SAMOAN CHURCHES

---by John Charlot

Pro-European, Samoan temples were fales which were somewhat smaller than those used for secular purposes, but of the same style. The first buildings used for Christian worship were large fales. When Western-style churches began to be built, they were designed by the Samoan master-builders of fales, who used pictures of old churches as models and perhaps received missionary advice. Samoan church architecture is, therefore, in a direct line with pre-Christian architecture, an authentic product of the Samoan artistic genius, and an important witness to the process of the assimilation of Western culture in Samoa.

It is obvious that one should not make extensive and original in Samoan churches, for instance the columns grouped in threes on the facade of the old church in Pago Pago village, or the round columned portico of the Protestant Church in Leone. Many churches have innovating towers which consist simply of columns and a roof with the sides left open. Such towers are sometimes arranged in open, pagoda-like tiers.

In a fa'ale, the eye is inevitably carried up the columns to move in the great domed space of the ceiling criss-crossed by gleaming brown beams. Samoan churches achieve the same effect with beautiful and complicated designs made of Inland woods, a distinctive and original feature. The shapes of the ceiling has been influenced by the fale as well. The ceiling of the Catholic Church in Leone has a shallow, but unmistakable rounded end.

The ceilings of most Samoan churches are formed in what is called a "broken arch." The ceilings of the side aisles slope upward toward the center, but they do not meet, as would if they formed a regular arch. Rather, the central, top portion of the arch, which covers the central aisle, is raised higher. The "broken arch" is like the round arch of the fa'ale, sloping the long house, but adapted to the three aisles of the Christian Church.

Perhaps the Samoan architect has carried over an ancient symbolism of the ceiling as the solid dome of heaven: the firmament taught by both the ancient chants and the Bible. The artist's eye has glimpsed the one foundation beneath both cultures, the only basis on which they can meet and live.

The Samoan architect is a composite style. A Gothic tower is capped by a Byzantine dome and supported by Baroque buttresses. The such combinations, impossible in European architecture, do not turn into chaotic jumbles due to the Samoan architect's exquisite sense of proportion. He was accustomed to defining the proportions of a fale by eye, without paperwork calculations.

Moreover, his profound understanding of the geometry beneath the elements of Western architecture, an understanding greater than that of the casual Western tourist. Looking at the photograph of a Gothic facade, he could see how the outwardly variegated statues formed short vertical lines when seen at a distance. He could use these lines in his own facade, even if he did not have or want statues. Beneath the superficial differences, a peaked Gothic window and a curved Baroque buttress were comparable forms which could be used together.

The historian can learn much about the basic elements of art by studying Samoan churches.

This solid grounding in form allows the Samoan architect to integrate even bizarre shapes and vivid decoration into a pleasing whole. He is enabled also to create interior spaces which are not indifferent, but rather produce impressions of largeness, height, grandeur, or, at times, intimacy. The room around one form one's feelings and thoughts, as does the landscape of a fa'ale.

The influence of fa'ale architecture on that of churches can be seen in certain characteristic emblems. The sides of the fa'ale are open, usually onto vegetation. Windows are used carefully and successfully in Samoan churches, light falling onto the interior. Walls often have floral decorations.

The sides of the fa'ale are formed by well-spaced columns. Columns are used