

Unit 16 : Abandoning Ancient Punatau, Tuvalu

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Facts

Capital:	Funafuti (45% of population)
No. of Islands:	five atolls and four coral islands
Formation:	low coral atolls
Population:	12,373 inhabitants (July 2009, est.)
Language:	Tuvaluan and English
Religion:	Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (Protestant) 97%
Government:	Independent Republic
Independence:	1 October 1978



Map 17.1. Map of Tuvalu

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- describe the features of Punatau village
- appreciate the difference between facts and opinions
- construct genealogical tables
- extract information from maps and photographs
- understand the link between tradition, change, colonial role and foreign intervention.

This chapter is about the village of Punatau, Tuvalu, and its history and archaeological remains.

Physical features and location

Punatau is located on the north western end of Vaitupu Island, in Tuvalu. It is pear-shaped and the most central islet of the Big Atoll of Vaitupu. Vaitupu is a low-lying atoll with two lagoons. The atoll is 5.1 kilometres long and 2 kilometres wide at its maximum.

Punatau Village and Origin

Oral tradition indicates that Telematua from Samoa was the first to settle the uninhabited Vaitupu Island at Punatau. This was confirmed by a legend:

Story of Telematua and His Sons

Telematua was old and did not walk, but only crept along (on the buttocks, progressing with two mats, which the creeper sat on and placed in front of him alternatively).

The elder son was Luka. Silanga was younger. They had a competition at making string to see who the better was. There came a day when Silanga went out to chase bonito. When he came ashore, his father had disappeared. Silanga ran down to the foreshore of the lagoon, but his father was not there. So Silanga went to Kilitai (a village). When he got there, his father was there.

Luka called out, "Come and sit down", and Telematua called out, "Come here to your string-making". The father was afraid as Silanga looked very morose. Silanga went up, lifted his father and carried him on his back. They went off to the place where Silanga dwelt, at Namoliki (Namo means lagoon, Liki means small). Punatau is at the smaller lagoon also called 'Te Loto'. The bigger lagoon in the south is called 'Te Namu'.

And so Silanga and Luka were separated. For that reason, the line of descent from Luka is not known here on Vaitupu.

Extract 17.1. Story of Telematua and His Sons (see Questions 2 & 3)

Punatau plan

In 1931, the school teacher, colonial officer and author, D.G. Kennedy managed to map the village site based on oral tradition and visual evidence. The High Chief's house and meeting houses were in the centre of the village. Their centralised location signified their important function within the community.

Traditionally, the apex of the social and political structure was the *Tupu* (King). Immediate subordinates were his principal assistants consisting of *Fagaulu* (head chief), *Taolua* (second chief) and *Taotolu* (third chief). These titles were traditionally inherited through the first-born son lineage. Women were never allowed to hold such titles.

Lower ranks of the social hierarchy were comprised of *Matai* (male elders only of extended family), *Tofuga* (local healers and healers of canoes and houses), *Toa* (warriors), *Tino Ote Fenua* (commoners) and finally *Te Pologa* (the slaves). Each stratum performed specialised responsibilities for the upkeep and unity of the whole community.

Questions and Activities

1. Describe Vaitupu Island in two sentences.
2. What were the names of Telematua's sons?
3. What are the names of:
 - (a) the small lagoon in the north?
 - (b) the big lagoon in the south?
4. Make a pyramid (or a list) and show all the ranks from *Tupu* down to *Te Pologna*.

Punatau and remnants

The mounds of Punatau's houses are still traceable. D.G. Kennedy said they were "of coral pebbles enclosed in low walls of coral boulders or slabs of stratified coral conglomerate set on edge and half buried to keep them upright".

Traditional mounds were between half and three-quarter meters high. *Lase* (lime) served as a cementing substance and paint. Posts were invariably of *Milo*, *Tausunu* and *Kanava*. Pandanus leaves were used for thatching and coconut leaves for drop-screenings.

All Punatau's dwellings were traditionally constructed and similar throughout. Only the four posts of the chief's house were made of boulders. They were approximately two meters high and probably a meter buried to hold them upright.

Unfortunately the remaining settler at the site admitted to D.G. Kennedy that he had dismantled the boulders to get them out of the way.

Traditional reasons for settling on Punatau

Oral traditions suggest that the foremost reason for settling at Punatau was the availability of fresh water. Although Punatau is located on the saline flat, the wells in the vicinity are shallow and fresh.

A recent land survey conducted at Vaitupu proved the high availability of the water, compared to elsewhere on the island. Tuvaluans recall that during the 1974 drought, people flocked to Punatau to collect water for food preparations and laundry.

The second reason for first settling at Punatau was accessibility to coconuts, *pulaka* and *taro*. They were components of the traditional staple diet. To be close to reefs and lagoons, which were abundant in fish, was another reason.

Lastly was the need to secure themselves from sudden attacks from foreign invaders. Legends say that invaders usually came from Samoa, Tonga and neighbouring islands. Nearer to Punatau is a smaller sea passage. There are bigger passages at 'Te Fae', the new site of the village. If invaders arrived at the big sea passage the settlers at the Punatau would have sufficient warning and time to prepare for combat.

Abandoning Punatau

Tuvalu was joined with Kiribati when Britain declared a Protectorate in 1892 and then a colony in 1916. The Resident Commissioner stationed in Kiribati ruled Tuvalu.

In 1909 William Telfer Campbell, (the second Residential commissioner) enforced a law for each island in the Colony to amalgamate to one village. At Vaitupu the Resident Commissioner had to walk to Punatau from Te Fae during his touring visits. For administrative convenience this Amalgamate Law was enforced.

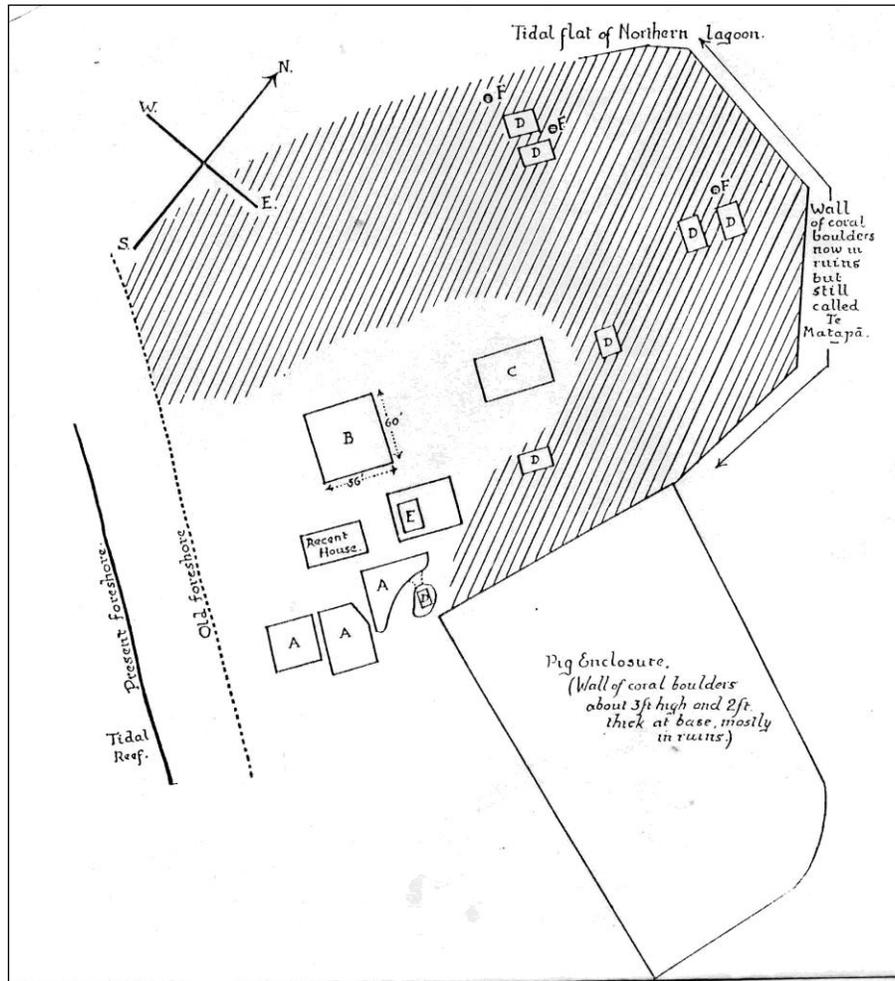


Fig 17.1. Map of Punatau

Missionaries were also a contributing factor to the shift of the population from Punatau. After arriving in 1865 they built their station at Te Fale to be near the wharf and main passage in case the ships called in with cargo. Due to the Missionaries' arguments and preaching, Tuvaluans' saw the need to be near their station. The people of Punatau migrated to Te Fale.

Probably there were other reasons for the shift to Te Fale. Although villagers may have wanted to remain in Punatau, they did comply with the British colonial demand and the suggestions of the missionaries. The wharf is still at Te Fale.

Relics from the Site

Despite the dense undergrowth, plots of clustered or individual graves at the site are still traceable. Small slabs of sedimentary corals were used for the rectangular borders. For headstones, a larger and carved slab was used. All graves were faced east. This had been a practice for centuries. It was believed that the dead should rise with the new day.

In D.G. Kennedy's book on the culture of Vaitupu he explained that the excavation of graves was necessary to bring "to light several objects of personal adornment, the use of which was prohibited by the church." Such were *pakaso* (polished pear-shell pendants worn by chiefs), *pa* (pear-shell shanks or lures), *lei* (whales-teeth pendants), and *pungapunga* (polished whalebone pendants).

Today, most of those Vaitupu adornments are no longer in existence. The traditional skills of their craftsmanship have also gone.

Otago University Museum in New Zealand might still have those relics. Kennedy sent most of his materials to the University. Presumably he thought that Tuvaluans could not look after those important relics. Hopefully, the excavated relics have not lost the meaning and value of their origin and identities through time and travelling to other destinations.

Questions and Activities

5. Describe a typical house at ancient Punatau (in 30 words).
6. How many houses had stone (or boulders) for house posts?
7. List the things that D.G. Kennedy found in the graves.
8. Why did Punatau villagers move to Te fale?
9. Why is Te fale a more important place than Punatau?