

SAMOAN CHURCHES ---by John Charlot

Pre-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 esthetic genius, and an important witness to the process of the assimilation of Western culture in Samoa.

A valuable project would be to make professional photographs of all the churches in Samoa and collect as much historical information as possible on each one. This becomes urgent as older churches are increasingly abandoned and destroyed.

The oldest churches in Samoa seem to have been simple, rectangular, peaked-roof constructions often made of thick coral blocks. But Samoan architects soon advanced to more ambitious designs. Interestingly, although they were mostly Protestant, they seemed drawn to architectural styles identified with Catholicism: Byzantine, Gothic, Baroque and Rococco. Even Neo-Classical elements are used flamboyantly rather than with the sober reserve of New England churches. The Samoan architect aimed for an effect of magnificence and display, of brilliant decoration. Architectural elements such as frames, ribbings, and vaults, were colored differently in order to have them strike the eye with all their line and style. Walls were covered with colored stucco decorations, most often floral. Columns were molded into complicated shapes, which vivid coloring emphasized again. Light stained-glass was used, decorative in itself but not obscuring the colorful interior.

The Samoan architect easily combined styles. A Gothic tower is capped by a Byzantine dome and supported by Baroque buttresses. The such combinations, impossible in European history, do not turn into chaotic jumbles is 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 knowledge of geometrical form, a characteristic of Samoan art, gave him a deep 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 those 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 geometrical 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 distinct impressions of largeness, height, grandeur, or, at times, intimacy. The room around one form one's feelings and thoughts, as does the domed space of a fale.

The influence of fale architecture on that of churches can be seen in certain characteristic emphases. The sides of the fale are open, usually onto vegetation. Windows are used carefully and successfully in Samoan churches, lightening both the walls and the interior. Walls often have floral decorations.

The sides of the fale are formed by well-spaced columns. Columns are used

extensively and originally 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 innovative 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 fale, 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 ceilings made of inland woods, a distinctive and original feature.

The shape of the ceiling has been influenced by the fale as well. The ceiling of the Catholic Church in Leone has a shallow, but unmis-

takable 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 they 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 fale afolau, 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. His artist's eye has glimpsed the one foundation beneath both cultures, the only basis on which they can meet and live.