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# ROW AS ONE! A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF THE SĀMOAN *FAUTASI*

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Every April in American Samoa, 10 to 15 village longboats manned with 45 village members line up outside of the deep-water harbour port of Pago Pago for their fiercest competition of the year (Fig. 1). These *fautasi* cost tens of thousands of dollars to purchase and maintain, and the race outcomes are intricately tied to financial benefits, village pride, community identity and a deep historical tradition of seafaring. The construction of these vessels throughout their history, locally, in New Zealand, and more recently the United States, and their transition from wooden clinker-built boats to sleek fibreglass creatures, reflects American Samoa's engagement with the world's economy and with colonising forces.

The *fautasi* procurement, training and races represent the single biggest community-based cultural event in American Samoa. Although these races have great significance locally, the history and development of these boats have been effectively ignored by researchers. Krämer (1994) does not mention them in his two-volume ethnographic description of the Sāmoan Islands, Buck (1930: 371) only mentions them in passing, and Holmes (1957: 307), calling them "*fa'atasi*", refers to them simply as "European long boats". It seems that they were viewed as tainted by Western cultures, and were considered as less important than previous, more traditional vessels. As a result, the cultural complexity and adaptive ingenuity of Sāmoan innovation has been under-appreciated and under-examined. Here we discuss the cultural evolution of Sāmoan seafaring technology from pre-Western contact to the contemporary boats racing today.





Figure 1. Modern fibreglass *fautasi* racing to the finish line in Pago Pago Harbour, American Samoa. Photo by David J. Herdrich.

This article traces the development and creation of the *fautasi* from its roots in smaller, slower boats with paddles rather than oars to the Sāmoan-driven integration of Western technologies to improve the speeds of their boats. We argue that the almost complete absence of contemporary *fautasi* in the anthropological literature reflects an ethnocentric perspective where Western cultures are lauded for technological advancements, while non-Western cultures are perceived as spoiled from their “natural” states should they adopt such technologies for their own purposes. We argue that Sāmoan cultural adoption of technological features of Western vessels fits with Sāmoan history of long-term trade relationships throughout the Pacific. These stem from cultural innovations in indigenous craft culture in the Asia-Pacific region. These indigenous crafts, the forests of their source material, construction sites near the shore, boat sheds, launching areas, navigation routes and waypoints were once major elements within the maritime cultural landscape of marine transportation.

## INDIGENOUS CRAFT CULTURE

Seafarers and coastal populations celebrate their maritime heritage in many ways, including the construction of traditional watercraft and the continuation of ocean activities like traditional navigation, boat races and sailing regattas. These experiences create an active connection to the sea, critical to maintaining the cultural identities of many marine-based societies. The construction of watercraft based on indigenous designs is often central to cultural activities, in addition to basic utility in travel for such activities as trade, war and fishing.

Hundreds of years ago in the Pearl River Delta, the Chinese built long, slender teak boats with ornate dragonheads and tails. These were associated with the traditional summer solstice festival of *Duanwu* or *Zhongxiaojie* commemorating filial piety. Dragon-boat festivals and paddling races spread with the migration of Chinese overseas and are regulated today by national and international governing organisations (International Dragon Boat Federation 2016). In California, the Native American Chumash Tribe has revived the construction of the *tomol* canoe built from cut-plank redwood sewn with animal sinew. Paddlers regularly voyage on the ancient sea routes from Santa Barbara to the Channel Islands, reconnecting with their seafaring ancestors and their maritime heritage of that special location (McGinnis *et al.* 2006: 3). The knowledge of voyaging techniques and the history and achievement of open-ocean navigation are also important elements of Hawaiian cultural identity. This was encapsulated in the 1976 construction of the Hawaiian voyaging canoe *Hōkūleʻa*. Her completion helped initiate a Pacific revival in traditional canoe construction, non-instrument navigation and ocean voyaging (Finney 1994).

These examples highlight the importance of sharing maritime heritage through traditional watercraft and perseverance of traditional ocean activities. Vessel construction and ocean activities are dynamic in nature, and therefore it is not surprising that new materials and technologies have influenced traditional behaviours. The use of new materials has an immediate impact on the persistence of traditional construction techniques, but may have less influence on the nature or significance of the cultural activity itself. For instance, the twin hulls of the performance-accurate replica *Hōkūleʻa* are constructed from fibreglass-covered marine plywood, and ocean passages have been made with Dacron sails (New Sails of *Hokuleʻa* 2004). Modern Chinese dragon boats are formed by lightweight fibreglass shells (Dragon Boat Dimensions 2017). This does not, however, seem to alter the central form of the craft, nor necessarily negate the cultural importance of Hawaiian voyaging or Chinese dragon-boat racing. In these cases, new materials and

technologies have been adapted by living maritime cultures into evolving traditional ocean activities.

The people of Sāmoa (comprising both the Independent State of Samoa and the U.S. Territory of American Samoa) possess a long history and connection to the waters surrounding their islands. According to current archaeological evidence, voyagers first arrived in Sāmoa at approximately 800 BC (Clark *et al.* 2016; Petchey 2001). The traditions and lifeways developed over 2,800 years are generally known as *fa'a Sāmoa* 'the Sāmoan way'. *Fa'a Sāmoa* places particular emphasis on the importance of family and of village, and continues to shape and inform the population today. A core component of these traditions centred on the building of ocean canoes for food, travel, trade and sport.

The construction and use of Sāmoan canoes for interisland voyaging, fishing and near-shore transport was central to island settlement and habitation. Over time there has been a variety of Sāmoan watercraft. The *paopao* was the smallest Sāmoan paddle dugout canoe with two booms attached to the outrigger, for inshore fishing in lagoon or harbour waters; the larger *soatau* paddle dugout canoe had more than two booms connected to the outrigger; the *'iatolima* or largest dugout canoe had a mast and sail and five booms attached to the outrigger pontoon; the *va'a alo* or bonito sewn-plank canoe featured two outrigger booms for deep-sea fishing; the *amatasi* sewn-plank sailing canoe with its wide platform on the booms was used for interisland travel; and the *'alia* double-hulled canoe was employed in long-distance open-ocean voyaging (Buck 1930: 370–416; Haddon and Hornell 1936: 223–47; Neich 1985: 51–54). Relatively modern craft circa mid-19th century include the *taumualua*, a large sewn-plank paddling canoe with no outrigger, the first of its type; and sometime later the *fautasi*, a long, lightly built wooden-planked craft with oars instead of paddles (Emerson 1934: 1550; Haddon and Hornell 1936: 240).

Today the majority of traditional Sāmoan watercraft have vanished, leaving only the *paopao*, the *'alia* (no longer canoes but small twin-hulled aluminium powerboats for local transport and near-shore fishing) and the oared *fautasi* (fibreglass racing shells). However, *fautasi* races are considered the largest annual cultural event in the Sāmoan Islands. The *fautasi* races are held on Flag Day (17 April) in American Samoa, and on Independence Day (1 June) in the Independent State of Samoa. These events have been a continuing tradition for over 100 years. Villages and families strongly identify with their respective competitive teams and winning vessels. The modern construction and form of these *fautasi* is no accident, and yet their antecedents are not included in descriptions of any earlier watercraft. Where, then, do these *fautasi* craft and the *fautasi* races find their cultural roots in Sāmoan history?

The emergence of the *fautasi* provides a Pacific case study of post-Western-contact technological and cultural expertise and adaptation. It combines the skills of the Sāmoan boat builders and the integration of beneficial technological features introduced by European sailors and American whalers. Anthropologists seeking knowledge only from traditional pre-contact societies rather than these hybrid post-Western-contact watercraft have overlooked *fautasi*. However, the emergence of the *fautasi* during this time of rapid change for Sāmoan culture invites further examination.

TAUMUALUA:

INGENUITY AND ADAPTATION OF AN OUTRIGGERLESS CANOE

Prior to the emergence of the *fautasi*, a slightly different canoe dotted the Sāmoan horizon. This canoe, the *taumualua*, emerged during the period of revolutionary change and internal strife between Sāmoan lineage groups in the mid-19th century, a time complicated by the increasing influence of *pālāgi* (foreigners) in the form of missionaries, beachcombers and the introduction of Western weapons. Part of these struggles included sporadic warfare between the forces of Ātua and Ā'ana and Malietoa, all rivals for leadership among the Sāmoan islands of 'Upolu, Manono, Apolima and Savai'i.

In February 1848, the British ship HMS *Calypso*, commanded by Captain Worth, arrived in Sāmoa, a relatively small warship carrying 20 guns, a sixth-rate wooden sailing vessel deployed for remote patrol duties to the distant Pacific Station (Krämer 1994: 302). When British property was reportedly damaged at the outbreak of the Sāmoan naval war of Taumua o Fua (1848–1851), Worth imposed a fine on the followers of Malietoa. He blockaded the war party within its fortified position at Mulinu'u promontory (near Apia) with the Royal Navy marines and a single longboat. This boat had a lighter, faster design than Sāmoan war canoes, resulting in reported astonishment and dismay on the part of the Sāmoan warriors. The opposing war parties of Ā'ana and Ātua “took a hint from this circumstance, and resolved to build similar war-boats; and an American resident at Aana, Mr. Eli Jennings, undertook the work” (Ella 1898: 247).

This story of HMS *Calypso* and Captain Worth may be apocryphal myth-making as Worth himself makes no mention of the longboat blockading action in his narrative (Worth 1852). Nonetheless, the story offers a possible description of the innovation of an apparently new “double-ended” boat design (*taumua* ‘bow’; *lua* ‘two’), a wider outriggerless or monohull paddled craft exceeding the lengths of previous boats. Multiple observers noted the popularity and usefulness of the new watercraft at the time. “They use these on their expeditions from settlement to settlement on what they call *malangas* [*sic*], or travelling parties, and also in war. When fully manned, these boats

are a fine sight” (Smith 1898: 155). They were also raced in regattas held in Apia (*Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser* 1890: 3; *Samoa Times and South Sea Gazette* 1878: 3).

In reference to their construction, numerous thinly veiled ethnocentric reports by Western observers attributed *taumualua* origins to whaleboat designs. These writers did not make a distinction between Western longboats and even lighter-built Western whaleboats. “Within the last few years the native carpenters have been trying their hand at boat-building, and it is astonishing to see how well they are succeeding in copying the model of an English or American whaleboat, sharp at both ends, or having ‘two bows,’ as they call it. Some of them are fifty feet long, and carry well on to one hundred people” (Turner 1861: 268).

The transition to a model with no outrigger does not necessarily represent any loss of traditional boat-building skills. Instead, it continues the tradition of sewn-plank construction. For instance, Haddon and Hornell (1936: 240) wrote how “the hull was made with irregular lengths of dressed planks sewn together on the inside with sennit lashings passed through marginal edges as with the *va’a alo*”. The finished hull had a smooth carvel surface, all the lashings being on the interior surface of the boat.

The stem (*taumua*) as well as the *taumuli*, or stern, were carried upwards some height and curved. The canoe had a depth of hold of about three feet, and was formed of pieces of wood seven to eight feet long, sown together with sennit in the same manner as in the *alia* canoe. These planks are dubbed out with the adze to about one and a-half inches in thickness, the inner surface having a bevelled and raised ridge on each edge, through which the lashings were passed, as is to be seen in the *va’a-alu-atu* [*sic*] of to-day. These vessels had ribs to strengthen them inside, about four feet apart. The seats for the paddlers are about three inches below the gunwale. The canoes were much ornamented with shells, &c., the bow and stern pieces being made of *malili* wood, whilst the hull itself was made of *ifi-lele* [*sic*] or sometimes of *fetau*. They were decked fore and aft for some eight feet. They carried one sail only, of the usual triangular shape, common all over Polynesia, the apex of which was downwards, and this was made of mats. The mast was set on top of the thwarts, and not on the bottom of the canoe, and was kept in position by stays. The sail was called a *la*; the mast a *tila* or *fangā* [*sic*]. For steering they used a large paddle fourteen feet long and twelve inches broad in the blade. (Smith 1898: 158)

Monohull craft had been observed elsewhere in Oceanic cultures. Some observers postulated that this new model, with its traditional construction, could have come to Sāmoa via the Solomon Islands of Melanesia, the Tuamotu Islands or Fiji. “Indeed the ‘two bows’ [*taumualua*] is so unique that hardly anyone will at first think of an imitation, particularly considering that from

time immemorial Melanesians have had boats without outriggers. Since in boat building Fijian influence is so very pronounced, why should not the two bows have come about through similar influences?” (Krämer 1994: 302).

Haddon and Hornell (1936: 240) looked beyond the simple dichotomy of Sāmoan versus Western construction and described the specific fusion of cross-cultural methods in greater detail: “To stiffen it [sewn hull planks], the European system of fitting frames was adopted. These, however, were secured not by bolts but by sennit lashing secured to cleats projecting horizontally from the inner surface of the hull planking, a method familiar to the builders as that already in use in double canoes.” They found this *taumualua* nautical evolution to be “a local adaptation of the European whaleboat ... European and Samoan features were blended with notable success, and the result was a distinct triumph for Samoan adaptive ingenuity.” Later the European method using metal fasteners and regular linear hull strakes would be put into use, a broad and general transition in wooden construction which took place in many locations with the adaptation of small-boat iron-fastening technology.

#### THE ROOTS OF *FAUTASI*: A NAVAL ARMS RACE IN SĀMOA

The timing of these innovations and adaptation is also important in Sāmoan history, coming in the middle of a period of intense warfare between the Malietoa, Ātua and Ā‘ana people. In a 2009 interview on the island of ‘Upolu, His Highness Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi, speaking for his family, referred directly to this intervention.

We had been ... struggling for quite a long time, you know, to find our bearings. We got beaten by these guys [Manono/Malietoa forces] time and time again, until Eli Jennings comes into the picture, and he builds these boats ... It’s a double-hulled boat, the way it was built. I think they had bamboo breastworks, but it could carry 200 soldiers. And it could carry, very importantly, cannon. And that was the first time we had beaten these guys for a long time ... The reason why I’m grateful to the Jennings is that we wouldn’t be around, you know, if we had been crushed again in that naval battle which was fought in Safata ... (His Highness Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi 2009)

Here the Head of State for Samoa refers to new monohull craft incorporated into a double-hulled design, joining the larger Western-style monohulls as a catamaran. The catamaran design, of course, is well known as traditional island construction and the core feature of the long-distance *va‘atele* or voyaging canoes that made ancient migration and settlement throughout the Pacific possible. However, these larger double-hulled vessels built by Eli Jennings were entirely different from Pacific canoes, featuring a hand-cranked central paddlewheel, log barricades, iron prows and cannon (Pritchard 1866: 63, 74).



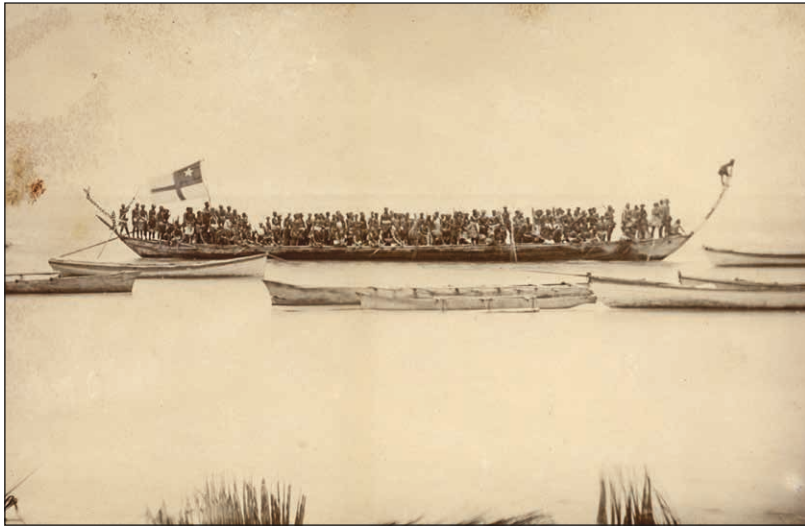


Figure 2. Sāmoan *taumualua* with about 100 paddlers, c. 1893. Western-style longboats and Sāmoan outrigger canoe in the foreground. Alma Lyons Green Collection, Feleti Barstow Public Library, Polynesian Photo Archives, American Samoa.

This emerging ability to significantly lengthen outriggerless boats proved immediately useful in military contexts. The armed *Le Taumuasila* paddlewheel ram appears to be a startling but short-lived derivation of the new elongated watercraft, one that may have played an important role in the 1848–1851 Sāmoan war. Other experiments were conducted regarding the importance of elongated double-ended monohull craft. “The town of Sapapalii, in the Faasaleleaga, is now building the largest war canoe ever constructed in Samoa. This war vessel is double, each craft being 96 feet in length, 10 feet in width, and 6 feet in depth of hold. She will carry 250 warriors, and will be a valuable auxiliary to the Government schooner *Laetitia*” (*New Zealand Herald* 1881: 6).

Jennings was by no means the only Western carpenter in Sāmoa. Captain Worth, on board the HMS *Calypso* in 1848, noted scores of foreigners in a variety of roles. There is no way to tell if the story of Eli Jennings is also apocryphal myth-making, though a consensus of recorded views credit Eli Jennings with a specific and timely role in the introduction of the *taumualua* form and the initial demonstration of its versatility.

The *taumualua* appears, in this historical context, as an important design predecessor, but at what point did the *taumualua* become a *fautasi*? *Taumualua* built in the traditional Sāmoan method were still quite different from the documented wooden *fautasi* of the 20th century. In general, *taumualua* were 18 to 21 metres (60 to 70 feet) in length and 2.1 to 2.4 metres (seven to eight feet) in beam (width), had long curved, upright, decorated stem and sternposts and were propelled using paddles, not oars (Fig. 2).

#### TAUMUALUA TO FAUTASI

The emergence of the *taumualua*, falling between the more traditional Sāmoan watercraft and the new oared *fautasi* built with Western methods, served as a transitional step. It appears to be a case of change to the overall form of the elongated outriggerless fast hull first, followed by the adaptation of specific construction techniques and new materials. From our review of newspaper records, *taumualua* seem to have vanished from existence after 1893, replaced with the appearance of a *fautasi*-like craft shortly thereafter.

Key technological innovations match the transition from the *taumualua* to the *fautasi*. The *fautasi* was strake-built iron- or copper-fastened, with an attached rudder rather than steering blade that was firmly fixed to the sternpost by pintle and gudgeon, and that used oars rather than paddles. However, in the current literature these innovations do not appear to be associated with any particular historical event, nor noted in any detail beyond simply stating: “Later still, these boats apparently evolved into the even longer whaleboat-style *fautasi*” (Neich 1984: 193).

The lineal progression from *taumualua* to *fautasi* is challenged by no one, seemingly being a change in the technology of construction but not in the essential form of the craft. The adoption of the fixed rudder was a widespread innovation, an acknowledged improvement over the cumbersome and less-wieldy steering oar.

The timing of the transition from paddles to oars is also unclear. At some point between the creation of the new form in 1849 and clear descriptions of oars for rowed craft in 1894, Sāmoans had intentionally changed from paddling craft facing forward to craft using pulling at the oars or sweeps, facing the stern. The power developed from the use of the oars and oarlock and fulcrum was easily apparent. A two-mile boat race at the harbour of Pago Pago between a local *taumualua* with a 50-paddler crew and a six-man pulling boat from the USS *Tuscarora* made this clear. Although the Sāmoan paddle craft charged ahead at first, the oared vessel easily overtook the *taumualua* in the long run (*Evening Star* 1875: 1). A later description of a whaleboat-type trip in Sāmoan waters includes a hybrid use of both, oars being employed for open water and paddles being “safer and easier to use ... for going in or out

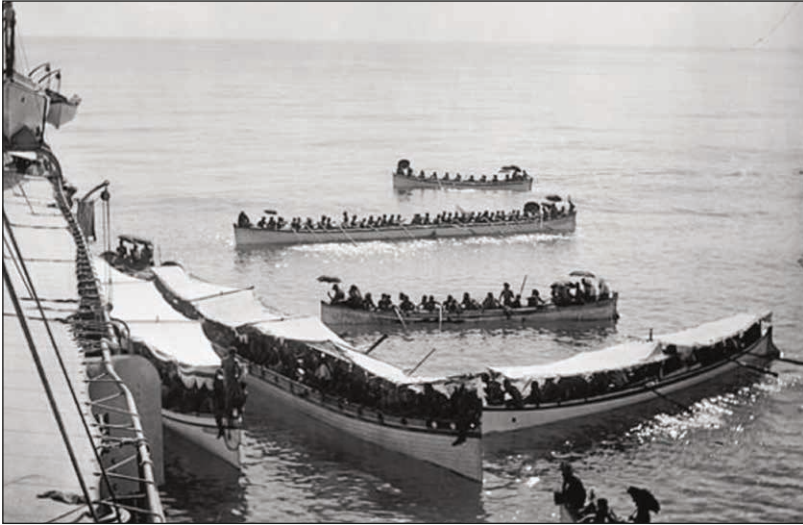


Figure 3. Followers of Matā'afa Iosefo Laiufi surrendering weapons to the USS *Badger*, 1899. Thomas Andrew Collection, Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa. (available at: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/211673>)

of treacherous reef openings” (Turner 1894: 199). This indicates a recognition of the use of both technologies under different circumstances.

The need for speed during armed conflict may help to explain the incentive behind a transition from *taumualua* to *faotasi*. However, Buck offers an additional motivation associated with the cessation of armed conflict:

As inter-district wars died down, the *taumualua* in turn gave way before the *faotasi*, a boat built purely for transport ... The *faotasi* are also community boats which require large crews. They are unsuited to the needs of the few. (Buck 1930: 371)

Buck's emphasis on the peacetime association of the *faotasi* is challenged by the fact that oared longboats with attached rudders were also built specifically for warfare. In an 1895 newspaper article we find that “unusually large whaleboats” were becoming popular in Sāmoa, including one “60ft long with 7ft 6in beam and 3ft depth [that] pulls 28 oars”. Further, that “A larger boat of the same type was recently built by Bailey for Samoan natives,

who use them for cruising from one locality to another on visits and also for transplanting war-parties” (*Auckland Star* 1895: 4). If the story of the HMS *Calypso* (above) is to be believed, one of the very early impressions of Western longboats themselves originated from a military context. Furthermore, photographs taken at the end of the war of 1899 show Matā’afa’s forces, in what are clearly *fautasi*, surrendering their arms to the American vessel USS *Badger* (Fig. 3). The Sāmoan boats were identified as “Samoan War Canoes”, which leaves little doubt that *fautasi* were used in military naval contexts (*Detroit Free Press* 1899: 29). So, while there are no descriptions of *fautasi* being barricaded on the sides like some *taumualua*, speed of transport and the capacity for large crews of *fautasi* was equally advantageous for both civil and military uses.

#### BUILDING THE FAUTASI

Prior to the use of the term *fautasi* itself, the use of that design can be inferred through the combination of oars (rowing, not paddling), length and the use of metal fasteners (Western-built, not lashed), built for specific purposes in the Sāmoan market. The first reference to a boat approaching the style and length of a *fautasi* that we are aware of occurred in 1894 in the *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*:

A very handsome, useful, rowing boat has been lately launched to the order of Sagapolo [*sic*], a [high] chief of Saluafata. ... Her dimensions are; 45 feet in length by 7 feet beam, by 2ft. 9. [depth of hold] amidships, and 4 feet bow and stern—material kauri—copper fastened. This boat with care should last a lifetime, and in any future regatta will doubtless make her mark. (*Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser* 1894: 2)

Though shorter than some of the *taumualua*, this early description of a *fautasi*-type vessel combines oars with confirmed Western boat construction (copper-fastened) and an appreciation for the speed of the design. The reference to kauri wood, *Agathis australis*, specifically identifies this particular boat as New Zealand-built. In a broad sense, it combines Western construction methods with the greater length of the Sāmoan *taumualua* craft, indicating Sāmoa’s connectedness and adaptation to the industrialised world. We hesitate to refer to this boat directly as a *fautasi* but only *fautasi*-type because there was another rowing boat that was closer to this length which Sāmoans refer to as a *tulula*. There is reference in 1894 to armed *tulula*, “*tulula ma auupega*”, in a proclamation dated 23 April 1894 in Apia during a period of tension between various Sāmoan factions and their Western sponsors (Gibson and Moltke 1894).



The following year there appear distinct references to longer oar-powered boats of similar design, which we believe does mark the origin point of boats that would soon be referred to as *fautasi* and appeared to a reporter at the time to be a “war canoe”. The concave-shaped keel, deeper at bow and stern than amidships, may have provided these ever-lengthening vessels with the necessary support against inevitable stresses. Some boats of this new style of construction were built in New Zealand for the Sāmoan market, as recorded in the *Auckland Star* newspaper:

In Mr. C. Bailey’s boat-building yard ... there are now about half-a-dozen boats under construction for the Islands. The most noticeable of these is an extremely novel craft. This is a long, sharp-ended cutter, 64ft in length, with 7ft 6in beam, to pull 34 oars, which has been built to the order of a number of natives on the island of Savaii, Samoa. Large pulling boats are much in request amongst the natives of Savaii and other islands in Samoa at present, owing to the exigencies of war which may break out again at any time, and several more orders are expected to come up here for similar boats. The boat has a big rise and fall, and is fitted with a rudder, instead of having the usual steer oar. She is fitted with seventeen thwarts, and will carry close on a hundred men. With her thirty-four oars going, the boat will look more like a war canoe than anything else. (*Auckland Star* 1895: 3)

The Sāmoan demand was high for these watercraft of increasing size. An oared boat 18 metres (60 feet) in length and fitted to pull 28 oars was variously described as “A Huge Boat” and as “A Monster Whale Boat” by European writers who viewed such boats as “unusually large” (*Bay of Plenty Times* 1895: 7; *Star* 1895: 1). One writer from Honolulu’s *Evening Bulletin* tells of their surprise at the length of the boats: “A short time ago we were surprised to hear of a boat 40 feet long, but now-a-days boats of 60 feet,—and we hear of one 94 feet,—are common” (*Evening Bulletin* 1895: 6).

The predominance of foreign-built boats in foreign-published newspapers should be taken with a grain of salt, and the assumption that all *fautasi* were shipped to Sāmoa from beyond the islands, simply because those notices dominate the foreign sources, should be carefully examined. Firstly, the newspaper articles often note that it is Sāmoans who are ordering the boats and are, presumably, providing the “unusual” specifications. In addition, there is evidence that these boats were also being built in Sāmoa. The same 1895 *Evening Bulletin* article cited above stated, “We hear that a boat 100 feet long is being built by the Kenisons in Savaii to pull 56 oars.”

Furthermore, the boats were not just built by those of European descent. For instance, a letter on the subject of local tax inequities from E. Schmidt, President of the Municipal Government in Apia, to the Consular Representatives of the United States, Germany and Great Britain, dated 11 October 1895, supports the assertion of local Sāmoan boat-building during this time:

The fact that these natives carry on a considerable business by the construction of the fashionable enormous village-boats increasing continually in number and by freeing themselves from the burden of the tax-payers, compete in an illegal way with the foreign boat-builders living in the islands, has caused considerable dissatisfaction among the latter ... (Schmidt 1895)

#### THE DOMINANT SĀMOAN BOAT

By at least the end of the last decade of the 19th century then, the form and construction of the wooden *fautasi* had fully emerged. The lashings and the upraised stem and sternposts of the *taumualua* had vanished. Whether clinker-built (overlapping hull planks) or carvel-built (edge-joined hull planks), these lightweight fast wooden craft, usually between 18 to 30 meters (60 to 100 feet) in length, were constructed in the Western fashion with internal framing and an enlarged keelson to prevent longitudinal hogging or sagging along the vessel's extreme length. There are reports of oared boats of 36.5 metres (120 feet) and 47.5 metres (156 feet) in length (*Press* 1897: 5; *Sydney Morning Herald* 1899: 5). These boats with numerous thwarts for seating could feature 36 oars or more, had attached stern rudders with tillers, and to Western eyes, appeared distinctly related to elongated whaleboats.

One observer timed a *fautasi* race over a one-and-a-half-mile course, confirming the boats' and crews' ability to easily sustain 10 knots or 11.5 miles per hour (Emerson 1934: 1550). All these factors made them well suited for Sāmoa's marine environment, which boasted few protected harbours or wharves but multiple surf landings and long distances between islands (Emerson 1934: 1550–51).

The first specific mention of the term "*fautasi*" known to date is from 1898 in the context of racing, and more specifically observations on boat names:

The natives certainly have a sense of humour as a glance at any of the names of their "*fautasi*'s" ... will shew—one I saw the other day was called the "Misela" (Measels) another the "Fiva" (Fever) while a third belonging to the other party was called the "Fua laau" (medicine) the owners of the latter informed me that she was built to cure the other two ... (*Samoa Weekly Herald* 1898: 2)

Observers, at least as early as 1887, describe the popularity of numerous sports and competitive games of strength among the Sāmoan Islands, such as boxing matches, foot races, wrestling, spear practice, club fights, pulling or tug-of-war matches, pig hunting, pigeon-catching and canoe races<sup>1</sup> (Churchward 1887: 139; Stair 1897: 136). What began as competitive events between individuals was often mirrored or transferred to the inter-village level, taking on a more formal and institutionalised aspect (Mageo 1991: 20). In this case, it seems that the newest version of the Sāmoan canoe, the *fautasi*, fitted easily into the existing intense and enthusiastic inter-village competition.

From at least their first appearance in numerous correspondence and newspapers, *fautasi* were immediately very popular, clearly associated with both racing and wartime uses, speed being a primary concern in both. Their great popularity and expense recall elements of a naval arms race combined with the pursuit of speed in professional boating competitions.

A curious craze for boat-building recently spread through Samoa. Village vied with village as to which could build the largest boat, and this extravagant public works policy threatened to ruin the competitors ... They were often 120 feet in length, and would carry the whole village on a journey. At least one village built a boat which cost 2000 dollars, and its name, "The End of All Things," burst the building boom. (*Poverty Bay Herald* 1897: 4)

In fact, *fautasi* were so popular that some outside observers compared the significance of boat construction in Sāmoa to the importance of building a church.

Probably the two strongest inducements to the Samoan to work in order to obtain money are the desire to obtain a large racing-boat or faitassi [*sic*], or to build a new church in which to worship. The faitassis [*sic*] are long, narrow boats of the whaleboat type, built in European fashion, and have often as many as thirty-six oars. When one of these is required, the Samoan will work by cutting copra or gathering cocoa in a manner that would put to shame many a European worker. (*Evening Post* 1923: 7)

While the writer may have found something humorous in comparing a racing boat to a church, there is more involved. The importance of the *fautasi* to Sāmoans is related to its history rooted in warfare and its importance as a means of village transportation for traditional village *malaga* (traveling parties) to neighbouring villages, as well as the village identity and rivalries associated with racing.<sup>2</sup> Because of these factors it was infused with and embodied a significance beyond a mere sporting vessel. One can say this with some certainty because the polite Sāmoan term for a *fautasi* is *sā* or sacred (*Samoa News* 2017). Watercraft in many cultures are often decorated for traditional or ceremonial roles (Fig. 4).

From their beginnings and into the first decades of the 20th century *fautasi* became the basic transportation platform for village-to-village and island-to-island travel. Like many places in the world, and particularly for island settings, the ocean provided a natural highway connecting people and communities, prior to the laborious effort of road and highway construction. As marine steam propulsion slowly made inroads into the Pacific, to be followed by gasoline and diesel propulsion, man-powered small craft retreated from their familiar commercial and military roles. There is surely

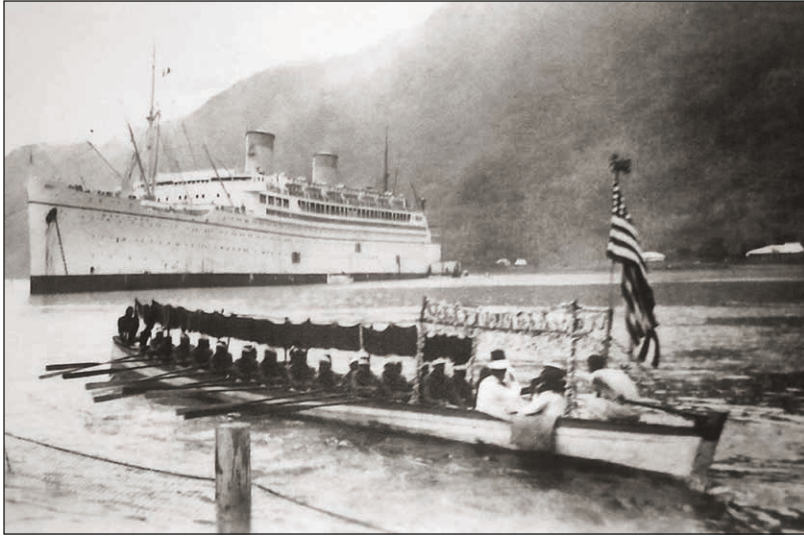


Figure 4. Pago Pago Harbour: Governor O.C. Dowling (Captain, U.S. Navy) departs American Samoa 15 January 1936 in a ceremonially decorated *fautasi* manned by 24 Sāmoan rowers. U.S. National Archives.

some truth to Peter Buck's 1930s assertion that the old *fautasi* seemed to be all rotting away (pp. 371–72).

At least some *fautasi* and *tulula* remained in limited commercial service in specific locations well into the 20th century. The shorter, more manoeuvrable *tulula* were often used to ferry cargo through narrow reef channels to and from larger vessels anchored offshore, a critical role for islands where there were no port facilities available, such as the Manu'a Islands. Longer *fautasi* were better suited for inter-island open ocean crossings. For instance, in the 1950s, "All trade is carried on by the five *fautasis* (long-boats) which ply to and from Manono or Upolu" (Holmes 1954: 237).

#### TERRITORIAL PROHIBITIONS AND THE ROLE OF RACING

In 1899, the Tripartite Convention partitioned the Sāmoan Islands between Germany and the United States, and in 1900 the U.S. Navy took possession of the eastern islands, establishing a coaling station and administrative centre on Tutuila. During this time many aspects of life in American Samoa came under increased regulation, including inter-island travel.



On 30 March 1903, the Naval Government in American Samoa promulgated a regulation concerning travel on *malaga* or traditional large-scale group travel by Sāmoans to visit other villages on other islands. Any trip that involved eight or more people using any type of vessel had to submit an application to the Secretary of Samoa Affairs, who would then make recommendations to the Governor, who would then decide whether to approve or deny the travel. This regulation was a *de facto* restriction on *fautasi* travel since the crew alone was upwards of 32 rowers. This regulation was likely a factor in reducing the demand for and maintenance of *fautasi*. Many of the older boats began to rot in their boatsheds (Buck 1930: 371).

Over the next 60 years, inter-village boat races increasingly became the sole and default use of *fautasi*. The U.S. Naval Station's regular newsletter, *O Le Fa'atonu*, provides a reference for many (not all) of the flag-raising or Flag Day (17 April) ceremonies and sporting events between 1900 and 1950. The *American Samoa News Bulletin* helps to fill in some of the years from 1965 to 1985. Flag Day *fautasi* races first appear in the naval newsletter in 1909. Prior to that, *tulula* races and local canoe and whaleboat races are listed without *fautasi* being specifically named, though they are certainly prevalent in historical photographs prior to this period. Also, there is a hint that they may have been used on the first Flag Day on 17 April 1900, as a programme kept in the U.S. National Archives has a handwritten note about "large boat races". Later, the general size of *fautasi* becomes synonymous with the number of oarsmen or oars carried on board. This was often juxtaposed with the minimum number of boats needed in each size category for the race, as in "For boats of at least 36 oars, three boats must enter; for boats of 24 to 34 oars, three boats must enter" (*O Le Fa'atonu* 1913: 4). Flag Day events included parades, formal speeches, benedictions and a large variety of competitive sports.

#### CONTINUING ADAPTATION: THE EVOLVING FAUTASI EVENT

The *fautasi* race course itself changed over time, in course length, boat size and prize money. In the early decades, the course was usually one and a half to two miles long, with various landmarks for start and finish lines. Today the *fautasi* race is between three and seven miles long, depending on the weather and ocean conditions. On Tutuila, races usually started offshore and outside Pago Pago Harbour, coming into the inner harbour and towards the spectators at the finish line. Elsewhere race routes both started and finished in the calm inner waters, rounding a sea buoy and doubling back.

The *fautasi* race was the most exciting race ever held in Tutuila, the course being straight and all boats having an equal chance to win the race. The course

... was a mile and three quarters in length extending from Aua to Blacklock's wharf. (*O Le Fa'atonu* 1911: 4)

Boat length also steadily increased. Whereas early racing *fautasi* in the first decade of the 20th century often fell into the range of 20 to 36 oars (10 to 18 thwarts), by the 1960s *fautasi* had surpassed that size. Eventually, 40 to 50 oarsmen became the norm. The additional length and added oars most likely increased the speed of the boat. By this time, the course was two miles long and the average time for completion was 10 minutes with a speed of 12 knots (13.8 miles per hour) (*American Samoa Daily Bulletin* 1967: 1).

Prize purses grew significantly by substantial leaps over the years. In 1924, the purse size more than doubled for a showdown between American and Western Samoan *fautasi*. In 1975, the first six winning boats received awards, with \$5,000 for first place and \$500 for sixth place, a purse ten times larger for the winner compared to 1950. The steady increase in prize packages up to the 1970s finally stalled with the new millennium. Though the winner was awarded \$15,000 in 2017 (a 98% increase from 1905), the 21st-century prize value actually declined compared to earlier purses when adjusted for inflation. In addition to monetary prizes, a perpetual trophy was annually transferred between winners.

*Fautasi* construction today is experiencing an accelerated transition, perhaps changing the nature of the race itself. *Fautasi* with wooden-plank construction existed up until the mid-1980s, when boats constructed with marine plywood coated with fibreglass and resin appeared on the scene. Then, starting in 2000 these plywood/fibreglass boats began to be replaced by more advanced models—referred to as “high-tech” boats. There was also an accompanying transition from heavy wooden oars to advanced lightweight carbon-fibre hybrid sweeps.

#### AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL BLIND SPOT?

With few exceptions, anthropologists working in Sāmoa seem to have ignored hybrid vessels such as *fautasi* and their use and significance in contemporary sports, despite the increasing popularity and size of the race events (Fig. 5). For instance, Albert Francis Judd's extensive field notes from a Bishop Museum expedition in American Samoa and the Pacific barely mention *fautasi* boats and make no reference to any races at all, notwithstanding the existing *fautasi* record of regular events occurring throughout that period (Judd 1926–27). Field notes record the *paopao* as being the common kind of canoe; “the big canoes have completely disappeared from American Samoa” (Judd 1926: 58).

Could this oversight be due to a matter of unfortunate timing, possible effects of the hurricane in January 1926 that may have destroyed the boats?



Figure 5. *Fautasi* (longboat) regatta, Apia, c. early 1900s. Photo from Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa (available at: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/1452587>).

Or perhaps to an unconscious bias common among outside observers, valuing only the material record of an ethnographically “pure” past, unaffected by Western influence? A historical photograph documents the presence of a sizable *fautasi* in the village of Fitiuta in 1938 (Fig. 6). Despite their unique size and their important function in Sāmoan culture, *fautasi* may simply have been mistaken for Western objects and overlooked. One observer briefly describes *fautasi* in Ta’ū Village and has a map indicating two boathouses for them, but merely identifies them as “European long boats” (Holmes 1957: 307).

Since the blossoming popularity of the *fautasi* in the late 19th century, devastating events have cancelled some of the regular race events (hurricanes, tsunami, world wars), and the written record kept by the naval administration is partial and incomplete at best. Yet, despite these obstacles and the apparent lack of interest on the part of Europeans, the consistency and significance of the *fautasi* race for Sāmoans remains clear. The Naval Station newspaper *O Le Fa’atomu* often noted that the *fautasi* race was “an important event”, the “main event” and the “apex” of all the sports of Flag Day in American Samoa.



Figure 6. Beach launching of a wooden *fautasi* at Fitiuta Village c. 1938. Adolf and Marjorie Borsum Collection, American Samoa Historic Preservation Office.

Across the Sāmoan Archipelago, *fautasi* races amongst the villages' *sā* (sacred boats) remain serious inter-village competitive events. In American Samoa, up to 150 men compete for one of the 45 seats in the village boat. Participation in the race is recognised as a sign of leadership, village pride and camaraderie, and may have additional health benefits (such as weight loss and cardiovascular health). Teams begin training in early February for the April race. Training consists of a steadily intensifying mixture of aerobic and anaerobic exercises that frequently reflect the military training of the captains. Closer to the race it is not unusual for men to run as a group up mountainsides in the morning, and go for another run together along the road before a late afternoon row. This acts to build endurance and camaraderie while simultaneously signalling commitment to other village members.

There is a strong emphasis on building unity amongst the *fautasi* crew that extends to the entire village community. In the weeks leading up to the race the men are expected to refrain from all sexual activity and begin living and sleeping together at the boathouse or a large Sāmoan guest house (*maota*



or *faletele*). Families and village members support the crew directly by providing meals at their temporary home, and indirectly by reallocating their chores and responsibilities and providing money towards boat maintenance and team uniforms. These matching uniforms prominently display village colours, which indicate village pride and are mirrored by the matching t-shirts and colours of cheering village members during evening practice heats in the harbour, as well as the during race itself. This synchronicity is further evidenced during practices and races when crew member calls for *foetasi!* ‘row as one!’ or ‘pull the oar in sync as one!’ are commonly heard.

Today considerable community funding goes into the design and construction of faster and more lightweight *fautasi*. They are computer-designed boats that are made of sleek moulded fibreglass with foam cores, sliding seats and in some cases built-in GPS navigation units. Currently, the fibreglass-coated marine-plywood *fautasi* and the high-tech boats still race against each other because the different technologies have different advantages and disadvantages. The lighter high-tech *fautasi* are superior



Figure 7. *Fealofani Samoa III*, a modern “high-tech” *fautasi* from the village of Fagasa. Photo by David J. Herdrich.

in the calm waters of the harbour, but the older, heavier *fautasi* have more stability in the swells of the open ocean and are less prone to swamping. Still, there is some discussion and debate as to whether the high-tech boats have too much of an advantage and, if so, what can be done about the situation. Though the modern boats may only bear a passing resemblance to the original wooden-plank *fautasi*, they provide a clear symbol of this seafaring culture's interaction with the global community (Fig. 7).

In the last few decades, prize awards have grown considerably, boat technology and construction costs have skyrocketed and commercial sponsors now support the racing events. These changes may have financial ramifications for villages that wish to continue this tradition. *Fautasi* racing has seen dramatic change, with some in the sport now questioning whether the tradition itself is threatened (Likou 2017). Regardless of technology, each *fautasi* in the race is still dependent on the support of its village, on the strength, teamwork and spirit of its crew, on the strategy and decisions of its captain, and on the luck of the weather and sea state. These represent unchanging elements of the *fautasi* traditional cultural practice. Although the technology has transitioned over time, the cultural tradition of the *fautasi* and its connection to the Sāmoan past continues.

\* \* \*

The story of the *fautasi* in the South Pacific represents a series of connected traditions and events that weave their way through Sāmoan history, and now find their most current expression in the annual races. This story begins with the evolution of the outriggerless form of the Sāmoan-built *taumualua* at a time when Western longboats played some minor roles in Sāmoan warfare. Adoption of specific Western construction methods, as well as the purchase of extremely modified longboats from abroad, led to a market for these fast and desirable vessels. The first of those came to be named *tulula* in 1894, followed soon thereafter by boats of a length and design that appeared to be *fautasi* in 1895. The resulting *fautasi* building boom drew attention and comment from many other parts of the Pacific, the new watercraft and its improved speed having proved its worthiness in multiple roles like inter-island passenger service, military operations and recreational events. The rise of powered vessels and government regulations reduced these roles, but never succeeded in eliminating the *fautasi*. The tradition of competitive racing held on and thrived, continuing into the 21st century to the point where modern advancements in materials science and computer design raise the question of sustainability of the *fautasi* traditional cultural practice in modern culture. But for now, even with the changes in technology, the importance of the *fautasi*, or the *sā* of the village, remains strong.

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## NOTES

- 1 By 1906 several references to pulling/rowing vessels had even worked their way into the translations of some contemporary proverbial Sāmoan expressions regarding travel at sea:
  - *'Ua fa'afetaia'iga a taulā*—'the meeting of sailboats': when two boats sail past each other in a favourable breeze, only short greetings can be exchanged. If the boat is being pulled by oars, the rowers can stop and there is time for a longer conversation.
  - *E tutupu matagi i liu [o va 'a]*—'a wind can rise even in the hold': when the wind dies down the crew have to take to the oars. Should anyone then hoist the sail the others will mock him. He, however, will answer with droll exaggeration...
  - *'Ia fa'atutu mai foe 'ina ia faia'ina le savili*—'pull hard so that we may overcome the wind': when a boat has to fight against a strong headwind, the helmsman calls out ...
  - *O le mao a le ala*—'the warning "pull, there is a lull"': the boat entrance to Taga, Savai'i, is dangerous as there is no reef and the waves are unusually high. It is necessary that the boat crew await the lull that sets in after the seventh wave and then pull with all their might. It is easier to judge from the shore when the right moment comes. That is why whenever a travelling party approaches, the villagers assemble on the strand to watch the spectacle and to advise the travellers with the cry ... (from Schultz 1906: 74–80).
- 2 Memories are long regarding victories in *fautasi* racing. For example, the village of Fagasa won the *fautasi* race held for American Samoa's jubilee celebration in 1950. The village was so proud of this accomplishment that 50 years later there were concerted efforts to train and support a strong crew, and much expense was undertaken to build the first "high-tech" *fautasi* to ensure another victory for Fagasa during American Samoa's centennial celebrations in the year 2000 (pers. comm. Atuatasi Lelei Peau pers. comm., 2017).

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#### ABSTRACT

The racing of *fautasi* (30-metre, 45-seater, oared Sāmoan longboats) remains a central cultural competition that unifies contemporary American Samoa and the two Sāmoan states more generally. However, the *fautasi*'s emergence and transition into this role has been dismissed as a vestige of colonialism and has been understudied by scholars. This paper examines the origin, development and use of the Sāmoan *fautasi* with special reference to the *taumualua* (double-ended paddling canoes) and *tulula* (9-to-12-metre, 20-seater, oared boats) that preceded them. We describe these traditional Sāmoan boats and the popular racing events that have grown around them in the context of hybrid nautical design, Western colonialism and modern commercialisation. Previous descriptions of the development of *fautasi* in the anthropological literature are, in many cases, oversimplified. Rather than simply replacing the *taumualua* when Sāmoan warfare ended, we argue that, pinpointing their origin to 1895, *fautasi* were developed because of their superior speed, a clear benefit in numerous functions including use as war boats, cargo and passenger vessels and racing craft. Over a period of 127 years all of these functions, except the popular sport of *fautasi* racing, fell away due to government regulations and the adoption of motorised vessels. Despite these transitions, *fautasi* retain a strong cultural connection to Sāmoa's maritime past with the annual *fautasi* races and represent the single largest cultural event in American Samoa.

*Keywords:* Sāmoa, history, maritime vessels, *fautasi* 'longboats', *taumualua* 'double-ended paddling canoes', *tulula* 'oared boats', boat-racing

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