Structures of Tokelau history

Judith Huntsman & Antony Hooper

In the British and French records of late 19th century Tokelau, there are brief accounts of two occasions on which one of the atolls, Fakaofo, seemed set to invade and conquer the neighbouring atoll of Nukunonu. The two occasions are set a generation apart. In the first instance, Fakaofo's intentions were phrased in terms of religious rivalry, the cause of Protestantism against the Popish devil; in the second it was as Great Britain opposed to France. In spite of these differences, both phraseologies are, in their own ways, alike in their grandiloquence; there are also other remarkable similarities in the circumstances surrounding each of the planned attacks. In neither case did an attack take place — though exactly why it did not is never really accounted for in the European written records.

Taken by themselves, or set only in the context of other consular and mission records, these two remote non-events could never rate much significance — a brief footnote, perhaps, in an account of colonial rivalries at the end of the world, but not much more — and with the implication that it was all really due to the petty confused ambitions of a few recent but over-zealous converts who had yet to learn the true measures of the civilised world.

Within the Tokelau context, needless to say, the events are recorded, and of course construed, quite differently. There are no written Tokelau records of either planned attack, and it is only the second one which is referred to at all, and then in the context of a widely known oral narrative. The narrative tells of how two ocean-going canoes set out from Nukunonu to travel the 64 km to Fakaofo. At the time of their departure, the seas were calm and the weather favourable, but the canoes soon encountered wild winds and contrary currents, and were never heard of again. In Tokelau tellings, this narrative is variously embroidered with circumstantial detail: the etiquette of interatoll voyaging, the names of the crew members, their kin relations with one another and the names of their descendants, and how the Holy Water of Mary was aboard yet another canoe which departed Nukunonu earlier the same day and returned safely.

The significances which Tokelauans explicitly draw from the story are many and varied, related in various ways to the contexts and occa-
sions in which it is told. Yet there is also much which is left untold. Although the context of invasion plans is frequently mentioned (since the lost canoes contained those who were actively doing the plotting) this is never at all embellished. More strikingly still, the motivation for the planned attack is never explicitly mentioned. It seems to be simply assumed by both tellers and listeners alike, as part of the order of things, that Fakaofo should attempt to assert political authority over Nukunonu, that it should seek allies from a third atoll, Atafu, in this undertaking, and that, given the circumstances of the times, the whole enterprise should come to nothing.

It is just these assumptions with which we shall be concerned. Tokelau myth, genealogy, and traditional accounts of the pre-European past create an order of things at once economic, social, political and cosmological in its implications, which bound the three atolls into a set of structured relationships that motivated the Tokelau world right through the impact of the early contacts with Europeans during the first half of the 19th century. That order eventually changed, but not by a simple replacement of all that had gone before. What these European documents about attacks which never took place and the local tale of the lost canoe all speak to is the internal logic of the transformations of the established order in the aftermath of missionisation and the depredations of slavers during the 1860s.

EVENTS

The first planned attack dates from 1887. At this time all three islands were Christian — Nukunonu wholly Catholic, Atafu wholly Protestant and Fakaofo bitterly divided between both faiths, though the Protestants far outnumbered the Catholics. In that year a Catholic priest in Samoa forwarded to the British Consul 'in Apia some letters which he had received from Catholics in Nukunonu and Fakaofo (Didier 1887). The letter from Nukunonu reported,

Some chiefs of Fakaofo . . . came to Nukunonu to oblige the people to have our King and government with Fakaofo. The King and Government of Nukunonu could not agree with this and in this they are of the same opinion with the Catholic chiefs of Fakaofo. The [Fakaofo] chiefs then went to Atafu for the same purpose. The King of Atafu would not agree to their proposition, but as [the Samoan pastor of Fakaofo] had written to . . . the protestant teacher at Atafu about the matter, [he] went to the King and obliged him to agree to the request of Fakaofo, and they agreed to do so and to make war on Nukunonu. They say that they are preparing to make war this month.

Two Fakaofo letters supported this story.

They are preparing a secret scheme to go to Nukunonu to force them to become Protestant, and they will return and compel us to do the same. They are trying to make Fakaofo and the other islands one government under the King of Fakaofo. This has originated with [the pastor]. The
people here expect the people from Atafu this month and on their arrival they will go to establish the Protestant religion on Nukunonu.

Thus warned of the possibility of trouble among the natives within his domain, the British Consul saw to it that the London Missionary Society immediately removed the too zealous pastors, and initiated a mood of co-operation and accommodation between the two Mission groups in Samoa under the Pax Brittanica. Fakaofo, too, entered a period of interdenominational accommodation, and the phrasing of tensions between the atolls in terms of religious differences came to be muted.

The second planned attack dates from the turn of the century, by which time the atolls were more clearly under British influence, owing to the establishment of the Protectorate in 1889. Although the Union Jack had been graciously accepted in Fakaofo and Atafu, in Nukunonu the aliki and elders tried to prevent sailors from raising the British flag. Over a year later the incident was recounted to a visiting priest, who reported the heartfelt words of the local aliki.

"Tell the aliki vaka (captain) that we do not know Vikatoria (Queen Victoria); she is in Papalagi (Europe) and I am here; she should stay there, not come here and bother me; I will not go and cause trouble in her country. We do not want anything to do with her flag; can you not see that our's is flying above our heads, I do not need another; take your's away. . . . we will never agree to what you have brought to our island; your flag will never replace our's" (Didier 1892:365–6).

The flag was raised despite the aliki's protestations, but subsequently, following the aliki's words, Nukunonu refused to fly the British flag or to consider itself under British protection. They flew instead their "flag of Mary", given them by the French Marist Mission, and insisted that their protector was the French Bishop in Apia (Cusack-Smith 1896). The first British Deputy Commissioner had been conciliatory. His successor was not.

I arrived at Nukunonu on June the 22nd and found a decidedly hostile spirit to British Protection. [We] were not met on arrival. . . . A private flag (presumably a Missionary one) was flying from the Government flagstaff and the chiefs told my clerk that they expected a French man-of-war. . . . I felt that I was bound to take measures to show the natives that the hoisting of the British flag in 1889 was not a mere form that they could discard whenever it pleased them. . . . I also told them that as they refused to lower their private flag, which they declared to be the only one they would have flying over the Island, or to hoist the British flag I would proceed to do it for them to prove to them that British Protection accepted in 1889 could not be rejected subsequently and that the Island would continue under British Protection "as long as the sun shined or water runs" (Maxse 1898).

Convinced of "political intrigues of the French Catholic Mission in the Island", Maxse requested permission from the High Commissioner to deport certain Nukunonu elders to Fakaofo if they remained intransigent. His report continued:

The Government Secretary of Fakaofo informs me that his Island has always claimed overlordship of Nukunonu and that the latter Island has
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acknowledged it. On my stopping off Fakaofo on my return he promised me to proceed to Nukunonu with the first fair wind, to point out to the inhabitants the error of their ways.

A month later this interchange was reported to a visiting Cook Island Protestant pastor in Fakaofo, who recorded that,

There was a small dispute going on in Nukunonu at this time. The British Consul went on the man-of-war to inspect that land. When they looked at the land, they saw a different flag — not the British flag. Then they pulled down that flag and raised the British flag, warning them that if they took the flag down again, there would be reprisals. Then Fakaofo asked if they could intervene to avert the quarrel, and the British Consul agreed because Fakaofo was said to be the principal island. That is what we heard in Fakaofo (Fugitive Papers 1899:20).

A Tokelau narrative, told by a Nukunonu sage, takes up the story from here and ends with the memorable incident of the two canoes.

The following is a précis of his account (Manuele Palehaujune 7, 1981).

— A decision was reached in Fakaofo that all Tokelau should be united under a single ali'i — the Fakaofo ali'i, and a party voyaged to Nukunonu to make their decision known there.

— There were two men who were 'half-Nukunonu' among the elders of Fakaofo, and although they always outwardly agreed to Fakaofo decisions they did not inwardly agree with them. They reached a decision, the two of them, that when the voyage went to Nukunonu, they would go immediately and inform the Nukunonu ali'i of Fakaofo's intention and advise him not to accede to it. So that is what happened.

— When the party from Fakaofo met with the Nukunonu ali'i and informed him of Fakaofo's decision, he said that he did not agree. Nukunonu did not accept the view of Fakaofo. To this the leader of the Fakaofo party said that he would go and seek allies, and Fakaofo left without Nukunonu support for their plan.

— Back at Fakaofo a decision was reached to go to Atafu and make the decision known to them. The Fakaofo party travelled to Atafu on the mission ship that arrived soon thereafter.

— When the issue was made known at Atafu, opinion was divided. One group agreed and the other did not. After some time two double canoes were put together in Atafu by those who agreed with Fakaofo. The plan was that they would journey with the Fakaofo party back to Fakaofo, and from there raise battle against Nukunonu.

— The two double canoes departed and stopped at Nukunonu. Now it was always customary I am told, that every voyage was by two steps. This meant that every voyage between Fakaofo and Atafu stopped overnight at Nukunonu and then departed on the following morning. The two canoes arrived at Nukunonu in mid-afternoon and the Nukunonu elders insisted that the party rest overnight. But they said no, and they sailed on. At that time there had been three Catholics from Fakaofo in Nukunonu and they had departed to Fakaofo earlier that same day in an outrigger canoe and with the wind behind them. The men in this canoe later told the story of sailing along singing as they went, when suddenly the wind went crazy and the current changed, swirling around. They said their farewells. Now they had with them a bottle containing 'the
Having completed his account, the teller added something he had forgotten. When the voyagers from Atafu stopped at Nukunonu, they took with them a man from Atafu recently married into Nukunonu. The event can thus be dated, for the only son of that man was born September 1902, not long after his father’s disappearance.

Needless to say, the loss of the two canoes put an end to Fakaofo’s warlike design, though not to the Fakaofo claim of overlordship. This was repeatedly transmitted to the Western Pacific High Commissioner in Fiji (Newell 1907 and Ielemia 1910).

**THE TOKELAU ORDER ESTABLISHED**

Among Tokelau *tala anamua* ‘narratives of ancient times’ are ones which tell of how the warriors of the three atolls battled, harassed and tricked one another, and of how Fakaofo achieved dominance. These narratives of interatoll conflict are a defined set, recounting ‘the days of wars’ when the separate atoll polities were autonomous, with no kinship or other links between them. In all the stories, and in all their several versions, the warriors of the separate atolls are consistently portrayed as of different character. Atafu’s warriors are portrayed as barbarous by nature, mercilessly and ferociously harassing the others. Nukunonu’s warriors apparently sought only to defend their homeland, and then sometimes reluctantly. Fakaofo’s warriors are depicted as being mature, controlled and disciplined. In most of the stories the outcome of the encounters is inconclusive: the forces retire, are repulsed or simply leave. But two stories, those which are most often told and widely known, logically bring ‘the days of war’ to an end, with the victory of Fakaofo. One relates how Fakaofo routed Atafu.

Atafu warriors upon departing Fakaofo waylaid the daughter of the Fakaofo *aliki* and wantonly killed her. Learning of this the Fakaofo populous was rightously incensed and determined to take revenge. The Fakaofo warriors, led by the *aliki*’s son, launched a flotilla of undermanned canoes and sailed to Atafu. As more and more canoes appeared upon the horizon, the brazen war leader of Atafu lost his nerve and fear spread among the people. In the night the Atafuans sailed away from their homeland, never to return; in the morning the Fakaofo force found the atoll abandoned and claimed it as theirs.

This was a triumph of rightousness over barbarism.

The second account tells of how Fakaofo defeated Nukunonu.

Having been repulsed on two previous occasions, Fakaofo warriors under the leadership of mature men made a carefully planned attack on

water of Mary’. Of the two double canoes nothing further is known, but of the canoe of these three, at dawn they found themselves offshore of Nukunonu village and came ashore. By their surmise the other canoes sank for the current was something extraordinary, by their account swirling like a whirlpool. That was their story and the other canoes were never heard of again.

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Having been repulsed on two previous occasions, Fakaofo warriors under the leadership of mature men made a carefully planned attack on
Nukunonu. Preoccupied with domestic concerns, the Nukunonu warriors could not be mobilised by their leader, who could only devise a strategy to save himself. The well-disciplined Fakaofo forces marched from the village clockwise around the atoll. At the far north-east islet, they came upon the blood-smeared body of the Nukunonu war-leader, who rose to abuse them after they had all passed by. Following the ‘rules of war’ the Fakaofo warriors could not attack him once they had passed him; they could only march on. About half-way round the atoll they came upon a woman’s garment hanging from a bush, and in deference to that woman they halted, claiming for Fakaofo all the lands over which they had marched and leaving the other half of the atoll to Nukunonu.

Thus did the disciplined warriors of Fakaofo defeat the ill-disciplined, lackadaisical warriors of Nukunonu, and thus did Fakaofo claim “overlordship” of Nukunonu.

In no story of ‘the days of war’ do gods or spirits figure. Yet, when the order which resulted from Fakaofo’s triumphs was in place, prominent within it was the god Tui Tokelau, represented by a 14-foot stone slab standing in Fakaofo, clothed in layers of fine mats plaited in Nukunonu.

A myth, set in some remote era before people rose in the atolls, explains the fine mats of Nukunonu. Superficially, it is a “just-so story” of mutual theft by two localised ai'ʻu ‘spirits’.

Fenū of Fakaofo stole Nukunonu’s fresh water and placed it in Fakaofo; Hemoana of Nukunonu retaliated by stealing Fakaofo’s kie pandanus (Freycinetia) and placed it in Nukunonu. To this day, Fakaofo is blessed with fresh groundwater, which Nukunonu lacks, while only in Nukunonu does kie pandanus flourish.

The myth not only sets two valuable natural resources in place, it also contrasts the two atolls by the cultural associations of their stolen and exclusive resources. Fresh water gives life and productivity to the land, which men plant and harvest; kie, laboriously processed by women, is converted into fine mats and malo ‘men’s loin-cloths’.

However, following its defeat by Fakaofo, Nukunonu did not enjoy a monopoly of its valuable. In the name of Tui Tokelau and as “overlords” Fakaofo extracted offerings and tribute from Nukunonu, and heading the list of goods demanded and supplied were fine mats, specifically those that would adorn and conceal Tui Tokelau. Fakaofo thus reclaimed the resource stolen by Hemoana as processed goods. Though Nukunonu retained control of the lands not traversed by Fakaofo and though those lands remained vested in Nukunonu’s indigenous aliki, Nukunonu accepted its subordination and acknowledged the primacy of Fakaofo’s aliki and the omnipotence of Tui Tokelau.

By right of conquest Fakaofo not only extracted goods and produce from Nukunonu, but also appropriated Nukunonu’s reproductivity — its women. Another account phrases Fakaofo’s supremacy in the idiom of kinship, telling of how Nau, a daughter of the Nukunonu aliki, was carried off to Fakaofo to reside as consort of the Fakaofo aliki, Kava-vahe-fenua. She is referred to as te fafine o te halaga, a phrase which
may be rendered either as 'the tribute woman' or as 'the betokened woman'. Each rendering puts a slightly different meaning on the event: the first implies booty taken from the conquered; the second conveys the founding significance of an event that would be repeated. Indeed, Nau was only the first of many Nukunonu women (predominantly aliki daughters) taken as spouses by Fakaofo men. The extractive nature of Fakaofo wife-taking is marked, for in contravention of the customary rule of uxorilocality, Nukunonu women, following the path of Nau, resided as wives in Fakaofo. This meant that they were separated from the support of their natal kin, removed from their rights to property, and denied their honoured position as sisters. Though their offspring had a Nukunonu 'side', given the thoroughly cognatic nature of Tokelau kinship, these children were 'of Fakaofo' by birth and nurture.

GENEALOGICAL DIMENSIONS

With the union of Kava-vahe-fenua and Nau, the genealogies of Fakaofo and Nukunonu became linked, and by subsequent unions and through the succeeding generations the two populations came to be increasingly interrelated. Nevertheless, the genealogical constructs of the two islands largely ignore this, though in different ways, following the logic of their own internal social orders.

According to the received “standard” version of the Fakaofo genealogy, Kava-vahe-fenua (Kava, divider of lands) the consort of Nau, was the latest in a line of aliki also known as Kava. The genealogy takes note of Nau and her son Pio, whom she bore to Kave-vahe-fenua, but makes no mention of Pio’s descendants. Instead, the aliki line of Fakaofo is continued through Tevaka, Pio’s half-brother, whose mother was of the local chiefly lineage. The gafa aliki ‘aliki genealogy’, issuing from Tevaka, in subsequent generations takes a ramifying, largely patrilineal form. This is Fakaofo’s premier genealogy stating that Fakaofo is he fenua aliki ‘a chiefly land’.

Nukunonu’s genealogy is constituted of four separate stocks, one of which is specified as being aliki. As the genealogy is set forth, the separate stocks become confounded with one another by marked unions, whose issue may be assigned to more than one stock. However, in particular generations the stocks are disambiguated by reference to specific latter-day significant ancestors, who are primarily associated with one stock of another. What is portrayed is a social order based on complementary coalition. Places around the atoll and in the village, and offices with specific prerogatives and duties, are associated with each of the four stocks, which separately and together maintain the social order. Nukunonu sages all proclaim that Nau was of local aliki stock; her precise identity is unclear, however. There are at least four suitable candidates, none of whom is named Nau. Be that as it may,
note is taken of other Nukunonu sisters who went off to Fakaofo as wives. In addition, Nukunonu genealogists recite a line issuing from Nau’s son Pio. This line, however, has an ambiguous, at times controversial, status in Nukunonu. It may be celebrated as indigenous — as having “true” Nukunonu antecedents, or it may be dismissed as intrusive, depending upon who is speaking and what is being spoken about. This is because reputed descendants of Pio were sent as representatives of the Fakaofo aliki to Nukunonu and were politically prominent in the 19th century. They may thus be considered as either “sister’s sons” returned home, or as presumptuous interlopers from Fakaofo.

What then of Atafu, the atoll abandoned by its original people. After several (or many) generations Atafu was resettled as an outpost of Fakaofo. The “father” of the settlers was the son of a younger brother descended from Pio, the son of Kava-vahe-fenua and Nau, and their “mother” was a named daughter of a named Nukunonu aliki. On both sides the new Atafuans had chiefly status: redundantly junior to Fakaofo (though this may be disputed, see below), and redundantly sororal to Nukunonu. The Atafu genealogy is constructed as a comprehensive stock issuing from their “father” and “mother”, in which seniority is not marked. The sociological statement which this makes is one of wholly cognatic unity and equality.

While unions with named persons from other atolls are noted in the separate genealogies, the specific ones mentioned, the importance attached to them, and the interpretation placed upon them varies. Drawing upon the genealogies and narrative annals of all three atolls, we have constructed a composite, overarching Tokelau genealogy. Figure 1a is a radical abbreviation of a far more complex construct; much redundancy and many generations have been eliminated in order to pinpoint the key relationships which are focused on the chiefly lines. These may be succinctly stated as follows:

Fakaofo:Nukunonu :: Wife-taker : Wife-giver
Fakaofo:Atafu :: Elder brother : Younger brother
Nukunonu:Atafu :: Mother’s brother : Sister’s son

This construct is emphatically ours. No Tokelauan has ventured to put together anything of the sort, though several control all the information from which it is constructed. Some Tokelauans might even agree with the logic of the formulation, but none would agree with its details, for each atoll sees the matter somewhat differently. By taking our construct apart, we can best indicate their different representations. In so doing, we indicate the links that are emphasised and the significances attached to them.

The Fakaofo representation (Fig. 1b) may be characterised as both exclusive and expansionist. Only two women are significant, one doubly so. These women are contrasted as ‘of Fakaofo’ and superior versus ‘of Nukunonu’ and inferior, and correspondingly their offspring were ‘main-stem’ chiefs and ‘side-branch’ chiefs respectively. In addition, the
Nukunonu woman stands for all the other unnamed Nukunonu women appropriated by Fakaofo, who never appear to taint the pure Fakaofo aliki line. The ‘main-stream’ remained purely ‘of Fakaofo’ and in Fakaofo, while the ‘side-branch’ chiefs were despatched to Nukunonu and Atafu as Fakaofo-appointed aliki or representatives of the premier aliki in Fakaofo. Thus, from the Fakaofo perspective, was their pule ‘rule’ maintained and expanded.

In Nukunonu’s representation (Fig. 1c) the linkages between the atolls are based on alliances created by unions of sisters of their aliki with aliki in the other atolls, thereby giving the Nukunonu aliki line, and by extension all of Nukunonu, the status of mothers’ brothers to the other atolls, with all the moral connotations that status implies. From their original “given” sister issues both the founder of Atafu, who is “given” another sister, and a line of kovana ‘governors’ posted from Fakaofo. The common use of the English borrowed term by contemporary Nukunonu informants, distinguishes this intrusive pule ‘authority’ from that of their own indigenous aliki line.

The Atafu representation (Fig. 1d) is simply a statement of the origins of their founding “father” and “mother”; of their chiefly status in Fakaofo and Nukunonu respectively.

The three representations, despite their differing emphases and significances, may be combined into a single genealogy of interatoll relations because in the logic of kinship they are not contradictory. Wife-givers are mothers’ brothers; the progeny of wife-takers are sisters’ children of wife-givers. Now Nukunonu and Atafu concur that theirs is a tuātina-ilāmutu ‘mother’s brother-sister’s son’ relationship, whereas Nukunonu and Fakaofo have somewhat different views of their links, which tie up with Tokelau concepts of power and morality.

On the one hand, Fakaofo’s genealogy is exclusive. It is a status lineage which attends to the patrilineal connections of a succession of ‘main stem’ aliki. Females are rarely included, and when they are they are simply named. As wives they have no natal connections; as daughters they have no issue. In terms of Tokelau social categories, the ‘main stem’ aliki gave rise only to tama tāne ‘issue of sons’, and had neither mother’s brothers nor sister’s sons and thus none of the moral obligations entailed in these relationships. On the other hand, there was Nau, the one aliki consort with natal connections — ‘of Nukunonu’ though not of specific parentage. Nau both symbolised Fakaofo’s appropriation of Nukunonu productivity and reproductivity, and produced the ‘side-branch’ aliki who represented and extended Fakaofo’s overlordship. In some respects the Fakaofo representation seems to echo the interpretations of chiefly usurpation and legitimation which have been proposed for Fiji (Sahlins 1981) and Tonga (Bott 1981). Common to both is the scenario of foreign chiefs who take local chiefly daughters as ‘honoured wives’ (Fiji: marama) and thereby gain the support of their wives’ fathers and brothers. Subsequently, the foreign chiefs’ sons succeed them as legitimate chiefs of their mothers’ people, privileged and honoured as sisters’ sons. The Fijian scenario is in a
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mythopoetic mode: the usurper is an absolute stranger from "beyond" with no natal connections; the Tongan is in a historical mode: the intrusive chief is a known younger son of a paramount despatched to extend the power of the centre. Both plots are comparatively appealing, but in the Tokelau case there are some significant differences. Specifically, in both Fiji and Tonga the intrusive chief remains with his 'honoured wife' among her people and is succeeded by his local son, whereas in Tokelau the local women of Nukunonu are inevitably removed from their homeland, despite the norm of uxorilocality, and correspondingly their sons do not succeed their fathers, except in Atafu where there are no other candidates. The Fakaofo genealogy, by giving Kava-vah-e-fenua two wives, pointedly denies succession in Fakaofo to the son of Nau on the grounds that she is an inferior (not 'honoured') consort. And even the 'side-branch' aliki sent to Nukunonu are conveniently polygynous and mobile so that their successors normally have Fakaofo mothers.

These modifications of the plot turn on the obligations and prerogatives entailed in the Tokelau tuātina-ilāmutu relationship, which are rather different from those of the Fijian vasu and Tongan fahu relations of privilege. A Tokelau sister's son is referred to as the mate 'companion in death' of his mother's brother, obliged to give support and protection to him in situations of distress and danger. Though a Tokelau mother's brother is expected to aid and succour his sister's son, the burden of the obligations inherent in the relationship rests upon the younger man. A sister's son should be cherished, but he is not privileged in the vasu/fahu sense and should show deference to his elder.

The Tokelau version of the mother's brother-sister's son relationship was simply not in keeping with Fakaofo's dominant position vis-à-vis Nukunonu. Thus, as the Fakaofo genealogy clearly states, Fakaofo took wives from Nukunonu, but denied any obligations as sisters' sons to Nukunonu. Nukunonu genealogy implicitly challenges the Fakaofo representation by including their given daughters and at least some of their issue, who are seen to have moral obligations to their mothers' brothers, the Nukunonu aliki.

What the Fakaofo genealogy expresses, both in its local and extra-local formulations, is hierarchy and dominance. The 'main-stem' is both purely Fakaofo and senior to the 'side-branch', or Nau's son, Pio, was younger than his half-brother. The genealogies of Nukunonu and Atafu contrast markedly with that of Fakaofo; they express in their own distinctive ways ethics of complementarity and egalitarianism, and explicitly challenge Fakaofo assertions of primacy based on seniority. They both claim that Pio was at least the older and favoured son, if not the legitimate successor, of his father. This is a point of sporadic outright contention, and song is a powerful medium of its expression. Ancient songs, attributed to notable forebear-composers, are cited and sung to validate assertions; new songs are composed to dramatically state a claim. However, such open assertions or claims are rare — at
least at interatoll gatherings where they might be contested, both because Tokelauans try to avoid open confrontation and because of the real significance of more recently established genealogical relationships.

The register of genealogical statement changes when recounting forebears and relationships of the 19th century. The accounts are more comprehensive, recording each person’s multiple kinship links with many others. The relationships they state, both within and between atolls, are part of everyday life, determining land rights, enjoining cooperation and hospitality, defining who is marriageable and who is not, and cross-cutting atoll loyalties. They are not just remembered; they are lived and are known by all responsible adults.

EUROPEAN ACCOUNTS OF THE TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ORDER

The Atafu part of the Tokelau triad was probably not in its separate place until about 1800. The atoll had not yet been resettled when it was “discovered” by Byron in 1765 (Gallagher 1964) or when it was visited by Edwards in 1791 in search of the Bounty mutineers. Edwards and his party searched the atoll thoroughly. Though there was abundant evidence of people having been there, they found no one. Edwards concluded that “it was an occasional residence and fishery of the natives of some neighbouring islands” (Edwards and Hamilton 1915:45), and he was undoubtedly correct. However, by 1825 the atoll had “natives on it” (Reynolds 1835:20), and in 1841, when visited by the United States Exploring Expedition, it had a population of 100 or so residing in a well-established village (Wilkes 1845:7–8).

The numerous reports and journals of this expedition, and of other visitors to the atolls in the following 20 years, imply the social order that Tokelau ‘accounts of the past’ portray. Fakaofo’s freshwater well was repeatedly remarked upon. Timber from Atafu in the form of canoes and kie pandanus from Nukunonu in the form of mats and garments were being sent or taken to Fakaofo. Atafuans indicated that “the great chief (aliki) lived on an island in a southeast direction” (Hale 1846:152), i.e., Fakaofo. At Fakaofo visitors were received by the aliki, seated at the shore and surrounded by his advisers. One visitor remarked, “... his superior state and authority was manifest in our reception” (Nautical Magazine 1861:474). Tui Tokelau stood outside a large god-house in Fakaofo, shrouded in fine mats, and a smaller shrine and slab of Tui Tokelau were located in Atafu. There is no report of any slab or shrine in Nukunonu. Fakaofo by all accounts was populous and the centre of power both sacred and secular, overlord of its Atafu outpost and Nukunonu tributary.

This political order is accounted for by Tokelauans as the outcome of specific events and episodes of their past, which transformed three unrelated warring populations into a single ordered polity controlled by Fakaofo. Though sceptics may question whether the events that
Tokelauans tell of actually occurred, the political order which those events account for was certainly in place in the first half of the 19th century.

THE 1860s: MISSIONS AND SLAVERS

During the two decades following the brief visit of the United States Exploring Expedition in 1841, the presence of foreign vessels in Tokelau waters and of strangers on Tokelau shores was no longer unusual. As early as the mid-1840s Tokelauans themselves were voyaging afar, sometimes accidentally, and some of these voyagers returned to regale their countrymen with stories of their adventures. They told of the manners and customs of their Polynesian neighbours and of the Europeans already established in nearby Polynesian lands. A few returned with a mission. Having been converted abroad they sought to save their fellow men. By the late 1850s all Tokelauans were at least vaguely informed about the Christian ideas and practices which Polynesians in Samoa and Uvea, and some of their own countrymen followed. When directly offered Christian salvation, they were poised to respond; and when they did so, it was in terms of their own local interests. Fakaofo probably received the largest number of returned converts. But despite their entreaties and direct approaches by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries, the Fakaofo ali ki and his chiefly advisers rejected Christian salvation. Fakaofo’s god was Tui Tokelau. Atafu and Nukunonu responded quite differently. At Atafu, a Protestant convert after a few years persuaded the people to seek a teacher and salvation. Samoan teachers arrived in 1861 and Atafu quickly abandoned Tui Tokelau for Protestant Christianity. Nukunonu’s conversion required no persuasion. In 1861, they seized upon Catholic salvation proffered by a chiefly son returned from Uvea. For both Atafu and, more particularly, long-exploited Nukunonu, it was not just Christian salvation that was offered, but an escape from Fakaofo’s domination sanctified by Tui Tokelau. No more offerings were conveyed to the “false idol”; no longer was retribution to be feared from a “false god”.

Fakaofo leaders remained adamantly opposed to all Christian persuasion for a time, threatening and rebuking local converts and visitors from Atafu and Nukunonu. They relented only after a dramatic incident of deliverance from disaster at sea (Bird 1863; Hooper and Huntsman 1973:75), accepting Protestant teachers in January 1863.

Less than two weeks later, the vaka gaoi ‘man-stealing ships’ (slavers “recruiting” for Peru) converged on Tokelau. They left with more than half the Tokelau population in their holds (Maude 1981; Chap. 9). Atafu lost the fewest people thanks to the Protestant teacher who shielded most of his flock and comforted those that remained. In Nukunonu the small population left (some 60 people) was rallied to action by their returned chiefly son. Half went into hiding; the others...
voyaged to Samoa to inform the bishop. Fakaofo was truly in disarray. Over half the population was stolen, another quarter had died from a virulent dysentery epidemic, and only 57 people remained. The Protestant teachers soon left in despair and a trader grabbed land. Fakaofo was not yet firmly converted, but had in its midst both Catholic and Protestant converts. When Tui Tokelau was subsequently forsaken, Fakaofo harboured two religions and their mutual intolerance. Fakaofo, internally in turmoil, was in no position to assert its historic dominance and would never effectively exercise overlordship again. The three atolls were again three autonomous polities. However, these polities, unlike the ancient warring ones, were now inextricably linked by bonds of kinship forged over the centuries — both the salient ones of the former order and many others.

By the end of the century, Tui Tokelau had literally been toppled. The stone slab had been pushed over, trodden upon, cracked in two, and incorporated in a reclamation wall. Fakaofo’s overlordship had been severely compromised by conversion and in the ensuing decades all but ignored. Nukunonu increasingly asserted autonomy of governance. In the 1890s, without consulting Fakaofo, Nukunonu had installed as its aliki an elder of impeccable autochthonous aliki standing — the same man who three decades before had brought to his people their Catholic faith. Thus, two central features of the old order were denied: Tui Tokelau and Fakaofo pre-eminence. One remained — the kinship order, and the transformation of that confounded rather than assisted Fakaofo attempts to reassert overlordship.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE KINSHIP ORDER

Consider again the Tokelau narrative of the lost canoes. It says little explicitly about kinship, but to an informed listener it is all about kinship. Although this story is in no sense a humorous one, like much of Tokelau humour it turns on understood kin relations and their behavioural entailments. These implications of the narrative were elicited or confirmed after the account was told, and we present them by way of exegesis (our further inference is indicated parenthetically).

— The two ‘half-Nukunonu’ men who forewarned and advised the Nukunonu aliki were related to him as FZS and FZSS. Their Nukunonu mothers had been taken as wives to Fakaofo in pre-Christian times and thus the two men were ‘of Fakaofo’ by birth and nurture. None the less, their allegiance to their homeland was compromised by their obligations to support and protect their “mothers’ brother”.

— Fakaofo leaders sought Atafu support as allies, as the ‘side branch’ which would support the ‘main stem’. However, little support was forthcoming. Atafu loyalties were necessarily divided (and, in any case, the Fakaofo proposal, which would have effected their autonomy too, could have had little appeal). The Fakaofo envoys were their “brothers” and furthermore Protestants like themselves, but they also had loyalties to the homeland of their “mother” and obligations to their “mother’s
brothers”. The Nukunonu aliki was BSS of Atafu’s founding “mother”.
— The members of the Atafu party who joined the Fakaofo cause were related to the envoys by more immediate kinship ties, and the young man, recently married into Nukunonu, who joined the party at Nukunonu had so many compelling close relationships to its members that he could not have avoided going along.
— The voyagers violated precedent by not tarrying in Nukunonu overnight. Rejecting the hospitality offered them by the elders, they in effect denied their bonds of kinship. Rather they set out precipitately to meet their fate in tempest-driven, contrary seas.

Throughout the account as it has been amplified, the strategies of power are confounded by obligations of kinship, particularly those of a sister’s son to his mothers’ brother. When the considerations of power overrode moral obligations, in effect denying kinship, retribution swiftly followed.

The conclusion is obvious. Fakaofo’s would-be warriors could not return to the days when they fought and conquered, when the obligations of kinship did not extend beyond Fakaofo shores. Fakaofo men had taken Nukunonu wives; Atafuans were the progeny of Fakaofo and Nukunonu. To quote another Tokelau sage: “So what we see these days is a people with a Fakaofo side, a connection to Nukunonu lines, an Atafu side; they may disagree and quarrel, but they are proscribed from fighting one another”. The obligations of cognition could no longer be denied.

The narrative of the lost canoes encodes and exemplifies the whole history of the transformation of the established Tokelau order. The dimensions of the known world had changed, and both Nukunonu and Atafu had been quick to seize the opportunities to align themselves with the power of the missions. Only Fakaofo (and, most conspicuously, the Fakaofo aliki) had held out to the last. When, decades later, Fakaofo attempted to reassert its dominance, its plans were foiled by those same marital alliances and appropriations that had formerly betokened that dominance, but whose moral and kinship implications they had sought to deny.

* * *

The transformation became complete and explicitly recognised when Nukunonu, reconciled to British protection, used that institution to gain Fakaofo’s acceptance of Nukunonu’s autonomy. Nukunonu acknowledged Fakaofo’s former claim to the extent of paying them a token compensation of four tons of copra — a final appropriation. Though local political autonomy was henceforth recognised as well as exercised, the significant relations of kinship between the three atolls remained. These were reiterated in the 20th century. When the office of aliki was abolished with annexation in 1915, the last incumbents of the office in the three atolls were demonstrably related to one another as the overarching genealogical construct prescribes. The Fakaofo aliki
had his Nukunonu 'side'; he was a "sister's son" of the Nukunonu aliki (Fig. 2).

![Genealogical links between the last aliki.](image)

**NOTES**

In this paper we have drawn heavily upon information and understandings gained over many years from conversations with Tokelauans. It would be cumbersome, indeed impossible, for us to acknowledge all our Tokelau informants individually. What we have learned and what we have here put together comes from things different people have said to us and to each other many times in different contexts. Tokelauans often cite their sources as kupu a toeaina 'words of elders'. We have included only one citation, that for the narrative round which the paper turns, and shall let that stand as an acknowledgement for all the rest. This is appropriate, for the narrative is the 'words of an elder' respected throughout Tokelau for his knowledge, and one who has been most generous in imparting that knowledge to us. That same man has on many occasions made the distinction between what he has heard from his own elders and his own thoughts or opinions. We have tried to follow his example. We are greatly indebted to the people of Tokelau for the knowledge which has been generously and patiently given; the interpretation we place upon it is our own.

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1. Here and elsewhere we have taken the liberty of correcting the spelling of Nukunonu. Until recently it was erroneously spelled Nukunono.
2. Lātūpou, literally 'standing post branch', and lāfa lalala, literally 'leaning branch', are the terms used.
3. The Tongan word mateaki has much the same meaning. Cf. Churchward 1959:344 — "mateaki . . . a.v.i., to be loyal, to be ready to die (if need be) for one's leader or party etc. Adv., Loyally, devotedly, N., Loyalty, devotion even to death; bodyguard, or person devoted to and ready to die for one. . . ."
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