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KORO: THOUGHTS ON WEST POLYNESIAN FORTS

Kimi Pepa
Simon Fraser University
Canada

West Polynesia is used in this paper to refer to the region covering the Fijian, Tongan, and Samoan island groups and also the islands of Rotuma, Futuna, 'Uvea, and Niue (Figure 1). Fortifications in West Polynesia are distinguished from enclosed fortifications in other parts of the Pacific by being referred to as *koro* or its linguistic variants *kolo* and *'olo*. This word is not used to refer to fortifications in the rest of Polynesia, although the term is used in Rarotongan to refer to an enclosure or palisade (Green 1967: 108). McKern, who undertook the pioneering archaeological investigations in the Tongan islands, proposed that the word was originally a Fijian term that spread with the diffusion of the idea of fortifications (McKern 1929: 81).

FIJI

Structural features of Fijian forts, or *koro*, have been radio-carbon dated to around A.D. 1000 (Frost 1974: 118; Best 1984: 130), and Palmer (1969) has argued that agricultural structures may have provided the blueprint for the development of defensive structures. Fijian *koro* cover a variety of forms, ranging from flatland ring-ditch examples (see Parry 1977) to ridge examples with transverse ditches and banks (see Best 1993).

SAMOA

The construction of Samoan fortifications are attributed to hostile relations with other island groups. There are Samoan traditions of Tongan invasions during the initial centuries of the second millennium A.D. (see Davidson 1965). Davidson (1974: 241-42) commented on the wealth of accounts in

Western Samoa discussing Tongan invasions:

Many forts and other field monuments are attributed to Tongans, and one of the most famous of all Samoan traditions recounts the expulsion of Tongans by Tuna and Fata and the creation of the Malietoa title, some 19 generations before 1900...

Initial missionary reports of Tongan involvement in Samoan wars suggest that instead of the total domination of Samoa by Tongans in the remote past, and their glorious expulsion, the reality may have been a series of Tongan invasions, and occasions when Tongans sided with one or other party in Samoan internal wars. Stair stated that Tongans had frequently invaded Samoa unsuccessfully (Stair 1897: 241). Wilkes reported that warriors from Vava'u had attacked Samoa at a period the missionaries inferred to be some 70 or 80 years before 1839 (1845 (II): 95). The missionary Harbutt reported from Lepa that Atua district had been ravaged shortly before 1830 by all the rest of the Leeward Islands, and a fleet of Tongan canoes which happened to be in Samoa at the time (Harbutt MS 1842).

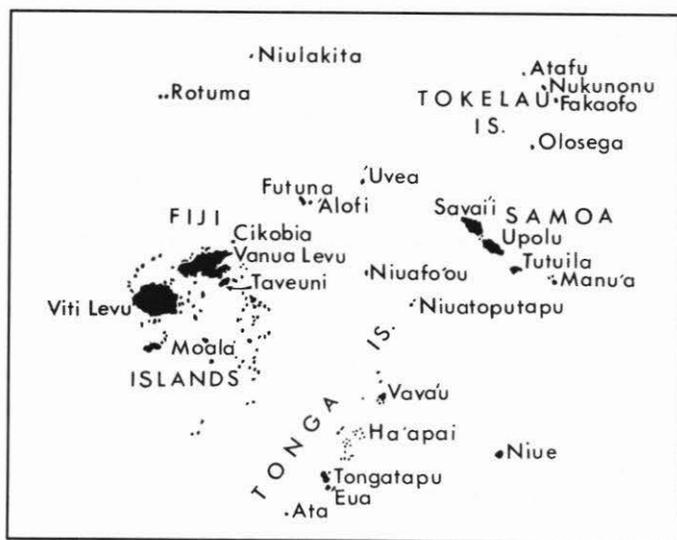


Figure 1. Location map of island groups

Best (1993) provides a review of the historical literature referring to Samoan forts, together with detailed surveys of the sites. Best, together with Davidson, was not convinced that, structurally speaking, a relation between Tongan and Samoan forts could be drawn. As Best (1993: 434-35) commented:

... fort builders will come up with the same answer, given the same topographical restraints, even when separated by half a world. It is of little use to speculate on one Island group deriving

the idea from another, unless it can be shown that the form of fort, or its position in the landscape, resembles those in the other group because of a deliberate choice on the part of the builder.

In Vava'u, which offers far more suitable natural situations for fortifications, only five forts have been recorded, three of which are certainly historic, while the remaining two, although more similar to Samoan forts, appear more large than effective (Davidson 1971: 35). It is doubtful whether the Tongans would have been able to teach the Samoans anything about fortification, particularly on the Samoans' home ground. On the other hand, the greater variety of fortifications in Fiji, including both ring ditch and ridge and hill forts, suggests that Fiji is a more likely source, if Samoan forts require a source.

TONGA

Fortifications and some ideas on warfare have generally been considered to be introductions to Tonga from Fiji during the Civil War period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries A.D. (see Swanson 1968; Green 1970). This theoretical position has been challenged by Burley (1994), who argues that conflict was common in the Tongan islands in prehistory. Indeed, fortifications in the Ha'apai islands can be associated with oral traditions concerning the fifteenth century governor Mata'uvave, sent by the *Tu'i Tonga* Kau'ulufonua to subjugate the island group (Burley 1995). Marais (1995) has done a study of the ring-ditch fortification, Kolo Velata, on the island of Lifuka in Ha'apai which is attributed to this period by local accounts.

I have argued for the possible independent development of Tongan fortifications (Pepa 1994). My argument focused on structural features of fortifications on Tongatapu, referred to as *kolotau*, pointing out the fact that forts on the flat topography of that island were constructed differently to flatland examples in Fiji. The most striking case is provided by the Lapaha defenses at the former chiefly residence at Mu'a, which was open on one side to the lagoon. It is often attributed by oral traditions to Talatama, the first *Tu'i Tonga* to have resided there (Gifford 1929: 53), although McKern (1929: 93) was informed that *Tu'i Tonga* Talakaua either built or refurbished the fortifications. From genealogical reckoning, these accounts would date the fortification structure at Mu'a from the thirteenth to fifteenth century A.D. Such an antiquity for it seems credible, as its bank edges are tied in with an old lagoonal shoreline (McKern 1929: 100).

'UVEA

'Uvean forts, known as *kolo*, are associated with oral traditions concerning a Tongan military and chiefly presence on the island in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. (see Sand 1993). Forts on the flat, volcanic island of 'Uvea are characterised by their extensive basalt wall constructions. Some fortifications on the island resemble the Lapaha defenses in form (Pepa 1994: 49-50).

NIUE

Niuean fortifications have been reported on by visitors to the island. The colonial administrator Basil Thomson (1984: 89) mentions a fortress, or *taue uka*, at Tapa just south of Avatele. And according to the ethnographer Stevenson Percy Smith (1983: 62):

Judging from several exhibitions of the manner in which they used to fight, I do not think their wars were ever on a large scale or very disastrous in character. They were rather a series of ambuscades and skirmishes, in which no very great numbers were killed. Occasionally a tribe or the inhabitants of a village would be driven to seek safety in a *taue* or fort, but those I have seen were incapable of holding more than a mere handful of people... The *taue* I have seen were mere natural strongholds in rocks to which probably art added a little strength by rolling other rocks to fill up holes in the natural defence.

The American ethnographer, Edwin Loeb, mentioned many Niuean traditions concerning warfare and the use of refuge fortifications in his Bishop Museum monograph. As he explains (Loeb 1926: 142-43):

In Niuean warfare frequent use was made of forts (*taue*). These forts were natural protected places among the rugged coral rocks. They are never large enough to accommodate more than about fifteen people, and due to the lack of running water in Niue, could not have furnished refuge during a prolonged siege. Nevertheless they furnished ample shelter in the variety of bush warfare so common in Niue in the olden times.

A fort at Halagigie, situated on the top of high cliffs overlooking the sea, was especially impregnable. The only approach by land was along a narrow path which could easily be protected by the inmates of the fort...

At Fatiau I visited a fort known as Fafague. The approach to it was a narrow path extending through a thick undergrowth of bush. The fort proper is merely an elevated mass of rocks having but one path as a means of access.

The word *kolo* is also present in the Niuean language. In a grammar provided by Tregear and Smith (1907), *taue* is defined as "a fort, a place of refuge"

and *kolo* as "fort, tower". The word *kolo* may have never gained the fortified enclosure meaning because no enclosed forts were constructed on Niue. Rather, natural rock formations prevalent on the island were used to good effect. *Kolo* being defined as fortress or tower could be an historic semantic shift in meaning. It must also be noted that the existence of hostile relations between Niue and especially Tonga are well documented (see Ryan 1977).

CONCLUSIONS

The scholarship on fortifications in West Polynesia has focused on treating them in a similar way to portable artefacts such as pottery. Fortifications are analysed structurally and whether a diffusion of cultural ideas or an independent development occurred are inferred from similarities or differences in form. Several factors also have to be taken into consideration, though. For example, the topographic conditions that each island presented and how the structures were utilised, whether to demarcate territories or settlement areas, or for refuge and defensive purposes.

A perusal of collections of oral traditions and historical records show that the West Polynesian region has always been an area of interaction, confusing attempts to derive cultural ideas on fortification to a particular island and its associated social group. However, taking the above evidence into consideration, it can be concluded that structures that can be classified as fortifications could have developed independently on the larger islands. It has been proposed that ring-ditch forts in Viti Levu developed from agricultural structures, that bank and ditch structures on Tongatapu and Vava'u acted more as territorial delineators, and that structures on the island of Upolu were well adapted to the hillier environment. We also have to consider the nomenclature, though, and the above evidence can be taken as supporting the position proposed by McKern. However, his statement should be further refined. *Koro* could be a term referring to a specific enclosed defended settlement structure developed in Fiji. The idea diffused and similar structures appear in Tonga and 'Uvea by the fifteenth century A.D. The further development of such structures on Tongatapu and the presence of the term in the modern Samoan and Niuean languages shows how *koro* are a testament to how influential Fijian culture was and is in the area.

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