

Soso’o le fau ma le fau. A project for teaching and learning about the Samoan Fale

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Abstract

The famous dome-like structure the Samoan Fale with its complex artistic lashings and curvature to provide a resilient design distinct to the Pacific. This paper describes an intergenerational approach to working with the Samoan Tufuga (master builder), Lesā Faanu and how staff and students of the Faculty of Technical Education (FOTE) at the National University of Samoa were able to learn the knowledge and skills which are used to make of the magnificent structure. A model Samoan Fale was a feature of the NUS Culture Week 2021, where the collaboration of staff and students was evident in its construction from start to finish.

E iai le alagāupu mai aso 'anamua ua lauiloa i atumotu uma o Samoa: "soso'o le fau ma le fau." O le uiga o lenei fa'aupuga, e faigofie lava ona malamalamaina 'auā e soso'o lava le fau ma le fau i le fausaga o le fale Samoa. 'Ā ta'u lea fa'aupuga i le lāuga, e tele lava ona fa'auigaina, peita'i o le 'auga o nei fa'auigaga uma e fa'asino i le manatu lea: e sili atu le tāua o le so'ogafau nai lō o fau 'ese'ese e lua. E tautala le alagaupu i le mālosi'aga e mauaina pē 'ā tu'utasia mānatunatuga, ma fa'atino ni gaoiga i le agaga 'aufa'atasi. E fa'asino fo'i lea fa'aupuga i le tāua o le fa'aauau pea o malamalama'aga mo le fa'atinoga o se galuega e ala i le a'oa'oina o le poto iloa ma le poto masani e sosolo mai le tasi i le isi e pei 'ona māua i le isi o alagāupu "e au i le tauola, e au i le fāgota." 'O le fa'auigaga lea i le manatu a le Afioga ia Lesā Laufale Fa'anū, o se Matua-o-faiva mai le alaafaga o Sa'anapu. I lona tāofi, e pau lava lea le 'auala e mafai ona mautinoa ai se lumana'i mo le fausiaina o fale Samoa mao'i.

Introduction

There is an old Samoan proverb well known to orators throughout the archipelago: “joining the rafter (*soso’o le fau ma le fau*).” Referring to Samoan house construction, it simply means to join one rafter to another. Used in oratory, the proverb is interpreted in a myriad of ways, but the common theme is the synergy implicit in the notion that the connecting of two separate rafters, the sum, is greater than the parts used. It speaks to the strength that comes from unity of thought, and unity of action. It points to the importance of succession, the imparting of knowledge and experience from one person to another. Lesā Laufale Fa’anū, a master builder from the village of Sa’anapu, referred to this last interpretation in connection with the house-building skills he has mastered that have to be passed on to a new generation of builders if this cultural heritage is to survive (Percival 2021). In Education, Tagoilelagi-Leota (2017) uses this proverb referring to it as the “joining *fau* (bark stripped from the *fau* Hibiscus tiliaceous) with another piece of *fau*. Used commonly in leadership contexts where a leader is replaced by someone of equal caliber, like the *fau*”.

This presentation takes you through the journey of the staff and students of the Faculty of Technical Education in collaboration with a Master Builder Lesā Laufale Fa’anū. Working together, they built a Samoan house (*Fale*) model that was a feature for the Faculty’s involvement at the NUS Culture Day 2021. This model now sits at the Centre for Samoan Studies as an educational resource and tool. I lay out this presentation in three parts, starting with the Samoan welcoming ceremony (*Ava ole feiloa’iga*), then looking at the teaching and learning journey that took place and concluding with the Samoan closing ceremony (*Ava ole fa’amavaega*).

Ava o le Feiloa'iga

At the start of the project, when Lesā started the teaching process, he began the day with a ceremony that he prescribed as a debriefing time where we give glory to God for a new day, and also seeking strength and guidance from the Lord for the challenges ahead in the building. The Ava Ceremony is a serious part of the process of constructing a main house (*fale tele*). The students of the National University of Samoa performed this which allowed them to be one with their culture and adhere to the construction roles and the responsibilities required on site.

Large *fale* are referred to as *fale tele* (round, used for meetings or receiving guests) or oval house (*fale ofulau*, which may be used as the residence of a high ranking chief). When it serves as the guest house for a high ranking chief the *fale tele* is referred to as the guest house (*fale tali malō*). Smaller *fale* are also built for sleeping or working, using the same construction principles. Throughout Samoa these traditional structures are rapidly being replaced by modern structures using imported roofing iron, timber and concrete.

The *Fale Tele* Project aimed to share the skills and knowledge used to build a Samoan *fale*. The Faculty of Technical Education collaboratively engaged with the builder (*tufuga fau fale*) and the construction team, to retain these skills and learn through an intergenerational approach with the Master builder. The significance of having Lesā join in this project and process is likened to the part of the proverb “*soso’o le fau*” or joining the rafter. He comes with traditional knowledge and methods with little aid of the technological era. “Systems change but the basics remain the same” (*E sui faiga ae tumau faavae*), this Samoa cultural saying befits the work that was carried by the *tufuga* Samoa. The much-anticipated urge from the *tufuga* was for the National University of Samoa to build its own Samoan *fale tele* fully built using one hundred percent Samoan methods, one hundred percent Samoan resources and materials.

Site Visit and data collection

FOTE Team’s first approach was to collect information on how to build a Samoan *fale tele*. We were privileged enough to have a walk in Galumalemana Steven Percival’s *Fale Tele* structure, standing in his home and residence in Malololelei. One of the main proverbs we learned from this visit was “*Mapu i sasaga, asu o faamatua*”. Smoke from burnt logs disperses under the main frame of the Samoan *fale*, meaning any differences or issues are resolved under the main frame of the *fale*. From this visit we were able to identify the different parts of the *fale* for the next steps in building the model.

Soso’o le Fau ma le Fau

The process of building the model Samoan *fale* model took three weeks. The carving of the rafters took place first, followed by the debarking of all the natural materials in preparation for the build. Questions and storytelling (*talanoa*) took place between the builders and the staff and student building understanding and capacity of the various methods used for the build. This includes the appropriate materials and why they are used for building certain parts of the *fale*.

Different lashing techniques were taught, cutting and shaping the different parts of the build were conducted intentionally and in detail with the Master Builder. This in essence is why the proverb used for this paper, encompasses this passing on of knowledge and skill. “The adjoining of rafters” which means to continue living our culture and traditions through an intergenerational process between the old and young, the skilled and the learners. The work highly highlights *soso’o le fau ma le fau* through my work with the master builder (*matua o faiva* or the *ta’ita’i tufuga*). The work must

continue, and the FOTE staff and students through this project have retained this knowledge and skills of Samoan Fale Construction. The investment also goes back to NUS as a teaching and learning resource.

Historical significance

This project comes with emotional attachments to history. With reference to the first parliament building of Samoa, which was sadly demolished in 2012, the motivation is to build resilience and awareness in maintaining Samoan historical treasures. Building capacity through collaboration with Samoan master craftsmen and enlarging these trainings through university platforms, will hopefully plant the seed and create safekeeping measures for the Samoan Fale.

The work we completed with the *tufuga* and his team over the course of three weeks, has equipped the NUS Staff and students with the necessary skills and knowledge. The Samoan Fale Model, a product for NUS Culture Week 2021, is now a teaching resource and device for the Centre of Samoan Studies.

Teaching & Learning Journey

Proverbs/Alagaupu

The following proverbs were collected in collaboration with the Master Builder and his team (2021) during the process of teaching and learning.

“Mapu i sasaga asu o faamatua”. When smoke comes into contact with the *“sasaga”*, it disperses or breaks up. (Meaning, it is under the *fale tele*, where any issues or problems are solved)

“A gase poutu, e le tatali pou lalo”. When the three main posts are disfigured or damaged the under posts will not hold. (Meaning, when bureaucracy or decision-making is corrupt, then the rest of the society will experience disputes or differences resulting in the closure or end).

“Ua matagofie atuao, ae tasi lona, ole fau ua nofoi fa’ata’ifau”. The under posts are straight and level, but the rafters sit like a dog. (Refers to someone who only choose to respect a few parts of culture)

“Faataoto ia le ‘Au’au ae se’i o tatou velo aso”. Set the ridge, we want to install the purlins. (Meaning, set the agenda, start the meeting, we would like to share our thoughts).

“Ua fa’ala’au sautia le tausoga”. The interlocking members of the main frame have been expired over the years. Damage from the coolness of the upper part of the fale or the top part of the ceiling of the fale. (Meaning, when the meeting has taken too long or something has been discussed too long than its allocated time).

Fa’alupega

The following is the *fa’alupega* (greeting speech that refers to the foundation and recognition of the important leaders of a village) that was derived from engaging with the Samoan *fale* model:

Afio maia le Agai o Tupu ma le fale fa o lo tou Aiga Sa Le Malama. Respectful welcome to the four bestowed Master Builders Segi, Leifi, Solofuti, Moe

The Poutu: the trinity of the Fale Tele Model.

The poutu which is the central part of the fale tele represents three entities which hold up the structure of the building represents the Matai, Sa’aoao and Tama’ita’itai & Taulele’a. (chiefs,

daughters and sons of the village. In our learning journey it represented discipline, commitment and loyalty.

The Parts of the Fale Tele that were identified in our learning journey were made up of: *Atuaa/Pou lalo, Poutu, Fau lalo, Fau Luga, Fatuga, La'au Matua, So'a/ Tali So'a, 'Au'au, 'Aso, Pae 'aso, Niu fafo, Moamoa, Amo pou.*

The materials for building included: *Niu Vao* (a variety of coconut palm), *Poumuli* (a variety of timber for posts), *Toga Vao* (a type of wood), *Ulu* (Breadfruit wood).

Intergenerational Approach

Through storytelling and sharing of proverbs; the passing and retaining of skills and knowledge; the observation and questions and the hands on and practical learning was instrumental in the success of the project. From the Master Builder, to the lecturer, to the students, different generations participated and took part

The photos must be able to elaborate on much of the intergenerational approach. This is how the Tufuga was able to pass down the knowledge and skills, and it was also the same approach he (*tufuga*) learned from his ancestors, the rich pool of knowledge in the making of the Samoan Fale.

The FoTE staff have now retained the skills and knowledge from the Tufuga *fau Fale*, "*Soso'o le fau ma le fau*". The intergenerational approach has built a bridge between gaps. The National University have retained the skills and knowledge through ongoing conversation and collaborations, data collection on site while doing the work, practical learning.

Collaborative Approach

This project brought together six programs for the very first time for a common goal to achieve what we now have standing in the CSS Museum.

These programs are all under the Faculty of Technical Education: Electrical Engineering, Fitting and Machining, Radio and Electronics, Construction Trades, Welding and Fabrication, Refrigeration and Air Con, Automotive and Plumbing programs collaborated through the sharing of resources.

Out of an intergenerational approach and the collaborative approach, FOTE Students were able to hear from history and culture, ways we can adapt and become resilient to the pandemic.

This conference's theme is on resilience during this global pandemic. I offer the following as lessons learned from this journey of building the Samoan *Fale*. Having to work with a traditional based and culturally based methods and ideas, a big question of uncertainty regarding modern methodology of building and regulations emerges. How can retaining this traditional knowledge be beneficial we move forward to hopeful post-covid era in building. A collaborative approach offered us an enhanced platform of learning. This brought the faculty to work together and together we celebrated this achievement. It also made us forget about Covid, because of the resilience built through discipline, commitment and loyalty to the cause.

I draw on the The Fonofale Model of Health (Springboard Trust, 2021), which I find interesting that they use the Samoan *fale* to offer a model for mental health and wellbeing. The different parts of the *fale* represents different parts of a person and their community, offering this holistic view on building resilience. As noted by the Springboard Trust (2021) "it is critical that we apply a culturally competent lens to everything we do that involves Pacific or indigenous people - especially in schools". Models like the *fonofale* help both leaders and learners learn and grow as themselves (Springboard Trust 2021).

Ava O Le Fa'amavaega

All good things must come to an end, and therefore, we end with an Ava Ceremony. Whereby the *Tufuga* uplifts everything to God for the journey and bless the completed *fale*.

Inspiration in our Learning.

The outcome of this project has built confidence in our teaching to collaborate with industries in a holistic view in a 100% funded project like building a *fale tele*, and it may be our answer to building resilience and a response to Covid. In utilizing our skills and knowledge in the Faculty of Technical Education.

Resilience through Inspiration and Insight

- Documenting the work that we have done together.
- Demonstrating how TVET/FOTE students and staff can collaborate for learning cultural skills.
- Sharing how we can all learn from what we have done in building resilience during this Pandemic.

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