In conjunction with this new land tenure system Richardson saw the need to adjust family traditions that he believed were impeding progress. Ceremonies that demanded much production and labour were discouraged as they diverted resources from the main job of providing product for trade on the plantations.¹⁷

Through the *Fono of Faipule*, Richardson disseminated new regulations to increase the amount of land available for production.

6. Native land to be divided up into areas of approximately 10 acres so that each person is able to work on a plantation has an area of approximately this size to cultivate.

7. Undeveloped land in a village area owned by any person not living in that area may be used by the village concerned [sic].¹⁸

Post-colonial writer Susan Najita suggests that the commodification of land proposed by Richardson is directly relational to the violation of the *va* through the brother/sister, man/woman *tapu*.¹⁹ Through a reading of Albert Wendt’s *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* Najita suggests the sexual dysfunction and relational breakdown of key characters is also mirrored in Samoa’s relationship with the land. She puts forward Wendt’s concept of *use* (in reference to prostitution as sexual labour). In Samoa the word *fanua* has two meanings, placenta and land. In reference to land it can be either used (cultivated) or unused (fallow). She equates the privatisation and excess production of the land comparable to the prostitution and commodification of women, both of the concepts seriously debasing the *va* and the *Fa’a Samoa*.

Appropriation Versus Colonisation

Much has been written about the rapid uptake of Christianity in Polynesia, particularly in Samoa. This was ascribed in part to the western belief that Samoans were without any major religion and

16. “Native Legislation,” Mandated Territory of Western Samoa (Report of the Royal Commission concerning the Administration of.), *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, Session I, A-04, 6, 1925.

17. Paul Shankman, “Race, Class and Ethnicity in Western Samoa,” in *Ethnicity and Nation-building in the Pacific*, ed. Michael C. Howard (Tokyo: Unitec Nations University, 1989).

18. “Some of the most important matters decided by the council of Faipules at the Fono held at Mulinu’u 5th to 13th June 1924,” Policy on Samoan Affairs, 1922-1960, IT1 107 EX 2/11, Archives New Zealand.

19. Susan Y. Najita, “Recounting the Past. Telling New Futures: Albert Wendt’s *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* and the ‘Tropical’ Cure” in *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific: Reading History and Trauma in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 64-98

therefore the void was easily filled with no competition from primitive deities. However now it seems that Christianity was so easily assimilated because the patriarchal structure posed no threat to the already existing structure of the fa'a Samoa. "Christianity instead of bursting the bonds of the old life, has been eaten up by it."²⁰

20. Felix M. Keesing, *Modern Samoa: Its Government and Changing Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1934), 410.

Samoa had welcomed the new religion yet continued to operate the *matai* system and 'ava (kava) ceremony. Many visible changes had taken place, clothing, modesty, gender roles; but the core hierarchy involving titles and inheritance was untouched. Western influence was a thin veneer symbolised by the trading store and the church.²¹ However as mentioned earlier the introduced technology was already slowly transforming Samoan cultural practice; the village Lepea could possibly be seen as where this change became apparent.

21. Albert Wendt, "Guardians and Wards": *A Study of the Origins, Causes, and the First Two Tears of the Mau in Western Samoa*, MA diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 1965, 42.

Richardson presumably believed he was simply rationalising what already existed; perhaps without fully realising the implications of the regularly spaced fales placed on the edge of a vast symmetrical malae. What this indicated was the centralization of power to the administration via the *Fono of Faipule*. The arrangement of buildings in Lepea were no longer a physical manifestation of the relationships within the village, there was no room for neighbourly relations, trees once held dear, or deceased loved ones; the art of *teu le va* (tending to relationships) had been deferred to other rule makers.

This paper has attempted to explain how the village of Lepea came into being, the possible motivations behind its architectural transformation and the ramifications of its inception.

It is an example of how a desire to regulate and rationalize in the western sense, as a means to financial independence, and a perceived step towards civilization, can push what was once a reciprocal relationship into one of resistance and distrust.

However, the village has remained, and the intensity of emotion has subsided. And although western values seem to be incorporated into the Samoan identity, the Samoan people are proud and stubborn; despite Richardson's efforts to individualise land in Samoa, 80 percent is still under customary title.²²

22. Maggie Tait, "Customary Land Excluded from Samoa Bill," *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), May 12, 2008.

Samoa is currently recovering from category-four tropical cyclone Evan that hit two weeks before Christmas 2012. During the cleanup what has become apparent is the strong sentiment that



although the islands' architecture is under the constant threat (or promise) of renewal, there also arises the opportunity for Samoans to re-asses and renegotiate their histories, around their current version of fa'a Samoa.