

# THE HISTORY OF POLYNESIAN SETTLEMENT IN THE REEF AND DUFF ISLANDS: THE LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

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This article summarises some of the results of a research project undertaken at the University of Oslo. The project's purpose was the documentation and description of the two languages spoken in the Reef Islands, and the study of language contact there. One of these languages is the Polynesian outlier Vaeakau-Taumako (Pileni), spoken in the Outer Reef Islands as well as in the Duff Islands located some 100km northeast of the Reefs. In this article we present a likely scenario for the settlement history of the Polynesian population in the Reef and Duff Islands, based on linguistic evidence, primarily place names and the likely structural effects of language contact, and on evidence from oral traditions in the form of narratives recorded in the islands. These are drawn from a corpus of data, including recorded narratives, elicited sentences and handwritten texts, collected in Vaeakau (Reef Islands) and Taumako (Duff Islands) during several periods of field research between 1997 and 2005.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION

Temotu Province, the easternmost province of the Solomon Islands located some 390km to the east of the main Solomons chain, is one of the most linguistically diverse areas in the world. Here, in a region comprising only 895km<sup>2</sup> of land area and with some 19,000 inhabitants, about a dozen languages were spoken until recently. The main island, Santa Cruz, is home to two or three languages (depending on where the line is drawn between language and dialect); another language related to those of Santa Cruz is spoken in the Reef Islands, about 70km to the north of Santa Cruz. The islands of Utupua and Vanikoro, to the southeast of Santa Cruz, originally had three distinct languages each, but each of these islands is now dominated by a single language (Amba on Utupua and Teanu on Vanikoro), with the others reduced to just a few speakers each.

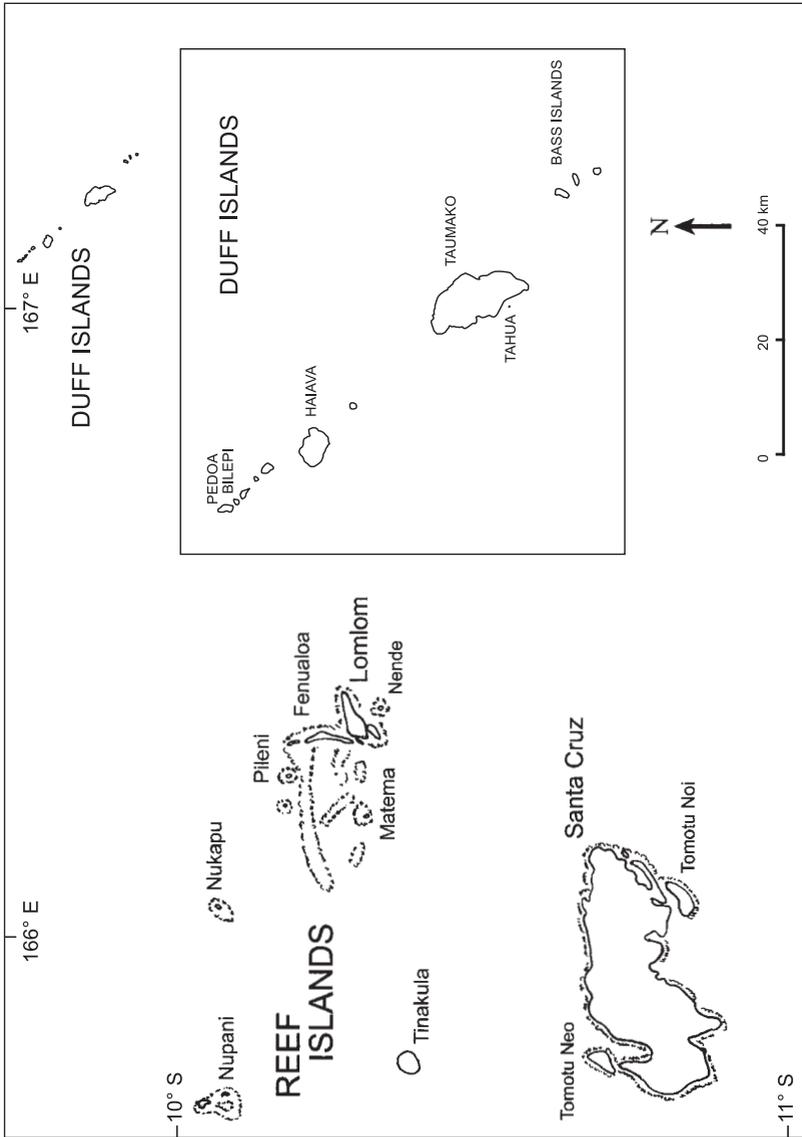
Polynesian languages are spoken in four locations in Temotu Province: the small and very remote islands of Tikopia and Anuta (whose languages are distinct but fairly closely related), the Reef Islands, and the Duff Islands. The Reef Islands and Duff Islands varieties have sometimes been described as two distinct languages, labelled Pileni and Taumako respectively (e.g.,

Pawley 1967). While our research shows clear differences both in phonology and lexicon between the two, they are considered to be varieties of a single language by the speakers and will be treated as such in this article. Most speakers do not approve of the name “Pileni” for their language, as this is the name of only one of several islands where the language is spoken. We have therefore chosen the name Vaeakau-Taumako for the language as a whole, i.e., including the dialects of both the Reef and Duff Islands. Vaeakau is the name of the administrative district comprising the Polynesian-speaking Reef Islands, while Taumako is the name of the largest of the Duff Islands, which is often also used for that group as a whole.

Vaeakau-Taumako speakers in the Reefs are geographically very close to the Main Reef Islands where the Äiwoo language (see below) is spoken. The distance between Äiwoo-speaking Fenua Loa and Vaeakau-Taumako-speaking Nifiloli is about 300m, and the gap can be waded at low tide. Day-to-day interaction between the two groups is fairly limited, though Vaeakau-Taumako speakers travel quite frequently to the trade store on Pigeon Island in the Main Reefs. But Äiwoo speakers rarely have any business in Vaeakau, and many (perhaps most) adult Äiwoo speakers have never visited these Polynesian-speaking islands. This does not, however, reflect any animosity towards their neighbours. Äiwoo speakers often asked to be taken along on our day-trips from the Main Reefs to Vaeakau; people are interested in visiting the Polynesian-speaking islands if given the opportunity, but such opportunities hardly ever arise in everyday life.

There is some intermarriage between the groups. Hovdhaugen judges, on the basis of multiple visits, that probably more Vaeakau-Taumako-speaking women marry into Äiwoo-speaking communities than vice versa. In any case, in-marrying women are expected to adopt the language of their new home and more or less abandon their native language. The ideal is to speak the language of one’s place of residence, not of one’s place of origin. The northern end of Fenua Loa is to a certain extent linguistically mixed, with Vaeakau-Taumako speakers living in an otherwise Äiwoo-speaking community; the latter consider Vaeakau-Taumako speakers on the other islands their *wantoks*, an extended-family category based to a large extent on a shared language.

Today, most communication across the language border takes place in Solomon Islands Pijin (SIP). Before the arrival of SIP in the area, however, communication must have depended on pervasive passive and active bilingualism. Structural adaptations in Vaeakau-Taumako based upon Äiwoo models (“metatypy”, in the terms of Ross 1996), suggest that Vaeakau-Taumako speakers have been bilingual in Äiwoo for several generations, using Äiwoo in interactions with their neighbours while maintaining their own Polynesian language as the language of in-group communication (see



Næss and Hovdhaugen 2007). Today, Vaeakau-Taumako speakers in the Reef Islands are often reluctant to admit to any knowledge of Äiwoo, claiming that it is too difficult to understand. But we have observed that many in fact speak it quite fluently and will do so if the need arises. Äiwoo speakers, however, readily state that they speak some Vaeakau-Taumako, but their proficiency appears generally to be at a “tourist” level, with just enough basic vocabulary to get by in simple interactions.

#### LAPITA POPULATIONS AND THE POLYNESIAN ARRIVAL

The Reefs-Santa Cruz (RSC) languages, including Äiwoo spoken in the Reef Islands, have generally been assumed to be of mixed Papuan-Austronesian origin. However, recent research by Næss shows that most of the structural features of Äiwoo thought to have a Papuan origin can in fact be more plausibly analysed as variations on themes common in Oceanic languages. Moreover, regular sound correspondences suggest that all the non-Polynesian languages of Temotu Province form a single first-order subgroup of Oceanic (Næss 2006, Ross and Næss 2007). Though much research remains to be done, both on Äiwoo and certainly on the languages of Santa Cruz, before this conclusion can be solidly established, it is highly likely that the Reefs-Santa Cruz languages will have to be re-classified as Austronesian.

If this conclusion is correct, the present-day inhabitants of the Main Reef Islands are presumably the descendants of the original founding Lapita population. Archaeological evidence of the presence of such a population, dating back approximately 3,200 years, has been excavated at several sites in both the Reef Islands and Santa Cruz (Spriggs 1997:129-35).

The prehistory of the Duff Islands is somewhat less clear. The first documented settlements in the Duffs date to about 800 B.C. (Foss Leach, pers. comm.). This is chronologically close enough to the settlements found in the Reef Islands that they may be assumed to have been part of the same Lapita migration. Also, chert from the Duff Islands has been found at the Nenubo site in the Reefs (Spriggs 1997:134), which is evidence of contact between the two island groups' populations.

It is not known exactly when, and from where, Polynesians first arrived in the region. For Tikopia, which is archaeologically and ethnographically the best-explored of the Polynesian-speaking islands in the area, the earliest Polynesian settlements have been dated to about A.D. 1200 (Kirch 2000:144), and a date of A.D. 600 has been provided for the initial Polynesian settlement in Anuta (Kirch 1982:253). The Polynesian population in the Duff Islands was certainly well established by the time the Quiros Expedition visited the islands in 1606 (Kelly 1966). The Duff Islanders have no traditional

accounts concerning the origins of their ancestral settlers, but oral traditions from other Polynesian outliers in the Solomons all claim an ancestral origin in the nuclear Polynesian region—Samoa, Futuna, Tokelau and Tuvalu. This concurs with the linguistic evidence (Pawley 1966, 1967). Any precise understanding of the subsequent settlement history of the area is complicated because of contacts between the Solomons Outliers after they were settled. Quiros' 1606 expedition reported Sikaianan prisoners-of-war being held in Taumako (Kelly 1966:230). Anuta and Tikopia oral histories include stories about contact with the people of the Duff Islands (Feinberg 1998, Firth 1961). A connection between the Duffs and Tikopia is further suggested by the names of two of the four Tikopian *kainanga* or clans, Taumako and Tafua, which correspond to the names of the main island of the Duffs, Taumako, and of the offshore artificial islet on the fringing reef of Taumako, Tahua, on which a large proportion of the population currently resides, apparently to escape the mosquitoes onshore (Davenport 1968). As Kirch and Yen (1982:345) have argued, "cultural replacements, immigration from multiple sources, and a general diversity of external contacts are all likely possibilities for any Outlier sequence."

The Polynesians, then, would have arrived from the east, probably first reaching Tikopia and Anuta before moving on to the Duff Islands. Here, they would first have arrived at the small, rocky Bass Islands located east of Taumako. These islands are currently unpopulated, but Vaeakau-Taumako oral accounts refer to people living there (Hovdhaugen, Næss and Hoëm 2002). All place names in the Bass Islands are either identifiably Polynesian or show no phonological signs of a non-Polynesian origin. Most likely, these islands were unpopulated when the Polynesians arrived and may have been the first place they settled in the area. A small group of initial colonisers would have found a safe haven in which to establish themselves and over time their numbers would have been augmented by other arrivals.

From this base, the Polynesians then moved in on the larger and more fertile Duff Islands. It is impossible to say what happened to the original Duff Islands' population; whether they were banished or massacred by the invaders, like the pre-Polynesian *hiti* of Rennell and Bellona (Monberg 1966:92-95) or the *Nga Faea* and *Nga Ravenga* of Tikopia (Firth 1961:128-43); or whether there was, to some extent, co-existence and a melding of the original population with that of the new arrivals. It is apparent that there was at least some degree of intermixing, as the people of the Reef and Duff Islands today are, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable in their phenotype (i.e., appearance) from their "Melanesian" neighbours. This is in contrast to the people of Tikopia, who conform to a much larger extent to the "Polynesian" phenotype. As R.H. Codrington (1882) in his journal from a voyage to the

area, wrote, "I could see no difference whatever physically between the people of these Reef Islands whose dialect is Polynesian, and the others. A Tikopian is unmistakably distinct, but then his island lies by itself; there is no admixture with the people of a large and neighbouring place."

The main island in the Duffs, Taumako, has only a single place name which looks to be of non-Polynesian origin: Blivai, a point of land on Taumako Island. The largest of the islands to the northwest of Taumako, Haiava, is also known by the names Papa, Aua and Poutoa. These multiple names may be an indication of a complex settlement history; according to Taumako elders recognised as knowledgeable in such matters, the island has been depopulated and repopulated several times, though the reason for this is unclear. A somewhat speculative scenario is that the original inhabitants of the Duff Islands may have withdrawn to this island before or during the Polynesian intrusion, and that this could have been the location where they were overtaken by the Polynesians and assimilated more or less peacefully into the invading group. A possible fact in support of such a scenario is that two of the small islands northwest of Haiava have clearly non-Polynesian names: Bilepi and Pedoa. Although present-day Vaeakau-Taumako has both /b/ and /d/ phonemes, no words containing these phonemes have a clear Polynesian etymology. Furthermore, the percentage of place names showing these two phonemes is much larger than the percentage in the rest of the vocabulary. Both islands are currently uninhabited, but oral accounts refer to settlements on Bilepi.

An extended period of cohabitation would be expected to leave traces in the language. Since Vaeakau-Taumako, unmistakably a Polynesian language, is the only language spoken in the Duff Islands, the original inhabitants, assuming they survived the invasion, must at some point have shifted from their native language to that of the newcomers. This implies a preceding period of bilingualism, with the original language eventually going out of use altogether.

If linguistic effects of such scenarios of bilingualism followed by language shift are at all observable in the remaining language, they typically concern its phonology. The speakers for whom it is the second language may transfer some of the phonological characteristics of their native language into the new language—in other words, speak the target language with an accent. These phonological features from the original language are then retained in the new language after the shift (Ross 2003:191).

As nothing is known of the language of the original settlers in the Duff Islands, it is impossible to say to what extent Vaeakau-Taumako shows adopted phonological characteristics from this language. One feature of Vaeakau-Taumako phonology which is highly unusual for a Polynesian

language is phonemic voicing of oral stop consonants (/b/, /d/, marginal cases of /g/). It is possible that this feature is the result of a language shift. If the pre-Polynesian population originated from the same Lapita group as that of the Reef Islands, their language must be assumed to have been related to (proto-) Äiwoo; present-day Äiwoo has /b/, /d/ and /g/. It is of course conceivable that the “non-Polynesian” phonemes have entered into Vaeakau-Taumako through contact with Äiwoo; similar acquisition of phonemes through contact is attested for several other Polynesian Outliers (Clark 1994:113). If this is the case, we must conclude that present-day Vaeakau-Taumako shows no traces of an earlier language spoken in the Duff Islands.

#### THE POLYNESIAN INCURSION IN THE REEF ISLANDS

At first glance, and by comparison with the Duff Islands, the Outer Reef Islands seems a fairly unattractive location to settle; indeed, this is one reason for assuming that the Polynesians initially established themselves in the Duff Islands, which are relatively large volcanic islands, with streams providing drinking water. According to Davenport, the fertility of the soil is quite poor and much of the land area is rocky or swampy, leading him to surmise that “always, Taumako has had to import some food to support itself” (Davenport 1968:143). However, personal experience by one of the authors (Hovdhaugen) suggests that crops are in fact adequate if not abundant in a reasonably good year. Indeed, the Duff Islands people are proud of the relative abundance of food in their islands compared to the tiny coral islets inhabited by Vaeakau-Taumako speakers in the Reef Islands. Furthermore, in our text material from the Reef Islands, famine and the search for food are recurrent themes, while few such stories appear to be told in the Duff Islands. However, the fringing reefs in the Duff Islands do not support anywhere near the abundance of fish and other marine resources that is found on the Great Reef from which the Reef Islands take their European name. In order to secure sufficient protein in their diets, it seems only reasonable that the Polynesians, experienced seafarers as they were, would have been interested in gaining access to the rich fishing grounds in the Reefs, the nearest group of islands to the Duffs.

The Reef Islands, however, were already inhabited, and their occupants were both numerous and well used to war; the Polynesians would have been unable to force their way onto the larger and most fertile of the islands. At the fringes of the Great Reef, however, there are a number of small coral islets, at least some of which are likely to have been unoccupied. These would have provided the foothold for the Polynesians to establish themselves in the area, gaining access to fishing grounds and establishing trade connections with their neighbours in the Reef Islands. As they were in possession of superior

seafaring technology and skills, it is likely that the population in the Main Reef Islands would have seen advantages in establishing and maintaining contact with the Polynesians, as long as they were not in direct competition for vital resources. The canoe-building and navigational skills of the new arrivals would eventually become the basis for an institutionalised trade network encompassing the entire region (see below).<sup>1</sup>

The entry of the Polynesians into the Reef Islands may not have taken place entirely without conflict, however. It is likely that at least some of the places in the Reef Islands that today are populated by Polynesian speakers were at least periodically settled by Āiwoo speakers before the Polynesians established themselves. There are two types of evidence for this.

First, written sources indicate that the language border has shifted over the past 100-150 years. The Āiwoo language is first mentioned in linguistic literature by Codrington (1885) and Ray (1919), who refer to the language as “Nifilole” or “Nufiloli”—clearly with reference to Nifiloli Island, which today is populated by Polynesian speakers. Ray (1919) refers to the Polynesian language, which he calls Pileni, as being spoken on Fenua Loa, Pileni, Matema, Nukapu and Nupani. If this is accurate, it means that a century ago the people of Nifiloli were Āiwoo rather than Polynesian speakers, whereas there would have been Vaeakau-Taumako speakers in Fenua Loa, which today is populated almost entirely by Āiwoo speakers. An earlier Polynesian population on Fenua Loa would also explain why this island is known on all maps and official documents by its Polynesian name, Fenua Loa, rather than its Āiwoo name, Ngāsinuwe; and that even Āiwoo speakers, when speaking English or Pijin, refer to the island as Fenua Loa.<sup>2</sup>

The second type of evidence consists of place names in the Outer Reef Islands (Vaeakau). Nukapu, Pileni and Nifiloli all have village or ward names that are clearly not Polynesian and in most cases look to be of Āiwoo origin. Such place names increase in number the closer one gets to the Āiwoo-speaking islands: two on Nukapu (Bahivai, Niuademehi), three on Pileni (Dede, Tabelao, Tevadele) and four on Nifiloli (Balo, Nganiabengi, Ngaunada, Nibale). That no non-Polynesian names are found on Nupani is unsurprising, as this is a very remote island and to a large extent isolated from the rest of the group; there is no reason to believe that Āiwoo speakers ever lived there. Partly for this very reason, it may have been the first foothold of the Polynesians in the Reef Islands. Furthermore, a distinctive dialect is spoken on Nupani, which linguists consider the most archaic (i.e., closer phonologically and morphologically to Proto-Polynesian) and locally considered the most prestigious of Vaeakau-Taumako dialects, perhaps because it is the most distinctive (Davenport 1972) and certainly because it has been used for church translations.

Turning to Matema, we find a rather interesting scenario. It is a tiny island which local people say cannot support a permanent population of more than 50-80 (see Davenport 1972:60); there is very little cultivable land and fish is the main food source. This source, however, is plentiful, because Matema is in a very central location on the Great Reef, right in the middle of very rich fishing grounds. The island also has a freshwater well, a feature not found in any of the other outlying islands. Therefore, it would have been an ideal place for the Polynesians to establish themselves, periodically or permanently, for purposes of fishing and trading.

With the exception of Tabuē,<sup>3</sup> the name of the point facing towards Santa Cruz, there are no obvious non-Polynesian place names on Matema, and it is likely that it has never been permanently settled by Äiwoo speakers. The name Matema itself, however, is interesting. It has a somewhat unusual phonological structure as it is pronounced with a stressed, long, final vowel, as [mate'ma:] or even [mde:'ma:]. By contrast, all the other trisyllabic island names have short vowels and the usual penultimate main stress (Pi'leni, Nu'kapu, Nu'pani). Phonemic vowel length is relatively marginal in Vaeakau-Taumako and tends to be manifested mainly through shift of main stress to a phonemically long vowel: *kulu* ['kulu] 'breadfruit' vs *lepū* [le'pu] 'rat' (Hovdhaugen and Næss in preparation).

There are several other Vaeakau-Taumako names beginning in *ma-* in the area around Matema: Malani, a reef which is said to previously have been an island, and Malimi, also a reef. The latter two names are recognisable as being of Äiwoo origin: the Äiwoo forms are *Mwalanyi* and *Mwalimi*. The *mwa-* prefix is from Äiwoo *numwa* 'reef'; Äiwoo nouns regularly lose the initial *nV-*, a reflex of the Austronesian article *\*na*, in compounds (Næss 2006). Other *mwa-* names in the same area include *Mwatubi*, *Mwanuwä* and *Mwa-Tuwo*; the latter refers to the village Tuwo on Fenua Loa and indicates that the people of Tuwo hold fishing rights in this part of the reef.

The Äiwoo name for Matema Island is *Noduwä*. However, in light of the above discussion, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the name "Matema" has its origins in the form *mwa-Temââ*, which means 'reef of Taumako (people)', *Temââ* being the Äiwoo name for Taumako. This supports the assumption that the Polynesians came to the Reefs in order to gain access to marine resources, and if, by negotiation or conquest, they were granted rights to exploit part of the reef, *mwa-Temââ* 'Taumako Reef' would be an obvious name for Äiwoo speakers to give to it. Though this would clearly have been the name for a section of reef, the Polynesian settlers may have interpreted it as the name of the island at some stage, and taken it over.

As noted above, Matema is in a central location on the Great Reef, not only with respect to fishing resources but also for inter-island travel; it is

the natural starting-point for journeys to Santa Cruz and the first island to become visible on the horizon when travelling from Santa Cruz to the Reef Islands. As the Polynesians' role in inter-island trade and voyaging increased, tiny Matema was likely to have become an important hub of transport and exchange in the Reef Islands.

Following this scenario, when the Polynesian-speakers established themselves in the Reef Islands as the newcomers and by far the smallest group, they would have had to learn their neighbours' language in order to trade and negotiate with them. As noted above, structural evidence suggests that Vaeakau-Taumako speakers were bilingual in Äiwoo, rather than the other way round. Some of the structural changes that appear to be modelled on Äiwoo include: the alternation between the vowels /e/ and /o/ in certain words; the Polynesian spatial prepositions *i* 'locative' and *ki* 'directional' both taking on similar locative-directional meanings 'in, at, on, from, with, to' (compared to the single spatial preposition *ngä* in Äiwoo, with a range of meanings 'in, at, on, from, with, to...'); the formation of transitive causatives through a causative prefix *plus* a transitive suffix (e.g., *hua-mo-kia* CAUS-fall-TR 'drop', compared to Äiwoo *wä-nubo-wä* CAUS-die-TR 'kill'); the use of subject markers preceding the verb's tense-aspect markers, which are unusual for Polynesian languages and may be modelled on Äiwoo which has subject prefixes to intransitive verbs; and the extensive use of tail-head linkage in narrative, a common feature in the Melanesian area (Crowley 2002:69).<sup>4</sup>

Even today, Äiwoo tends to be the language used in communication across the linguistic border if Pijin is not used. Indeed, Äiwoo appears to be spreading as an inter-group language throughout the area, at least as far as Santa Cruz, where it is said to be replacing the smallest of the Santa Cruz languages, Nagu (Nanggu). There are also reports of Äiwoo being used as a *lingua franca* among immigrant communities on Vanikoro.

#### THE RISE AND FALL OF THE POLYNESIAN TRADE EMPIRE

It is historically well documented that the Polynesian-speaking people's skill in canoe-building and navigation formed the backbone of a trade network that covered the entire island group: Santa Cruz, Utupua and Vanikoro as well as the Reef and Duff Islands. Large sea-going sailing outrigger canoes (*puke*) were built in Taumako, where timber to build them was available. These canoes were loaded with smaller paddling canoes, pigs and sago flour, and sailed to the Reef Islands, where the large canoes, pigs and sago flour were sold to the Polynesians there. The Taumako people then paddled home in the smaller canoes. The Reef Islanders used the *puke* canoes they had obtained for trade voyages to the larger southern islands (Davenport 1963:62, 1968:146). Thus the Polynesian settlements in the Reefs, particularly Nukapu, Nifiloli and Pileni,

were an important link in the inter-island trade that was central to the Polynesian way of life in the area up to a century or so ago (Davenport 1972:68).

As canoe-builders, traders and navigators, the Polynesians were likely to have enjoyed a high degree of prestige in the area, as evidenced by a large inventory of Polynesian loanwords in all the languages in the area, including those of Santa Cruz, Utupua and Vanikoro. Synchronically, that Āiwoo appears to have a much larger proportion of Polynesian loanwords than Vaeakau-Taumako has of Āiwoo loanwords would seem to be an unusual situation, as smaller and more marginal groups tend to borrow more from larger, richer and more powerful groups than vice versa. This can be explained, however, by the reasonable assumption that the Polynesians were seen as a high-prestige group for as long as the trade network existed; speakers typically borrow vocabulary from languages associated with prestigious or powerful groups. Vaeakau-Taumako speakers, by contrast, may in recent years to some extent have avoided the borrowing of Āiwoo vocabulary in order to protect the distinct identity of their language (see the discussion on linguistic differentiation below). We have been able to identify so far only a couple of dozen Āiwoo loanwords in Vaeakau-Taumako, most of them nouns referring to plants, shells, artefacts etc.

This inter-island trade network, however, did not survive long under the British administration, which came into effect in 1899. Restrictions were placed on long-distance canoe voyages, which were considered too hazardous. The Reef Islands' main export article was removed from the intricate exchange network when the sale of women to Santa Cruz as marriage partners or as prostitutes for men's house societies was banned by the British authorities. Given that the Reef Islands had few other resources to sell, the resulting imbalance in the network is likely to have been a major contributing factor to its eventual collapse in the first half of the 20th century. When there was no longer any market for the sea-going *puke* canoes, they were no longer built, and inter-island voyaging drastically diminished as a result. By the time Davenport visited the islands in 1960, only two *puke* canoes existed in the Reef and Duff Islands (Davenport 1968:177).

The collapse of the trade network left the Polynesians in the Reef Islands with a much reduced degree of contact with their "homeland" in the Duff Islands, and without the social position and prestige that their central role in the network had given them. Though they had always been dependent on trade interactions with their Āiwoo-speaking neighbours, they were now forced to turn to them in order to survive in their marginal and resource-poor islands, and to negotiate a relationship in which they were clearly the weaker party. In Taumako as well, the loss of their main economic activity had severe consequences for their social and political organisation in the islands (see below).

Today's Polynesian speakers in the Reef Islands clearly feel marginalised in relation to their larger, wealthier and more powerful neighbours. They have to a great extent lost the links to their historical Polynesian identity; they have no oral histories recounting their distinctive geographic or cultural origins and little extant knowledge of the once-crucial seafaring skills—though competent navigators are still highly valued, and certain named individuals who lived a couple of generations ago are still renowned for their navigational skills. On their tiny islets with little or no cultivable land, they eke out a living on the margins of the larger, richer, more fertile Main Reef Islands.

#### THE CONTEMPORARY LINGUISTIC SITUATION: ADOPTION AND DIFFERENTIATION

It is highly likely that certain characteristics of today's Vaeakau-Taumako language reflect this situation and the diminished social and economical status of the Polynesians in the area in general. As noted above, a number of structural properties of Vaeakau-Taumako have been adapted to resemble those of Āiwoo, suggesting a long period of bilingualism. However, there are other changes in Vaeakau-Taumako that have gone in the direction of greater *differentiation* from Āiwoo.

First, the phonemes /s/, /th/, /kh/ and /lh/ can all be realised phonetically as [h], in addition to /h/ being a phoneme in itself. By contrast, Āiwoo has no /h/ phoneme and no sounds pronounceable as [h] in any context. In English loanwords, /h/ is typically replaced with /v/, as in *vatu* 'hat'.

Second, Vaeakau-Taumako has an unusually large inventory of articles and quantifiers, with at least the following articles: *a* 'personal', *a* 'collective', *e* 'nonspecific singular', *ni* 'nonspecific plural', *ngha/nangha* 'specific plural' and *te* 'specific singular'. Quantifiers include *thai* 'one', *lua/la* 'two' (differing in distribution from the numerals *thai* 'one' and *lua* 'two'), *lui* 'two, a few', *i* 'some', *nanghai/nhgi/nanghi* 'some' and *thanga* 'group, crowd'. Āiwoo, by contrast, has no articles and few genuine quantifiers; a plausible candidate may be *dä* 'some', though the distribution and exact function of this morpheme are somewhat unclear (Vaa 2006:28-32, 60-68). Terms like *däu* 'many' and *du* 'all' are verbal and cannot be said to belong to a distinct lexical class of quantifiers.

Third, the common Polynesian process of reduplication has run wild in Vaeakau-Taumako; it is extremely frequent and fulfils a variety of functions including repetition, duration, emphasis, plurality. Both nouns and verbs may reduplicate, and there is both partial and full reduplication; indeed, both may be combined in a single form: *noho* 'sit, stay, live' > *nohonoho* >

*nōnohono* ‘sit, stay (emphatic); stay for a long time’. Äiwoo does have some reduplication, but it is fairly rare, and apparently limited to verbs. Only partial reduplication is attested: *lopâ* ‘speak’ > *lolopâ* ‘chat’, *meli* ‘release’ > *memeli* ‘let down (a rope) gradually’.

These kinds of changes in phonological and lexical structure, and in salient and easily analysed morphological processes such as reduplication, may at least partly result from language-contact; comparisons with earlier materials (e.g., Ray 1919 and the Melanesian Mission’s 1918 prayer book) suggest that these changes have mainly taken place within the last century or so. This means that they would coincide with the Polynesian speakers’ changed status and increasing marginalisation after the collapse of the trade network, suggesting a process reminiscent of what Thurston (1987, 1989) called “esoterogeny”, which occurs in the emblematic language of a bi- or multilingual community, that is, in the language associated with ethnic and in-group identity. It results in increased differentiation from neighbouring languages through greater complexity in phonology and morphology; more irregularity and a more complex lexical inventory owing to numerous near synonyms; and a greater use of idioms with non-obvious meanings (Thurston 1987:55-60, 1989:556). The purpose of esoterogeny is to make the language more suitable as an “in-group” language by making it more difficult for outsiders to understand.

Thurston applies the concept of esoterogeny to the differentiation of closely related languages, so that languages which were originally very similar, perhaps mutually comprehensible, become less so over time. This is a somewhat different situation from that found in the Reef Islands, where Äiwoo and Vaeakau-Taumako are only very distantly related and certainly not mutually comprehensible. Nevertheless, the presence of extensive long-term bilingualism, coupled with the more recent dramatic change in social and economic status of the smaller of the two language communities, could well be expected to have had somewhat similar effects on the languages. As noted above, today’s Polynesian-speaking population, especially in the Reef Islands, have lost most of the social and cultural practices marking their distinct identity as Polynesians, along with their main source of economic power and prestige, which has left them geographically, socially and economically disadvantaged vis-à-vis their larger and wealthier neighbours. The one thing that still sets them apart from their neighbours is their language, which remains identifiably Polynesian and which links them to Polynesian communities elsewhere in the Solomons and in the rest of the Pacific. Consequently, language is likely to have taken on a crucial role in the speakers’ construction and perception of their own in-group identity.

Bilingualism is a highly sensitive issue among present-day Vaeakau-Taumako speakers in the Reef Islands. As noted above, while these Vaeakau-Taumako speakers often speak Äiwoo quite fluently, they commonly deny any knowledge of the language when asked. By contrast, speakers in Taumako, who are both geographically more distant from and economically more independent of the Äiwoo majority, claim no particular difficulty in speaking and understanding the language. This difference can hardly result from any inherent difference of ability and intrinsic features of the language, but it must be assumed to reflect different attitudes towards the mastery of the other language. The use of distinctive linguistic markers to emphasise the difference between their own minority language and that of their larger and more powerful neighbours seems a reasonable explanation for the changes observed in the Vaeakau-Taumako over the past century.

\* \* \*

We argue, then, that the initial presence of Polynesians in the Reef and Duff Islands area was in the Duff Islands, where they are likely to have mixed with the original population. However, the Polynesians must have quickly come to dominate in these islands, since no traces remain of the pre-Polynesian language in the Duff Islands, beyond perhaps a few phonological quirks in Vaeakau-Taumako. The Polynesian settlements in the Reef Islands began most likely as more or less permanent outposts for fishing and trading purposes, but acquired an important role in the trade network that linked all the islands in the area until it declined and collapsed in the first decades of the 20th century.

The question of why Vaeakau-Taumako speakers have no oral history concerning their origins remains open. They do not keep genealogies and thus rarely have knowledge of their forebears beyond their grandparents' generation. This parallels the situation among the neighbouring Äiwoo speakers, but is in sharp contrast to most other known Polynesian societies. Nearby, in Tikopia and Anuta, elaborate oral histories have been collected recounting the original, and several subsequent, arrivals of Polynesians in the islands, the descent of the various clan groups, and the waging of wars and other monumental events that have shaped the islands' history (Feinberg 1998, Firth 1961). Feinberg (1998:3) notes that "history, for [Anutans], is intimately linked with cultural identity.... They validate their sense of who they are through an assertion of historical connection to Polynesia, both as their ancestral homeland and as a source of later interactions". Vaeakau-Taumako speakers, by contrast, have no such acknowledged historical connections to their Polynesian origins, beyond their language.

A highly speculative explanation would be that this loss of oral traditions of origin is linked to the fact that for a long period the Polynesians of Vaeakau and Taumako derived their in-group and inter-group identity from their prestigious role as shipbuilders, traders and seafarers. Commenting on the Duff Islands, Davenport wrote:

[T]he acquisition of political influence was closely related to possessing the abilities to organize the labor and resources to build the great canoes. Political leadership... was largely concerned with building *puki* [*puke*]; *puki* was the most valuable economic export; thus, political leadership was largely concerned with organizing and stimulating the export trade. (Davenport 1968:175)  
With the passing of the *puki* went the major economic enterprise by means of which able and industrious Taumako men could gain prestige and wealth... Today there are few influential men, because there are few economic activities that require vigorous leaders to organize them. (Davenport 1968:178)

In other words, more important than descent or family connections was influence and leadership in the construction and export of canoes for trade and inter-island voyaging. The decline of the trade network certainly had important consequences for social and political organisation.

Even today, political power is diffuse and strongly contested in many of the islands. Also, there is little impetus or initiative for economic activities, especially in Vaeakau, where natural resources are few and nothing has been able to replace the prestige and wealth that once came with the construction and navigation of the large Polynesian sailing canoes. It may be, then, that Vaeakau-Taumako speakers' central role in the trade network, which for generations must have been a central aspect of the social structure of the area, became so strongly linked with their identity as Polynesians that the old tales of origin and descent progressively lost their importance as bearers of tradition and identity, until they were lost altogether. It certainly seems to be the case that the collapse of the trade network has left Vaeakau-Taumako speakers with no distinct sense of in-group identity and tradition beyond that provided by their Polynesian language.

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## NOTES

1. Some degree of inter-island travel is possible even with the small dugout canoes that are the main means of everyday transport in the area today. During a period of famine in the Reef Islands in 2005, people occasionally travelled by canoe to Santa Cruz and back in order to buy food. Such ventures are probably only undertaken under fairly extreme circumstances, however.
2. It is of course also possible that the prevalence of Polynesian place names on maps etc. is simply due to the (foreign) mapmakers mainly consulting the Polynesian speakers, as they would likely have found their language easier to understand.
3. There may be a link with *Otabwe*, an Äiwoo-speaking village on Lomlom.
4. For more detail and discussion, see Næss and Hovdhaugen 2007.
5. This is primarily an internal identity, rather than one with other peoples speaking Polynesian languages. In Vaeakau there is little such awareness of the relation of their language to other Polynesian ones, and little reference made to it. Taumako people are more aware of their linguistic connection with Tikopia, Anuta and Sikaiana, but are not particularly conscious of links to Polynesian societies outside the Solomons.

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