




# Returning to Samoa – The Appropriation and Restitution of a Samoan Prow. Germany, Colonialism and the Current Restitution Debate

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**Abstract:** In 1932, the Übersee-Museum Bremen received a collection of cultural artefacts as a gift from Admiral Wilhelm Souchon (1864-1946). Among these artefacts was a prow dating back to the time of the Samoan Civil War of 1888 and the conflict between the imperial powers of the USA, Great Britain and the German Empire for supremacy over Samoa. Souchon acquired the prow as a naval officer on the SMS *Adler* in 1888. The article follows the traces of this prow. It outlines its journey from Samoa to Germany and its restitution in 2024, drawing on historical sources that shed light on both the German and Samoan perspectives on the events.

**Keywords:** Übersee-Museum Bremen; Samoa; Germany; colonialism; restitution

From 1884 until World War I, Imperial Germany, as a ‘latecomer’, acquired colonies in Africa and Oceania as well as a small territory in China, Tsingtao. In the Pacific, there were the colonies of so-called German New Guinea and, since 1900, Samoa. The German colony Samoa comprised of the Western Islands of what is today called the Independent State of Samoa. For many decades, public debate in Germany, if at all critically dealing with German colonial history, only focused on the former colonies in Africa.<sup>1</sup> For a long time, the cliché of a peaceful colonialism in the “South Sea” dominated the discussion.

Over the past few years, a major change has occurred regarding the attitude towards keeping cultural assets and ancestral remains from former colonized countries in Western museums. Recent discussion at German universities about colonialism, its lasting consequences and the raising of

ethical questions have reached institutions, society and even politics. The question is: by what right are we keeping artefacts and human remains of former colonized peoples, probably ignoring the feelings of their descendants? German museums have therefore increasingly focused on the history of their collections and critically examined these collections’ provenance. They do this in order to take steps to repatriate cultural artefacts or human remains, if necessary, and to be able to respond to corresponding requests.<sup>2</sup>

The following article was written due to the Bremen Übersee-Museum planning a new permanent exhibition. In March 2025, the exhibition opened under the title *Der Blaue Kontinent: Inseln im Pazifik* (The Blue Continent: Islands in the Pacific). It focuses on the past and present of Oceania from multiple perspectives. Many of the themes

1 See Hermann Mückler: Die deutschen Kolonien im Pazifik, in: Alexis von Poser / Bianca Baumann (eds.): Heikles Erbe. Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart. Eine Ausstellung des Niedersächsischen Landesmuseums Hannover, Dresden 2016, 43-55, here: 43; Livia Loosen: Deutsche Frauen in den Südsee-Kolonien des Kaiserreichs. Alltag und Beziehungen zur indigenen Bevölkerung 1884-1919, Bielefeld 2014, 15-16.

2 Particularly in connection with the creation of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which serves, among other purposes, to present the Berlin and thus largest German collection of ethnographic artefacts, there were controversial discussions about the handling of cultural assets from colonial contexts. In 2019, the German Lost Art Foundation established the Department of Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts. The department funds corresponding provenance research. See <https://kulturgut-verluste.de/en/contexts/colonial-contexts>, <02.03.2025>.



Figure 1: The prow

presented have been developed together with representatives of Pacific peoples. A Samoan colleague, Mitiana Arbon,<sup>3</sup> was part of the curatorial team. With his help, the Samoan artefacts kept in the museum came to the fore. In the process, a piece resurfaced whose history had been forgotten over the past two decades, but which urgently needed to be closely examined against the backdrop of the recent discussion about provenance and ethics. It is a prow that dates back to the Samoan Civil War of 1888.<sup>4</sup>

## The Debate and the Bremen Übersee-Museum

The German term ‘Übersee-Museum’ can be translated as ‘Overseas-Museum’.<sup>5</sup> The museum opened in 1896 and is located in the city center of Bremen. It is a three-section museum housing natural history, ethnographic and commercial collections, made up of around 1.2 million so-called objects. As the museum’s current name makes clear, a large proportion of its collection originates from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania. Bremen’s mercantile business community of the 19th and early 20th century, which was very active in the overseas trade, played a key role in the founding of the museum. The image of the ‘hall of fame of Bremen’s trade’ was evoked at the opening. The merchants

3 Mitiana Arbon is now working as a curator for the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

4 The provenance of the item is shortly mentioned in: Viola König (ed.): *Menschen, Meere, Kontinente – die Erde in 80 Minuten. Erlebnisswelt Übersee-Museum Bremen*, Munich / Berlin 1996, 14; and Roger Neich: *Samoa Figurative Carvings and Tamualua Canoes – a Further Note*, in: *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 100 (September 1991), No. 3, 317-327, here: 322.

5 An overview of the history of the Übersee-Museum is given by Herbert Abel: *Vom Raritätenkabinett zum Bremer Überseemuseum. Die Geschichte einer hanseatischen Sammlung aus Übersee anlässlich ihres 75jährigen Bestehens*, Bremen 1970; also see Wiebke Ahrndt (ed.): *Spurensuche. Geschichte eines Museums*, Bremen 2019; and Bettina von Briskorn: *Zur Sammlungsgeschichte afrikanischer Ethnographica im Übersee-Museum Bremen 1841-1945*, Bremen 2000, 50-116.



used their connections abroad to help procure artefacts, natural history objects, human remains and samples of goods. The Bremen Norddeutscher Lloyd ('NDL'), at times the world's largest passenger shipping company, was an important sponsor of the museum. The company had been providing the state-subsidized connection to the South Pacific with its mail steamers (Reichspostdampfer) since 1886.<sup>6</sup> The South Pacific was of particular interest to German business circles because of the copra industry. Besides financial donations, the NDL allowed the museum's director and staff to travel on its ships free of charge. NDL ships also transported collections without charging for them. This put the museum in a position to acquire very large items without having to worry about the shipping costs. In the competition between German museums to acquire important cultural artefacts from Oceania this was an advantage.

In the first decades of the museum's existence, there were presentations employing groups of figures, house models partly made in the countries they represented and taxidermized animals. These presentations were intended to enable museum visitors to imaginarily travel to and experience the regions of the world on display. In this way, the museum molded certain ideas of the world outside Europe in its visitors, contributing to the formation of stereotypes and perpetuating racist clichés. Popular education was on the agenda and, at the same time the founding director, Prof. Dr. Hugo Schauinsland (1857-1937), emphasized that this education would be based on science.



Figure 2: The Bremen Übersee-Museum

6 See Dirk H. R. Spennemann: 'Steam to Tonga and Samoa'. The Norddeutscher Lloyd Mail Service 1886 to 1893, Albury, N.S.W. 2002.



Figure 3: Postcard from before 1934 showing a 'Samoan' scenery with a life-size figure in the museum.

Being opened at the height of the German colonial era, the museum benefited on a large scale from the colonial infrastructure, which fostered the supply of natural history and ethnographic artefacts as well as human remains. Most of the artefacts and human remains in the Oceania holdings were acquired by sailors (especially of the NDL), missionaries, salesmen, colonial officials, members of the German Imperial Navy, museum staff and scientists during the German colonial period.

Against this background, there is no question that the Übersee-Museum had to critically engage with its colonial past. It should be questioned how its holdings were collected and by whom, and what these objects and human remains mean to people in the societies of origin today. For several years now, the museum's own provenance research has focused primarily on objects and human remains that originate from a colonial context. This research is always subject to the proviso of being open to restitution and repatriation – in the event of relevant findings. The current director of the Übersee-Museum, Prof. Wiebke Ahrndt, was deeply involved in the German discussion on the care of human remains in museums from very early on. Ahrndt has been head of a working group at the Deutscher Museumsbund (German Museums Association) that published a respective guideline in 2013 (revised edition 2021). She also was part of the Museumsbund-team that worked four years on the 'Guidelines for the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts', which were finally presented in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

The restitution of objects must always be preceded by sound provenance research. It may also be the case that a restitution is simply not desired by the society of origin, even though that object was appropriated under, from today's perspective, unacceptable conditions. The above-mentioned 'Guidelines for the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts' state:

*"Discussions should be conducted with sensitivity right from the start. It is important to bear in mind that a solution does not necessarily have to end solely with the return of the collection item. Some communities of origin do not want to have any collection items from European museums returned to them, others are interested only in specific groups of collection items, e.g. human remains and objects with a religious significance, or their return may be controversial within the possible groups of relevance. [...] The authors of these Guidelines therefore recommend that museums make clear right from the start that they are prepared to discuss the return of collection items but are also willing and open to talk about other solutions."*<sup>8</sup>

Despite all the goodwill, the museum itself is not entitled to decide on the return of objects and human remains. It can only recommend restitution because the decision on restitution ultimately rests with the city government of Bremen. After all, the museum and its holdings belong to the city of Bremen, which together with Bremerhaven also constitutes an individual state within the Federal Republic of Germany. It should be emphasized, however, that the city government has hitherto been very open to repatriation and considers it a moral obligation. In the end, restitution is a purely political matter.

### **A List Naming Objects – The Starting Point for Provenance Research on a Samoan Prow**

On 10th August 1932, Admiral Wilhelm Souchon (1864-1946), a well-known man in the city of Bremen, who lived in Horner Heerstraße 23 in Bremen, wrote a postcard to the Städtisches Museum für Natur-, Völker- und Handelskunde (Municipal Museum of Natural History, Ethnology and Trade) – today's Übersee-Museum:

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7 Deutscher Museumsbund (ed.): Guidelines. Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections, Berlin 2021, URL: <https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/dmb-leitfaden-umgang-menschl-ueberr-en-web-20210625.pdf>, <19.10.2025>; Deutscher Museumsbund (ed.): Guidelines for German Museums. Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts, 3rd Edition, Berlin 2021, URL: <https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/mb-leitfaden-en-web.pdf>, <19.10.2025>.

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8 Guidelines 2021 (see FN 7), 80.



*“I have a number of memorabilia from the South Seas that I would like to donate to the museum: kawabowls, spears, arrows, idols, clubs, etc. Perhaps one of the gentlemen will look at the items to see if they are of value to the museum, after telephoning me so that I am at home. / Last house on the right before the end of tram line 4 in Horn.”<sup>9</sup>*

The museum accepted the donation of the artefacts which was accompanied by a list. The handwritten list of the collection, compiled by Admiral Souchon himself, comprises of 17 different catalogue numbers, some of which include several pieces each. The first and maybe at the same time the most interesting item on this list is the “tip of the bowsprit of a Samoan war canoe holding about 70 men, taken from the insurgents by SMS Adler 23 Oct. 1888 shells as a hanging”.<sup>10</sup>

## The Prow

The museum’s ethnographic collection from Samoa is dominated by over 400 items that Otto Tetens (1865-1945) collected and sold to the museum in 1907. Tetens had lived on the island of Upolu from 1902 to 1905 where he had worked at the local observatory.<sup>11</sup> There are also some smaller additions, including some that date back to the time before the museum was founded. However, probably none of the objects is as closely linked to historical events as the one presented below.

Admiral Souchon’s donation was incorporated into the museum holdings and was given the entry number E 6310.<sup>12</sup> The prow itself was inventoried as object D 4870. One can assume that it was presented



Figure 4: The prow in a destroyed showcase.

in the museum’s exhibition quite soon. It was probably exhibited at the latest after the museum had been renamed by the National Socialist city government in 1935. The new name given by the Nazis was “Deutsches Kolonial- und Übersee-Museum” (German Colonial and Overseas Museum). It was specifically ordered to show in its exhibitions what Germany had lost by surrendering her colonies as a direct consequence of the First World War, one of these lost colonies being Samoa. At present, we only know of one older photograph of the item, which shows a destroyed display case of Samoan exhibits with the prow in the center.<sup>13</sup> In view of the condition of the display case, we must assume that it is a photograph from the Second World War or the immediate postwar years. During the war, the museum had been hit by several bombs.

To be honest, the prow probably received little academic attention in the 19th and early 20th century. Its story is unlikely to have been mentioned in the exhibition. It wasn’t until the 1990s that a certain interest in it arose. In 1991, Roger Neich (1944-2010), a New Zealand ethnologist and professor of anthropology, published an article on ‘Samoan Figurative Carvings and Tamalua Canoes’.<sup>14</sup> The prow was among the carvings Neich had investigated. It was also presented in a museum publication a few years later.<sup>15</sup> But in both cases no detailed research on the provenance of the prow had been undertaken, albeit historical sources, like logbooks,

9 “Ich habe eine Anzahl Erinnerungsstücke aus der Südsee, die ich gern dem Museum stiften würde: Kawabowlen, Speere, Pfeile, Götzen, Keulen u. dergl. Vielleicht sieht sich einer der Herren die Stücke darauf hin an, ob sie für das Museum von Wert sind, nach telefonischer Anmeldung, damit ich zu Hause bin. Letztes Haus rechts vorm Endpunkt der Straßenbahnlinie 4 in Horn”, in: Archive Übersee-Museum (hereinafter ÜM) 177, vol. 3.

10 ÜM 333, list Souchon, “Spitze des Bugspriets eines ca. 70 Mann fassenden samoanischen Kriegskanus, den Aufständischen abgenommen von SMS Adler 23. Oct. 1888 Muscheln als Behang dazu”.

11 ÜM 511, Entry Book, E 581. A large number of Tetens’ notes on the flora and fauna of Samoa, but also on everyday life and on the objects sold to the museum, are kept in the museum’s archive and can be accessed as digital copies on the Übersee-Museum’s homepage in German and English, see <https://www.uebersee-museum.de/ueber-uns/das-museum/sammlung/tetens-samoa-studien/<23.10.2025>>.

12 ÜM 511, Entry Book, E 6310.

13 Inventory number: P 29774.

14 Neich 1991 (see FN 4).

15 Viola König 1996 (see FN 4), 14.

life reports and newspaper articles, have in fact survived.<sup>16</sup> These documents allow for a precise reconstruction of the historical events that led to Souchon appropriating the prow.

### The Collector: Who Was Admiral Souchon?

Who was Admiral Souchon? Wilhelm Theodor Anton Souchon was born in Leipzig on 2nd June 1864. His father Wilhelm Ferdinand Souchon (1825-1876), a portrait painter by profession, died when Souchon was twelve years old. His mother Klara, née Naumann, married the Privy Councilor Genast after his father's death. Souchon's education first took him to the Kiel Naval School and later to the Naval Academy.<sup>17</sup> After he had finished his training, he served on the Australian station in Oceania from 1887-1889. In his memoirs, Souchon writes:

*“My 2 ½ year stay in the South Seas can justifiably bear the name ‘Samoa’, as it was filled with our struggle for possession of this marvelous group of islands, the pearl of the South Seas. Written with a blush of anger at the deceit and greed of the Anglo-Saxons, with blood and tears, it is nevertheless a chapter of my longing for the fairyland / [...] I was part to the crew of the small cruiser ‘Adler’, launched in 1883, with a displacement of 884 tons and a crew of 127, until this ship foundered in the harbor of Apia on 16 March 1889.”<sup>18</sup>*

16 Wilhelm Souchon's remaining papers are held in the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives) in Berlin, BAarch N 156/1 to 36, and is also available as a digital copy of microfilms and originals at <https://inventio.bundesarchiv.de/inventio/direktlink/d5ce3a88-8101-4559-b896-756184f34c6d/>, <11.04.2024>. The library of the Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg/University of the Bundeswehr (German Army) holds three handwritten diaries under the shelf marks MIL 058 2AD YC0007-1 to 4, covering the period 1887-1889, 1892-1893 and 1900-1902. These can also be found in the Federal Archives. The library also holds a souvenir album in the form of a collage of postcards, greeting cards, business cards, menus and other papers.

17 Matti E. Mäkelä: Souchon der Goebenadmiral greift in die Weltgeschichte ein, Brunswick 1936, 26-27.

18 “Mein 2 ½ jähriger Aufenthalt in der Südsee kann füglich den Namen ‘Samoa’ tragen, da er doch ausgefüllt von unsrem Ringen um den Besitz dieser herrlichen Inselgruppe, der Perle der Südsee. Mit Zornesröte über die Falschheit und Raffgier der Angelsachsen, mit Blut und Tränen geschrieben, ist es doch ein Kapitel meiner Sehnsucht an das Märchenland. / [...] ich [gehörte] zur Besatzung des 1883 vom Stapel gelaufenen kleinen Kreuzers ‘Adler’, von 884 t Deplacement und 127 Köpfen Besatzung, bis zum Scheitern dieses Schiffes im Hafen von Apia am 16.ten März 1889.” Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereinafter BAarch) N156/7, ‘Aus meinem Leben’. Autobiografie von Wilhelm Souchon (handschriftlich), 21. November 1933, 170-171.

Wilhelm Souchon's service in Oceania coincided with the Samoa Crisis, in which the imperialist powers of the USA, Great Britain and the German Empire struggled for supremacy in Samoa. Souchon experienced the German defeat at Vaialele on 18th December 1888.<sup>19</sup> He again escaped death on 16th March 1889 when a cyclone destroyed the warships and merchant ships in Apia harbor – including *SMS Adler* – as he was assigned to the shore watch. It was not until ten years later in 1899 that Savaii and Upolu, the western islands of Samoa, were to become German colonial territory and the other part of the archipelago was taken over by the Americans. The British received Tonga and parts of the Solomon Islands as compensation.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 5: Postcard from 1916 with a portrait of Vice-Admiral Wilhelm Souchon.

19 A German perspective on the battle is provided by Franz Reinecke: Samoa, Berlin 1902, 55-59.

20 See Horst Gründer: Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien, 8th edition, Paderborn 2023, 99-104 and 103-105.



The admiral's life was repeatedly linked to events of historical significance, especially during World War I. This is the reason why he was so well-known and highly regarded by his German contemporaries. Wilhelm Souchon spent the last years of his life in Bremen, which is certainly also due to the fact that his second wife, Violet (1889-1953), née Lahusen, was from a well-known Bremen family of businessmen.<sup>21</sup> The press in the Hanseatic city, but also other newspapers in the German Reich, regularly reported on his life on occasions such as his birthdays or service anniversaries.<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Souchon died in Bremen on 13th January 1946.<sup>23</sup>

### The 23rd October and the Following Days According to Souchon's Diary?

What exactly happened in October 1888, when the prow was 'taken away' from the 'insurgents'? To get closer to a possible answer to this question, we can refer to Wilhelm Souchon's diary.<sup>24</sup>

In 1888, a civil war raged in Samoa between the Tamasese and the Mata'afa party. The imperialist powers, the USA, the German Empire and Great Britain, were represented by consuls in Apia, which formed a neutral zone of an international community. Warships of the Great Powers were moored in the harbor and by supporting one of the civil war parties, they tried to protect their own interests and gain influence. Germans owned significant coconut plantations in Samoa, which supplied

21 Staatsarchiv Bremen (hereinafter StAB), 4,82/1 2099 Einwohnermeldekartei Wilhelm Souchon and wife.

22 Souchon's work is the subject of the following newspaper articles, among others: Anonymous: Admiral Souchon 65 Jahre, in: *Weser-Zeitung*, No. 323, 2nd June 1929; [?] Hollweg: Admiral Souchon 65 Jahre, in: *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, No. 2525, 4th June 1929; Wilhelm Sauer: Das Logbuch des Admirals, in: *Weser-Zeitung* (Beilagen), No. 512-516, 14th-18th October 1933; Anonymous: Admiral Souchon. On his 70th birthday, in: *Berliner Tageblatt*, No. 256, 2nd June 1934; A.N.: Deutscher Durchbruch nach den Dardanellen. On the 75th birthday of Admiral (ret.) Souchon, in: *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, No. 148, 31st May 1939; Anonymous: Ehrentag unseres 'Goeben'-Admirals, in: *Bremer Zeitung*, 1st June 1939; Sr [Wilhelm Sauer]: Aus dem Logbuch des 'Goeben'-Admirals'. Admiral Souchon 75 Jahre, in: *Bremer Nachrichten mit Weser-Zeitung*, No. 149, 2nd June 1939; Anonymous: 60 Jahre Soldat, in: *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, No. 102, 12th April 1941. See also StAB 9, S 3-4642 Admiral Wilhelm Souchon. We would like to thank Leo Heyer, who completed a student internship at the Übersee-Museum, for compiling and editing the various articles on Souchon.

23 StAB 4.82/1 2099, Einwohnermeldekartei Wilhelm Souchon and wife.

24 Library of the Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg/University of the Bundeswehr, Diaries of Wilhelm Souchon, MIL 058 2AD YC0007-02.



Figure 6: Mata'afa Iosefo (1832-1912)

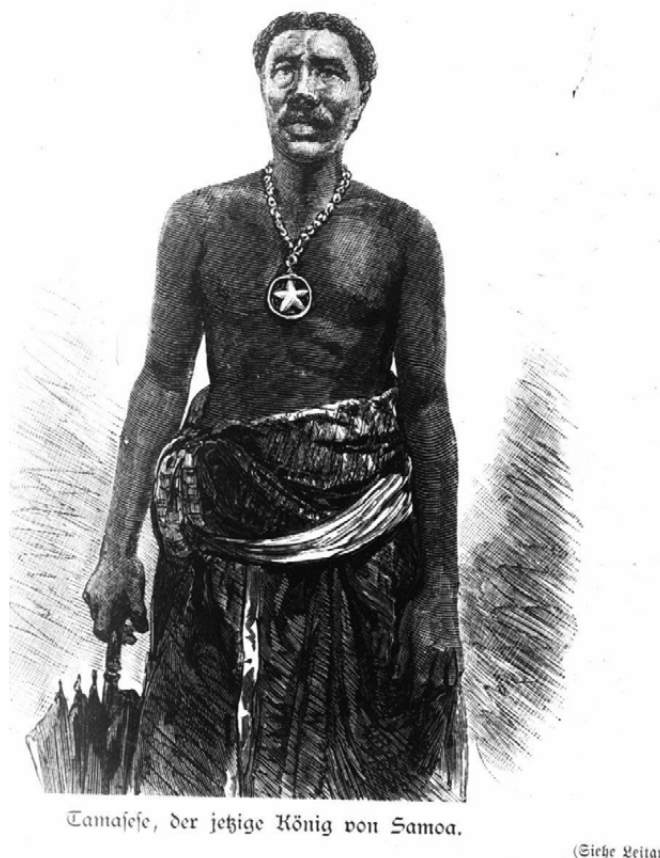


Figure 7: Tamasese Lealofi (1855-1915)

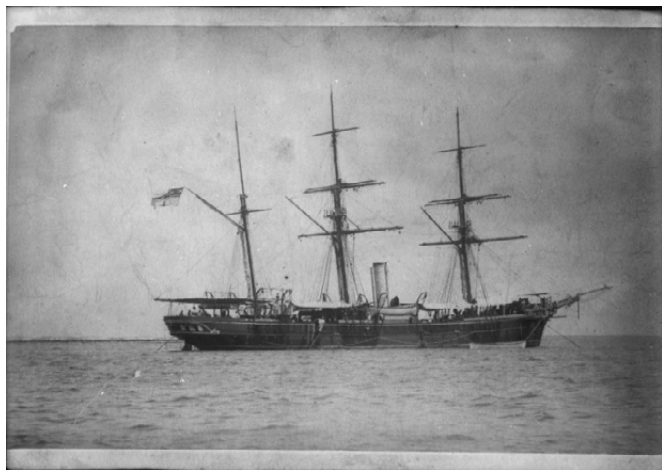


Figure 8: SMS Adler

the coveted commodity copra, the dried flesh of the coconut, from which oil is extracted. The Germans had sided with Tamasese, while the British and Americans decided to support Mata'afa.<sup>25</sup>

At around 8 p.m. on 23rd October 1888, the German crew of the gunboat *SMS Adler* was about to accept an invitation to board the *Lizard*, a gunboat of the British Royal Navy,<sup>26</sup> when it was noticed that the guard at the German consulate was burning torches, thus sending a signal. Shortly afterwards, gunfire was heard on the bridge next to the consulate. Under the leadership of Wilhelm Souchon, two tenders were taken ashore. According to Souchon in his diary, the German marines were supposed to prevent a Samoan war canoe belonging to Mata'afa's party from making booty. They succeeded in cutting off the canoe and eventually captured it. The crew of the canoe had jumped into the water when they were called, and the Germans fired at the swimming Samoans in the darkness. Souchon states that he had not actually intended to give the order to fire. The canoe was towed away and taken on board of the *SMS Adler*. In his diary Wilhelm Souchon wrote that it had come from a place called Manono. In his notes he describes the boat as very

well made and beautiful. A cannon is said to have been installed on a platform of the canoe. The Germans also found some traces of blood in the boat. According to the naval officer, the canoe could hold 60 to 70 men.

On 24th October, the boat was sawn apart, the pieces of interest were distributed and the rest was turned into firewood. As part of this operation, Wilhelm Souchon came into possession of the prow. The cannon was sunk. The incident caused quite a stir in the international community of Apia, especially among the Americans and British. The two powers officially protested, reinforced their consulates and manned them with guards. Mata'afa, on the other hand, remained calm. Souchon expresses his admiration that the Samoan leader did not retaliate.

It was not unusual for a member of the German Imperial Navy like Souchon to collect ethnographic objects. The contemporary academic community had long been trying to recruit Germans living or traveling abroad as collectors of useful material. In 1875 – and in 1888 as a revised new edition –, a “Guide to Scientific Observations while Traveling” was published, the first version of which focused particularly on members of the navy.<sup>27</sup> Various academic disciplines were covered in these instructions. The section on ethnology was written by Adolf Bastian (1826-1905).<sup>28</sup> Bastian is often referred to as the father of German ethnology. His introduction to ethnology was followed by the naming of objects that were important “for the purposes of ethnological museums”.<sup>29</sup> Above all, higher ranks,

25 See Gründer 2023 (see FN 20), 99, 103-104. For the phase shortly before the events outlined here, which is described from the point of view of the German Imperial Navy, also see Heiko Herold: Reichsgewalt bedeutet Seegewalt. Die Kreuzergeschwader der Kaiserlichen Marine als Instrument der deutschen Kolonial- und Weltpolitik 1885 bis 1901, Munich 2013, 117-128.

26 John M. Hawley / Beatrice Anderson Stengel: The Samoan Hurricane of 1889. From the Journal of the late Rear Admiral John M. Hawley, U.S. Navy, in: United States Naval Institute Proceedings 65 (December 1939), No. 442, 1756-1774, online: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1939/december/samoan-hurricane-1889>, <12.04.2024>.

27 Georg Neumayer (ed.): Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Bedürfnisse der kaiserlichen Marine, Berlin 1875; and Georg Neumayer (ed.): Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen, Second revised and enlarged edition, Berlin 1888. As Georg Neumayer, the editor, put it in the foreword in 1874, German sailors and travellers had until then preferred to rely on the British “Manuel of Scientific Inquiry”. See also Godwin Kornes: Die Kaiserliche Reichsmarine in Ozeanien. Annäherung an eine Grauzone bei kolonialzeitlichen Sammlungserwerbungen, in: Richard Hölzl / Museum Fünf Kontinente (eds.): Kolonialismus in den Dingen. Das Museum Fünf Kontinente und seine Bestände aus der Kolonialzeit, Regensburg 2024, 87-97, here: 91.

28 Adolf Bastian: Allgemeine Begriffe der Ethnologie, in: Georg Neumayer (ed.): Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen. Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Bedürfnisse der kaiserlichen Marine, Berlin 1875, 516-533. Neumayer's instructions were reissued in 1888 and Bastian was again included in the publication. It is not known whether Souchon knew about these instructions.

29 Bastian 1875 (see FN 28), 530.



i.e. captains, officers and ship's doctors of the German Imperial Navy, are said to have collected, as Godwin Kornes notes in his article on the German Imperial Navy in Oceania:<sup>30</sup> "It can be assumed that many lower ranks also acquired souvenirs, but larger collections are so far only known from senior officers who had more resources (money, space, time) at their disposal."<sup>31</sup>

## A Brief History of the Samoan Islands

The Samoan Islands are culturally connected through *fa'a-samoa*, which consists of its traditions, customs, language, and chief system. The archipelago comprises of five inhabited islands divided among political districts. With chiefly authority spanning centuries, the matai (chief) is entrusted with the responsibilities to care for the extended family or *'aiga potopoto* and is trustee of family lands, knowledgeable in family genealogies, customs, and protocols. The matai chosen by the extended family is the representative to the council of chiefs at both the village and district levels.

Although Samoans have traded and interacted with neighboring islands for centuries, the first contact between the West and Samoans was in the late eighteenth century. It was not until 1830, with the arrival of Christian missionaries, that the West impacted Samoan society with a monotheistic religion, new ideologies, and development. Despite Samoa's exposure to new religious, economic, social, and cultural changes due to Western influence, the rivalries between the two leading families of the Malietoa and Tupua ensued until the end of the nineteenth century. The imperial powers of the United States, Germany, and Great Britain came to the islands at different periods for economic and political positioning in the region. During the 1870s to 1890s civil wars, the United States and Great Britain sided with title holders of the Malietoa and Mata'afa; Germany supported the Tupua representative, Tamasese. The imperial powers often sought and sided with influential chiefs to achieve their economic, political, or

social agendas. Samoan chiefs fought for power and authority under particular chiefly titles, Western empires took advantage of these wars to achieve their goals.

The Tripartite Convention of 1899 divided the islands of Samoa between the three imperial powers. Germany controlled the Western islands of 'Upolu, Savai'i, Manono, and Apolima. The United States, which had a military base in Tutuila as early as 1878, regarded Tutuila, Aunu'u, and later the Manu'a Islands as their territory. Great Britain relinquished its ties to Samoa and took over other German colonies elsewhere in the Pacific as part of the negotiations of the Samoan islands. The Western Islands of Samoa gained their independence from New Zealand only in 1962. The islands of American Samoa remain a US territory until today.

## The Taking of the Prow from a Samoan Perspective

In addition to the diaries of Wilhelm Souchon, online newspapers, and secondary sources by historians provide detailed accounts of the events on 23rd October 1888. The civil wars of Samoa are preserved only in the memories of families and in limited online newspapers. Identifying the 'voices' of families involved in these events is difficult, given the transitions of power at the time, and tracing family connections is a challenge due to the various family titles. The online newspapers express a one-sided opinion of the events that took place in 1888. Similarly, Souchon of course only provides his own personal perspective on these events.

The civil war between the troops of Tamasese and Mata'afa took human lives and destroyed property. The imperial powers had backed the civil war for titular control in Samoa by these paramount chiefs. The German Empire supported Tamasese, and Mata'afa had the support of the USA and Great Britain. The USA, the German Empire, and Great Britain established consuls in Apia to protect economic and political interests. The different political powers had established neutral zones, or *'ele'ele sa*, in towns and adjacent districts.

Tamasese and his troops occupied the Mulinu'u peninsula, also known as the seat of government or the capital of Samoa. Tamasese's camp was under close protection of the German naval forces.

30 Kornes 2024: (see FN 27), 91.

31 Kornes 2024: (see FN 27), 94. "Es kann davon ausgegangen werden, dass auch viele einfache Dienstgrade Souvenirs erwarten, größere Sammlungen sind bislang jedoch nur von höheren Offizieren bekannt, die dafür mehr Ressourcen (Geld, Platz, Zeit) zur Verfügung hatten."

Today, Mulinu'u continues to have that significance, as it is the location of Samoa's parliament and other government buildings. On the other side of Apia Bay, Mata'afa's troops were based in Matautu.

Between 5 pm and 6 pm on the evening of 23rd October 1888, 26 men and a woman started from the Matafagatele area towards Matautu on a canoe, or *taumualua*. At Matautu, the woman went ashore, and a couple of men got into the *taumualua*. The *taumualua* made its way to Matafele, near Apia, where it picked up more men. 33 men were on their way towards the Mulinu'u area to retrieve a small cannon that was dropped into the sea by Tamasese's troops. It is unknown how Mata'afa's troops knew about the small cannon, but according to newspaper articles, they found the cannon in the reef about a mile from Mulinu'u Point.<sup>32</sup> According to the men in the *taumualua*, no one challenged them when they were searching for the cannon, and they claimed to be "a long way from Mulinu'u Point."<sup>33</sup> Not anticipating any danger, the men sang songs on returning to Matautu. As the men passed the German Consulate building, a group of German marines stood on the Grevsmühl's Wharf, ordering them to bring the "gun" ashore, referencing the cannon.<sup>34</sup> They stopped the boat and were proceeding to do as requested when a volley was fired at them by the German marines on the wharf. They immediately jumped out of the *taumualua* on the off-side, swimming along and pushing the canoe forward. When they got to a far enough distance from the German marines, they jumped into the *taumualua* and got to the other side of the harbor. At this point, a German gun boat lead by Wilhelm Souchon intercepted the *taumualua*.

At around 7:45 pm, Souchon records in his diary: "Soon after we heard (19 shells) rapid fire on the bridge next to the Consulate. I went ashore

with an armed cutter and dinghy 8'6 with the order to intercept a Samoan war canoe."<sup>35</sup> When the *taumualua* arrived in the Matautu area, seeing the boat full of armed German sailors, they heard shouting from the *taumualua*. Souchon claims that he yelled at them while they were 30 meters away. At this moment, the Samoans jumped overboard and went ashore. The German sailors immediately fired on them. The newspaper stated that seeing armed German sailors hailing in a language foreign to them, "they naturally thought they would be fired upon as before and jumped overboard."<sup>36</sup> Souchon writes in his diary that his sailors "fired on their initiative at individual swimming Kanakas, of course in total darkness without any prospect of success."<sup>37</sup> Because it was dark and as the Germans were shooting at the Samoans running at the beach side of Matautu, several shots struck houses and shops owned by foreigners, mainly American and British. This incident called for an immediate apology by the Germans.

According to Souchon's diary, the men in the *taumualua* had come to loot. Supposedly, the Samoans were in a 'neutral territory' as per British, German, and US consuls. According to the German consul, the boat "went to Mulinu'u, which is German property, to commence hostilities."<sup>38</sup> The Germans also adamantly claimed that those shots came from Samoans in the *taumualua*, not the Germans. According to reports at the time, the Samoans were unarmed. The US and British consuls condemned the Germans for firing on unarmed boats in neutral territory. Robert Louis Stevenson mentions these events in his book *A Footnote to History*. He writes that the "shots had been fired upon a very trifling provocation, the spirit implied was that of designed disregard to the neutrality."<sup>39</sup> In defense of the Germans, the German ambassador in London, Count Paul Hatzfeldt (1831-1901),

32 Anonymous: News from Samoa, in: New Zealand Herald, vol. XXV, 12th November 1888, Issue 9209, online: [https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18881112.2.53?end\\_date=16-11-1888&items\\_per\\_page=10&page=6&query=News+from+Samoa+&snippet=true&start\\_date=01-11-1888](https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18881112.2.53?end_date=16-11-1888&items_per_page=10&page=6&query=News+from+Samoa+&snippet=true&start_date=01-11-1888), <01.05.2024>.

33 Anonymous: The Late Outrage, in: Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser, vol. 1, Issue 6, 3rd November 1888, online: [https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/STSSA18881103.2.7?end\\_date=16-11-1888&items\\_per\\_page=10&query=the+late+outrage&snippet=true&start\\_date=01-11-1888&title=STSSA%2cSTSSG%2cSWH%2cSAM-REP%2cSAMZ](https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/STSSA18881103.2.7?end_date=16-11-1888&items_per_page=10&query=the+late+outrage&snippet=true&start_date=01-11-1888&title=STSSA%2cSTSSG%2cSWH%2cSAM-REP%2cSAMZ), <01.05.2024>.

34 Anonymous 1888 (see FN 33).

35 Library of the Helmut Schmidt University of Hamburg, shelf mark: MIL 58 2 AD YC 0007-02, Diaries of Wilhelm Souchon, entries from 23rd, 24th, and 27th October 1888.

36 Anonymous 1888 (see FN 33).

37 Library of the Helmut Schmidt University of Hamburg, shelf mark: MIL 58 2 AD YC 0007-02, Diaries of Wilhelm Souchon, entries from 23rd, 24th, 27th October 1888. "...Die Leute [schossen] von selbst auf einzelne schwimmende Kanaker natürlich bei der totalen Finsterniß ohne irgend Aussicht auf Erfolg."

38 Anonymous 1888 (see FN 33).

39 Robert Louis Stevenson: *A Footnote to History. Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa*, New York 1895, 167.





## The Return of the Prow. The Übersee-Museum Bremen and National University of Samoa Collaboration

The restitution of the prow was a by-product of a multi-year collaboration between the Übersee-Museum Bremen and the National University of Samoa's Centre for Samoan Studies. The collaboration began in 2021 and is ongoing. Officially titled *Oceania Virtually*, the project was originally conceived as part of the anticipated redesign of the Übersee-Museum's existing Oceania exhibition, set for re-launch in 2025.<sup>44</sup> The project was conducted in a series of collaborative transnational activities and culminated in the joint curation and staging of an exhibition on the National University of Samoa main campus, entitled *Atalilo: Motifs in Samoan Material Culture*. The Atalilo exhibition was opened to the public on August 31st, 2024, in the newly established Ōfaga o Sailiiliga NUS Research Museum. The prow was restituted back to Samoa in time to be added to the exhibition.

The Atalilo exhibition is an exploration of how motifs were, and are still, used in the production of a specific selection of six genres of Samoan material culture, i.e. ele (Lapita pottery), ma'a (petroglyphs), la'au (wood carvings), afa (sinnet lashings, sinnet is a rope made from the fibers of the coconut), tatau (tattooing) and siapo (cloth made from bark). The selection of these genres was by design; partly to correlate to the limited availability of objects that could realistically be loaned from the Übersee-Museum, and partly due to the specific resources needed to mount an exhibition in Samoa. As a result, the Atalilo exhibition is made up of a collection of artifacts on loan from the Übersee-Museum and replicas and artistic renderings produced in Samoa. The prow is featured as an appendage to the Atalilo exhibition in the section featuring a special selection of carved wooden artifacts from the 1800s.

Deliberations on the restitution of the prow were initiated by Wiebke Ahrndt in September 2023, as planning for the Atalilo exhibition progressed.

44 The collaboration and its results are also described by Mitian Arbon / Matiu Matavai Tautunu / Stephanie Walda-Mandel: From Objects to *Measina*: Reanimating the Samoan Collection at the Übersee-Museum in Bremen in Cooperation with the National University of Samoa, in: *Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology* 150 (2025), No. 1, 51-68.

The National University of Samoa (NUS) was appointed by the Samoan Minister of Education to act on behalf of the Government of Samoa,<sup>45</sup> primarily because of the academic requirements of the prow restitution. Historian Bettina von Briskorn had already begun preliminary provenance research on behalf of the Übersee-Museum, and it was determined that a Samoan colleague would be integral to completing the research, thus, historian Dr. Brian Alofaituli was appointed.<sup>46</sup> By May 2024, Alofaituli and von Briskorn had produced a comprehensive provenance report on the history, removal and institutionalization of the prow. The provenance research confirmed that the prow was taken under wartime conditions, necessarily reclassifying the repatriation as a restitution because, as pointed out by the City of Bremen Senate, in accordance with the key points paper on the handling of collection items from colonial contexts adopted in 2019,<sup>47</sup> the Übersee-Museum also considers the acquisition of objects in military incidents to be ethically unlawful.<sup>48</sup> With the provenance research completed, and circumstances of the taking of the prow clearly recounted, the final handover to the Government of Samoa could be planned.

## Samoa and the Restitution

The Übersee-Museum Bremen is a state-sponsored institution operating under the auspices of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen and its governing body, the Senate. Thus, the restitution had to be sanctioned by the Senate in order to proceed. Activating the bureaucratic process that would facilitate the

45 The National University of Samoa falls under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Culture, as do all state-owned and state-run educational institutions in Samoa.

46 Dr. Brian Alofaituli is a Senior Lecturer of Development Studies at the Centre for Samoan Studies.

47 The paper is named "Erste Eckpunkte zum Umgang mit Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten der Staatsministerin des Bundes für Kultur und Medien, der Staatsministerin im Auswärtigen Amt für internationale Kulturpolitik, der Kulturministerinnen und Kulturminister der Länder und der kommunalen Spitzenverbände". See: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/974430/1589206/85c3d309797df4b2257b-7294b018e989/2019-03-13-bkm-anlage-sammlungsgut-data.pdf>, <07.05.2025>.

48 Senate of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen: Return of a Samoan boat stern from the collection of the Übersee-Museum Bremen for ethical reasons. April 22nd, Bremen 2024, URL: <https://www.rathaus.bremen.de/senatsunterlagen-57451?skip=50>, <04.03.2025>.



restitution of the prow required, first of all, an official request from the Government of Samoa. This request was made via an official correspondence from Samoa's Minister of Education and Culture, Hon. Seuula Ioane Tua'au to Bremen's Mayor and President of the Senate, Dr. Andreas Bovenschulte, on April 8th, 2024. Seuula's letter, combined with the provenance report and relevant research documents, was used to support the restitution request.

The Board of Trustees of the Übersee-Museum Bremen reviewed the request on June 10th, 2024, and "agreed with the legal and ethical assessment [...] and considered the return of the Samoan boat stern to be appropriate",<sup>49</sup> thus approving the deaccessioning of the prow from the Übersee-Museum collection. On June 18th, 2024, the Board's recommendation was tabled in a Senate meeting where it was determined that colonialism and its consequences affect all cultures equally, even if the effects of colonialism were often different for them. As part of our common social culture of remembrance, coming to terms with the colonial past is part of the basic democratic consensus in Germany and is a task for all areas of society, including culture, education, science and civil society, beyond politics. The return of the object to Samoa contributes to coming to terms with the colonial past and is a task for society as a whole.<sup>50</sup> The Senate endorsed the recommendation of the Übersee-Museum's Board of Trustees and the restitution of the prow was officially sanctioned.

Following deaccessioning, the prow was air-freighted back to Samoa. The conservator Conny Ammermann at the Übersee-Museum carefully removed the associated adornments from the prow and packed it up for its final journey. The prow departed Germany on June 26th, 2024, and landed at Faleolo International Airport on June 30th. Awaiting the prow there were Brian Alofaituli and a small team from the Center for Samoan Studies. The prow was transported back to campus and stored, yet unopened in its travelling case, to await the arrival of Wiebke Ahrndt. She was scheduled to arrive in Samoa with specific instructions of the museum's conservator on how to unpack and

re-adorn the prow. On July 8th, Wiebke Ahrndt and Ta'atia Fagalele<sup>51</sup> removed the prow from its packaging and reassembled it. The prow, after 136 years in foreign hands, had finally returned home to Samoa.



Figure 11: Conservator Conny Ammermann packing the prow for its journey to Samoa,



Figure 12: The prow is back home. From left to right, Wiebke Ahrndt, Brian Alofaituli, Dionne Fonoti, Ta'atia Fagalele.

The official handover of the prow was jointly planned by the Centre for Samoan Studies, the German Foreign Office and the Übersee-Museum staff. In a fortuitous turn of events, Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office Hon. Katja Keul was already planning a trip to the Pacific and had made initial plans for a stopover in Samoa. The handover was therefore planned to coincide with the visit of Minister Keul on July 10th, 2024. At 3pm that day, officiated by Minister of State Katja Keul, the prow was officially handed over to the Government of Samoa from the Federal Republic of Germany. When the Ōfaga o Sailiiliga NUS Research Museum was

49 Senate of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen 2024 (see FN 48). In some of the papers concerning the return of the prow, the prow was called a "boat stern".

50 Senate of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (see FN 48).

51 Ta'atia Fagalele is a lecturer of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage at the Centre for Samoan Studies (CSS).

opened on August 30th, 2024, the prow display was also unveiled. It now sits alongside a scaled model of a taumualua on loan from the Übersee-Museum Bremen.

### The Cultural Meaning of the Prow for Samoans Today

The restitution of the prow is a significant event in Samoan history for many reasons. First and foremost, it represents a timely historical redressing for Samoa and its first official colonizer, Germany. To their credit, the restitution was initiated, facilitated and funded by Übersee-Museum Bremen, the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen and the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany. This, to our knowledge, is the first time a foreign power and former colonizer has attempted to redress what was, essentially, a direct attack on Samoans in the well-documented war of 1888, which all partners acknowledged and for which Germany has accepted full responsibility.

The return of the prow is also a milestone in recent Samoan cultural heritage management efforts. As Samoa's first restitution, this event helps set a precedent for future actions of this kind. In Samoa, there are currently no laws or policies in place that specifically govern the return of antiquities, or, in this case, the restitution of artifacts removed from Samoa through war. The restitution presented a new situation for the Government of Samoa and all national stakeholders. Without a clear legal framework to guide the restitution, various spontaneous and measured methods were employed and adapted. What took place was an adaptation of existing practices, tied across various ministries and government agencies. The National University of Samoa, as a primary collaborator, led the way on the ground in Samoa, facilitating the import, handover and eventual display of the prow. The Centre for Samoan Studies team worked closely with the Samoan Ministry of Customs and Revenue to facilitate the arrival of the prow at Faleolo International Airport, and with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the hosting of Minister of State Katja Keul. Facilitating the restitution meant working through several layers of bureaucracy in both Germany and Samoa. Fortunately, because all of the partners agreed that

the restitution was imperative, the process was galvanized by a mutual desire to see the prow successfully returned to Samoa. Hence, the Samoan nation has successfully navigated its first restitution from a foreign museum.

Finally, and possibly most significantly, the return of the prow re-awakened national and public awareness of long-forgotten episodes of Samoan history. Although the taumualua is a decidedly Samoan vessel, it was heavily inspired by the American whaleboat, introduced to Samoa by whalers in the 19th century. One of these whalers in particular, Eli Jennings (1818-1874), is credited with building two whale boats for the A'ana forces in 1849, and the design was quickly adopted by Samoans who were motivated by the obvious need for lighter and faster war-vessels.<sup>52</sup> The taumualua would come to represent Indigenous innovation, as the Samoans quickly adapted the foreign design to native plank construction and replace the outrigger with oar propulsion. In their 1936 article, Alfred Cort Haddon and James Hornell deemed the taumualua "a distinct triumph for Samoan adaptive ingenuity".<sup>53</sup> The taumualua, although impactful, was in use only for a brief period and "vanished from existence in 1893",<sup>54</sup> because the political tides turned and easier to build vessels became more popular. Although it has a punctuated history, the taumualua was not only a vessel for transport and war but was also invested with tokens of Samoan identity, spirituality and faith. The return of the prow is a catalyst for memorializing these uniquely Samoan practices and its return will foster a deeper understanding of often-ignored periods in Samoan history and long-forgotten elements of Samoan cultural heritage.

### The Prow on Display in Samoa

Since the opening of the Ōfaga o Sailiiliga NUS Research Museum in September 2024, over 400 visitors, from Samoa and beyond, have toured the Atalilo exhibition and visited the prow. As an actual

52 Hans Van Tilburg et al.: Row as one! A history of the development and use of the Sāmoan fautasi, in: *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 127 (2018), No. 1, 111-136, here: 115.

53 Alfred Cort Haddon / James Hornell: *Canoes of Oceania*. Honolulu 1936, 240.

54 Van Tilburg et al. 2018 (see FN 52), 119.



artefact of Samoan history, the prow is commanding and impossible to ignore. Everyone who sees it is awed by the object itself, especially when viewed alongside the full-size taumualua model that is placed adjacent to it. Most contemporary Samoans are unfamiliar with the vessel and its significance, so the prow inspires and revives long-needed conversations on a range of topics that are relevant to efforts to sustainably manage Samoa's cultural heritage: boatcraft, warfare, settler and colonial impact, material culture and pre-contact spirituality, just to name a few. The future fate of the prow is now in the hands of the Government of Samoa and discussions are currently underway to determine what will happen to the prow after the Atalilo exhibition closes. While the prow's permanent home is yet to be determined, we are optimistic that every effort will be made to keep it on display in a place where the public can view the artefact and learn more about its significance and history. We are certain that the prow's return to Samoa will contribute to deepening Samoan-driven efforts to manage cultural heritage for the entire Samoan nation and, even more important, for the future.



Figure 13: Ta'atia Fagalele giving a guided tour to youth delegates from the Commonwealth Youth Forum (October 23rd, 2024).

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Figure 9: Source: Gary Pringle: Heritage Assessment, Apia, Western Samoa, Master of Science thesis at the University of Sydney, Sydney 1989.

Figure 10: Source: Roger Neich: Samoan Figurative Carvings and Samoan Canoes, in: Polynesian Society 93 (1984), 191-197, here: 192.

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