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Reinventing tradition Archaeology in Samoa

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Introduction

It can be argued that there are two sides to the study of archaeology. One is the scientific aspect, using modern methods of excavation, accurate recording, reliable carbon dating and competent analysis. The other is a discipline subjected to the demands of ideology, that is to say, a discipline that serves the purpose of an ideology. I am talking about tradition. The problem is that when the notion of tradition changes because of new influences, however these are generated, so does the perspective. An example is that a pagan country will highlight the validity of pagan principles and lifestyle, while a Christian country will do the opposite. That is to say, ideology will have an effect on how we describe and analyse the findings of a scientific discipline leading to different interpretations and solutions. In other words, we start from the same facts, but reach different conclusions.

In these situations, the facts must always be subordinate to ideology, an observation that is cogently argued in Marxist analyses of the relationship of structure and superstructure. It is also true of political analysis and, I contend, of archaeological analysis. The ideology can never be prised from the structure, nor the structure from the ideology, and that is because we are not just mechanical beings, we are also emotional ones. Our experiences are coloured by our feelings and this extends to all the sciences, however much we might preach about 'objectivity'. In traditional societies such as Samoa, feelings change when traditions change.

The beginnings of archaeology in Samoa

Understanding of the past in Samoa usually focuses on family genealogies, a body of knowledge which is usually memorised (Penisimani 1860; Krämer 1994). Little attention was paid by Samoans to the material remains of their ancient society. This is reflected also in the history of archaeology in Samoa. Thus, in the 19th century and early 20th century, relics of temples and sites of myths and legends throughout Samoa were places that people visited as modern-day tourists or as connoisseurs of exotic remains. The remains of an ancient temple at Magiagi, near Apia, was often visited by prominent citizens of the period, such as the Reverend John Stair, the first mission printer of the London Missionary Society (Lovett 1899), William T. Pritchard

(1985), one of the earliest traders in Apia, William Churchward (1971), the British Consul, and Chief Justice Schultz of the German Administration (1900–1914).

The real archaeological work, however, was started by Sir Peter Buck (1930), in his monumental study of Samoan material culture, followed by Derek Freeman in the early 1940s. Freeman (1944) introduced the methodologies of archaeology into his work, which involved excavations, collecting artefacts and measuring various prehistoric sites. These include the *Fale o le Fe'e* at Magiagi, the earth mounds of Vailele (near where the National University of Samoa now stands) and the historic cave at Seuao, Sa'anapu. He published his investigations in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*. Freeman's work was continued by Jack Golson in the 1950s. He conducted the first systematic survey of archaeological remains on the big island of Savai'i, as well as Vailele on Upolu, and discovered the first ancient pottery from Samoa.

In the 1960s, Golson was followed by Roger Green and Janet Davidson (1974) from Auckland University. They and colleagues conducted extensive fieldwork at Vailele, Falefa and other sites in the 1960s, and edited the two volumes of *Archaeology in Western Samoa*, which are still the primary source of archaeological information for Samoa today. Noted American archaeologist Jesse Jennings and his student Richard Holmer (Jennings et al. 1982) also did extensive fieldwork in Samoa, principally at Faleasiu and Falelatai in the 1970s. At the same time, Jennings reviewed the progress of the work involved in the discovery of Lapita pottery at Mulifanua in 1973, which showed that Samoa had been colonised by the same cultural group that had spread from the Bismarck Archipelago to the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji and Tonga.

Interest in the archaeology in Samoa has been of a sporadic nature despite the stature of the scholars who pioneered investigations. But this approach has changed, and now archaeology, the study of the material and social culture of the past, has become a new and important field in Samoa. This is due to the following three actions:

1. Recent extensive archaeological work in American Samoa undertaken mainly by American archaeologists such as Patrick Kirch, David Addison and others during the past 20 years;
2. The adoption of archaeology by the National University of Samoa in 2007 as a compulsory subject in its new Bachelor of Samoan Studies degree; and
3. A renewed interest in environmental and heritage issues by the Samoan Government in the mid 1990s, resulting in the renaming of the former Ministry of Lands as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

On the whole, a renewed interest in environmental and heritage issues is good for the country, as reflected in the renewed interest of the government in heritage issues, which is in keeping with similar developments in other Pacific Island countries. As part of the new interest, archaeological research has received a considerable boost, which in the long term will result in significant change not only to government policies, but also to academic pursuits at the National University of Samoa. But the anticipated growth of archaeology as both an academic and an applied discipline will not be unproblematic for several reasons.

Firstly, one major problem that I foresee is the nature of tradition under culture change. Traditions keep changing as people change their values and beliefs. One of the most dramatic of these beliefs is change to religious affiliations. In the pre-Christian past, generally before the arrival of the first contingent of London Missionary Society ministers in 1836, Samoans followed a religion which is best described, according to Edward Tylor's 1871 classification in *Primitive Culture*, as animistic. In effect, Samoans believed in spirit-gods which appeared to

them in the form of animals, birds, fish, reptiles, or as natural phenomena, such as the sun, stars, planets, the moon, lightning, earthquakes and so on.

In the 1830s and 1840s, evangelistic missionaries of the London Missionary Society from their base at Tahiti, Wesleyan missionaries from their base in Tonga, and Catholic missionaries from their base in Wallis and Futuna effected mass conversions of Samoans to Christianity (Williams 1837; Turner 1983; Moyle 1984). These conversions took place over a 30-year period and changed the religious belief and practice of the population in a basic and fundamental way. Everything that reflected Samoa's pagan religious beliefs and practices was condemned by European missionaries, and there was widespread destruction of ancient temples, shrines and sacred groves and visible incarnations of the ancient gods.

This act of destruction was so successful that very little of the old religious institutions remained, except in so far as they have been incorporated into the Christian religion, such as *lotu afiafi*, or evening prayer services (Va'a 1987). The *Fale o le Fe'e*, about 10 km inland of Apia, is the remnant of an old Samoan temple (Stair 1894, 1897) to the *Fe'e* (octopus), and though desecrated to a considerable degree, it managed to survive due to the fact that it was difficult to destroy the large stones that made up the posts of the temple.

The point about the re-invention of tradition, and in Samoa's case the change from paganism to Christianity, might have an important effect on future archaeological work, as religious fundamentalists try to discourage research which could remind Samoans of their pagan past. However, it is intriguing that in the British Isles and other parts of Europe there has been a revival in paganism by some sections of society.

The second major problem concerns the nature of internal politics in Samoa. One example happened recently in an archaeological project involving the National University of Samoa and Magiagi Village, 4.8 km southeast of Apia. The project concerned bush clearing and archaeological excavations at the *Fale o le Fe'e* temple, conducted in 2007–2008. In 2007, archaeology students from the National University of Samoa and archaeologists from Gotland University, Sweden, initiated a project which involved excavations at the *Fale o le Fe'e* temple, Magiagi (Martinsson-Wallin 2008). Before the research, we actively sought the support of both the Internal Division of the Ministry of Women and Social Development and the Electric Power Corporation (EPC). Meetings with the Internal Division were sought because it is the government arm which coordinates activities involving village councils, while the EPC controlled land through which our researchers had to pass to reach the temple site.

Of course, we also had to obtain the approval of the village council of Magiagi, mainly through the *Pulenu'u*, or government representative, in the village. As far as possible, we followed all of the necessary protocols to obtain access to the site.

However, unbeknown to us, there had been a political upheaval in the village in 2008, which resulted in a change in the *Pulenu'u*. The new government representative was not favourably disposed towards the project and he made known his opposition. When Associate Professor Helene Martinsson-Wallin (Gotland University) and I (National University of Samoa) visited Magiagi village to hand over the report of our 2007 research, we were subjected to haranguing by the new *Pulenu'u*. He accused us of not respecting our commitment (his words) to consult with the village, of not turning up for a scheduled meeting with the village council, and of not paying for village labour.

His diatribe was in Samoan, which I translated for the benefit of our European visitor. I told him that we did consult the village through the former *Pulenu'u* and that it was another government group that had failed to meet with the village council as scheduled. It was a case of

mistaken identity, I told him. I also informed the *Pulenu'u* that we did contribute money for the village, again through the former *Pulenu'u*, as a token of our appreciation. Moreover, we did not make any commitments that we did not honour, such as payment for several villagers who helped clear the land and who carried surveying equipment between the base and the temple site.

The bottom line, however, is that we got caught up in the internal politics of the village. From what I had overheard from several of the villagers, there is disagreement in the village council about the proposed reconstruction of the ancient temple for tourism purposes. The *Pulenu'u* we originally dealt with represented the faction that favoured the reconstruction of the temple as a historical site that tourists could visit and our archaeological team was dedicated to helping make this a reality. The new *Pulenu'u*, we were informed, represented the other faction.

The lesson, perhaps, is to have any future agreements with villages put down in writing, yet perhaps this can complicate matters further because the roots of the problem lie deeper. The Magiagi episode shows how complex these local issues are. It is possible that a political faction in the village did not want the old district war god of the Vaimauga, *Le Fe'e*, to re-emerge, and/or that supporting work on pre-Christian sites was seen as a culturally dangerous activity because it had the potential to challenge the contemporary belief system.

Thirdly, another problem for the future is the traditional concern for the physical remains of the ancestors, a common enough objection to archaeological investigations. This concern emerged in research at the Pulemelei Mound in Palauli, again involving archaeologists and students from Gotland University and the Australian National University. Some of the people of Palauli district voiced their opposition to archaeological excavations at the Pulemelei Mound because they said the work showed disrespect towards the physical remains of their ancestors who they claimed were buried there. Other issues were involved, of course, such as ownership of the mound. There was a court case disputing current ownership. The district lost. The Supreme Court held that the provisions of the Berlin Treaty (1899), under which the sales of certain traditional lands were legitimised, were Samoan law at the time, and therefore the sale of the Pulemelei lands was valid. The owner, O.F. Nelson and Co. Ltd, had its rights re-affirmed, but the village appealed the decision, with further court action likely in the future. By the time village politics intervened, much of the archaeological investigations had already been completed, with, it must be said, local labour from the village, but any further excavations have been effectively stopped, at least until a final decision is reached about land ownership. The O.F. Nelson and Co. Ltd performed a ritual to remove the various *tapu* involved in the project (Tamasese 2008), but this did not stop the village's opposition to the archaeology because the dispute also involved the question of authority over the land.

Already, archaeologists at the National University of Samoa are beginning to look elsewhere for fresh excavations – for instance, to Manono and Fagaloa. For example, Tautala Asaua (2005), the lecturer in archaeology at the Centre of Samoan Studies, is planning extensive work at the Manono site as part of her PhD field research. Archaeologists from Gotland University, Sweden, such as Helene Martinsson-Wallin and Gustav Svedmo, are also looking at new sites in both Upolu and Savai'i islands for institutional research and training postgraduate students. These researches, including student and staff exchanges between the National University of Samoa and Gotland University, are funded under the Palme Grant of the Swedish Government, and the National University of Samoa has been a beneficiary of this grant for many years.

Conclusion

Despite the anticipated problems outlined above, I am confident that solutions can be found in better and more formal negotiations about archaeological projects, which will help to identify and resolve internal village disputes before they escalate. Performing the necessary rituals and making appropriate payments will also ensure that locals support the investigations. In negotiating with the villages, the government protocol should be followed. That is to say, consultants, archaeologists and students should negotiate with interested parties through the agency of the Internal Division, the *Pulenu'u*, the village council and any other government department or corporation involved. The parameters of the project should be clearly spelled out and the extent and remuneration of village labour should be clearly identified, to avoid any misunderstanding. In the Samoan context, this may also involve making a formal gift to the village council (money or food, or both).

Internal politics in the village council are a reality in the Samoan context and it is not always possible to satisfy all factions. Failing an all-round agreement on the issues involved in the project, we can at least deal with the dominant part, then execute the project as quickly as possible in case the political climate changes. Proper respect should always be shown for the sacred sites of the Samoans, such as burial places, and above all for any physical remains excavated. American Samoan-based archaeologists have much experience in this area, and perhaps we can follow their example. For instance, remains can be collected and properly buried in a suitable location. There are no doubt many other obstacles to archaeological research in Samoa, but if we are to succeed in promoting the education, welfare and history of our people we must find ways of coping successfully with the challenges.

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