Transformations of the meeting-house in Tuvalu

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My problem is this: the Tuvaluan meeting-house is displayed as a symbol of indigenous culture in many different contexts. It is therefore often assumed, by both outside commentators and Tuvaluans themselves, to be of long standing in the history of that culture.

Yet the word *maneapa*, by which the meeting-house is generically known, is of Gilbertese origin. Moreover, the weight of evidence suggests that not only the word but probably even the type of building itself is a post-colonial borrowing or implantation. If, indeed, there were no *maneapa* as such in Tuvalu before British hegemony was established, then questions arise as to what, if anything, existed in its place; why the *maneapa* was introduced or borrowed; why it has achieved its current importance and, further, why it has become a symbol of national identity.

In this connection, the concept of “transformation” calls out for a strong measure of historical attention. Yet the meaning of history is not as self-evident as the traditional definitions imply, with their references to narrative, sequences of events and so on (Braudel 1980:27). Another avenue, almost a new orthodoxy, has been explored under the influence of structuralism. Rather than using sequences of events to explain structure, some anthropologists use the delineation of structure to explain events. While Lévi-Strauss’ name is the most closely linked to this programme (1966:passim), even historical materialists find it beguiling. Godelier, for example, reverses the conventional Marxist understanding of history with his contention that it explains nothing but is the category which itself needs to be explained, once structure has been revealed (Godelier 1977:49). In short, Godelier retains a Lévi-Straussian distinction between structure and contingency, reducing history to a residue. Though he shares with others the intention of unifying anthropology, history and other social sciences, this initial distinction complicates the task. One way out, indicated by Braudel, is to show the common interest of history and social sciences in long time-spans, *longues durées*, where history moves through structures which “provide both support and hindrance” (1980:31). Never-
theless, Braudel retains the historian's trademark by his presupposition that history is the "dialectic of duration" and time still the prime mover (1980:26). Braudel's time is divided into spans of different orders of length and therefore of different orders of explanatory power. But the criteria are temporal and his own, and not necessarily those perceived by historical subjects.

Though Lévi-Strauss has implied (1966:Chapter 9) that he is able to account for the different conceptions of time held by people in "primitive" and "modern" cultures, neither his approach nor any of the others mentioned so far recognises the hermeneutic problem of historical knowledge per se. Lévi-Strauss, for example, attributes the differences to a dichotomy between two basic modes of thinking which dominate their respective cultural worlds. Many anthropologists, however, find this dualism unduly restrictive.

The position expressed recently by Sahlins therefore represents a necessary reminder: "that different cultural orders have their own modes of historical action, consciousness and determination — their own historical practice" (1983:518). Sahlins' thesis prompts a re-examination of the concept of transformation in structuralist discourse. It seems to me that any anthropologist grappling with the relations between history and structure is faced with a choice between two different versions of "transformation".

First, one may consider it in the way that Lévi-Strauss does, as a permutation, or set of closely linked permutations, within a field of structural possibilities (1966:Chapter 3). By extension, one may treat the field as finite for analytical purposes. Historical changes are culturally modified to express these relations in a continuous manner. Presumably for anyone to carry out such an analysis of Tuvalu would require detailed knowledge of all the islands, if only to find out the extent to which they constitute a cultural field of that sort. So far this has not been done. A more modest form of this approach would be to consider transformations on only one island or within one clearly defined set of institutions, again emphasising continuity of structure. The difficulty still arises, however, of whether the transformations play themselves out within an essentially finite field of possibilities.

It might seem unusual to go to Saussure, a precursor and generally acknowledged progenitor of structuralism, for an alternative line of approach. I do so because the concept of transformation is not alien to his thinking, though he does not use the term. More importantly, his methods of analysis suggest an interpretation which is both more rigorous and more open-ended than Lévi-Strauss'. At issue are the implications of two terms which anthropology has borrowed from Saussure's theory of language — synchronic and diachronic. Saussure's view of synchrony proposes an axis of simultaneities "... which stands for the relations of coexisting things and from which the intervention of time is excluded" (1959:80). The Lévi-Straussian recension of synchrony also entails timelessness, but since transformations occur on this plane they can only be accounted for in terms of structural deter-
mination. Nowhere do we find support for such a reading in Saussure, for whom the system of language is not a field determined by the logic of its structural possibilities, whether encompassed by the human mind in general or defined by specific culture areas. Rather, the most abstract level of linguistic analysis in Saussure’s work, *la langue*, always pertains to a particular language. True, he seems to be foreshadowing structuralism with the following statement, “Nowhere else do we find such precise values at stake and such a great number and diversity of terms, all so rigidly interdependent” (1959:81). But this interdependence should be interpreted cautiously, “. . . for language is a system of pure values which are determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of its terms” (1959:80; emphasis added).

Transformations are found only in the comparison of different language-states along the *axis of succession*, “. . . on which only one thing can be considered at a time but upon which are located all the things on the first axis together with their changes” (Saussure 1959:80).

Is the end result of this detour merely to restate the obvious, that transformations have a historical dimension? Perhaps it is enough just to be reminded of Saussure’s precepts. But there is a further lesson to be drawn from his work. Despite the division between synchrony and diachrony, which underpins a division between static and evolutionary linguistics (1959:81), Saussure always recommended that language should be studied according to both co-ordinates. In other words, the phenomenon of language is a whole, whereas the different ways of studying it are motivated by analytic requirements. Analytic concerns arise from the questions that we put to the phenomenon at hand. Hence, to ask historical questions is to take part in a certain form of knowledge. Moreover, that form of knowledge may not be compatible with other kinds of historical practice. Buried in Saussure’s prescriptions for dealing with time, then, is a hermeneutic problem. What that problem is will become clearer, I hope, in the light of a more substantive discussion.

**TUVALU**

A brief introduction to Tuvalu may be necessary. Formerly the Ellice Islands, over which Britain declared a protectorate in 1892, they were amalgamated into the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1915. The group was renamed at the time of separation from the Gilberts (now Kiribati) in 1975 and achieved independence in 1978 (Macdonald 1982).

Tuvalu is an archipelago of nine islands south of Kiribati and north of Fiji. Closest to the equator (about 5°S) is Nanumea, followed southwards by Niutao, Nanumaga, Nui, Vaitupu, Nukufetau, Funafuti, Nukulaelae, and lastly, the smallest and most recently incorporated island, Niulakita (about 11°S) which, having no original population, is now owned and used as an offshore plantation by the people of Niutao.
The group is a mixture of reef islands and true atolls, covering a number of degrees of latitude, so there are some variations in ecology (soil, land area, vegetation, rainfall and so on). But, until the 19th century, almost all Tuvaluans depended entirely on subsistence activities on land, reef, lagoon and open sea. A limited number of cultigens, such as coconut palms, pandanus and swamp taro have been supplemented by mainly introduced varieties of tree and root crops. Fish, shellfish and birds completed the traditional diet. Since European contact, subsistence activities have extended to the husbandry of pigs and chickens. Nowadays, imported foodstuffs and other goods draw Tuvalu ever further into a position of dependence in the “world system”. Apart from subsistence pursuits and a small return from the export of copra, the new nation survives with the help of stamp sales, overseas aid, and remittances from the large number of Tuvaluans living outside the country. At last count the de facto population was 7349, which gives an average total per island of about 800. The actual totals ranged from 2120 on Funafuti, the centre of government and the major terminus for trade and transport, to 65 on Niulakita.4

Apart from the economic and political influences already outlined, perhaps the most important postcontact changes have occurred as a result of missionisation by visiting European and resident Polynesian pastors, most of them Samoan. Beginning in 1865, the rapid conversion of the southern islands, followed by the somewhat more troubled conversion of those to the north, led to the transformation of Tuvalu into a Christian society by the end of the 19th century.5

For most of the modern era, there has been only one church in Tuvalu and it is still predominant. This is the Ekalesia Tuvalu (or Tuvalu Church), a Protestant Congregationalist denomination which originated as a branch of the London Missionary Society and has become an autonomous national religion. The Tuvalu Church claims 95 percent of the population for its membership and its influence remains considerable. The chief challenges to its monopoly have come from Roman Catholicism, now almost non-existent, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’i. Together these last three minorities now represent about 5 percent of the population. Though tiny, these groups have a significance greater than their actual numbers would suggest.6

It is this dimension of Tuvaluan life, the relationship between church and society, which has attracted most of my interest. Unless otherwise acknowledged, the material in this paper comes from my own field notes, compiled during two brief periods of field work on Funafuti, Nanumea and Nukufetau between December 1978 and February 1980. Hence, the “ethnographic present”, where I resort to it, refers to that time.

MEETING-HOUSES IN TUVALU

Meeting-houses exist in every fenua ‘island community’ in the
The meeting-house in Tuvalu

On Funafuti, the seat of government, matters are more complex, as will be described below, but the basic pattern on the outer islands involves a *malae*, or 'open space', adjacent to a large church and a meeting-house. Both buildings are made of imported construction materials such as cement, timber and roofing iron. They differ unmistakably though there is a degree of stylistic variation in each case, especially among churches. The latter may cover roughly the same ground area as the meeting-houses, but are taller, enclosed in thick cement walls, and ornamented with lead glass windows, bell-towers and so on. In general, they are much more elaborate. Meeting-houses tend to have a low crested roof and a simple rectangular floor plan. Their sides consist of a double row of posts, filled in incompletely by low surrounding walls. In a couple of cases, an attempt has been made to give the meeting-house a more traditional air by the use of predominantly timber construction and a thatched roof, pitched at a higher angle than usual. The main meeting-house on Vaitupu and that belonging to the Vaitupu community on Funafuti are of this design. I do not think the reasons for choosing to build in this fashion were economic, as there are costs and benefits either way. Rather, they probably reflect a traditionalist stance. Nevertheless, all meeting-houses adhere to the same general plan.

Of the islands which I visited, the only one which had no central meeting-house at the time of my field work was Nukufetau. One was in the process of being built by communal labour and to the accompaniment of competitive games, sports, dances and feasting. While some of these activities took place in the roofless shell of the new building, important daytime gatherings were held in the shade of a very large tree on the edge of the *malae*.

Funafuti, too, is somewhat atypical because, although there is a central meeting-house for the use of the indigenous community, the great number of off-islanders in the capital, many of them members of their own associations, has led to the construction of several other large meeting-houses. In particular, those built by the Vaitupu and Nanumea people are bigger than the Funafuti meeting-house. These off-island *maneapa* are in the Fakai Fou or 'New Village' section of the town.

Funafuti, being the seat of government, is also the site for Government housing and offices in a section called Vaiaku. Parliament, when in session, meets in the Vaiaku *maneapa*, which is also used by associations not having a centre of their own. Both this meeting-house and the Nanumea one had regular church services conducted in them. The Tuvalu Church secretary told me that off-islanders in Vaiaku and Fakai Fou felt uncomfortable about attending *lotu* 'worship' at the local congregation's church and had preferred continual excuses to stay away, such as the distance they had to walk in the heat. Where other circumstances warrant, the Church regularly allows the holding of services in *maneapa*. If the church building is considered old and unsafe, as was the case on Nanumaga in early 1980, the meeting-house
can act as a substitute until repairs are made.

Smaller subsidiary meeting-houses also exist on most islands. On Nanumea, for example, there was a church maneapa next to the mission house in the church compound. This was where the church groups held feasts, such as those hosted by the Kaufaigaluega or 'Body of deacons and lay preachers', and the Komiti Fafine 'Women's Committee of the church'. It was also the venue for Sunday school and meetings of the local Bible translation committee. Nanumea has a satellite village at the small islet of Lakena, where pulaka 'swamp taro' is cultivated intensively, and this, too, has its own meeting-house and small church. This pattern is not uncommon. The now largely abandoned settlements at Funafala (Funafuti) and Tangitangi on Motulalo (Nukufetau) are said to have had maneapa and churches.

Village sections may also have their own meeting-houses, as on Niutao. The people of Haumaefa, one of the two village feituu 'sides' at Nanumea, were reported to have built a maneapa in 1979, a year or so after my stay on the island.

The main meeting-houses fulfil a variety of functions. While I was resident on Funafuti these included island meetings of the aliki 'chiefs', fonopule 'island council members' and toeaina 'old men'. There were feasts which marked either regular festivals in the island calendar or occasional visits by dignitaries from overseas whom the Government wished to entertain. Sometimes they were just treated to performances of fatele, the characteristic song-dance form of Tuvalu; at other times fatele were performed competitively between the village feituu, Alapi and Senala. Before big events there might be weeks of fatele practice sessions in the meeting-house.

During the Christmas–New Year holiday season, the maneapa was used almost continuously. Several times a week men, especially middle-aged and elderly ones not in Government employment, would spend most of the day there. Gathering at 7am for prayers and breakfast, they would chat and play cards and dominoes until noon when the main meal took place. Each family provided its own food and for this feast a wider range of people was in attendance. After the men had eaten and made speeches for a couple of hours, they would return to their games and conversation until dusk and the time for family worship.

Church activities in the maneapa embraced Sunday school for children of Tuvalu Church members, regular choir practices, a New Year's Eve choir contest two years running, and a performance by a Youth Fellowship troupe which had returned from a church convention in Fiji.

On more than one occasion, the maneapa was the scene of private wedding feasts to which invitations were required. At other times, the meeting-house was occupied by small groups of old people just talking and relaxing, or by women making mats and other handicrafts. On a few occasions, even, films were screened by individuals or groups who wished to raise some money.
In short, the *maneapa* functions as a multi-purpose community centre. Moreover, while my description has concentrated on Funafuti, which has some admittedly unique features, the meeting-house gatherings I observed on some of the outer islands were not essentially different.

**THE QUESTION OF FORMALITY**

The wide range of activities encountered in the Funafuti meeting-house and the easy-going nature of many of them do not square easily with accounts from other parts of the Pacific. Although Duranti's recent study of Samoan *fono* is concerned mainly with the sociolinguistic structure of meetings with little attention to the other pursuits that take place in the *fale fono* 'meeting-house', he gives the impression that, despite some variation in formality, Samoan *fale fono* are generally more exclusive and rule-bound arenas than Tuvalu *maneapa* (Duranti 1981: Chapter 4). The Gilbertese *maneaba* has an even more pronounced reputation for solemnity and punctiliousness:

> All behaviour under its roof had to be seemly, decorous, and in strict conformity with custom, lest the *maneaba* be * matauninga* (offended) and the culprit *maraia* (accursed) (Maude 1977:11; 1980:1).  

While Maude's description is based on investigations carried out before the Second World War, it does not, I think, refer to an idealised version of the past or to rules as opposed to behaviour. More recent field work by Lundsgaarde confirms the picture. He argues that any abeyance of *maneaba* ceremonial and etiquette is due to a combination of temporary circumstances (1978:74-6).

I am not saying that proceedings in the Funafuti meeting-house were invariably less formal than in its Gilbertese equivalents. True, it was a less restrictive place than the church, where, for example, smoking was banned. (Hence the meeting-house's popularity as a venue for choir practices.) But certain kinds of behaviour were always prohibited, such as the consumption of alcohol. Children and dogs were admitted but were supposed to be controlled, and I did not observe children present without adult supervision, except at films. Male youths could not treat the *maneapa* as a place to "crash" at night, though they might do so in other public places like the cement roofs of communal water cisterns.

It is interesting, however, that people of Kiribati apparently characterise Tuvaluans as displaying bad manners in the Gilbertese *maneaba* when invited to attend. As with all good ethnic stereotypes, the Tuvaluans return the compliment by complaining about Gilbertese behaviour in the *maneapa*. A possibility for resolving this interpretive stalemate lies in another reported aspect of the reciprocal stereotype, that Tuvaluans consider the Gilbertese excessively strict and formal (McCreary and Boardman 1968:59-60). In short, each group seems to agree about what is going on, but evaluates it differently.
On the whole, the degree of formality in the Funafuti meeting-house corresponded to the kind of occasion taking place, and not to a rigid set of rules. The contrast between the decorum of a full-scale island feast and the relaxed atmosphere of a film showing could not be greater. At the former, there were relatively fixed seating positions for old men and heads of descent groups, officers of the island council, the pastor and other church representatives. Those of highest status sat in front of one of the inner posts or along the line connecting them. The space between them and the outer row of posts was filled up by younger men, women and children seated in family groups. Those seated on the edge of the inner rectangle were served first and finished their meal before anyone else was allowed to eat. It was from their ranks, too, that came the long series of speeches, accompanied by the background noise of the rest polishing off the copious remains.

In comparison with the Gilbertese maneaba, however, seating positions appear to be more flexible. When J. McCreary and D. Boardman carried out a comparative study in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1968, one of their informants told them, "There is no clear dividing line as to where a man may sit in the maneapa on formal occasions even if they are quite young, because of their position in the Government service or the Church" (1968:57). From my own observations, I would modify this statement to the effect that individuals' placements are more flexible than the overall patterning of statuses. To use a Saussurean metaphor, it is as though the axis of combination were more rule-bound than the axis of selection.

The presence of high-ranking visitors further necessitated some rearrangement of seating positions. But in general the ground rules seemed to be the same, with high status marked by a place along the line of inner posts. The inner rectangle on these occasions was always left empty, unless fatele were part of the programme. During a film show, however, the whole floor area might be occupied, and seating positions dictated by order of arrival, demands of comfort and companionship, and the need to have a clear view of the screen. In Gilbertese maneaba, on the other hand, the inner space is taboo, except for dance groups or occasional speakers wishing to emphasise a point. According to Lundsgaarde, this custom "... reaffirms an organisational principle introduced into the Southern Gilberts by Samoans some six centuries ago" (1978:71).

The question of formality has many dimensions which cannot all be discussed here. There is the dimension just mentioned, of the kind of occasion, but this cannot be divorced from the question of what kinds of occasion are permissible in which meeting-houses. I have described the central Tuvaluan maneapa as having a wider (though not unlimited) range of uses than its Gilbertese or Samoan counterparts. A related topic is the question of whether a maneapa can be used by all community groups or whether some of these require their own meeting-houses. I have already indicated that these do exist in Tuvalu,
and on this point there may not be much difference from Kiribati (Lundsgaarde 1978:69).

To sum up, meeting-houses seem to be well integrated into the Tuvaluan pattern of life. They can incorporate the most ceremonial and the most informal aspects of people’s lives. Though the main meeting-house of a community is a powerful symbol of fenua solidarity and communalism, both these and smaller meeting-houses can accommodate the requirements of sectional interests without threatening the whole. The maneapa is a place where tradition is created, recreated and lived out, but it is also a place of surprising innovativeness. On certain occasions, such as “Women’s Day”, women may be served by men at feasts in the Funafuti meeting-house (McCreary and Boardman 1968:78). I have also taken part in a gathering in the church maneapa at Nanumea where women served themselves first at a buffet-style feast.

It is possible to interpret these reversals of standard operating procedure as expressions of a theme confirmed in a number of other contexts. That theme could be glossed as “structured informality” or “role reversal” or “improvisation”. But it also strikes me as an indication that the maneapa, in contrast with its Gilbertese cousin, is regarded as an essentially secular institution. This role is logical if we accept that its introduction came after conversion to Christianity, the arrogating of ali ki power to pastors, and the construction of fale tapu ‘churches’.

QUESTIONS OF TERMINOLOGY AND TRADITIONALISM

If the meeting-house is so much a part of Tuvaluan culture, why is the generic term for it derived from Gilbertese? If it were simply an alternative to other terms, it would pose less of a problem, but, as I stated at the beginning of this paper, it is indeed generic. In support of this point, the issue of how often a term is used is only marginally relevant. On some islands the local term may be used much more frequently than maneapa. Matters are further complicated by each of the main meeting-houses having its own “personal” name. On Funafuti it is known as Lotokava, on Nanumea as Nameana, and so on.

Among the local terms which denote meeting-houses, the three major ones, to my knowledge, are tausoa, aahiga, and falekaupule. These appear to be in complementary distribution throughout Tuvaluan dialects, lending support to my argument that they are seen as “kinds of” maneapa.

Tausoa literally means ‘friend, companion’ (Besnier 1981:232). It also refers to meeting-houses on at least two of the southern group of islands, Funafuti and Vaitupu, though on the latter island Kennedy claims that it was superseded by maneapa some time after conversion to Christianity. He considers that tausoa were ‘clan meeting-houses’ in the sense that their membership was recruited by descent (1931:265,
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305). While this seems plausible, his contention that they were restricted to males may reflect a general tendency in anthropology at that time to understate or ignore women's groups and institutions.

Thus, the tauhoa (a northern dialect equivalent) which existed on Nanumea were recruited on the basis of gender, but both men and women had their own. Interestingly, the term tauhoa on Nanumea is not applied to meeting-houses as such, but only to the groups themselves. However, each women's tauhoa had a house "where its members could gather to do their separate work projects" (Chambers 1975:25). Men's tauhoa, which met for companionship and sport, also had houses "... where members could gather in the late afternoon and dusk and where they often slept at night" (Chambers 1975:28). Until the 1920s, recruitment may have been based on descent, but during that decade they came to be recruited from feituu, the two 'sides' of Nanumea village. At the time of the Chambers' field work (1973-75), the tauhoa were not active, though similar women's groups do still carry on and have separate clubhouses for their activities (1975:25-7). The word tauhoa may have continued in some contexts (A. and K. Chambers, personal communication), so a potential semantic link still exists between groups, the ties that bind them together, and the buildings that they meet in.

The main meeting-houses on Nanumea, including the one at Lakena, are referred to as aahiga. This word is also native to Nanumaga, the neighbouring island which has strong historical ties to Nanumea (Chambers 1975:1). Aahiga is short for aahiga o muna 'the displaying [place] of words'. I was told, just as the Chambers were, to start speeches within its walls by paying respect to its dignity or mmalu (Chambers 1975:60).

Falekaupule means literally 'house of the gathered powers' or, more idiomatically, 'council house'. It is the term used on Niutao for the main meeting-house. Kennedy recorded a variant on Vaitupu, fale o te kaupule, which he translated as 'meeting-house of minor chiefs', an example of which is marked on a map of the "ancient" village of Punatau (Kennedy 1931:273). Whether the term itself is ancient remains unclear. Kaupule does not have the connotations of chiefly (aliki) power that supposedly legitimated leadership before missionisation and colonial administration. Nor is it the term which conventionally denotes the power of an assembled island council (fonopule). A derivation from Gilbertese kaubure is suspect as kau is a widespread Polynesian base meaning 'group, collectivity', and the term may well have originated in Tuvalu itself, either before or after Western contact.

Meeting-house names other than the ones mentioned above have been recorded by various authors: falefono, fale tapu, api, fale o pati alikivaka. My own field work leads me to believe that none of them is in current use.9

Maneapa, then, is certainly not the only word that denotes meeting-houses; but from the information that I gathered it has the
widest distribution throughout Tuvalu. It also occurs in “official” discourse and in works written by educated Tuvaluans for English-speaking audiences. Thus, the Tuvalu News Sheet, a weekly Government information bulletin, has described meeting-houses on all the islands as *maneapa*, including Nanumea. The *tausoa* on Funafuti usually receives the rather redundant title of *tausoa maneapa*. Other instances include a document prepared by Silinga Kofe, a high-ranking Government official. In his words,

"The Maneapa is the Tuvaluan name for the traditional meeting house in which the community elders sat and deliberated on the business of governing the islands prior to the introduction of present Local Government system (Kofe n.d.:9)."

These examples are paralleled by an upsurge of theological interest in *maneapa* among Tuvaluan clergy. The Rev. Alovaka Maui was fascinated by the homologies between *maneapa* and Old Testament institutions.

In Tuvalu the ‘house of chiefs’ is the community centre where the chiefs sit and draw up policies. They [the chiefs] are also called the ‘pou loto’ the inner posts because the ‘maneapa’ design has two rows of posts, the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’. The chiefs have to sit in front of the inner posts, whilst the public occupies places behind them between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’. The inner posts are to separate the ‘inner court’ and the ‘outer court’. The former for dignitaries and the latter for the common. This probably corresponds to the Jewish Temple structure. The inner court is for the priestly classes, while the outer court is for the common (Maui 1977:21).

Another theological interpretation came in 1980 from a young trainee pastor who found import in the Gilbertese form of *maneapa* which he derived from *aba-mane* ‘island of men’. Though his translation is different from Sabatier’s (see note 1), it bears the same connotation of an institution upholding communal ideals. Hence, both his exegesis and that which purports to find biblical parallels display an interest in the convergence of Pacific traditions and Christian beliefs. Recent formulations of Pacific-oriented theology support such interpretations and call for Christianity to be rooted in social traditions (Garrett and Mavor 1973). The correspondence between meeting-houses and places of worship has also been noted by a writer concerned with the phenomenology of space (Turner 1979).

It is probably no accident that these examples signal a recent upsurge of traditionalism among the governing elites of Tuvalu. Tuvaluan independence in 1978 was accompanied by many appeals to tradition, of which the *maneapa* has become an important symbolic marker. For example, the House of Assembly is called a *maneapa* and it is here that the rituals of nationhood are enacted: sessions of Parliament, celebrations in honour of the Royal Visit in 1982, and so on. A stylised version of such a meeting-house, more “traditional” in design than most of the existing *maneapa*, is the central motif on the new national crest. At the time of Independence, this crest appeared on T-shirts, towels and the front cover of the Tuvaluan *New Testament*. 
The latter's publication itself symbolised independence from the Samoan Bible which had been used up until then.

It is precisely generic symbols of this sort that new nations require, particularly when national identity is being promoted and must encompass strong local traditions. Hence the interest in showing maneapa as traditional, because nationalism is consciously accompanied by the search for such unifying symbols. There is also a less conscious reason, however, resulting from the integration of maneapa into society.

What does it mean to say that meeting-houses are well integrated into the Tuvaluan pattern of life? The phrase is clumsy, of course, since something which helps to define a culture must perforce be part of it. What I am trying to highlight is that for Tuvaluans this integration is unproblematic. Whether in the context of loyalty to one's home island or of national solidarity, meeting-houses represent tradition, full stop.

It is not the only institution to be so conceptualised. According to Ivan Brady, Tuvaluans make an explicit distinction between imported and indigenous aspects of their culture. I certainly agree with him that among those aspects which are seen as indigenous is the Congregationalist church complex.

Most of the culture content that can be identified as imported by the missions has been closely integrated and subsequently labelled as "own" culture by the islanders with a minimum of overt compartmentalization and a maximum of public substitutions for the status quo ante. In contrast, the colonial complex has been conceptualised and largely operationalized by the islanders as "other" culture from the outset (Brady 1978:269; see also Brady 1975:124).

The difficulty in this formulation is in deciding what is "own" and what is "other" in historical terms. As I see it, the distinction is metaphorical for most Tuvaluans; the allocation of a particular cultural form to either of these domains is tautological. With the maneapa we may have a case of an institution which, like the church, is a relatively recent introduction but which is now perceived as being Tuvaluan to an even greater extent than the church. The islanders are well aware of the history of conversion to Christianity. They commemorate it, re-enact it and make reference to it on numerous occasions. They also see Christianity as a world religion which links them to other peoples. The maneapa, however, has become quintessentially Tuvaluan, even though, as I now hope to show, there are good grounds for regarding it as of recent provenience.

A HISTORICAL PROBLEM: THE PRESENCE OF THE ABSENCE OF THE MANEAPA

We have seen that the maneapa is well established in Tuvalu. Yet accounts from only a few decades back reveal remarkably little about its existence. Over the past 90 years, several researchers have
investigated Tuvaluan material culture in great detail but none of them has provided a full-scale description of maneapa — their construction, their lore, or their role in social organisation. Such a lack seems inconceivable for Kiribati, where the maneaba has been characterised as "the masterpiece of Gilbertese culture" (Sabatier 1977:99). Grimble has discussed its oral traditions and mythology (Grimble 1972), Maude and Lundsgaarde its relationship to descent group organisation (Maude 1977; Lundsgaarde 1978), and Maude its design and construction (Maude 1980).

It is not for want of opportunity that no such documentation surrounds the Tuvaluan maneapa. Charles Hedley, who visited Funafuti in order to swell the scientific collections of the Australian Museum, wrote quite a detailed account of material culture in his "Ethnology" (1897) but never mentioned meeting-houses. The same omission occurs in his "General Account" (1896).

Some of the instances where Kennedy (1931) refers to meeting-houses have been discussed above. I have already cited his opinion that tausoa 'clan meeting-houses' on Vaitupu were superseded by maneapa. The passage is worth quoting in full:

It is said that about the year 1865, two Tongans arrived at Vaitupu to assist in the building of the first Christian Church. These people introduced the principle of the broken rafter, or rather the true "lean-to" verandah. . . . The advantage lay in the increased height of the eaves, which admitted more light and air. Further, with this construction, heavy rigid rafters were not essential since the same and even greater 'verandah' space was obtained by independently-supported eaves rafters. Consequently the heavy pandanus-log rafter was dispensed with for all dwellings and cook-houses, and retained only on the much larger communal meeting-house (known by the Gilbert Islands name, maneapa) which replaced the tausoa under the new regime (Kennedy 1931:271–2).

Both the wide-ranging transformation of Vaitupuan architecture and the adoption of a quasi-Gilbertese design for meeting-houses are consistent with other evidence. The main unclarity of Kennedy's observation is that the "new regime" could allude either to the era of virtually unchallenged church control or to the establishment of British administration. However, in other parts of his book, Kennedy does throw more light on the picture. He records (1931:265) that there used to be seven tausoa 'clan meeting-houses', each with its own name, and that "The names of two of these, Asau and Tumaseu, have survived to the present day to signify the rival sides of the malae (ngutu malae)" (1931:309).

According to Kennedy, the clans' main function was to organise island defences, and each had responsibility for a certain part of the island coastline. With the coming of the first Resident Magistrate of the British administration in 1908, the tausoa meeting-houses were demolished as part of the plan to centralise villages (1931:265). People still remembered enough about them to provide Kennedy with some details on their construction (1931:268–71), although the only descrip-

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tion given of the thatching of a meeting-house presumably involved a *maneapa*. The groups which engaged in the work were the village sides, the *ngutu malaes*, which provided communal labour and competed to finish their side of the house first (1931:281).

Everything here is significant: the transformation of several separate houses into one large-scale meeting-house, the adoption of the new name, and the fact that Kennedy spends more time describing the functions of the extinct institutions than of the contemporary one. All in all, he devotes remarkably little attention to the *maneapa*.

Gerd Koch’s disregard of *maneapa* is even more noteworthy, because his is the most complete study of Tuvaluan material culture (1961). His chapters on house-types provide construction details for sleeping-houses, cookhouses, storehouses and boathouses but nothing on meeting-houses. The few references to *fale atua* ‘god houses’ are sketchy and based on previous accounts (1961:110–1), but their inclusion leads one to suspect that Koch’s interest was antiquarian. Since there must have been meeting-houses in Tuvalu at the time of his field work, the only explanation I can proffer is that he did not see *maneapa* as part of traditional Tuvaluan material culture.

The earliest written accounts of visitors to Tuvalu also remain silent on this topic. But in their time, I feel, the meeting-house was simply not a salient communal institution. If they observed meeting-houses at all, the buildings are likely to have been *tausoa*, meeting-houses for “clans” or other social groups, rather than *maneapa*, large central meeting-houses.

“Elikana’s Story” (Chalmers 1872) falls into this category. Elekana was a London Missionary Society deacon from Manihiki whose place in Tuvaluan history rests on being stranded at Nukulaelae in 1861 after spending weeks blown off course in an open boat with several companions. They are credited with bringing the Gospel to Tuvalu and Elekana himself later became pastor at Nukufetau (Munro 1982). His description of Nukulaelae refers to three meeting-houses, one at each of the three “villages” (probably kin-based settlements). From the context it is impossible to say whether they were meeting-houses in the accepted sense or pagan shrines. They may even have been houses constructed for worship under the influence of a trader who prepared the ground for conversion (Chalmers 1872:147–8).

The missionary J. S. Whitmee visited most of the archipelago in 1870. By that time solid progress had been made in converting the five southernmost islands and he describes chapel buildings in abundance. The only mention of some sort of meeting-house, however, is “the house where public assemblies are held” on Niutao (1871:21). This vignette makes identification difficult, though it may indicate a central meeting-house.11 At Nanumea, on the other hand, he met the islanders at what appears to have been a *malaes*, rather than a meeting-house:

When we went ashore a few elderly men came to meet us. One, who is the chief orator, a kind of prime minister, took my hand and led me to the
place of assembly. Here the people sat on three sides of a square, and the other side was left for us (Whitmee 1871:25).

The continuation of his journey into the southern Gilberts provides a sharp contrast. The allusions to meeting-houses are numerous. Of Arorae and Tamana he uses the phrase “a large house, where public assemblies are held” and of Onotoa, “the large house of public assembly”. Almost every island he landed at has this feature singled out (Whitmee 1871:30–8).

A year later, T. Powell, another L.M.S. missionary, reported in very similar terms. The buildings he describes on Nanumaga are “shrines” and “temples”, the largest one being virtually indistinguishable from the “king’s dwelling house” (Powell 1871:44). Again, instead of a meeting-house as such, the place of assembly seems to have been similar to the one found by Whitmee at Nanumea the previous year:

A short walk took us to the Mares [? malae]. . . . We were directed to take our seats opposite to the king. On the right hand side to us of the square sat Nai and Lalou ["chiefs" of the island] while Papa [another “chief"] and the king’s brother sat on the left (1871:41).

There is an alternative explanation. Nanumea and Nanumaga are known to have had ritual procedures for quarantining strangers at this time and that could have been the reason why Whitmee and Powell were kept away from meeting-houses (A. and K. Chambers, personal communication).12

Further missionary voyages by W. W. Gill (1872) and, again, Powell (1878) continued to produce descriptions which are notable for the paucity of meeting-houses and the abundance of “pagan temples”. In the case of all these voyages, one final possibility needs to be dealt with: that the missionaries were too obsessed with relics of paganism to pay much attention to meeting-houses. Whitmee’s references to the buildings at Niutao and in the Gilberts undermines this hypothesis, however.

Some two decades later Britain asserted imperial control over the islands by the time-honoured expedient of sending a gunboat, H.M.S. Curacca, under the command of Captain Herbert Gibson. His report (1892) contains very little detail and is as ethnocentric as might be expected. Perhaps because of his official interest in local power arrangements, he does make a number of references to what might be meeting-houses — but might equally well be not. The terms he employs are of little help in resolving the question: “King’s House” (Vaitupu), “official House” (Niutao), “official Government House” (Nanumea), “Court House” (Nui, Nukufetau, Funafuti and Nukulaelae).

The vagueness of Gibson’s report is echoed in Mrs Edgeworth David’s description of her stay on Funafuti (1899). This is how she depicts the scene in the village:
There was a clear space in the centre, close to the lagoon shore, near which were grouped the King’s state house, the mission church and schools, and the native pastor’s house. . . . The King’s state house is evidently kept for show. I never saw the King in it except on Sunday afternoon between the services; and all the state business was transacted in a large, airy hut close by (1899:13-4).

Either the “state house” or the “large, airy hut” could have been a meeting-house along the lines of the present-day maneapa. The latter, in particular, sounds like a building with open sides where island meetings were conducted, and is therefore reminiscent of a maneapa. But it was in the “state house” that an island-wide distribution of Mrs David’s gift of yams was held (1899:122). That kind of activity took place in the Funafuti tausoa during my own field work. At any rate, the pattern of one large central meeting-house for all such functions is not apparent from Mrs David’s portrayal.

In fact, it may not have been until 1908 that the first modern-style meeting-houses were constructed. According to Kennedy, when the first Resident Magistrate arrived in that year,

. . . he found that one of the greatest obstacles to the inculcation of the principles of the new regime was the difficulty of collecting the people on each island from their scattered habitations and bringing them to a central place for purposes of instruction. He overcame this by ordering that there should be one main village on each island at which should be established the Native Government Station with its public meeting house, office, and prison (1931:265).

In the present paper, I can only briefly examine the important question of whether villages were centralised by British Colonial fiat, or earlier under the aegis of the church. Both opinions have been put forward by different researchers (Brady 1970:50, 1975:127; cf. Munro 1982:Chapter 6). Barrie Macdonald offers a reasonable synthesis:

Village consolidation began in the 1870s with the desire of the L.M.S. pastors in the Ellice and Southern Gilbert Islands to remove their newly-won converts from the sinful pleasures and distractions of Paganism. In the Ellice group, the rapid acceptance of Christianity by whole communities meant that when the colonial government began to pursue a rigorous policy of centralising settlements in the late 1890s, it found that the essential work had already been done (1982:205).

There is also evidence that centralisation was undertaken as the decision of Tuvaluans themselves, and that it might be a recurrent feature of their history. This view emerges from the historical material on Nanumea (Chambers 1975:51).

By whichever means centralisation of villages was put into effect, it does seem to have been an idea whose time had come. That the Tuvaluans were integrally involved I do not doubt, since communalism was and is an important ideological tenet of their way of life. Village centralisation merely represents an intensification of this. It is sensible, I think, to posit a cyclical process of centralisation and dispersion in the history of the island settlements, according to the differing effects of
ecological stress and modulation, population growth and decline, surges of religious enthusiasm and episodes of intense sectional antagonism. There have probably always been ways for individuals to opt out of, or to lessen the effects of, collective living. But against this historical rhythm, one must gauge the influence of a continual emphasis on *fenua* solidarity.

How this topic connects with the subject of *maneapa* is that centralisation may have been a prerequisite or co-requisite for the adoption of that type of meeting-house. Centralised villages with large communal meeting-houses would have suited the purposes of church and state. Conversely the new style of meeting-house might well have been welcomed by Tuvaluan leaders as a unifying forum against forces seen as external to the village.

A new socio-political order was forged. In this order traditional chiefly authority was greatly reduced, colonial administrators imposed a framework of laws and enforced them from a distance, and church congregations became arenas for control disputed between pastors and local church hierarchies. “Momentary arrangements” of these parts have succeeded one another along the axis of time. Since decolonisation and independence, new arrangements have arisen in which symbols defined as traditional continue, as always, to play an important role.

**CULTURE AND HISTORY**

Still the historical anomaly remains. Is it possible to address the problem directly from anthropology? To answer this question we need to consider the available options.

I am struck by the parallel between my case study of Tuvaluan *maneapa* and another historical problem encountered on a Polynesian atoll to the east. Robert Borofsky, an anthropologist working on Pukapuka, found that in 1976 a certain form of social organisation had been instituted. This was the Akatawa, a division of the community into two *tawa* or sides, replacing the previous three-village structure. Though Pukapukans readily agreed that its creation was recent, many of them insisted that it was the revival of an important tradition which some informants even remembered from their youth. Just as with the *maneapa*, however, written records, “including research by five well-known anthropologists over a 40-year period, indicate that this form of social organization may not have previously occurred and . . . , at the very least, was poorly known and/or culturally insignificant prior to 1976” (Borofsky 1982:i).

Borofsky’s solution to the historical anomaly is to posit a contradiction between two major cultural perspectives. The first is the culture of anthropologists, who attempt to make traditions intelligible by tidying them up and who question the validity of people’s oral statements (1982:5–6). Presumably, this is an extension of certain Western cultural themes. The second is that held by Pukapukans who
have a different view of the past:

Pukapukan traditions are far from static. To a certain degree, they are being created all the time. In being reproduced from one generation to another, traditional knowledge becomes partially transformed; in being validated by Pukapukans today, assertions about the past become somewhat altered; in being applied to the solution of current problems, traditional knowledge becomes changed in the process. Rather than being a set product from the past, traditional knowledge is more of a process — continually being reinterpreted to give it meaning in the present (Borofsky 1982:3-4).

Borofsky lists a number of factors which affect the acquisition and validation of traditional knowledge. These include the limited need for specialisation, the homogeneity of Pukapukan culture, the repetitiveness of everyday life, the prevalence of status rivalries, a concern with interpersonal harmony, an emphasis on oral transmission, the atoll people's egalitarian orientation, and their lack of economic and political importance to the Cook Islands Government (1982:240-1). Thus, though the initial difference may be cultural, it does not rest purely on static cultural supports. As the list above suggests, social action and questions of power are also important. An idea such as the Akatawa, “once allied with certain social forces, interacts with a particular set of events in a way that may radically transform both it and the broader culture” (1982:242). Even so, the explanation is basically synchronic and rooted in cultural difference. As Borofsky puts it,

... though major changes may be going on in the culture, Pukapukans at times tend to de-emphasise and integrate them into existing cultural patterns. This essentially is the point that Lévi-Strauss suggests regarding 'cold' societies. Some cultures tend to de-emphasise the significance of certain changes (1982:243).

Borofsky's analysis is challenging and far more complex than my summary gives it credit for. It attempts to bring his own form of knowledge into focus and it addresses the problem of historical knowledge, instead of avoiding it. But one has to question why such a full-blown explanatory schema is brought to bear on the historical problem. Does the latter really bear so crucially on a theory of cultural difference and is it so complexly over-determined? We lose sight of the essential problem, that history (in the sense of our perceptions of the past) is contestable in any culture. In Borofsky's case the problem is obscured by an explanation which is too powerful for the phenomenon it purports to be about.

I cannot claim to have offered any alternative so far. In fact, towards the end of the previous section I was tempted into a solution that was similar, which is to say synchronic, but far less sophisticated than Borofsky's. I implied that the maneapa would not now be present if it did not fulfil certain functions and if, at the same time, it did not conform to the rest of Tuvaluan culture. In particular, I referred to the role that maneapa and similar institutions play in the accomplishment
of communal ends, which is a strong ideological emphasis in Tuvalu.

Functionalism of this sort arose in anthropology partly out of a sense of frustration at the lack of written historical records in the societies that anthropologists studied. While this justification is now discredited as more and more historical materials come to light, writing the history of Tuvalu is no simple task. The records are vague on a number of crucial points, are far from continuous, and have the great disadvantage of being mainly written by cultural outsiders. Nevertheless, a presupposition adopted by early anthropologists *faute de mieux* has become entrenched in more recent styles of analysis.

For example, a structuralist approach also presupposes a synchronic starting point. An explanation in this vein entails the notion that *maneapa* were never really absent in Tuvalu. Or, to put it more accurately: the position that the *maneapa* presently occupies in the relata of Tuvaluan social structure corresponds to certain elements in precontact society. This type of model still needs confirmation from what is undeniably sketchy historical evidence but it asks more pointed questions of that evidence than a functionalist explanation. Thus, it prompts one to assess the influence of the church as an institution which has certainly affected the "values" (in a Saussurean sense) of other institutions within the system. Churches and meeting-houses between them may incorporate structural features of 'god houses', clan meeting-houses, the houses of *aliki*, and *malae*. From a structuralist viewpoint, therefore, contemporary institutions make sense as the expression of a synchronic transformation of Tuvaluan culture, in which the same oppositions between sacred and profane, *aliki* and followers of *aliki*, island solidarity and descent group divisions, are played out as before. The more things change the more they remain the same.

A synchronic explanation is evasive, however, if the problem it confronts is properly historical; it tends to fill an explanatory vacuum, whether applied by anthropologists like myself or by Tuvaluans. With regard to the anthropological explanations advanced above, the historical anomaly is resolved by showing that there is no major contradiction between past and present, either from a functional or a structural point of view. As for Tuvaluans, they resolve the anomaly by projecting the present into the past.

Seen historically, however, the anomaly refuses to dissolve. It is more than just a residue. I suspect more and more that it has to do with two entirely different ways of making history, each possessing its own hermeneutic. I have questioned the traditional status of the *maneapa* and defined it as problematic. Tuvaluans are free to accept or reject that view. If they accept it, they must accept the possibility of a different historical method, for if it were normal historical practice in Tuvalu to examine written records the anomaly probably would not have arisen. It is, after all, an anomaly growing out of the disjunction between two ways of doing history.

What grounds have I for characterising these ways as different?
Are they, as Borofsky says, due to cultural differences in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge? Yes and no. The differences lie in the realm of knowledge and, in my view, are therefore cultural. But they have little to do with the existence of separate Polynesian and Western cultures. On the contrary, the practice of history in a Western academic sense is possible in any literate society, including Tuvalu. But in the absence of that specific practice of recording, writing and interpreting documents and comparing them to oral accounts, people’s perceptions tend towards the synchronic. Saussure’s conclusions on this point are uncompromising:

The first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist insofar as the speaker is concerned. He is confronted with a state. That is why the linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony. He can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only falsify his judgement (1959:81).

As Fredric Jameson has stated in his commentary on Saussure, no one denies the fact of the diachronic, that phenomena have their own history and that meanings change. Only, for the speaker, or for the cultural member (to use a term more compatible with the aims of my paper), at any moment one meaning alone exists, the current one. Jameson proceeds to summarise perfectly these two different forms of knowledge:

We may express all this in yet another way by showing that the ontological foundations of the synchronic and the diachronic are quite different from each other. The former lies in the immediate lived experience of the native speaker; the latter rests on a kind of intellectual construction, the result of comparisons between one moment of lived time and another by someone who stands outside, who has thus substituted a purely intellectual continuity for a lived one (1972:6).

It is, on the one hand, not surprising that synchronic explanations by anthropologists can co-exist peacefully with the synchronically experienced oral traditions of their informants. They may differ in detail or in analytic abstraction, but neither is in the business of resolving contradictions between successive historical states. On the other hand, it is only natural when anthropologists engage in historiography that anomalies should emerge, because the anomalies themselves are born out of the difference between synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The one considered in this paper literally would not exist if I had not decided to examine the historical documentation concerning the maneapa; the one considered by Borofsky would not exist if he had not attempted to gain historical confirmation for the Akatawa on Pukapuka.

So why practise history? One reason is political, since history is a powerful form of knowledge. Those who do not “know” history can be exploited by those who do. Sahlins makes this point in his discussion of societies which, like pre-European Hawai’i, deal in “heroic history”. In
Hawai‘i, he claims, the elites knew more history than the ordinary people and consciously denied them access to it:

Having lost control of their own social reproduction . . . the people are left without historical appreciation of the main cultural categories. . . . For them, the culture is mostly ‘lived’ — in practice, and as *habitut* (Sahlins 1983:524).

Actually, as Sahlins admits, everyone has their own particular historical consciousness, but I would also extend the argument in the opposite direction: for *all* of us culture is “mostly ‘lived’”. In contrast with the normal background of synchrony, history therefore represents a dialectical turn in awareness, one which may be liberating.

But, being a form of knowledge like any other, history is also limiting. That is another reason for practising it — to explore those limits. Otherwise one would be left with the mistaken impression that history can automatically demystify the social world. Demystification is not my aim, since I do not wish to negate the importance currently attached to *maneapa* in Tuvalu. Rather, I wish to understand what grounds that importance in different kinds of historical and social practice.

**NOTES**

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2. Or, rather, at least two versions, since “transformation” can be treated simply as a synonym for “change”.

3. The letter ‘g’ represents /ŋ/ in this orthography but it must be stressed that there is no universally accepted way of spelling Tuvaluan. In deference to Niko Besnier, I shall attempt to make my spelling phonemic for an academic audience but it is not always possible to be consistent in this respect. In particular, Tuvaluans themselves often do not indicate vowel length, at least by the use of two vowels, and so the vernacular form of names will generally be retained. Otherwise Funafuti would be Funaaftui and Nui would be Nuui. See Besnier (1981) for further details.

4. The population figures come from the 1979 census (Government of Tuvalu 1980), prepared by Sheila Macrae and Simeona Iosia. The other background data either comes from my own research or are condensed from a number of the sources in the references.
5. See Munro 1978, 1982; Macdonald 1982; L. Kofe 1976. Undoubtedly the term "Christian society" is vague. It could refer to any or all of a number of criteria: high proportions of people attending church, widespread belief in Christian doctrine, the elevation of pastors to high status and leadership roles, development of theocracy, and so on. All these criteria apply or have applied in the past. The matter is too complex, however, to deal with here.

6. Again, the significance of the "sects" cannot be outlined fully in this paper. To put the issue as briefly as possible, their presence places great strain on the ideal of religious consensus. The figure of 95 percent adherence to the Tuvalu Church is taken from pastors' reports filed at the central Church Office on Funafuti, and undoubtedly glosses over problems of interpreting membership, attendance and so on. Nevertheless, it may even be an understatement as, according to Nico Wit, at the time of the last two censuses (1973 and 1979), “only about 3 percent of the people enumerated . . . were recorded as belonging to another religion” (Wit 1980:61).

7. I visited them all, with the exception of Nukulaelae and Niulakita. My descriptions are not meant to apply to those two islands.

8. Maude also quotes from an unpublished paper by Sir Arthur Grimble:

   Everything that took place in the maneaba was subject to the strictest ceremonial rules, under the most definite religious sanctions; and everything that carried with it an informal atmosphere, such as the sports of wrestling, of hide-and-seek, or other games of their nature, was banned from those precincts. It may be said that only such acts as lent themselves to a solemn ritual, and possessed a definite social significance were permissible in the maneaba (Maude 1977:43).

9. (a) falefono (Chambers 1975:1). This is originally a Samoan expression and, like falesa (see below), probably went out of vogue when Samoan influence over church and society declined in the middle of this century. However, according to Sir Harry Luke, who visited Vaitupu and Funafuti in 1939, falefonon was the standard term (1945:117). Given the brevity of his stay, one cannot place much confidence in his statement.

   (b) fale tapu (Brady 1970:38, 55). Literally meaning 'sacred house', this term now refers exclusively to churches. But it may have had more secular duties earlier on, especially during the era of Samoan mission domination, when falesa was probably the common term for “church”. Falesa is now used very rarely.

   (c) api (Kennedy 1931:208-9). He does not elaborate on this usage.

   (d) fale o pati Alikivaka 'house where the chiefs speak', a phrase mentioned by the Rev. Alovaka Maui in discussing a traditional poem; hence probably an archaic trope (Maui 1977:22).

10. For examples of News Sheet usage, see, for example, issues No. 96 (December 26, 1979:20) and 164 (August 5, 1982:7, 13).

11. Information supplied by Doug Munro since the original version of this paper was prepared gives a much clearer picture of this meeting-house, which is presumably the one encountered by another traveller, John Moresby, in 1872. He describes it, in terms very reminiscent of a Gilbertese maneaba, as “a building with a high pitched roof, which comes down within three feet of the ground, the space left between the roof and the ground being perfectly open all round” (1876:79). This evidence, along with the narrative by Henry Pease on Nanumea, indicates that at least some of the northern islands fall outside the scope of my central argument (see footnote 12).

12. Again, information recently acquired gives some support to this interpretation, which runs counter to my historical thesis. I refer to the account by a whaling captain, Henry Pease, who visited Nanumea in 1853. He describes the purification ceremonies in some detail and notes that it was only towards the end of his two-day stay that he visited the “great Council House” (Pease 1853). As with Niutao (footnote 11), this account suggests that northern Tuvalu had large central and communal meeting-houses earlier than the southern islands, probably as a result of Gilbertese influence.
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