

Chapter 8

Telling Lives in Tuvalu

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Tuvalu is an independent low-island microstate of 9,500 people in the central Pacific. It used to be the Ellice Islands component of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) before separation in 1975 from the Micronesian Gilbertese, or i-Kiribati. Its inhabitants, who are mainly Polynesian and mainly Protestant, do not have a long tradition of 'life writing' and one could argue that such practices are inconsistent with Tuvaluan culture. My response to this suggestion is that the relationship between Tuvaluans and other Polynesians to their life histories is more complex; but there is a school of thought concerning Pacific conceptions of personhood that supposedly lends weight to the argument. I will return to this problem briefly later.

Whether or not the practice of life writing 'fits' their culture, a small number of Pacific Islanders who were either Tuvaluan or had a profound influence on Tuvaluan history have been the subjects of published biographies or autobiographies. The following three persons almost certainly comprise the sum total so far.¹ One is the subject of a biography that I co-authored, one wrote his own autobiography, and the last appeared in that hybrid kind of auto/biography, a life history dictated by him but written up by his interlocutor.

First in order of appearance was Elekana, the Cook Island London Missionary Society deacon credited with having introduced Christianity to the archipelago in 1861. As the survivor of a so-called miraculous drift voyage to Nukulaelae, Elekana cropped up in many missionary narratives illustrating the workings of divine providence but also appeared in scientific accounts of voyaging and tales of seafaring. I became interested in Elekana during the course of my doctoral research, as his story (or rather stories) seemed to shed light on how Christianity took root in Tuvalu as the first great institutional transfer of the mid-19th century central Pacific. After some preliminary published interpretations,² the magnum opus of this research so far has been a book by Doug Munro and me entitled *The Accidental Missionary: tales of Elekana*.³ Because so much has been written already on this historical figure, in this paper I will refer to him less than I do to the other two.

The second subject is Frank Pasefika, a former civil servant in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony administration, who published a short autobiography under the aegis of the University of the South Pacific in 1990.⁴

The last subject is Neli Lifuka, the self-proclaimed leader of Kioa, a Tuvaluan colony island in Fiji purchased through the good offices of the GEIC administration after World War II for the use of people from Vaitupu. His story was compiled by an anthropologist, Klaus-Friedrich Koch, and published as *Logs in the Current of the Sea* in 1978.⁵ This was the result of Koch deciding to switch from an ethnography of the displaced community of Tuvaluans on Kioa to ‘an ethnohistorical biography’ of its most charismatic leader. The biographer first came into contact with his subject on Kioa in July 1968 and returned to record the story in June 1969. They secluded themselves for a week in a crude shelter on the other side of the island from the main village and talked, interrupted only by sleeping, eating and the daily visits of Neli’s son or daughters to bring more provisions. By the end of that time, Koch had recorded 48 hours worth of reminiscences (some eight reels of taped conversation). Not all of that material, by the way, figures in the published version.

The first very obvious pattern of note is that these three subjects are all men (as are all the subjects of the briefer pieces or passages referred to in footnote 1). Call it a wild hunch, but I don’t think that this particular inclusion/exclusion is a coincidence. The dominant pattern of personhood in the Pacific reflects the domination of male persons in the vast majority of societies.

The common gender of their central figures aside, however, the stories do vary in other respects. The biography of Elekana, *The Accidental Missionary*,⁶ was written well after the life it attempted to portray was over. It was also based exclusively on documentary sources, both primary and secondary (though these did include the transcript of a face-to-face interview with a knowledgeable elder conducted by another ethnographer, Niko Besnier, on Nukulaelae). Although he has been the most recent of the three men to receive extended biographical treatment, Elekana’s life of course was much the earliest in a chronological sense, preceding the other two by several decades. Neli Lifuka (b. 1909) and Frank Pasefika (b. 1914) were more recent historical actors and their lives overlapped not only with each other’s but also with many people still alive.

They also both participated actively in the recounting of their lives—Frank by writing it down and Neli by telling it into a tape-recorder. On this score, nevertheless, any apparent difference from Elekana is somewhat illusory. True, he never authorised a biography but it’s my guess that he wouldn’t have resisted one being written and he was happy enough to be turned into a legendary character in missionary folklore (though less happy to be made an example of in other respects). He also wrote an extended account of the drift voyage that established his status as one of God’s chosen.

An important part of the framework for understanding all three is that their biographies have appeared only in English, not in Tuvaluan. That has a great deal to do with the exclusions and disciplines of missionisation and colonialism (and of present-day publishing) but in a complex kind of way.

Elekana almost certainly did not speak, read or write English fluently though he may have acquired some of the language through contact with the LMS's British missionaries. In fact he didn't even know the language of Tuvalu until he drifted there and the language he was probably most comfortable with was Cook Island Maori (both the Manihiki dialect of his home island and the southern dialect, which had become the official church language of the Cooks group through the spread of the Church). Residence in Tuvalu—on Nukulaelae after the drift voyage and later on Nukufetaeu after being stationed there as a native teacher—probably forced him to acquire oral fluency in the vernacular but at that time it was not a written language. Rather, Samoan became the LMS central Pacific language of instruction, of the written scriptures and of preaching. Consequently, it was Samoan that Elekana would have had to learn when he went for missionary training at Malua.

After his first sojourn in Tuvalu, Elekana did write a couple of brief accounts of his exploits but Doug Munro and I were only able to find translated versions that the LMS had commissioned for the edification of its members, especially the juvenile ones. The language of the originals was probably Cook Islands Maori but we just don't know for sure. Virtually all the material we consulted to write his story was available only in English. It is also the language that Doug Munro and I have done most of our publishing in, though he is one of the few Pacific historians to have had some of his works translated into the vernacular.⁷

Neli Lifuka and Frank Pasefika both knew English pretty well, partly through their involvement in the elitist male secondary education system of the British-run GEIC. Neli, however, left school early after he rebelled against the regime of the dictatorial headmaster of Elisefou, D.G. Kennedy,⁸ and seems to have been mostly self-taught. From internal evidence, I suspect English was the main language of Neli's life history interviews but Koch left that point implicit, perhaps because he thought it was obvious. (He died not long after the book came out so I've never been able to get an absolute confirmation.) Neli himself attributed his command of English to the help of the fourth engineer of the second ship he worked on: 'He gave me newspapers to read and gave me paper and pencil to practice my writing. When I didn't know a word, I asked him, and he explained it to me'.⁹

Frank lasted longer in the formal education system and states that the choice of language for his account was deliberate: 'I have written this story in simple English because I thought that by the time this story was published everybody in Tuvalu may be able to read and write in English'.¹⁰ He's probably right

because, at least since independence in 1978, Tuvaluan children have learned English from an early age. This contrasts with their 19th century counterparts, for whom written language consisted mostly of scriptures and religious tracts in Samoan, which was the first language of most of the native teachers and missionaries posted to the Ellice Islands until well into the 20th century. There were, of course, a few important exceptions like Elekana, whose singularity confirms the rule because of having to learn Samoan as an adult.

Elekana was different in other respects as well. Like his biographers, his biography is unreliable at the best of times. That was actually one of our main interpretive points. But *The Accidental Missionary* is also radically 'incomplete' for a biography. We don't know exactly when Elekana was born or when he died; in fact we don't know much about his early life or his later career at all. We focused on the years when he was most famous to missionary audiences and most useful to missionary bodies. This, and the fact that our approach was deliberately Tuvalu-centric, was not just because of our research blinkers but also because that was virtually all we could find in the records. As a result, Elekana's written life is much more fragmentary and partial than Neli's and Frank's. In our defence, it may be that all such lives are partial from this distance.

The shape of the other two life stories is more conventionally rounded. Neli begins with his childhood and rather turbulent schooldays at Elisefou on Vaitupu, his early employment on freighters and on phosphate boats at Ocean Island/Banaba, and his promotion up the ranks to engineer. At other times he worked on a government boat and a missionary vessel but argued with his commanding officers over pay and conditions and resigned in each case. Interestingly, he then found employment blasting reef passages with his old headmasterly nemesis, Kennedy (who had morphed into a resident District Officer (DO)). Later he even went back to Vaitupu to work as a caretaker at Kennedy's former school. Eventually he returned to Ocean Island to work on the phosphate boats but gained a foothold in the Colony administration by being appointed as a hospital dresser and Ellice community liaison person. True to form, he also led a strike of Ellice Island workers against the British Phosphate Commission.

Kennedy turned up again and, resistant to the idea of a posting to the Solomons, suggested to Neli that they sail a canoe back to Tuvalu. (Given Elekana's prior example, it's probably fortunate that they didn't.) The two old antagonists were now firm friends, according to Neli, and he waxed lyrical over Kennedy's contribution to development in Tuvalu.

Frank, meanwhile, endured the school regime more successfully than Neli but seems to have enjoyed it even less. When Elisefou was shut down on Kennedy's appointment as DO in 1931, Frank was one of five boys selected to go to King George V School at Tarawa in the Gilberts, the headquarters of the GEIC. There he found life 'a bit easier and more independent'.¹¹ He joined the

civil service on Funafuti (the headquarters of the Ellice district) as a clerk and interpreter in 1933. This appointment entailed a wide variety of tasks (which he recounts in great detail) and also required him to work alongside Kennedy a lot of the time, which was not to his taste. Though a student and colleague of Kennedy for 16 years, he always found him 'difficult to like'.¹²

For both Neli and Frank, the Pacific War was a pivotal experience. From 1941, Neli was involved on Vaitupu in coast-watching and, later, in choosing labourers whom he accompanied to work at Funafuti helping to build the American base there. This became the headquarters for the assault on the Japanese bastion of Tarawa in November 1943. Neli was astonished by the number and size of the warships at Funafuti and, in a trope familiar from other parts of the Pacific, marvelled at the Americans' material wealth and enjoyed their egalitarianism.¹³ 'We always ate together, we had the same food.' Unloading ships 'was hard work but the Americans looked after us very well. The only trouble was with the British. They didn't want the Americans to give us the wages they wanted to pay. ... The Americans were very kind to us. They used their dive bombers to drop our mail and parcels at Vaitupu and the other Ellice Islands. ... The Americans were really very good to us'. And so on.

In one revealing deviation from the nativist ideologies that the Americans and their largesse inspired in places like Vanuatu, however, Neli was not impressed by the presence of black troops: 'After the Americans had taken Tarawa, other marines came from the United States. They were all Negroes, only the captain was a European. ... They always said bad things about the [white] Americans, and that they would get back at them sometime in the future. They reckoned that they were not treated like the European Americans. I think they were wrong because they were educated by the Europeans; they didn't know anything by themselves. How can I go against a person who teaches me things? That's bad. The Negroes were natives just like us, but they always talked smart'.¹⁴ I have had students who, in assuming a retrospective ideological alliance among all non-white Pacific Islanders, attribute Neli's views to having internalised the self-hate of the colonised subject. In my opinion, he was much more likely to have been reflecting the standard racial hierarchies of the time, which placed blacks (including Melanesians) lower on the great chain of being than Polynesians.

For Frank, the war meant that his duties increased and for extended periods he was often left to operate without the direct supervision of a *palagi* (white) official. But, like Neli, what he remembered most vividly was the American 'invasion' in September 1942. In fact, he was on board a ship in the massive convoy from Suva when it anchored in Funafuti lagoon.

After the battle for Tarawa, Frank was put in charge of travelling around the Colony to repay government officers their salary arrears. This temporary transfer

to the Treasury became permanent and he spent the rest of his career in that branch of government, mainly at Tarawa, retiring once at the age of 50, then operating the government hotel on Funafuti for a few years until required for short-term redeployments back in Treasury and as part of the team for the 1973 Colony census. When those duties came to an end, he settled on Funafuti as head of a large extended family and worked voluntarily for the Ellice Islands/Tuvalu Church until he finally retired for health reasons in 1984 at the age of 70.¹⁵ Of the three subjects of this essay, he is the only one I have met personally. That was in the late 1970s when he was working, as I recall, on the church newsletter—but I have to confess he didn't leave a strong impression on me.

Neli was appointed magistrate on his home island of Vaitupu soon after the war came to an end. Almost inevitably, he alienated many of the elders (for being too young), the pastor (for questioning his authority and privileges), and some *palagi* members of the administration (for not enforcing laws where he felt no wrong had been committed). But he had enough allies to remain in power for a while and claims that he restored Vaitupu to its favoured position with the government.¹⁶ His lively period of rule survived numerous complaints and inquiries until 1951. The final straw was being caught *in flagrante delicto* with the pastor's young wife—in church, no less. There followed successful stints working for the Colony Cooperative Society and as an officer on one of the inter-island boats. After five years he even received an invitation to return to the magistrate's position on Vaitupu, an offer that he clearly relished being able to turn down.¹⁷ In the end, having been instrumental in the purchase of Kioa in 1946, he joined the community and quickly became chairman of its council (thereby annoying yet more people).

Lack of time precludes my continuing a detailed narrative of the lives of Neli and Frank and I have provided hardly any information on the life of Elekana. In the rest of this chapter, I wish to use the historical and ethnographic snippets of information provided so far to address some more general points concerning the issue I mentioned at the beginning of this paper—the question of whether or not (auto)biography, in a Western sense, conflicts with Pacific cultural frameworks.

The question arises because of a theory, popular in some circles, that Pacific conceptions of personhood are at odds with the standard 'Western' model of atomistic individualism. One variant of this approach postulates an image of *heroic* personhood, especially in relation to political leaders such as Polynesian chiefs; another variant prefers the more egalitarian image of *consocial* personhood. On this latter view, Pacific Islanders are generally less interested in 'inner' motivations than their 'Western' counterparts, their sense of individual agency is inseparable from wider social or group relationships, and their sense of selfhood

is changeable across different contexts (perhaps even ‘partible’, which I understand to mean as distributed fractionally across those different contexts).

Consocial personhood has its clearest expression in a collection of anthropological essays edited by Jocelyn Linnekin and Lin Poyer, *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*.¹⁸ But its advocacy is by no means restricted to anthropologists. Tongan educator Konai Helu Thaman supports the idea of consocial personhood and has found it persuasive for explaining the importance of cultural rights—which are collective, she claims, unlike the individual human rights of Western modernity.¹⁹

The concepts of heroic and consocial personhood at first glance seem rather opposed to each other but they can be seen as mutually reinforcing. Thus the theory of heroic personhood proposes a view of leaders as emerging integrally from the group. Canonically, the group is named after its founding individual whose repeated incarnation through succession means an unbroken sense of the leader’s self. This endlessly reconstituted chief may be said to represent the whole group in an almost physical sense. Just as there is no individual without a group, there can be no chief without a people. Ruminating on Hawai’ian mythology, Marshall Sahlins puts it thus: ‘The king assumes, and in his own person lives, the life of the collectivity’;²⁰ and, the ‘king encompasses the people in his own person, as projection of his own being’.²¹

However, if one applies the overall frame of heroic/consocial personhood to the few contemporary published examples of political biography or memoir in the Pacific, including those addressed in this paper, the picture becomes murky. The men I have discussed arguably saw themselves as heroes but in an individualistic manner quite recognisable to *palagi*; and their views of personhood do not strike me as particularly ‘consocial’. I can cite many instances where each of them (but especially Neli) prided himself on going against the grain, claimed to be right when everyone else was wrong, and took great satisfaction in being able to say ‘I told you so’. Consocial? More like anti-social.

In any event, I hope I have presented enough pertinent material on these three men in this brief account to suggest that they are not obedient and unthinking bearers of group identity. They strike me all as clear-cut individuals. Frank Pasefika’s passive-aggressive style contrasts with both the self-belief and self-righteousness of Elekana and the gleeful nonconformity of Neli Lifuka.

At the same time, not only were they rarely in control of their own destinies, they could never have been the unalloyed creators of their own subjectivities. As an aging survivor of the Foucauldian revolution in social thought, I am continually struck by the relevance of Michel Foucault’s work to the historiography of the Pacific. The most influential of these ideas stem from his histories of the rise of modernity in Europe, an era that established new

boundaries between reason and madness²² and concomitant procedures of exclusion and confinement.²³ While Foucault never turned his attention directly to this region of the world, his writings shed light on the subjugated knowledges and forms of personhood produced, for example, by the forces of religion and colonialism—partly, of course, because Europe exported them. I also remain convinced of the theoretical grasp offered by his analysis of the productivity of subjectification in relation to how lives may be constructed. While people are subjects of a kind, the very notion of the bounded autonomous subject is an effect of power. Narratives that emphasise the free agency of individual lives are themselves examples of technologies of the self.²⁴

Studies of the Pacific and elsewhere demonstrate the major role played by literacy in relation to such technologies. For Tuvalu, this topic has been most intensively studied by Niko Besnier by means of some insightful analyses of connections between religion, personhood and literacy on Nukulaelae, one of the more isolated Tuvaluan atolls.²⁵ Besnier's work represents a major contribution not only to Tuvaluan ethnography but also to studies of the cultural shaping of literacy in general. In some ways, however, it seems tangential to the processes that led to the more individualised life stories that concern me here. For example, the only kind of literacy practice in his work that has a sense of 'authority' similar to the *authorship* of the accounts I address is the Nukulaelae tradition of writing down sermons for delivery in church. Such occasions, underpinned by the putative authority of the scriptures and the word of God, turn the sermonisers (who are not just pastors but a substantial body of lay preachers as well) into much more forceful and even authoritarian figures than the usual codes of interpersonal conduct on the island allow. Besnier convincingly argues that this culturally sanctioned 'deviation', rather than evidence for transgressive individuality, is actually *support* for the view that on Nukulaelae, as elsewhere in the Pacific, notions of personhood are highly context-dependent.²⁶ I am not persuaded, however, that such an explanation is pertinent to the idiosyncratic case-studies I have outlined, with their intricate connections between individual personality and the technology of literacy that helps to create that sense of individuality in the first place.

There is no time to pursue these points in any detail here but my brief sketch does suggest that disciplinary regimes, exclusions, prohibitions, displacements and colonial subjectifications played a major role in shaping these Tuvaluan life stories and the very possibility of their publication.

Ian Burkitt recently bemoaned the fragmentation of everyday life and its deleterious effects on the ability of people to shape meaningful life narratives.²⁷ I take a different view. A decade ago, in one of my first attempts at understanding Elekana, I argued that 'ethnographic life histories and cross-cultural biographies actually emanate most richly from marginality'. I went on to say:

Biography as a genre is marked by the traces of people crossing cultural and physical boundaries, transitions from one state to another (often literally). ... In part this pattern occurs because the crossing of geopolitical boundaries throws up administrative and bureaucratic information... by springing the subtle and not-so-subtle tripwires of governmentality. ... Lastly, it may come about because crossing cultural boundaries makes received assumptions about what constitutes a life more problematic as well as easier to structure as a sequence.²⁸

Elekana's famous drift voyage, his involvement in converting a whole culture, his rise and fall in the missionary pantheon, and his appearances in the margins of many of the documents recording his restless career; Neli's constant troubles, disputes and nomadic escapades; the upheaval of his and Frank's world by a war between huge powers that saw Pacific islands serve merely as stepping-stones, their fears of Japanese bombardment and occupation (albeit a less terrifying ordeal than life under Kennedy at Elisefou); and their episodic registration in the bureaucratic affairs of the GEIC—all of these lend support to a view of biography that, whatever the vernacular cultural plausibility of the genre, sees dispersal, interruption and exclusion as central to the exercise involved in telling lives in Tuvalu.

ENDNOTES

¹ Others have featured in memoirs (Michael Goldsmith, 'Alovaka Maui: defender of the faith', in Doug Munro and Andrew Thornley (eds), *The Covenant Makers: Islander missionaries in the Pacific* (Suva 1996)), in briefer pieces on various pastors and traders (Doug Munro, 'Kirisome and Tema: Samoan pastors in the Ellice Islands', in Deryck Scarr (ed.), *More Pacific Islands Portraits* (Canberra 1978); 'The Lagoon Islands: a history of Tuvalu 1820-1908', PhD thesis, Macquarie University (Sydney 1982); 'The lives and times of resident traders in Tuvalu: an exercise in history from below', *Pacific Studies*, 10:2 (1987), 73-106; 'Samoan pastors in Tuvalu, 1865-1899', in Munro and Thornley, *The Covenant Makers*; 'The humble Ieremia: a Samoman [sc. Samoan] pastor in Tuvalu, 1880-1890 [sc. 1895]', *Pacific Journal of Theology*, Series II, 23: 40-48 (2000) and as bit players in longer works (Munro, 'The Lagoon Islands', Michael Goldsmith, 'Church and society in Tuvalu', PhD thesis, University of Illinois (Urbana, IL 1989); see too Nicholas Thomas and Richard Eves, *Bad Colonists: the South Seas letters of Vernon Lee Walker and Louis Becke* (Durham, NC 1999) on Louis Becke's sojourn in Tuvalu.

² Michael Goldsmith and Doug Munro, 'Encountering Elekana encountering Tuvalu', in Donald H. Rubinstein (ed.), *Pacific History: papers from the 8th Pacific History Association Conference* (Mangilao 1992); Michael Goldsmith, 'Decentering Pacific Biographies', in Alaima Talu and Max Quanchi (eds), *Messy Entanglements: the papers of the 10th Pacific History Association Conference, Tarawa, Kiribati* (Brisbane 1995).

³ Michael Goldsmith and Doug Munro, *The Accidental Missionary* (Christchurch 2002).

⁴ Frank Pasefika, *The Autobiography of Frank Pasefika* (Suva 1990).

⁵ Klaus-Friedrich Koch, *Logs in the Current of the Sea: Neli Lifuka's story of Kioa and the Vaitupu Colonists* (Canberra 1978), xi; Michael Goldsmith, Review of Klaus-Friedrich Koch, *Logs in the Current of the Sea*, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 87:4 (1978), 361-62.

⁶ Goldsmith and Munro, *The Accidental Missionary*.

Tito Isala and Doug Munro, *Te Aso Fiafia: Te Tala o te Kamupane Vaitupu, 1877-1887* (Suva 1987).

⁸ Klaus-Friedrich Koch, *Logs in the Current of the Sea*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12; see too 32.

¹⁰ Pasefika, *The Autobiography of Frank Pasefika*, 7; see also 54.

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- 11 Ibid., 22.
- 12 Ibid., 21.
- 13 Klaus-Friedrich Koch, *Logs in the Current of the Sea*, 28-29.
- 14 Ibid., 29-30.
- 15 Pasefika, *The Autobiography of Frank Pasefika*, 42.
- 16 Klaus-Friedrich Koch, *Logs in the Current of the Sea*, 33-44.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Jocelyn Linnekin, and Lin Poyer (eds), *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific* (Honolulu 1990).
- 19 Konai Helu Thaman, 'Cultural Rights: a personal perspective', in Margaret Wilson and Paul Hunt (eds), *Culture, Rights, and Cultural Rights: perspectives from the South Pacific* (Wellington 2000).
- 20 Marshall Sahlins, 'Hierarchy and humanity in Polynesia', in Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman (eds), *Transformations of Polynesian Culture* (Auckland 1985), 207.
- 21 Ibid., 214-15.
- 22 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: a history of insanity in the age of reason* (New York 1965).
- 23 Michel Foucault, 'Orders of discourse: inaugural lecture delivered at the Collège de France', *Social Science Information*, 10:2 (1971), 7-30.
- 24 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of Self* (New York 1986).
- 25 Niko Besnier, 'Literacy and the notion of person on Nukulaelae Atoll', *American Anthropologist*, 93: 2 (1991), 570-87; 'Christianity, authority, and personhood: sermonic discourse on Nukulaelae Atoll', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 103:4 (1994), 339-78; *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: reading and writing on a Polynesian Atoll* (Cambridge 1995).
- 26 Besnier, 'Christianity, authority, and personhood', 368-69; *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority*, 162-63.
- 27 Ian Burkitt, 'Situating auto/biography: biography and narrative in the times and places of everyday life', *Auto/Biography*, 13:2 (2005), 93-110.
- 28 Goldsmith, 'Decentering Pacific biographies', 7-8.